

European Policy Brief

■ *Appraising Citizens' Trust and Distrust in Governance*

Democratic governance systems depend on an engaged and critical citizenry that participates in electoral processes, critically accompanies government action, and defends its rights when opposing harmful decisions. They are thus based on a form of critical or vigilant support of political institutions and political processes that implies trust as well as distrust. This means that blind trust towards the institutions seems to pose problems for democratic systems of government, as does cynical distrust. But what does public support look like in times of mushrooming crises and ongoing transformations? How much do people still trust political personnel, political institutions, or the democratic system? How strong has a sense of mistrust become, beyond the democratically desirable forms of watchful or enlightened trust?

The EnTrust research project, funded by the EU's Horizon2020 programme, is dedicated to exploring trust and distrust in governance in seven European countries, at both national and EU levels, in order to answer these questions. It allocated one work package to explore the individual determinants of political trust/distrust and their effects and policy implications. Specifically, this work package employed a multi-methods approach (web surveys and online deliberative experiments) to offer valuable insights for policymakers interested in understanding the prevalence and drivers of trust and distrust in political institutions and, more importantly, how to shape these attitudes. On the basis of a roundtable, held in June 2023, which engaged civil society representatives and the Directorate General

for Justice and Consumers of the European Commission in a discussion on the findings and implications of this research, this policy brief offers recommendations aimed at (re)establishing trust in political institutions, while also recognising manifestations of distrust as an important condition of democracies. On this basis, four recommendations have been identified.

#1: Fight corruption and unethical conduct across all governance levels and show integrity

Corruption is a form of misconduct that not only irretrievably destroys trust, but also breeds disenchanting and cynical mistrust. It is thus essential to establish and enforce stringent anti-corruption measures at all levels of government. These measures demonstrate commitment to accountability and ethical conduct, which restore trustworthiness and can enhance trust by showing that public officials are dedicated to the public interest.

Governments and political institutions at all levels should conduct a comprehensive assessment of their internal structures, in order to prevent corruptive behaviour, maladministration, and revolving door practices. These measures should include a code of conduct that is applicable across all institutional ranks. At the EU level, the role of the European Ombudsman should be strengthened. In this regard, transparency seems to be a particularly important concern, to which EU policies should devote further effort. To prevent

corruption, it should be transparent with whom decision-makers and staff of all ranks meet. At the EU level, this includes Commission Heads of Unit, Parliament Committee Chairpersons, and Council members, among others. A comprehensive record of all work-related meetings should be regularly disclosed, encompassing a diverse range of gatherings including those conducted online or via phone call, as well as those labelled informal. This practice would establish transparency within the legislative process, granting 'outsiders' insight into the influences shaping legislation or policies.

Simultaneously, Member States and the EU should adopt high standards of information to the public, including through a thorough review of existing rules. Rules concerning the disclosure of documents and minutes to the public should not be misused to hide information from the public. As regards EU governance, this includes the publication of the voting records of Member States in preparatory Council working groups.

#2: Ensure a strong role of local governments within a clear multi-level governance system to gain public trust

Local democracy plays a particularly important role for citizens and has a decisive effect on their opinions and ideas about democratic politics. For this reason, it is essential to guarantee the functioning and the credibility of local institutions and political processes within a system of clear division of responsibilities and decision-making powers between different governance levels. The voices and perspectives of local and regional governments should be well-represented in national and European, as well as global governance forums. At the same time, it is crucial to establish mechanisms that guarantee transparency

and accountability within local, regional, national, and European institutions.

Politicians and political institutions should take advantage of public trust in local governments to (re)build confidence in representative democracy. They should acknowledge the essential role of local democracy in shaping European democracy and empower local and regional governments in facilitating civic participation and addressing immediate concerns of citizens, thereby fostering trust by demonstrating responsive governance. The capabilities of local and regional governments should be enhanced through adequate resources, technical support, and legal frameworks. This will enable them to implement open government initiatives that promote transparency, participation, and accountability.

Local governments should establish platforms to engage, discuss, and partner with citizens and residents, local organisations, and other stakeholders. Public engagement and participation should take place beyond electoral processes. Local governments should facilitate direct democracy at local levels that is inclusive of all citizens and residents, including marginalised groups.

#3: Promote deliberative democracy

The EU and Member States should develop, fund, and implement initiatives that integrate deliberative democracy practices into public decision-making processes, in a complementary role to a strengthened civil dialogue. By involving citizens in deliberations on key issues, governments can enhance public trust in institutions. Engaged citizens are more likely to trust institutions on perceiving that their voices are valued and considered during policy formulation. Enhancing communication between institutions and the public is key to

building understanding and fostering engagement.

