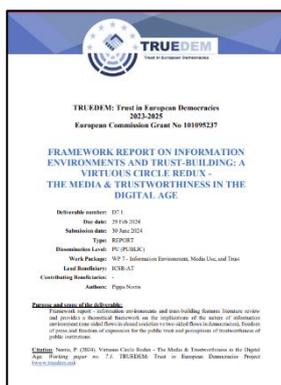


TRUEDEM: Trust in European Democracies (2023-2025)

Quarterly Project Newsletter - Issue 6 (June 2024)

A Virtuous Circle Redux - The Media & Trustworthiness in the Digital Age



A new TRUEDEM project report has been released under the authorship of the project co-PI Pippa Norris (Harvard University, USA). [The framework report on information environments and trust-building \(D7.1\)](#) examines the role of media environments in shaping public trust and perceptions of trustworthiness in democratic and non-democratic societies. The report revisits the virtuous circle thesis, which argues that media exposure in open societies enhances informed political trust, while restricted media in closed societies fosters unwarranted trust in authoritarian leaders.

The report is structured around key theoretical debates, empirical data, and comparative analysis across 39 European countries. It challenges the media malaise hypothesis, which blames news media for political cynicism,

instead presenting evidence that access to diverse media sources fosters critical thinking and strengthens democratic engagement. Using European Social Survey data (2002-2022), the study finds that higher media exposure is linked to greater trust in institutions when media systems are pluralistic and independent, whereas in closed societies, state-controlled media amplifies uncritical trust and misinformation. By distinguishing between trust and trustworthiness, the report argues that political trust should be based on rational evaluations of governance performance, rather than partisan bias or state propaganda. It highlights how economic performance, governance quality, and media freedom interact to shape public perceptions of institutional trust.

The report concludes that trust in democratic institutions is best sustained in societies with free, diverse, and independent media landscapes. It provides policy recommendations for improving media literacy, enhancing press freedoms, and countering misinformation as essential tools for strengthening democratic resilience in Europe.

Political Trust and Democratic Innovations: State-of-the-Art Report



A new TRUEDEM project report has been released under the authorship of the Frederic Gonthier, Prunelle Ayme and Celine Belot (GAU-FR). [The TRUEDEM Report on Political Trust and Democratic Innovations \(D9.1\)](#) explores how democratic innovations—including deliberative and direct democracy—affect political trust and legitimacy in European democracies. The study provides a state-of-the-art analysis of how these innovations can rebuild trust in political institutions, examining the mechanisms through which they influence citizen engagement and perceptions of governance.

The report highlights the decline in political trust over the past decades and its consequences for democratic stability. While skepticism toward government is inherent to democracy, widespread distrust threatens participation, legitimacy, and policy implementation. The study argues that democratic innovations have the potential to

enhance trust by fostering citizen involvement in political decision-making, either through deliberative processes (such as citizen assemblies and participatory budgeting) or direct democratic tools (like referendums and citizen initiatives).

Empirical findings suggest that political efficacy—the belief that citizens can influence politics—plays a key role in whether democratic innovations successfully increase trust. When well-designed, deliberative forums and participatory mechanisms can improve perceptions of government responsiveness, leading to greater public trust. However, poorly implemented initiatives or those seen as symbolic rather than impactful may actually reinforce cynicism.

The report also discusses barriers to democratic innovations, such as their frequent appeal to politically engaged citizens rather than disaffected groups, the risk of elite manipulation, and the tendency of deliberative processes to lack binding authority. While the study confirms the potential of democratic innovations to strengthen trust, it emphasizes that their impact depends on design, inclusivity, and political context.

(De)polarisation in values, attitudes and beliefs: comparative perspectives

On April 11, 2024, the Policy Institute at King’s College London, in collaboration with the World Values Survey Association, UCL, and the Behavioural Insights Team, hosted a [one-day international conference on polarisation](#), bringing together leading scholars to examine how values, attitudes, and beliefs are evolving in different societies. Among the key contributors were Prof. Christian Welzel and Prof. Pippa Norris, both members of the TRUEDEM project, whose presentations provided critical insights into the links between polarisation, institutional trust, and democracy.

Christian Welzel (Leuphana University & World Values Survey Association) delivered a keynote address titled *Mass Polarization, Institutional Distrust and the Breakdown of Democracy? Debunking a Commonplace Dystopia*. His presentation challenged the prevailing notion that increasing polarisation leads to democratic collapse. Drawing on cross-national data and long-term trends, Welzel argued that while societies may become more politically and culturally divided, this does not necessarily result in the breakdown of democratic institutions. Instead, he highlighted the adaptive resilience of democracies, emphasizing that institutional trust can fluctuate without permanently destabilizing governance structures.

