

European Policy Brief

■ *Fostering trust in governance: insights from a developmental-psychological perspective*

Trust in governance results from a socialisation process embedded in specific cultural and political contexts. This applies to both interpersonal and political trust. From a very young age, we are exposed to various viewpoints on governance and are affected by political decisions. While politics may seem less relevant during childhood and early adolescence, this exposure influences our political trust, even if it only becomes apparent later in life. Digitalisation has made this influence very multifaceted, providing on the one hand an opportunity for developing a healthy balance of trust and distrust in political systems and leaders, while, on the other hand, posing a risk for supporting extreme levels of trust or distrust in governments.

Against this backdrop, European political actors want to understand the circumstances that influence political trust and distrust. They search for insights into how to address discontent and improve democratic systems for greater acceptance. Relevant in this search is the question of whether trust and distrust can be attributed to age, generation, or rather to expectations that are embedded in the discourse specific to a certain period in time. Concretely, whether trust and distrust can be expected to change as individuals grow older.

The EnTrust research project, which focuses on studying trust and distrust in governance from various perspectives in the European context, assigned one work package to examine processes associated with trust and

distrust from the perspective of developmental psychology. Specifically, this work package explored the definition of trust and distrust, how they differ between people of different ages, the factors influencing them, and their consequences. The findings of this work package offer valuable insights for policymakers seeking to understand how governance influences trust and distrust in political institutions throughout different stages of life.

By combining these insights with the outcomes of a roundtable discussion involving civil society and the European Commission, which delved into the work package findings and the relevance of trust and distrust in their respective fields, this policy brief presents recommendations for finding a balance between trust and distrust in political institutions that strengthens our democracies at both European Union (EU) and Member State levels, taking into account developmental-psychological processes.

#1: Promote transparency and stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes, and base decisions on rationality and expertise

For political decisions to gain support and acceptance from citizens and other residents, they need to be transparent and logically explained, providing a clear rationale. To achieve this goal, the definition of an issue should involve various stakeholders

representing all segments of society, the economy, the environment, and politics. All these stakeholders should have the opportunity to contribute their input and feedback on potential solutions, striving to find a balanced approach that considers the interests of everyone involved rather than favouring one over the others. Moreover, all stakeholders should be engaged in monitoring and, if necessary, reformulating the implemented solution, whether it takes the form of a policy, regulation, or law.

Decisions must be grounded in rationality, expertise, and impartiality. The most experienced and affected stakeholders should play a significant role in the decision-making process, leveraging their expertise. Such expertise can encompass scientific or theoretical knowledge, as well as practical experience. The emphasis placed on expertise gives credibility and plausibility to decisions. When decision-making lacks transparency and fails to involve relevant stakeholders, individuals become sceptical, leading to potential non-support or non-acceptance of decisions. Decisions that are weakly justified may have initial effectiveness during times of crisis, however, those affected by the decisions expect well-substantiated decisions in the long run. It is crucial for governance and policymakers to give careful consideration to establishing sound reasoning for their decisions.

To ensure accountability and transparency, there should be a roadmap of lawmaking initiatives and a legislative footprint that demonstrates which stakeholders were consulted and the information on which decisions were made. This includes mandatory ex-ante, interim and ex-post impact assessments, encompassing economic, social, environmental and fundamental rights at both the EU and Member State levels. The implementation and monitoring of these guidelines should be

enhanced across different levels of governance. The information and evidence should be easily accessible and understandable to a wide range of individuals, while the inputs and evidence forming the basis for decisions should be effectively communicated.

By embracing evidence-informed decision-making, public support can be increased, the risk of being locked into path dependency can be mitigated, and overall accountability can be enhanced. Furthermore, tools such as the EU Youth Test should be promoted, evaluating the impact of legislative proposals on young people and aiming to integrate youth perspectives into all policies.