Deliberative processes allow us to gather insights into public priorities, values, and potential compromises, helping policymakers to navigate challenging decisions while maintaining transparency and legitimacy. Deliberative fora encourage learning, collaborative discussions, and the formulation of informed recommendations on policy proposals. They should be conducted in advance of specific types of public decisions and involve individuals from varied backgrounds. Governments should adhere to the principles laid out in the Council of Europe's [Recommendations for conducting deliberative processes](#) established to set international standards. The recommendations include: establishing a legal framework; providing clarity on the mandate and design of such processes; and ensuring fair representation and accountability.

If the format requires moderators, it is key to have transparency regarding how they were chosen. Additionally, they should not have specific interests in the topic being discussed. Regarding exchanges with experts and policy makers, civil society organisations should be given adequate space to contribute. Additionally, debating formats among the different stakeholders, as well as the possibility of a thorough question time for the audience, should be promoted. Initiatives should involve mechanisms to assess participants' opinions before and after deliberation to measure changes in perceptions of government responsiveness and effectiveness.

Local governments should establish citizens' advisory panels that offer ongoing insights into a range of issues over an extended period. A permanent citizens' assembly should be established to initiate citizens' advisory panels, granting them the authority to determine the subject matter for which

recommendations are sought. Additionally, citizens and other residents should be given the possibility of initiating a representative deliberative process through a petition system once a specific threshold of support is achieved. There should be standards and support structures for those who intend to launch a deliberative initiative. Legislation should require that representative deliberative processes feed into local strategic planning, thereby integrating citizens' perspectives into crucial local policies.

#4: Promote traditional, unconventional, and new forms of youth civic participation

Since young people, in general, have lower levels of trust towards institutions, and lower levels of trust are associated with participation in unconventional forms of political participation, it is of utmost importance that institutions take measures to widen the possibilities of engagement in policy making for young people, do not restrict the possibility of undertaking unconventional political participation, and seriously consider the policy demands stemming from that. This is crucial for the development of institutional trust, as unconventional forms of political participation represent a way to 'voice' young people's concerns within the system, rather than 'exiting' from it. The reaction from the institutions determines whether the participants in such actions feel they are 'being heard', therefore increasing their trust towards the institutions, or not, can fuel further distrust.

The EU and its Member States should acknowledge the diversity among young people, considering factors such as gender, socio-economic background, and geographical location. They should tailor policies and participation methods through youth mainstreaming to address the unique needs and preferences

of different profiles. Activities should be relevant and aligned with young people's interests and abilities, thereby ensuring that actions matter.

All government levels should develop strategies to encourage young adults to participate in elections. This could involve steps such as considering lowering voting ages, automatic voter registration, and easily accessible information on candidates and topics. Political communication should be expanded to social media and online platforms to engage young people in politics. The effectiveness of strategies aimed at promoting young people's civic engagement should be regularly assessed and modified, based on changing societal dynamics to ensure their relevance.

Lowering the age requirements for pursuing political office to increase the representation of young individuals and tackling intergenerational imbalances should be considered, alongside introducing youth quotas in European and national parliaments. These quotas should be adaptable and mirror the proportion of those under 35 in the population, ensuring effective representation. Regulations for campaign financing would ensure that financial limitations do not hinder young politicians from running for office.

The EU and Member States should uphold the legitimacy of protest and civil disobedience as valid forms of engagement and condemn any attempts at negatively labelling their actions. These actions resonate with young people's concerns, enabling them to actively influence policy decisions. Listening to and understanding the aspirations of young activists should be prioritised. Governments should allocate resources to initiatives that empower young people to lead projects that address societal issues and encourage participation in civil society organisations. They should create spaces

for their voices to be heard in broader discussions and actions.

When assessing unconventional political participation, governments should consider the intersection of various identities, like age, gender, and ethnicity, as well as issues such as social justice and climate change. Simultaneously, they should acknowledge how these intersections impact opportunities and forms of participation.

Governments should establish meaningful initiatives for consulting young people, and reinforce existing ones, by actively integrating them in the conception, execution, oversight, and evaluation of policies and initiatives. This cultivates a sense of active citizenship and ownership. They should create user-friendly online platforms where young individuals can take part in discussions, debates, and decision-making. For this undertaking, they could partner with youth organisations and grassroots movements to jointly develop policies, initiatives, and campaigns that resonate with the interests of young individuals.