Pippa Norris (Harvard University & World Values Survey Association) closed the event with a keynote titled *“Things fall apart, the center cannot hold”: Fractionalized and Polarized Party Systems in Western Democracies*. Her presentation focused on the fragmentation of political party systems, examining how the decline of traditional mainstream parties and the rise of populist challengers have reshaped electoral landscapes in Western democracies. Norris explored the consequences of this political realignment on trust in democratic institutions, arguing that while polarisation poses challenges, pluralistic democracies remain capable of absorbing and managing these divisions through institutional mechanisms.



TRUEDEM Webinar Series

The [TRUEDEM Webinar Series](#) is an academic platform dedicated to exploring the dynamics of political trust, democratic legitimacy, and governance in European democracies. Organized as part of the TRUEDEM research project, the series brings together scholars, policymakers, and experts to discuss the drivers of trust and distrust, the impact of political scandals and media, and the role of institutional reforms and digital innovations in shaping public confidence in democracy. Featuring interdisciplinary perspectives from political science, sociology, and psychology, the webinars provide in-depth analyses of both long-term trends and contemporary challenges to political trust. The series aims to foster research-driven discussions on strengthening democratic resilience and improving the relationship between citizens and political institutions.

Education-based Affective Attitudes: Higher Educated-Bias is Related to More Political Trust and Less Populism

#TRUEDEM webinar series

Education-based Affective Attitudes: Higher Educated-Bias is Related to More Political Trust and Less Populism

Recent political trends and events have been marked by strong educational differences. In addition, education has also been shown to be a basis for group identity and group conflict. This analysis argues that educational groups are likely to understand their position in society and their inclusion or exclusion (in politics) as being related to their educational level. Thus, it is likely that education-based affective attitudes are related to evaluations of the societal and political status quo. Using data from nine European countries, this research charts the relationship of higher education-bias (i.e., the preference for higher educated compared to less educated groups) with different political outcomes. The results demonstrate that the higher educated show in-group bias, in particular those who identify strongly with their educational group. The less educated do not show (significant) in-group bias. Those who have a stronger (positive) bias towards the higher educated display more political trust and satisfaction with democracy and are less likely to be populist.



Jochem van Noord is a political sociologist and political-psychologist who works as a post-doctoral researcher as part of the Brussels Institute of Social and Population Studies (BISPS), research doctor (DR) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. Jochem received his (double) PhD from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the University of Groningen in 2021, with an interdisciplinary research project about education-based status, combining both sociological and social psychological theories and methods, with a little bit of political science mixed in. His research interests revolve around inequality, group conflict, and culture/identity, primarily in the political domain.

JOIN US ON MAY 29, 2024, AT 17.00 CET

  Funded by the European Union

On May 29, 2024, Jochem van Noord (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) presented research on how education-based affective attitudes influence political trust and populism. Using data from nine European countries, the study found that higher-educated individuals show strong in-group bias, which correlates with greater political trust, higher satisfaction with democracy, and lower support for populism. In contrast, the less educated did not display significant in-group bias. These findings highlight the role of education in shaping political attitudes and democratic engagement. [Learn more here.](#)

Political Trust and Democracy: the Critical Citizens Thesis Re-Examined

#TRUEDEM webinar series

Political Trust and Democracy: the Critical Citizens Thesis Re-Examined

This analysis empirically assesses competing perspectives of the relationship between democracy and political trust. Multilevel analyses on a cross-national panel dataset of 82 countries for the period 1990-2020 was conducted. The findings suggest that there is a strong, negative relationship between democracy and political trust that cannot easily be dismissed as an artifact of model misspecification or response bias. Moreover, the research re-examines the critical citizens thesis by disaggregating political trust into trust in partisan and "non-partisan" institutions to test the claim that well-functioning democracies contain and channel distrust into the more partisan political institutions to keep distrust from generalizing to the entire political system. The results fail to find a statistically significant difference of the effect of democracy on trust between partisan and non-partisan institutions, suggesting that low political trust within democracies may be a more acute problem than much of the literature suggests.



Andrew C. Dawson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Ulfredson Campus of York University. He is a member of both the Graduate Program in Sociology and the Master's in Public and International Affairs Program, and an Associate Editor of the Canadian Review of Sociology. In 2019-2020, he was a Visiting Scholar at Massey College, University of Toronto. Originally from Alberta, he joined York University via Montreal, where he completed a MA and PhD in Sociology at McGill University, followed by a two-year postdoctoral fellowship at the Université de Montréal, jointly held between the Department of Political Science and CERIU (the Centre for International Studies). His primary areas of research interest are political sociology, violence and development, with a focus on state legitimacy, political and social trust, democracy and the rule of law.

