



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

REBUILDING TRUST IN AMERICA

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HOW DO YOU ESTABLISH TRUST?

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, the key components of establishing trust in institutions and leaders are:

Honesty: leaders will not benefit at the expense of others and will take responsibility for their actions

Fairness: leaders will have people's best interests in mind

Purpose: leaders will handle resources responsibly to solve problems

Vision: leaders are competent and capable of bringing about change

When citizens lack trust in each other and institutions, "they are less likely to comply with laws and regulations, pay taxes, tolerate different viewpoints or ways of life, contribute to economic vitality, resist the appeals of demagogues, or support their neighbors... They are less likely to create and invent." Citizens will be hesitant or even unwilling to cooperate freely if they do not believe others are responsible or trustworthy, or believe their rights are Not guaranteed and protected by society's institutions.

FACTS TO KNOW

- ▶ The 2020 Gallup Confidence in Institutions survey marked the 14th consecutive year that Congress is the lowest-ranked institution amongst Americans; only 6% of Americans say they trust Congress "a great deal," and 46% say they have very little or no confidence in Congress.
- ▶ Trust in news sources increased at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, but the media is still the least trusted institution behind government, NGOs, and businesses, with two-thirds of people saying they worry about fake news and false information.
- ▶ Almost 70% of Americans do not trust social media companies to determine which posts on their sites should be labeled as inaccurate. Between August 2019 and January 2021, the percentage of Americans who want more government regulation of Big Tech companies rose from 48% to 57%.
- ▶ Approximately 37% of Americans believe "most people can be trusted," and 62% say people "need to be very careful" around others, according to the World Values Survey.

GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

Levels of trust in government eroded during the late 1960s and 1970s, reflecting the turbulence of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and economic struggles. During the 1980s and 1990s, trust in the government fluctuated, tending to correlate to good economic growth. It reached a three-decade high shortly after the 9/11 attacks, but since 2007 fewer than 30% of respondents have said they can trust the federal government.

Levels of trust in state and local governments are measurably higher than trust in the federal government. According to the January 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer, 54% of Americans said they trusted their state and local governments to do what is right, while only 43% of Americans had the same trust in the federal government.

Cited Reasons for declining trust in national governments include corruption, "poisonous public rhetoric," economic inequality, a volatile media climate, "breakdowns in the rule of law," The perception that individual voices do not matter and that the system is rigged, and "governments' inability to provide essential security and human services."

Overall trust in the national government rose slightly from 43% in January 2020 to 46% in April. By August, 62% of Americans said the U.S. response to the pandemic was less effective than that of other wealthy nations. By January 2021, the spring trust bubble had burst, with global trust levels falling back to pre-pandemic levels.

FRAMING THE ISSUE



TRUST IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

A December 2018 Congressional Research Service report found that overall confidence in the police declined between 2014 and 2015, reaching a low of 52%. By 2017, the numbers had risen, with 57% of Americans said they had a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the police, which matched a 25-year average based on Gallup polling.

In 2018, PEW Research found roughly 80% of U.S. adults said police officers care about people and handle resources responsibly some or most of the time; over 70% said police officers provide fair and accurate information to the public some or most of the time; and 65% said police officers take responsibility for their mistakes some or most of the time.

The Center for Advancing Opportunity’s 2020 report, which focused on “Americans in areas of concentrated poverty,” found Black (35%) and Hispanic (18%) residents are more likely than White residents (11%) to say police treat them unfairly, and Black (45%) and Hispanic (25%) residents are more likely than White residents (19%) to say the legal system treats them unfairly. At the same time, more Black (52%) and Hispanic residents (59%) than White residents (46%) say they want police to spend more time in their area.

The death of George Floyd at the hand of police officers in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020 sparked nationwide protests against excessive use of force and racial bias in policing. In June 2020, an Axios-Ipsos poll found 77% of White respondents said they trust local police to have their best interests in mind, compared to just 36% of Black respondents. A Marist poll that same month found similar results: 70% of White respondents and 31% of Black respondents said they have “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of confidence in their communities’ police officers to treat Black and White people equally.

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TRUST IN SCIENCE AND ACADEMIA

The National Science Foundation found that levels of trust in science have held stable since the 1970s. Roughly 70% of Americans “have said they believe the effects of scientific research are more positive than negative for society,” and on average 40% of Americans have expressed “a great deal of confidence” in leaders of the scientific community while less than 10% have expressed “hardly any” confidence. The General Social Survey in 2018 also found 89% of Americans believe scientists work toward the public good and 88% believe scientists want to make life better. As of 2019, 86% of U.S. respondents to a PEW Research survey have “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of confidence in scientists to act in the best interest of the public.

A 2017 YouGov survey found 80% of U.S. adults said they trust scientists to provide accurate and reliable information, but over 70% said they are concerned scientific findings are influenced by sponsoring companies or organizations. There are also minor demographic differences; PEW Research found that White adults and Hispanic adults are more likely than Black adults to positively view medical doctors and research scientists, although majorities across all demographic groups still have overall positive views.

At the start of the coronavirus pandemic, Americans indicated they “overwhelmingly trust the CDC” to handle the pandemic and share accurate information, with total trust for the agency around 80%. The share of Americans believing the CDC and other public health officers are doing an excellent or good job has since fallen, hitting 63% as of August 2020. At the local level, Americans’ belief that “hospitals and medical centers in their area are doing an excellent or good job in responding to the coronavirus outbreak” have held steady since May, at around 88% of Americans. A PEW Research survey conducted in late April and early May found trust and confidence in medical scientists and scientists had increased since the outbreak.