Research background: supportive evidence

The EnTrust project, under the leadership of Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences in Greece, commissioned web-based surveys in seven countries (Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Serbia) to measure political trust and distrust in governance, identify different forms of political distrust, understand the causes and effects of political distrust, and explore possible policy-driven remedies. The surveys targeted a representative sample of the general population and resulted in about 2,000 responses per country. Fieldwork took place from January to May 2023 (and in Serbia partly August 2023).

In parallel, under the leadership of the University of Siena in Italy, EnTrust conducted online deliberative experiments with citizens and political representatives in four countries (Italy, Denmark, Greece, Poland). The objective of the experiments was to test the effects of policy deliberation on trust and distrust in governance. In total, 90 citizens participated in the online deliberative polls. The focus was on climate change, specifically plastic pollution, and sustainable mobility. Research findings provide strong evidence for the relevance of the core problems and the recommendations addressed above.

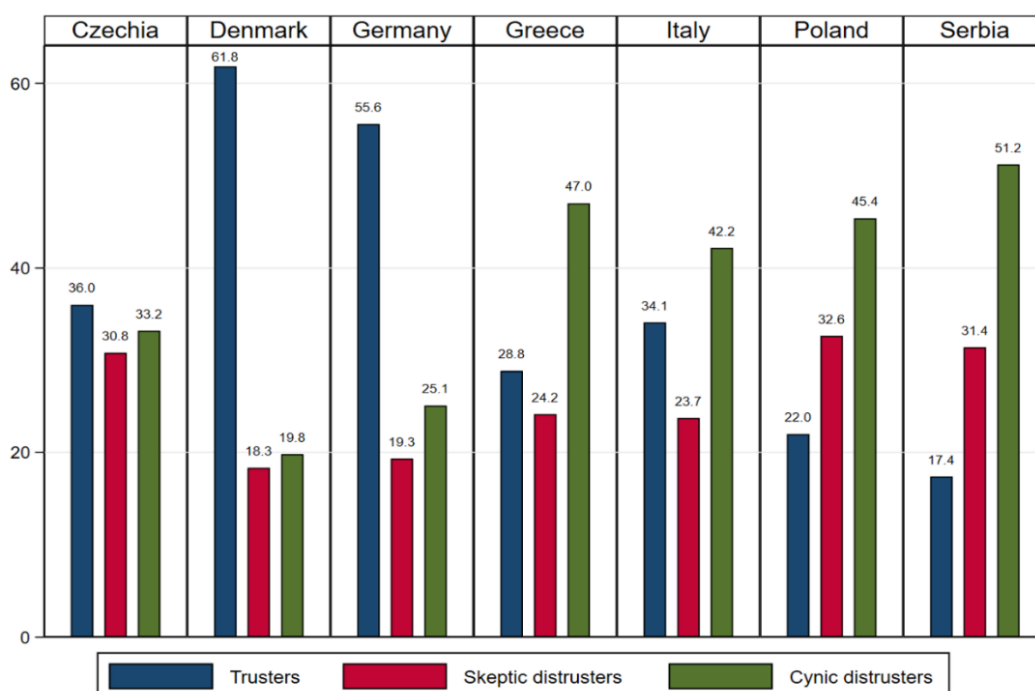
Key findings

The ethicalness of political institutions and politicians is often questioned

Among the respondents of the representative population survey across seven countries, 55% found that political institutions should

always be treated with doubt, regardless of whether they were trustworthy or not. This opinion was particularly noticeable in Greece (70%) and Serbia (66%), and less prevalent in Italy (43%), the Czech Republic (47%), and Poland (45%). Agreement with the statement that ‘no matter what people do, political institutions can never become trustworthy because the entire political system is irredeemably flawed and untrustworthy’ ranged from 37% in Denmark to 60% in Greece.

It is interesting to note that the level of popular disbelief in the trustworthiness of politicians is not much higher than the disbelief in the trustworthiness of institutions. In fact, almost as many survey respondents (i.e., 59%) believe that politicians cannot be relied on (ranging from 68% in Poland to 43% in Denmark). However, the assessment of politicians varies greatly, depending on which aspect of their trustworthiness is looked at. Regarding honesty, a proportion as high as 70% of all



respondents believe that politicians lie to get ahead (ranging from 83% in Poland to 55% in Denmark). At the same time, only 20% of respondents believe that politicians take decisions competently (just 13% in Serbia and Poland), and a mere 21% believe that politicians obey the laws while in office (ranging from 11% and 13% in Serbia and Poland, respectively, to 33% and 35% in Germany and Denmark).

