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POLICY BRIEF

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The Crisis of Trust in Democratic Institutions and the Democratic Process: How to Get Out of It

Alexandra Keating

Summary

In light of unprecedented levels of political polarization, economic uncertainty and an ever-changing media landscape, the authority and efficacy of democratic institutions have come under fire around the world. As these institutions are the very basis of many societies around the world, it has never been more crucial to work to ensure their sustainability.

Key points

- Economic inequality, increased polarization and lack of representation, and the rise of alternative forms of media have all contributed to a decline in the trust of democratic institutions around the world.
- Increased governmental transparency and accountability and voter engagement, along with compromise among lawmakers are essential in rebuilding global confidence in democracy and its institutions.

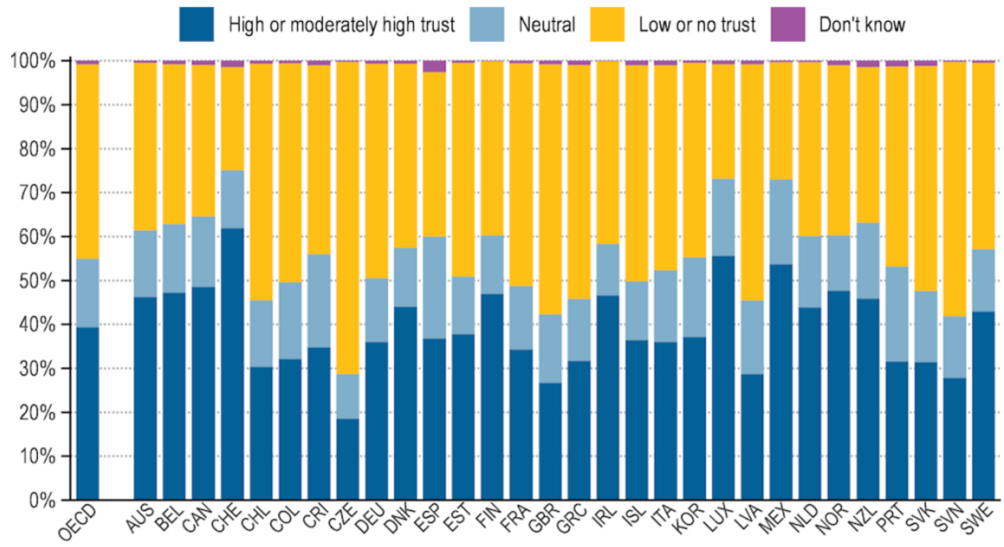
Introduction

Around the globe, there is a growing discontentment with democracy and its institutions. Governments and institutions that were once seen as prestigious are now considered inefficient and elitist by their constituents. Democracies are supposed to derive their power from their people, but decreasing engagement levels and growing disconnects between leaders and their people have led to a decline in the integrity of efficacy of these institutions, and citizens' trust within them. All of this raises several questions, but chief among them: how can this be overcome?

Shifting trust

As reflected in figure 1, there is a growing percentage of national populations around the world that do not trust their government. This erosion of trust is indicative of the fragility of democracies and their institutions.

Figure 1: A slightly larger share of the population has low or no trust in their national government compared to those with high or moderately high trust