JOIN US ON JUNE 05, 2024, AT 17.00 CET

  Funded by the European Union

On June 5, 2024, Andrew C. Dawson (York University) presented research challenging existing assumptions about the relationship between democracy and political trust. Using multilevel analyses of panel data from 82 countries (1990-2020), the study found a strong negative relationship between democracy and political trust, suggesting that democratic systems may struggle more with trust deficits than previously assumed. The research also re-examined the critical citizens thesis, testing whether well-functioning democracies channel distrust toward partisan institutions while preserving trust in non-partisan ones. [Learn more here.](#)

Stability and Change in Political Trust Attitudes

#TRUEDEM webinar series

Stability and Change in Political Trust Attitudes

Are political attitudes a stable feature of individuals or a rational response to changing circumstances and contexts? In this analysis, we explore this perennial question with a focus on the case of political trust, a fundamental indicator of democratic legitimacy and a long-standing topic of debate. Theoretically, we devise a framework that highlights how different theories of political trust assume different levels of stability or volatility and the implications that this has for those theories and their normative consequences. Empirically, we study within-individual stability of political trust using six panel studies that cover five countries between 1965 and 2020. Our results consistently point to trust being stable in the long term, with potential for short-term volatility in response to changing political contexts, and for substantial changes between people's formative years and their adulthood.



Daniel Devine is Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Southampton, UK. His research is in the broad fields of public opinion, political behaviour, and political psychology; he is primarily interested in how people develop attitudes towards their political systems - such as democratic attitudes, political trust, democratic satisfaction - and the consequences these attitudes have for policy preferences and political behaviour.

JOIN US ON JUNE 26, 2024, AT 17.00 CET

  Funded by the European Union

On June 26, 2024, Daniel Devine (University of Southampton) presented research on the stability and evolution of political trust over time. Using six panel studies covering five countries from 1965 to 2020, the study examined whether political trust remains a stable individual trait or shifts in response to changing political contexts. The findings suggest that political trust is remarkably stable in the long term, with only short-term fluctuations in response to political events, such as government turnover. [Learn more here.](#)

TRUEDEM at ESOF 2024: Advancing the Discussion on Trust in Science and Institutions



The poster for EuroScience Open Forum 2024 features a blue header with the event title and dates. Below this, a brown sidebar contains the theme 'Trustworthy science and trust in science', the date '12 June 2024 14:45 - 16:00', and the location 'International Congress Centre Katowice Ballroom A'. The main area lists 'Our speakers' with circular portraits of Agnieszka Turska-Kawa, Natalia Letki, Christian Welzel, and Michał Kotnarowski. At the bottom, it identifies the chair, Natalia Galica, and the event title 'EuroScience Open Forum 2024' over a cityscape image.

EuroScience Open Forum
Katowice 12–15 June 2024
Life Changes Science

Trustworthy science and trust in science

Insightful discussion

12 June 2024
14:45 - 16:00

International Congress Centre
Katowice
Ballroom A

www.esof.eu

CHAIR: NATALIA GALICA
University of Silesia

Our speakers

AGNIESZKA TURSKA-KAWA
University of Silesia

NATALIA LETKI
University of Warsaw

CHRISTIAN WELZEL
Leuphana University

MICHAŁ KOTNAROWSKI
Institute of Philosophy and
Sociology Polish Academy of
Sciences

**EuroScience
Open Forum
2024**

From June 12-15, 2024, the EuroScience Open Forum (ESOF 2024) took place in Katowice, bringing together experts to discuss the evolving role of science in society. [TRUEDEM scholars contributed key insights](#) on trust in science, institutional credibility, and academic career development.

On the first day, Natalia Galica led the panel “Trustworthiness of Science and Trust in Science”, featuring Agnieszka Turska-Kawa, Natalia Letki, Michał Kotnarowski, and Christian Welzel. The discussion focused on misinformation, politicization of research, and the need for transparency to strengthen public trust in science.

On the second day, Agnieszka Turska-Kawa chaired the session “Career Crafting in Science: Looking for Prospective Paths”, which explored academic mobility and networking. Panelists, including Eliza Gagatsi, Alicja Santos, and representatives from the European Commission and research organizations, discussed career opportunities and international collaboration for early-career researchers.

On the third day, Kornelia Batko led the panel “Determinants of Institutional Trust”, featuring Damian Guzek, Dawid Tatarczyk, Emilie Szwejnoch, and Natalia Galica. The session examined how institutional trust is shaped by media, political polarization, and governance quality.

By engaging in ESOF 2024, TRUEDEM scholars contributed to key discussions on trust in science and institutions, reinforcing the importance of research-based policy solutions in strengthening democracy and public confidence.

TRUEDEM Trust in European Democracies

Cross-country comparative comprehensive investigation of public perceptions of trust and trustworthiness (2023-2025)

Web: www.truedem.eu

Email: office@truedem.eu

Facebook: [@TRUEDEMEU](https://www.facebook.com/TRUEDEMEU)

Twitter: [@TRUEDEM_EU](https://twitter.com/TRUEDEM_EU)

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon research and innovation program under the Grant Agreement No 101095237 (TRUEDEM). The information and opinions in this report (and other project deliverables and communications materials) are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Commission.