

# Executive summary

Democratic governments today stand at a critical juncture, steering environmental and digital transitions while having to face increased polarisation within their countries, heightened geopolitical tensions as well as the social consequences of various economic developments such as inflation. In this high-stakes environment, building and maintaining trust in public institutions has emerged as a priority for many governments around the world.

This report presents the results from the second OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (Trust Survey), carried out in October and November 2023 in 30 OECD countries. It provides results of current trust levels and their drivers across countries and public institutions, and an analysis of their evolution over the past two years with a comparison with the results of the 2021 edition of the survey. The OECD will continue to monitor the results over time with future editions of the survey.

Results of the survey vary across countries, due to a range of cultural, institutional, social and economic factors. Nonetheless, like in the 2021 edition of the survey, the results show clear overall tendencies affecting OECD members and reveal common areas of action in the future that do not preclude other important areas that may be more specific to a country.

## Key findings

Across the 30 countries, **the share of people with low or no trust in the national government (44%) outweighs the share of those with high or moderately high trust (39%).**

**Trust in national government** across the countries that participated in the two iterations of the survey has registered **a 2 percentage point drop since 2021 on average**, although trust levels increased in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, France, Latvia and Sweden. This average decrease can be partly attributed to **women and people with lower education, whose levels of trust in national government have decreased both by 5 percentage points.**

Trust in the police, the judicial system, the civil service and local government is higher than in national government, with respectively 63%, 54%, 45% and 45% of people having high or moderately high trust in these institutions, while national Parliament and political parties elicit lower levels of trust (37% and 24% respectively).

As per the previous iteration of the survey, a key finding of the 2024 Trust Survey is that **socio-economic conditions and demographic characteristics matter**. People who feel financially insecure, women and those with low levels of education, as well as those who report belonging to a group that is discriminated against, consistently report lower levels of trust in government. Related to this, the sense of political agency is crucial in explaining the different levels of trust in national government in all countries. The trust gap between those who report they have a say in what the government does and those who say they do not is 47 percentage points.

Overall, **there is a clear divide between trust levels in the day-to-day interactions with public institutions, which remain relatively robust on average and in many countries, and trust in the government's ability to make the important decisions on complex policy issues with trade-offs across different groups in society.**

Indeed, a majority of recent users of the relevant public services report relative satisfaction with national health (52%), education (57%) and administrative services (66%). Moreover, a majority of the population believe public institutions would use their personal data for legitimate purposes only (52%) and have confidence their application for a service or a benefit would be treated fairly (52%). These are important elements given these day-to-day interactions with government remain key drivers of trust.

In contrast, while a majority still believes their government is ready to protect people in case of emergency, only **37% believe that the government balances the interests of different generations fairly and around 40% believe the government will regulate new technologies appropriately or will succeed in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the next ten years.** These results are at least partly attributable to the lack of confidence in institutions and officials working in the public interest, being accountable to each other and the population, and allowing people to have a voice and influence on decision making. **Only about 30% think their political system lets them have a say,** would adopt the opinions express in a public consultation, or that their governments can resist corporate influence, and 38% believe in the effectiveness of parliamentary checks and balances. Data shows these are all important drivers of trust today for which results are unsatisfactory in many countries.

Finally, in today's complex information environment, with the rise of disinformation and polarising content, how information is created, shared and consumed has an important link with trust. While **trust in the media on average is relatively low** and mirrors that in national government (39%), people's trust in government is closely related to their media consumption habits: only 22% of those who prefer not to follow political news report high or moderate trust in government compared to 40% among those who follow the news in some ways. **When government is a source of information, people are satisfied with the information available on administrative services (67%), while only 39% think that communication about policy reforms, an important driver of trust, is adequate.**

Additionally, while the use of statistics, data and evidence is also shown to be a strong driver a trust, **only about a third of people find government statistics trustworthy and easy to find and to understand.**

## What can governments do?

Notwithstanding differences across countries, the results provide a shared agenda for OECD governments to meet their citizens' increasing expectations. This agenda for action differs slightly across public institutions and levels of government given the levers and room for improving trust differ across those institutions.

Overall, the 2024 Trust Survey confirms that it is **the processes underpinning democratic governance** that need strengthening to meet people's increasing expectations: ensuring all people's voices are heard, strengthening checks and balance among institutions, using better, transparent and verifiable evidence in decision-making, and balancing the interests of a diverse population are the best levers to **improve trust, especially in national governments.**

- **Engage better with citizens to enhance trust in both local and national government.** There is a significant need for more meaningful and inclusive opportunities for citizen participation and influence in decision-making processes. This requires setting clear expectations about the role of deliberative and direct democracy within representative democracies; improving the mechanisms through which governments give all people a voice and are responsive to these voices and supporting spaces and capacities for civic and political engagement. Policies designed to promote political inclusivity and engagement or mitigate economic vulnerability and discrimination could also be key to closing trust gaps and empower people to participate in public debate.
- **Strengthen capacity to address complex policy challenges especially at national government level.** Data shows that governments must continue to improve their reliability and preparedness for future crises,

including those with global implications; and consider whether questions of intra-national and inter-generational fairness are allocated sufficient space not only during the policy deliberation process, but also in public communication.

- Related to the above, **support a healthy information ecosystem and invest in evidence-based communication.**

Governments would benefit from more actively communicating about the evidence, research, and statistics that inform their decisions to improve public perception of the decision-making process, and ensure the data are openly verifiable; ensuring they clearly and inclusively explain how policy reforms affect the public; promoting a healthy, diverse, and independent media environment that provides the necessary checks and balances in the information ecosystem, a requirement for trust; and strengthening media literacy in society.

- For all institutions, **invest in improving perceptions of integrity in daily interactions and complex decision making.** Trust in all

institutions surveyed would benefit from clearer rules related to integrity and anti-corruption and their implementation. Strengthening checks and balances in the political system, in particular to prevent perceptions of undue influence and conflict of interests, is also likely to help build trust and help maintain support for representative democracy.

- **Invest in reliable, responsive and fair public services, especially to enhance trust in the civil service and local government.** While a majority expresses satisfaction with services, data shows that improving the speed and ease of administrative service delivery, as well as the responsiveness of public services to feedback from users or ideas from frontline public employees would contribute to even higher satisfaction levels. Fair treatment from public employees and legitimate use of personal data also hold potential for increased trust. The declining satisfaction with the healthcare and education systems over the past two years warrants further monitoring.



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