#2: Enable and promote meaningful, transparent and inclusive civic participation

Individuals want to be treated with respect. When people feel respected, they are more likely to reciprocate respect, fostering the development of mutual trust. In the relationship between political institutions and individuals/civil society, respect and trust are essential for the proper functioning of governments. At the same time, democratic governments should also be open to acknowledging and addressing a certain degree of distrust of their constituencies on specific matters, and abstain from suppressing or ignoring the concerns of the people. Individuals want to be respected, taken seriously, and listened to. They should also have the freedom to exercise their right to engage in various forms of political participation without facing disrespect or attack, even if their participation takes unconventional forms but are within their civic rights.

Political participation and civil dialogue play a crucial role in developing critical trust in governance and for engaging in democratic forms of expressing distrust. In a democratic system,

citizens and other residents desire opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes beyond merely casting their votes in elections. There should be a range of options available for citizen involvement, considering different preferences and reaching out to those who are often excluded from such initiatives.

While various forms of participation exist, such as European Citizens' Panels or European Citizens' Initiatives, they may face issues of self-selection, depoliticisation, and/or a lack of impact. Engagement should be inclusive, encompassing the entire public sphere and embracing diverse political opinions. For increased political accountability, formats such as the European Citizens' Panels should introduce pro/con arguments, and participants should be exposed to varying views from European political groups, including contesting recommendations from civil society.

Individuals and civil society should be involved from the early stages of decision-making processes, enabling them to shape the form of participation and ensuring their input has a meaningful impact and influence on the way forward. They should receive mandatory feedback on their input, clearly outlining how it was considered in the decision-making process, and have accessible channels to follow up on legislative initiatives, especially if they were actively involved.

Particularly for certain groups like youth, involvement should not be a mere token gesture, but a meaningful and impactful practise, instilling confidence in the process. The entire process should be transparent and clear, demonstrating respect and trust in the participants, which, in turn, will be reciprocated.

In participatory processes, it is crucial to have a certain degree of trust not only in institutions, but also in the individuals with whom

participants engage, whether they are politicians, representatives of civil society, or fellow citizens. Interpersonal or social trust plays a significant role in this context. There should be a general level of trust within society, respecting diverse viewpoints and believing in the potential for governance improvement through deliberative, democratic processes, particularly at the local level, and especially when there is dissatisfaction with the political system. Notably, the trust and respect placed in individuals who demonstrate consistency and reliability in their behaviour, can be extended to political institutions. Therefore, the focus should not only be on enhancing political/institutional trust, but also on fostering interpersonal/social trust, as both are vital in democratic societies. Citizens' assemblies can provide a space where both forms of trust can be strengthened, but they should include a follow-up and feedback to participants.

Not everyone is interested in politics or possesses sufficient information to trust or distrust political institutions. Some disinterest stems from disillusionment with the belief that conventional forms of civic participation have any influence on governance. Targeted communication campaigns are necessary to address these attitudes and prevent them from evolving into "blind" trust or distrust. Democracies rely on the participation of all individuals. Understanding why people engage or abstain from civic participation, whether conventional or unconventional, is crucial. Concrete measures can then be taken to address concerns and issues through communication campaigns that promote political engagement. It should be evident how people's voices and votes hold significance and are taken into account. For example, if individuals perceive participating in elections as meaningless, alternative approaches to organising, accessing, and monitoring elections should be

explored to involve citizens and other residents more effectively.

#3: Integrate civic education and counter disinformation

The importance of civic participation for democracies should be integrated into school curricula. From a young age, Europeans should learn about their civic duties and why individual political involvement matters. They should be equipped with the skills to critically reflect on different perspectives and express their opinions respectfully and constructively. This also involves promoting an awareness about a healthy balance between trust and distrust, essential for critically evaluating political decisions and holding political actors accountable. It also helps to prevent “blind” trust or distrust in governments, since both pose a threat to democracies.

