Introduction

Governments today stand at a critical juncture. They are tasked with navigating simultaneous transitions and overcoming significant challenges, from ensuring economic security and recovery to managing heightened geo-political tensions, mitigating and adapting to climate change and adjusting to technological changes. At the same time, rising polarisation and citizens disengaging from traditional democratic processes place governments under increased pressure. In this high stakes environment, building and maintaining trust in public institutions has emerged as a priority for governments around the world.

Trust in public institutions is the bedrock upon which public officials in democracies rely to govern on a daily basis and make policy choices to tackle pressing challenges. Trust reduce transaction costs – in governance, in society, and in the economy – and eases compliance with public policies. Trust can help foster adherence to challenging reforms and programmes with better outcomes. In democracies, robust levels of trust – along with healthy levels of public scrutiny – can help legitimise and protect democratic institutions and norms.

Trust is also an important indicator to measure how people perceive and assess their government institutions. High trust in public institutions is of course not a *necessary* outcome of democratic governance. Indeed, low levels of trust measured in democracies are possible because citizens in democratic systems – unlike in autocratic ones – are not only free to report that they do not trust their government, but they are also encouraged to scrutinise government behaviour and show 'sceptical trust'. The resilience of democratic systems comes from the open public debate they foster, enabling them to take into account a plurality of opinions to improve in the pursuit of trustworthiness and better outcomes; and from the ability of different institutions to hold each other accountable. Even low levels of trust in individual public institutions should not be viewed as an indication of a rejection of democratic values, but rather as a demonstration that citizens have high expectations for what institutions in democratic systems can deliver.

This report provides an encompassing stocktake of what drives trust in public institutions in 2023 by asking people in 30 OECD countries about their experience with, and expectations of, government reliability, responsiveness, capacity to tackle complex and global challenges, integrity, fairness, and openness. The OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (Trust Survey), which provides the original data for this report, was implemented in 30 OECD countries in October and November 2023, following the inaugural 2021 wave that included 22 OECD countries (Box 1). The 2023 Trust Survey asked the same set of questions as in 2021, allowing for comparisons in the evolution of results over time. A few new questions were introduced, allowing for a deeper understanding of the results.

Box 1. The 2023 OECD Survey on the Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (Trust Survey)

The second wave of the OECD Trust Survey provides extensive coverage across 30 OECD member countries, typically with 2000 respondents per country. Twenty countries covered in the first Trust Survey in 2021 also participated in 2023. These are: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Korea, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Additionally, ten new countries joined the Trust Survey in 2023: Chile, Costa Rica, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland. Countries volunteer to participate in the survey, which according to the 2022 Luxembourg Declaration on Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy is set to be carried out every two years.

The Trust Survey questionnaire follows the structure of the OECD Framework on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (see Annex 1.A in Chapter 1) which defines trust as "a person's belief that another person or institution will act consistently with their expectation of positive behaviour". The questionnaire includes questions regarding trust levels in different public institutions and the media, situational questions about public governance drivers of trust, and modules on satisfaction with public services, political participation, global and intergenerational challenges and the respondent's background. The questions related to trust levels and drivers use a 0-10 response scale and an option to answer 'don't know'.

Data collection for the 2023 OECD Trust Survey took place in October and November 2023 in most countries (see Annex B). In Ireland, Mexico and the United Kingdom, data collection already started in late September; and in Norway, it was finalized in early December. The national surveys were carried out online for most countries by Ipsos, by national statistical offices (in Finland, Ireland, Mexico and the United Kingdom), by a national research institute (Iceland), and a survey research firm (Norway). Apart from Norway, where some respondents filled out paper surveys, and Mexico, where respondents were interviewed in person, the data collection occurred through online surveys. Data are generally representative of the adult population at the national level; and the urban adult population in Mexico.

An Advisory Group consisting of public officials from OECD member countries, along with representatives from National Statistical Offices and international experts has led the development of the survey questionnaire and oversaw the survey implementation and analysis. The Advisory Group has helped ensuring that the questionnaire was adapted to different national contexts, while guaranteeing meaningful international comparison.

Since the publication of the 2021 results, the OECD has also been able to track how governments more broadly have used the results of the OECD 2021 Trust Survey to guide their public policies. This includes, for example, making trust an overarching policy objective for government action, embedding trust in the strategic framework for public services transformation and creating government coordination mechanisms dedicated to driving forward the trust agenda (Box 2).

Box 2. Countries initiatives following the 2021 Trust Survey

The OECD Trust Survey provides strong evidence that positive perceptions of public governance processes, namely government responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness, and fairness are related to trust in various political institutions. However, evidence of how specific policy changes or interventions can affect levels of trust is sparser. This box thus aims to provide an overview of how governments have used the results of the OECD 2021 Trust Survey to guide their public policies, rather than evaluate the effects of these government interventions.