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TRUST IN THE MEDIA

84% of Americans believe the news media is important to democracy, and focus on the media's role to "provide accurate and fair news reports," "ensure Americans are informed about public affairs," and "hold leaders accountable for their actions." At the same time, trust in the media has been falling for the past two decades, aligning with "a profound shift in journalism," when "journalism began to embrace the necessity of interpretation." This shift "places great responsibility on readers to discern for themselves the difference between what can be trusted as factual and what represents a reporter's judgment."

According to a 2018 Knight Foundation report, the proportion of Americans with a "great deal" or "fair amount" of trust in the media fell from 54% to 32% between 2003 and 2016. The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer revealed that globally, 35% of people trust search engines, traditional media, and social media. Majorities of respondents cite bias (75%) and inaccuracy (66%) as reasons for declines in trust. Majorities of Americans also say their trust in the media is limited by the lack of media's transparency in how stories are produced, where there are conflicts of interest, and where funding comes from.

Even though over half (53%) of U.S. adults say they often or sometimes get news from social media, only 40% of those news consumers expect the news they see to be accurate. Over 60% of Americans believe social media has a negative effect on the country, with 28% of those respondents citing misinformation as the primary reason. Almost 70% of Americans do not trust social media companies to determine which posts on their sites should be labeled as inaccurate. Big Tech companies such as Amazon, Facebook, and Google are falling further out of favor with Americans; in early 2021, Gallup reported only one in three Americans has a positive view of Big Tech companies, a decline from 46% in August 2019.

89% of Americans were following the media closely in March 2020, but 62% thought the media was greatly or slightly exaggerating. An April 2020 Ipsos/USA Today poll found 46% of Americans trusted the media to report accurately on the coronavirus, and an equal 46% did not. An August 2020 Edelman report found 49% of Americans are getting most of their information about the coronavirus from major news organizations, and 46% of Americans say "they will never believe information about the coronavirus" if the only place they see that information is on social media.

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TRUST IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

According to a 2020 Morning Consult poll, 55% of Americans say they trust the average American company, but 60% of U.S. adults say corruption is widespread in business. The 2020 Gallup Confidence in Institutions survey found small businesses in particular have Americans' trust, with 75% of U.S. adults saying they have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in small businesses. Only 19% of Americans expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in big businesses.

The January 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer revealed businesses are the only institution seen globally as both ethical and competent, thanks to trust in local employers. On the whole, businesses can continue gaining public trust by guarding information, embracing sustainability, and taking precautionary health and safety measures for employees. Two-thirds of all respondents said "CEOs should take the lead on change rather than waiting for the government to impose it." Another 68% believe CEOs should step in to fix societal problems when the government does not.



TRUST IN COMMUNITIES AND EACH OTHER

Over 60% of residents in Norway, Sweden, and Finland think most people can be trusted. Halfway around the world, Fewer than 10% of residents in Columbia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru believe this. Overall, the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer found people worldwide have more trust in their fellow citizens and their own employers than they do in CEOs, journalists, and government leaders (although trust in almost all society declined at least slightly from 2020).

In the U.S. levels of trust are not as high as global averages. A 2019 PEW study of Trust and Distrust in America found Americans' trust in each other has deteriorated in the last two decades. This lack of confidence can extend into all sectors of the community, from government to schools to the environment.

SOLUTIONS

RESEARCHING POLICING REFORM OPTIONS

Misunderstandings between police and citizens have given rise to an isolated police culture in which few officers are held accountable for violations. Those who do face discipline “are often allowed to resign in lieu of termination,” so they may be hired by another agency. Citizens can reach out to both police officers and constituents in their communities, or support and volunteering with groups working to bridge gaps and rebuild trust between communities and law enforcement personnel. Researching policing reform options and the facts driving them is another way to start becoming more involved and better understand the situation.

ENCOURAGING TRANSPARENCY IN SCIENCE

The majority of U.S. adults indicate they are more trusting of scientific studies when the data is available to the public or has been reviewed by independent committees, and they are less trusting when they know industry funding was involved in studies. Researching and getting involved in science-focused initiatives, task forces, and commissions in your community is a way to become a careful consumer of science. Ask questions about research and how information is disseminated.

ENCOURAGING TRANSPARENCY IN THE NEWS

Bias, inaccuracy, and fake news are the most prevalent concerns when it comes to trusting media sources. The RAND Corporation’s Truth Decay Project takes a look at these concerns, investigating how the rise of social media and political and social polarization have contributed to “the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life.” News organizations can take the steps to explain themselves, such as being more transparent in how they gather their news, how they are funded, or why they cannot divulge a source. Another idea is labeling technologies; much like labels that “instill confidence in our food, medicine, and other consumer goods,” such labels or disclaimers could also work to “instill trust in the news, video, people, and organizations we encounter on social networks.”

SOLUTIONS

STRENGTHENING CIVIC EDUCATION

“One of the primary reasons our nation’s founders envisioned a vast public education system was to prepare youth to be active participants in our system of self-government.” Today, only 23% of American 8th graders are proficient in civics and only 18% are proficient in U.S. History. The Center for Civic Education and the National Constitution Center offer resources to help teachers incorporate civics issues in the classroom. Service-oriented extracurriculars can give students a voice in how their school operates. Service programs like AmeriCorps allow participants to work with and in communities. Individuals and communities can reach out to educators, school administrators, and even school boards or boards of education to understand how school districts teach civics, and what opportunities have the potential to be incorporated into curricula.