Executive summary

International surveys agree that the level of trust in government has declined since the crisis (down to 43% in 2015 according to the Gallup World Poll). Trust in political parties and in parliaments has also fallen to around 50% according to Eurobarometer/European Social Survey. The Edelman Barometer 2016 finds a widening disparity between levels of trust in public institutions according to income, with high-income persons reporting a higher degree of trust in government (on average 10% higher). Trust in financial institutions decreased by an average of 9 percentage points in OECD countries between 2007 and 2015.

Public trust has been eroding just when policy makers need it most. At least three major “pressure points” stand out as policy arenas in which trust is being won or lost:

- Concern about the continuing lack of economic growth and its impact on incomes, jobs and equality.
- Anger over persistent problems of corruption, tax evasion, regulatory capture and other signs of weak respect for rule of law.
- Unease over the ability of governments to manage global pressures and risks such as climate change, geopolitical tensions, terrorism and large-scale migration.

This report examines the influence of trust on policy making, and some of the public policy tools that can strengthen trust. While trust is clearly a multifaceted concept – depending as much on subjective perception as on facts – its influence on the outcomes of public policy is significant and sufficiently tangible to make building trust an objective worth pursuing for public institutions.

In proposing a framework for understanding trust in public institutions, the report places the emphasis on two principal drivers of trust: competence and values. These drivers encompass a range of qualities and attributes that have been shown to inspire trust – in particular reliability, integrity, responsiveness, fairness and openness. The report explores how these
attributes can be better integrated into how governments make and implement public policies.

Key findings

- Two different but complementary components matter in understanding and analysing trust: i) competence or operational efficiency, capacity and good judgement to actually deliver on a given mandate; and ii) values or the underlying intentions and principles that guide actions and behaviours. Responsiveness and reliability are critical dimensions of competence; with regard to values, citizens expect integrity, openness and fairness.

- With regard to values, four policy levers are particularly powerful in influencing trust: 1) governments defining and adhering to integrity principles; 2) seizing critical opportunities to demonstrate integrity in practice, such as large public infrastructure projects and major events; 3) political leaders leading by example (with regard to asset disclosure, transparency, etc.); and 4) ensuring common standards and behaviours at all levels, since state and local authorities often interact more closely with citizens than do central government civil servants.

- Improving public services, in terms of access, quality and responsiveness, plays an important role in strengthening trust in government: service performance, citizen satisfaction and public trust are closely connected. Better understanding citizens’ needs, experiences and preferences can result in better targeted services, including for underserved populations, often at little extra cost.

- Citizens’ perception of fairness, in process as much as in outcome, is a critical dimension of trust. People must feel they have a real voice; are treated with respect; and receive necessary explanations. Positive perceptions of fairness lead to greater acceptance of decisions, better compliance with regulations, and more cooperative behaviour in dealing with agents of the government. The reverse also holds: some citizens will even prefer negative consequences for themselves, such as financial penalties over compliance, if they perceive that they have been treated unfairly. In general, low trust generates extra transaction costs for citizens, businesses and government.

- Sound use of public money is another important domain in which trust can be easily lost. Governments need to ensure that the budget
decision-making process itself is open and provides for an inclusive, participative and realistic debate on budgetary choices, and not simply provide access to information once spending decisions have been made. Tools to promote fiscal transparency include the Citizen’s Budget, which presents key public finance information for a general audience, and independent bodies responsible for oversight of fiscal policy (independent fiscal institutions or IFIs).

- From law-making to budgeting and service delivery, efforts towards greater openness send a clear signal of a government’s commitment to invest in trust while improving the quality of the decisions made. The current move towards concepts of ‘open government’ and the even more ambitious ‘open state’ are positive signs that governments are trying to strengthen dialogue with citizens, even if in some cases this openness illuminates facts that generate distrust.

- According to the Edelman Barometer 2016, which looked at customer behaviour, almost 70% of respondents chose to buy a product because they trusted the company. The private sector has shown that, with the right groundwork and preparation, the behaviour of individuals can be strongly influenced by perceived trustworthiness. Companies understand that there are two separate dimensions at play: cognitive (rational or experience-based) trust and affective (emotional) trust. They therefore tend to use an integrated approach in establishing trust with their different stakeholders. While the emotional dimension can be linked to, for example, brand loyalty, the rational will value such attributes as reliability and quality. For a public institution, developing a reputation for reliability and quality will bring tangible benefits, such as easier acceptance of new services, procedures or regulations.

- Justice is perhaps the public service that most directly depends on a strong trust relationship between public institutions and citizens. There are various empirical, conceptual and institutional challenges in understanding the links between trust and justice; large gaps remain in the literature and in empirical research on trust in civil (as opposed to criminal) justice. Clearly however, the tools that matter most with regard to legal and justice services are similar to those discussed above with respect to other public services, such as reliability, responsiveness and fairness. Trustworthiness derives from understanding users’ needs and the pathways people in different situations use to access services, as well as integrating these services with other social services (e.g. health, employment).
From: Trust and Public Policy
How Better Governance Can Help Rebuild Public Trust

Access the complete publication at: https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264268920-en

Please cite this chapter as:


DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264268920-2-en

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