

Executive summary

The inaugural OECD Survey on the Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (Trust Survey) is a new measurement tool for democratic governments seeking to improve public confidence in government reliability, responsiveness, integrity, fairness and openness. Twenty-two OECD countries volunteered to participate in the first wave of the programme, taking a collective step forward to measure and better understand what drives people's trust in public institutions in order to build further the resilience of their democracies. Most countries were surveyed in November-December 2021, with a few surveys taking place in 2020 and January-March 2022.

Trust is an important indicator to measure how people perceive the quality of, and how they associate with, government institutions in democratic countries. At the same time, high trust in public institutions is of course not a *necessary* outcome of democratic governance. Indeed, low levels of trust measured in democracies are only possible because citizens in democratic systems – unlike in autocratic ones – are free to report that they do not trust their government. The resilience of our democratic systems comes from the open public debate they foster, enabling them to improve and meet increasing citizen expectations.

Results of the survey vary significantly across countries due to a range of cultural, social, institutional and economic factors. Cross-national comparisons should thus be considered carefully. Nonetheless, the results show clear overall tendencies affecting OECD members and reveal common focal points for the future that do not preclude other important areas that may be more country-specific.

Overall, the results show that OECD countries are performing reasonably well on average on many measures of governance, such as citizens' perceptions of government reliability, service provision, and data openness. A majority of people, in most countries, are satisfied with access to information about administrative procedures and with the provision of healthcare and education. More than half of respondents, on average cross-nationally, trust their government to use their personal data only for legitimate purposes, and about six in ten think they would be treated fairly if they applied for a benefit. Only a third are concerned that their government would not be prepared for a future pandemic.

OECD governments, in short, are governing. These are the outcomes we expect from economically developed and mature democracies with stable governance.

Yet despite these good outcomes, as countries fight to emerge from the largest health, economic and social crisis in decades, trust levels decreased in 2021 (though they remain slightly higher than in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis). Public confidence is now evenly split between people who say they trust their national government and those who do not. Historical data show that it takes a long time to rebuild trust when it is diminished; it took about a decade, for example, for public trust to recover from the 2008 crisis. This is why countries urgently need to invest in re-establishing trust to tackle the policy challenges ahead.

In many countries, there exists a paradox of lower levels of confidence in many government institutions than in satisfaction with public service provision. At the more granular level, the judiciary, police, civil service and local governments tend to inspire more confidence than national governments, elected officials, political parties and parliaments and congresses.

This raises an important question: How can governments better connect with citizens and strengthen trust?

A key factor distinguishing democracy from other forms of government is equal opportunities for representation in decision-making. Many people in OECD countries see equal access to policy-making processes as falling short of their expectations.

Results from the survey, for example, illustrate that governments could do better in responding to citizens' concerns. Just under four in ten respondents, on average across countries, say that their government would improve a poorly performing service, implement an innovative idea, or change a national policy in response to public demands. And when considering more overtly political processes, around a third of citizens say the political system in their country lets them have a say.

Public perceptions of government integrity are also an issue. Just under half of respondents, on average across countries, think a high-level political official would grant a political favour in exchange for the offer of a well-paid private sector job, and about one-third predict a civil servant would accept money in exchange for speeding up access to a service.

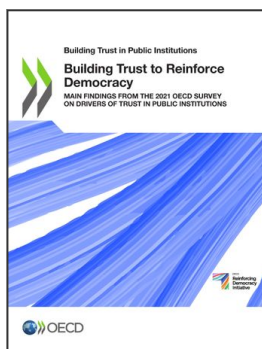
Disadvantaged groups with less (real or perceived) access to opportunity and voice have lower levels of trust in government. Younger people, women, people living on low income, people with low levels of education, and people

who feel financially insecure consistently report lower levels of trust in government. Political polarisation is related to trust, as well; those who did not vote for the incumbent government are much less likely to trust it. Across countries, there is a sense that democratic government is working well for some, but not well enough for all.

Democratic governments face additional challenges today. A high correlation between partisanship and trust in government suggests that polarisation may affect governments' ability to deliver effectively. Scepticism towards the news media suggests that a key component of democracy, access to reliable information, is today a factor of distrust. Around half of citizens think governments should be doing more to reduce climate change, while just over one-third are confident that countries will actually succeed in reducing their country's contribution to climate change.

Notwithstanding differences across countries, this analysis also provides a shared agenda for OECD governments to strengthen trust, reinforce democracy, and recommit to reducing inequalities. This report suggests that these goals must be targeted together. Governments cannot focus solely on the *outcomes* of policies but also on *processes* – especially if governments want to keep democratic institutions and norms intact.

To meet their citizens' increasing expectations, OECD governments will have to invest in improving the mechanisms through which they give all people a voice and are responsive to those voices. They will have to enhance integrity and fight undue influence, credibly address long-term challenges such as climate change, evaluate and communicate the effects of reforms on different socioeconomic groups, develop better governance models for information ecosystems, and regularly monitor public trust in institutions as part of broader assessments of government performance.



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