- **Prioritising trust as a policy objective** implies the government recognises trust as an indicator of government performance, and an input with significant impact on policy outcomes. It often involves a commitment to regular data collection, which allows governments to track trust evolution and identify areas requiring further investment. For instance, following the Study on Drivers of Trust in public institutions, New Zealand's government committed resources to monitor trust determinants and correlate them with socio-economic characteristics' data. Similarly, Colombia used the OECD 2021 Trust Survey data as a baseline and will use it as a monitoring indicator for its National Development Strategy. Estonia set concrete numeric targets for trust in the national and local government and the Riigikogu (Parliament), currently derived from Eurobarometer, as monitoring indicators in their "Estonia 2035" long-term development strategy. In Mexico, the Federal Cabinet for Public Safety and the security cabinet of Mexico City use trust data in decisions relating to improving performance and trust and reducing corruption; and the National Commission for Superior Courts of Justice refers to statistics on trust in the judicial system in policies for improving social trust in judges and local courts. And in Sweden, several results of the 2021 Trust Survey related to trust were reported in the governmental budget bill to Parliament.

- **Embedding trust in the strategic framework** can help mainstream the concept of trust across the public administration. For instance, Ireland used the OECD Framework on Drivers of Trust to shape its Public Service Transformation Strategy to 2030 (Government of Ireland, 2023[1]). This strategy explicitly commits to the public governance drivers of trust identified by the OECD and lists public trust as one of six top-level outcomes. Likewise, Norway initiated its Trust Reform in 2022, a public sector management reform which aims to boost public trust by improving government competence, focusing on responsiveness (Government of Norway, 2022[2]). By leveraging the unique knowledge and expertise of front-line staff, the reform seeks to transform the public sector into a more user-centric and citizen-responsive entity. Chile participated in the OECD Trust Survey for the first time in 2023, although the OECD Framework on Drivers of Trust already informed the 2022-2026 Modernisation of the State Agenda in Chile (Government of Chile, 2022[3]). The agenda's core objective is to regain trust in and legitimacy of government institutions, and it includes specific initiatives to strengthen government competence and promote government values during this period.

- **Putting in place dedicated coordination mechanisms** can help facilitate the implementation of agendas surrounding trust. Norway formed a committee of state secretaries and group involving all ministries to improve coordination around trust in the administrations (Government of Norway, 2022[2]). Along these lines, Finland created a cross-government working group to implement OECD Trust Survey recommendations and identify areas for further work. Beyond intragovernmental coordination, in Portugal, an institutional framework is being developed for decision-makers and the scientific system to enhance trust.

- **Enhancing openness and engagement opportunities.** Finland institutionalised national dialogues following the model of *Lockdown Dialogues* held during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Latvia organized several trainings for "public dialogue's facilitators" and in August 2023 the State Chancellery launched a series of national discussions with citizens on the issue of trust, following the Finnish model. The main conclusions of these dialogues were presented to Members of Parliament. Ireland leveraged survey findings to tailor their initiatives to the specific needs and concerns of different population groups. Lower levels of trust among youth led the government to the establishment of youth assemblies to inform government policies on issues such as climate change and artificial intelligence. The Irish government also targeted young people in its public consultation to improve the development of digital public services by partnering with voluntary organisations.

Note: These examples were compiled in relation to the activities conducted by the OECD Trust Survey Advisory Group.

The year 2024 represents a significant milestone in global politics, with 83 elections scheduled across 76 countries, representing nearly four billion people (Hsu, Thompson and Myers, 2024[4]; The Economist, 2023[5]). This unprecedented wave of democratic activity is unlikely to be matched until 2048. Of the 30 countries surveyed in the 2023 OECD Trust survey, 9 are holding national elections in 2024, and this number rises to 23 with the elections to the European parliament.

While the OECD Trust Survey measures the structural drivers of trust in institutions, which may vary mildly around elections, the political cycle affects several elements of trust in government itself. Recent participation in elections can improve the perceived legitimacy of the system with people feeling that they have a voice if the electoral system is perceived as fair and neutral, and subsequently, heightened confidence that expectations will be met at the start of electoral mandates (Hooghe and Marien, 2014[6]; Kolpinskaya et al., 2020[7]). However, the effects are likely to be mediated by partisanship, especially in majority systems with clear "winners" and "losers (Hooghe and Stiers, 2016[8]). In addition, the increased media scrutiny and consumption of political news during elections can also result in more informed, yet potentially more sceptical, citizens (Lau, Sigelman and Rovner, 2007[9]).

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