An understanding of political systems and skills to critically evaluate processes and decisions should be promoted through embedding activities such as educational and simulation games, and critical political discourse analysis in school curricula. Simulation games can increase the comprehension of complex political structures and show the relevance of politics to everyday life. Extracurricular partners who are specialised in such simulations should be involved because teachers might lack the competencies to implement such activities. Critical political discourse analysis should be taught to critically engage with political statements and agendas and check them against European values, including tools to verify and search for information. These school activities also serve to tackle social inequalities in political competencies. Additionally, schools should inform their pupils about national youth parliaments and the European

youth parliament which focus on civic education and participation.

Regarding EU affairs, individuals should be informed about EU issues at the Member State level. They should have easy access to information on how they can participate at the EU level. Schools should foster an understanding of the functioning of the EU and emphasise that citizens' voices hold weight at the EU level. Incorporating EU citizenship into school curricula and providing training for teachers are vital steps towards achieving this goal.

In addition to civic participation, effective communication is crucial to counter disinformation intentionally aimed at disrupting democracies, and fully eroding trust in political institutions through baseless or misleading claims. Measures should be taken to prevent and address this situation, such as enforcing the [2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation](#) and enacting [legislative initiatives on political advertising](#). These measures should encompass various media platforms, taking into account different media preferences. If individuals are involved or targeted, such as for media literacy trainings, measures should be tailored to different target groups.

Regarding EU affairs, Member States should organise specialised training programmes for journalists to enhance their understanding of the EU and decision-making processes. This will enable them to report accurately and clearly on EU processes, preventing misunderstandings or the spread of disinformation that can lead to categorical distrust in the EU.

Research background: supportive evidence

The EnTrust project's Work Package 5, led by researchers from the Masaryk University in the Czech Republic, aimed to analyse the conceptualisations, correlates, and antecedents of trust and distrust in governance. Taking a developmental and cross-country perspective, the research focused on four distinct life stages spanning from early adolescence to adulthood (age groups 11-12, 14-15, 18-19, and 30-50) in various European countries (Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland and Serbia). The team employed a mixed-methods approach, utilising qualitative focus groups and a large-scale survey-based experiment. A total of 56 focus groups with 251 participants were organised across all seven countries. The experiment, guided by insights from the qualitative findings, involved 4,082 participants from four selected countries (Czechia, Germany, Italy and Serbia). This comprehensive methodology enabled a thorough exploration of trust and distrust development in relation to authorities.

Key findings

Predictability, transparency, consistency and expertise as defining determinants of trust and distrust.

Participants understood trust and distrust as distinct dimensions that can coexist. They considered moderate trust to be ideal, accompanied by critical evaluations of available information. Extreme levels of trust and distrust were deemed undesirable and associated with risks, such as blindly following or (*a priori*) rejecting authorities. Furthermore, participants emphasised the necessity of general trust in others for a well-functioning society.

Predictability, transparency, and consistency were identified as factors contributing to trust, while unpredictable actions, ambiguity, and inconsistency fostered distrust (see Recommendation #1). For example, the unpredictability in implementing and revoking anti-Covid measures significantly undermined trust in governance. Additionally, participants were very attentive to any indications of policymakers pursuing their own interests, particularly financial ones.

Authorities' transparency regarding reasons and arguments for their decisions had a greater impact on trust as participants grew older, with younger participants being less influenced by it. The awareness of the societal impact of trust and distrust, the ability to consider distrust in a broader context, and the capacity to appreciate and evaluate information increased with age, drawing on various life experiences when developing trust or distrust towards others or authorities.

Knowledgeability and perceived competency were identified as key sources of trust in authorities. Participants called for well-founded and clearly explained decisions and policies, as reflected in Recommendation #1. They believe that arguments should be diverse but not overwhelming, as information overload contributes to uncertainty and distrust.

Reciprocity and respect through governance, and participatory processes as crucial conditions for trust

Reciprocity plays a vital role in trust, with a strong expectation of mutual trust. Participants believe that reciprocity in relationships, such as confiding in each other and providing mutual help and support, along with shared values and worldviews, contributes to trust. While the expectation of reciprocity was weaker in formal relationships with

authorities compared to interpersonal relationships, perceived distrust from authorities could elicit reciprocal distrust from individuals, as reflected in Recommendation #2. Confidentiality, specifically the ability to keep secrets, was particularly important for the youngest age groups (11-15) in developing trust, while adult participants emphasised shared values and worldviews.