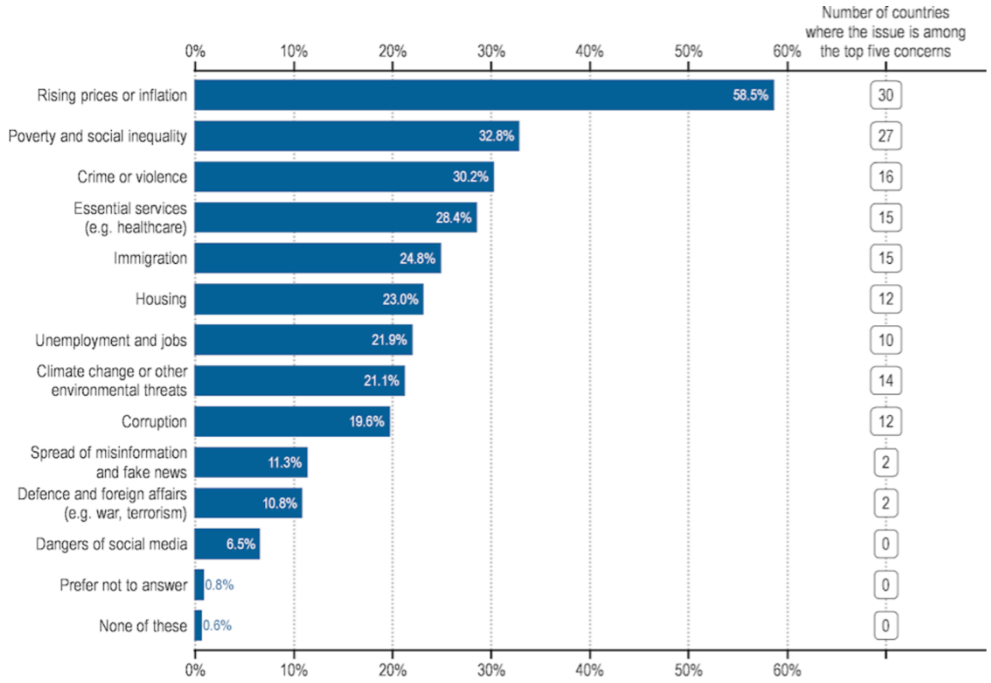
Source: OECD Trust Survey, 2023

There are several reasons as to why this is occurring. In an opinion piece for The Washington Post, Fareed Zakaria describes this phenomenon as shifts in trust, rather than a simple, outright decline. He emphasizes the role of media in upholding democracies, discussing how a decline in trust of traditional media outlets and governmental institutions has led to people placing their trust in individual commentators as an alternative. While mentioned in context of the United States, these patterns can be seen worldwide; "This shift from institutions to individuals is enabled by new technologies that allow individuals to have the kind of reach and influence that was once the preserve of large organizations" (Zakaria, 2024). The elevation of these individuals' commentary undermines the authority and reach of said institutions.

Economic inequality is also emerging as a factor in democratic backsliding and distrust. A recent study "compared levels of income inequality in countries that have experienced democratic erosion or backsliding and those that have not, and found a robust statistical association between the two" (Steimer, 2025). Economic concerns consistently rank as a priority for voters around the globe, so citizens look to leaders that provide a reason for fluctuation and inequality within their economy. Professor Susan

Stokes, one of the co-authors of this study, also cites this as a reason for increased polarization within governments; whether it be blaming corporations or so-called outsiders, "Backsliding leaders play on inequality and deepen polarization by encouraging a sense of grievance among the public. Feelings of being left behind and alienation from elite institutions—backsliding leaders prey upon all of these" (Stokes, 2025).

Figure 2: Economic concerns are at the forefront of people's minds



Source: OECD Trust Survey, 2023

Representation within government, or lack thereof, is another common issue; "Many citizens, particularly groups such as youth, disadvantaged socio-economic communities and women, often feel excluded from the political process. To address this, we need adapt our representation models to make them more inclusive and diverse" (OECD, n.d.). Especially in larger democracies, it is very common for citizens to feel as though their representatives do not share their interests, and belong to an elite class rather than serving their constituents. While this may not necessarily be the case, the power of public perception cannot be underestimated in any government, and a hostile disconnect between officials and the public certainly contributes to a lack of political engagement.

Rebuilding confidence in democratic institutions

The key to restoring trust in democratic institutions is reformation within governments that have succumbed to forms of backsliding. Policymaking needs to be more targeted at directly addressing issues that people care about—reflected in figure 2, but public health, the environment and the economy are some of the most prominent—in order for citizens to believe in the efficacy of their leaders and institutions. Accountability among leaders is also a pillar of maintaining trust, rather than endless cycles of partisan blame games that result in no compromise.

However, this is not just limited to political reform. Promoting democratic norms throughout society is crucial in ensuring that these institutions can properly function and endure the test of time. Once again, media plays an essential role here. As social media becomes the leading source of news for people around the world, it is important to remember that many of these sites are privately owned.

Prioritizing profit has become the norm, making many platforms susceptible to algorithms that affect what users see and the individual decisions of their owners. However, a democracy cannot sustain itself without an informed citizenry. Information and ideas need to be easily accessible and free-flowing in order to allow citizens to make their own decisions and participate in their government, hence the importance of independent media and rights to freedom of speech. This, along with nongovernmental organizations, unions and interest groups allow for increased representation within government while also providing another mechanism to hold officials and institutions accountable.

Conclusion

Democracy is not doomed. In fact, "low political trust is perfectly compatible with high and enduring rates of popular support for democratic arrangements… If anything, declining trust is more strongly associated with public demands for greater popular voice in political decision-making" (Seyd, n.d.). People believe in the power of these institutions and want their governments to succeed and maintain their integrity; levels of trust are decreasing because those institutions can be held to higher standards. As Zakaria says, "The handful of countries that have broken out of poverty and bad government have established good, fair institutions and procedures that go beyond any individual… Liberal democracy has been marked by its emphasis on procedures, not outcomes." (Zakaria, 2024). The rebuilding of confidence in these institutions will not happen overnight, nor will it be the result of one individual or group making a change. It will come from prioritizing democratic values, and honest efforts both within and outside of governmental systems, focused on the greater good and the power of the people.

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Author

ALEXANDRA KEATING

Alexandra Keating is a fourth-year undergraduate student at the University of Delaware. She is majoring in Communication with a concentration in Media, and International Relations with a concentration in U.S. Foreign Policy & National Security and a European regional specialization. She also has minors in Journalism and European Studies. Alexandra studied abroad in Prague in the fall of 2024 and was a Policy Analyst Intern with the Institute for Politics and Society. Her interests include cross-cultural communication, journalism, foreign policy, diplomacy and security.

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Martinská 2, 110 00 Prague 1

+420 602 502 674

www.politikaspolecnost.cz

office@politikaspolecnost.cz