For recommendation #1, it is most significant to note that the different levels of political trust among the seven different countries strongly mirror the perception of corruption among the national samples of our survey. In general, a significant proportion of respondents testified that corruption is widespread in their countries: 31% believe that it is very widespread, while 40% believe that it is fairly widespread. It is noteworthy, however, that Greece and Serbia are the most extreme cases, where 92% and 89% of respondents, respectively, believe that corruption is very or fairly widespread. The lowest values in terms of perceptions of corruption are found in Denmark (only 6% believe that corruption is very widespread and 22% believe that it is fairly widespread) and Germany (the corresponding figures are 12% and 40%). The other three countries lie in between the cases already mentioned.

Local and regional authorities are more trusted than national governments

As our representative population survey shows, citizen trust differs notably regarding different levels of government. On a scale from 0 ('no trust') to 10 ('complete trust'), survey respondents from Denmark and Germany were located around the middle regarding trust in their national governments. Respondents from the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Serbia positioned themselves in

the lower half of the scale. In all countries (except Serbia), trust in regional and local governments was higher by about one point on average (see Recommendation #2). In the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, and Serbia, trust in the EU was similar or slightly lower than trust in the national government. This pattern was reversed in Greece and Italy. In Poland, trust in the EU was significantly higher than in the national government. Overall, trust in the different governance levels was the lowest in Serbia and the highest in Denmark and Germany.

Among the survey respondents, 43% found that the political system would be more trustworthy if national governments transferred more control to local and regional authorities. In contrast, 18% disagreed with this statement. Notably, just over half of the respondents in Poland indicated that decentralisation would make the political system more trustworthy.

Different impacts of experts' and politicians' participation in deliberative fora

According to our online deliberative experiments, participation in deliberative fora does not significantly impact on levels of self-reported trust in institutions. This statistical observation, however, does not mean that political deliberations are irrelevant. What our experiments show is that the disposition to trust political institutions will not be influenced by short deliberative interventions, but rather by more enduring experiences of political involvement and interaction. This expectation is justified when looking at the effects our deliberative experiments were able to detect, given that they hint at indirect effects on political trust. First, the participation in deliberations with politicians has an effect on the preference towards deliberative policy-making processes. This effect varies according to

ideological orientations, because the preference increases among left-wing oriented participants, while tending to decrease levels of perceived citizens' efficacy among right-wing oriented participants. The fact that deliberative experiments were engaged in discussing environmental issues might have encouraged the former, while discouraging the latter. Second, data suggests that interactions with professional politicians in the deliberative fora decrease individual preferences towards technocratic policy-making processes (the opposite occurs after interactions with experts), thus showing that it increases confidence in political processes of decision-making. Fourth, interactions with experts lead progressive participants to give more importance to forms of 'lifestyle politics' (i.e., emphasising the political meaning attributed to environment-friendly styles of consumption), thus demonstrating that participants learn to reflect on their personal involvement in problem solution. Finally, the most robust result points to the strong decrease in populist attitudes among participants joining those deliberative fora, including exclusive interactions with professional politicians. Overall, our findings show that deliberations with politicians and experts have a positive effect on the citizens' readiness to attribute importance to political participation and decision-making, thus indirectly contributing to informed or sceptical forms of trust in political institutions.

Low level of trust among young people and those engaged in unconventional forms of political participation

Notably, young survey respondents (18-29 years old) had on average lower levels of trust in their national governments than older age groups. This observation was repeated in every country, except for the Czech Republic, where the relationship between trust in

government and age appears to be inverse. Furthermore, in Greece and Italy, the average levels of trust in government were virtually equal among the 18-29 and 30-49 age groups, and both lower than the 50-64 and 65+ age groups. Finally, Serbia constituted a partial exception, with the 30-49 age group displaying the lowest average levels of trust in government compared to the remaining age groups.

The survey findings show a correlation between trust in national governments and engagement in conventional forms of political and civic participation, which include voting in elections, working in political campaigns, volunteering in the community, and volunteering for or donating to NGOs. In contrast, people that have lower levels of trust tend to be more involved in unconventional forms of political and civic participation (i.e., taking part in demonstrations, street actions, strikes, or boycotting products). These findings hold true across individual countries, with very few exceptions, (e.g., people who work in political campaigns and volunteers for NGOs in Italy display, on average, lower levels of trust in government). These findings evidence that segments of the younger generation are sceptical of representative democracy with its participatory options and political institutions but exhibit forms of political engagement outside conventional forms of participation. The low level of trust is thus an expression of low confidence in representative institutions of democracies, but not necessarily in democratic (e.g., plebiscitary, associational, or deliberative) governance. This observation has been recurrently highlighted by previous research, which speaks of a 'critical citizenry' that favour new forms of political behaviour and can thus contribute to reinvigorating democratic governance.

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 Forms, Determinants, Effects and Remedies of Trust and 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), Krisztof 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.