A key aspect that explained positive effects of voice, transparency, and a predictable framework on trust, was the perception of being respected (see Recommendation #2). When authorities engaged in consultation, provided transparency, or established a predictable framework, participants felt more respected, which in turn fostered greater trust, willingness to accept decisions, and reduced distrust. This effect of the perception of being respected was consistently significant across different countries and contexts.

The positive impacts of voice, transparency, and a predictable framework were universally observed across all countries and contexts, enhancing trust, acceptance, and reducing distrust. Active participation in evaluating diverse information and making informed decisions about political matters were highly valued by participants. Taking an active role in this process was of great importance to participants (see Recommendation #2).

"Trust vacuum"

In some countries, the research teams identified a "trust vacuum" where neither trust nor distrust was evident. This occurs when individuals lack interest in a particular topic or decision, or when they have limited access to information sources. Additionally, information overload contributes to uncertainty and distrust. Tackling the "trust vacuum" is addressed in Recommendation #2.

Trust and distrust based on experience

Trust and distrust were primarily shaped by individuals' experiences within their specific environment and socialisation contexts (see Recommendations #2 and #3). Participants developed and adjusted their levels of trust and distrust based on positive experiences with specific individuals or authorities, such as honesty, reliability, and confidentiality, as well as negative experiences like betrayals or disappointments. Significant experiences had the potential to impact not only trust in specific individuals or authorities, but also individuals' overall tendency to trust or distrust. Various experiences during the pandemic significantly influenced participants' overall levels of trust and distrust in authorities. For the younger age groups (11-15), parents or other family members played a significant role in shaping their trust or distrust in authorities.

Understanding decision-making and critical thinking are key to protecting against misinformation

Understanding certain issues or processes increased participants' trust, whereas not knowing how decisions are made and who makes them contributed to distrust and even scepticism. The latter situation bore the risk of participants being highly susceptible to misinformation and conspiracies, for example, when searching online. This mainly concerned younger participants whose critical thinking abilities were not fully developed (see Recommendation #3).

Research parameters and project information

The EnTrust project is funded by the EU in the context of the Horizon2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Grant Agreement No. 870572). The recommendations and findings presented in this policy brief are based on the [Integrated Report on the Psychological Insights into Trust/Distrust](#), as well as on an [expert roundtable](#) between the research team and the following experts: Gabriella Civico (Civil Society Europe/European Volunteer Centre), Camille Dobler (Missions Publiques), Damian Boeselager (Member of the European Parliament, Greens/EFA), Kristóf Papp (European Youth Forum) and Srd Kisevic (DG JUST, European Commission).

The EnTrust consortium consists of eight partner teams conducting research and dissemination activities in seven countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland and Serbia), and at the EU-level. Its work-plan consists of seven work packages devoted to the systematic analysis and reflection of different aspects of the topic:

1. The Theoretical and Normative Underpinnings of Trust and Distrust
2. Trust and Distrust at the Street-level of Public Policy
3. The Role of Democratic Social Movements in the Formation of Trust and Distrust
4. The Role of the Media in Trust and Distrust Building: Information or Polarisation?
5. Developmental-psychological Insight into Trust and Distrust
6. Appraising Citizens' Trust and Distrust in Governance: Forms, Determinants, Effects and Remedies
7. Civilising Trust and Distrust: Role Models and Recommendations

Further work packages are committed to the dissemination, exploitation and communication of research, management and ethical issues.

Further information on the EnTrust project is available at www.entrust-project.eu.

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Project Information

Project Type: Collaborative Project
Call: H2020 SC6 GOVERNANCE-01-2019: Trust in Governance
Start date: February 2020
Duration: 48 months
Coordinator: Prof. Dr. Christian Lahusen, University of Siegen
Grant Agreement No: 870572
EU-funded Project Budget: € 2,978,151.25



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870572. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union.