

NECE FESTIVAL 2026: TRUST

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// No Society Without Trust

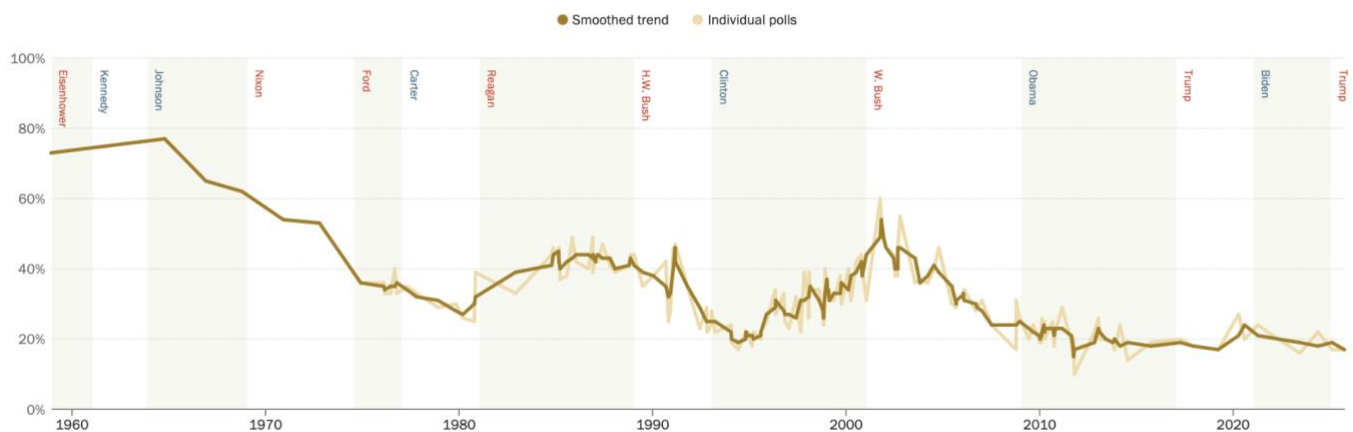
Trust is a treasure. When we receive it from someone, we can build long-lasting friendships and relationships. The same is true for society. **Only where people trust each other do they cooperate.** Trust is the ingredient that turns strangers into communities. It allows us to work together, exchange and trade, and build common institutions for the future. It is what made liberal democracies possible. In this sense, trust is not a moral luxury. It is the functional infrastructure of social life.

In fact, all modern, diverse societies depend on this **invisible infrastructure**: Markets rely on honoring contracts; welfare states rely on people being honest about their needs; electoral politics relies on trust in established norms and procedures, so that losers of democratic elections step down peacefully. When social trust erodes, these arrangements become fragile, conflicts intensify, and the legitimacy of shared institutions weakens.

Across many liberal democracies, there is growing evidence that this infrastructure is now under sustained pressure. This does not mean that trust has suddenly disappeared. Rather, **specific dimensions of social trust are eroding**—with broader consequences for the social fabric. One clear example is political polarization. Rising polarization has a direct, measurable impact on citizens' trust in their governments and public institutions. Declining political trust does not remain confined to the political sphere. It spills over into social life and weakens trust among citizens more broadly.

Public trust in government near historic lows

% who say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right **just about always/most of the time**



Note: From 1976-February 2025, the smoothed trend line represents a three-survey moving average. Data prior to 1976, and the most recent number (September 2025), are from individual polls. Sources: Pew Research Center, National Election Studies, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN surveys.

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Combined with **increasing pluralism and diversity**¹, the **politicization of everyday issues**², a **fragmented information landscape**³, **rising wealth inequality**⁴, and a **general lack of optimism about the future**⁵, trust can no longer be taken for granted as a stable background condition of social and political life. Instead, maintaining and **repairing trust must become an active societal effort** rather than a passive inheritance.

At the same time, empirical evidence on how societies successfully rebuild trust remains limited. While many studies document trust erosion, there are few well-documented cases of sustained trust recovery.⁶ That is why the NECE Festival 2026 focuses on TRUST as a central question for civic education today: **It shall aim to create the space and platform to bring together thought leaders and practitioners to examine how trust can be rebuilt in democratic societies.**

In more concrete terms, the NECE Festival 2026 aims to:

- **Contribute to a shared understanding of social trust** and its different dimensions in democratic life.
- **Explore the underlying reasons for declining trust**, including political, social, and informational dynamics.
- **Showcase powerful examples of regaining trust**, including concrete “ways forward” and transferable practices.
- **Offer masterclasses and skill-building formats** that equip participants with practical tools they can apply in their work.
- **Connect and highlight “trust brokers”** across sectors—education, media, academia, civil society, business, and politics—who can demonstrate credible approaches to rebuilding trust.

¹ Diversity here understood as in terms of age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, socio-economic weakness, ethnic origin, and religion. Interestingly, we see in Western European countries a trend of becoming less accepting towards diversity,, see example of Germany <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/en/publikation/diversity-barometer-2025>

² The politicization of everyday issues, such as dating norms etc., are usually a tracker of affective polarization. Here we see increasing polarization in many Western societies. A good overview of corresponding data can be found in the Edelman Trust Barometer 2023 which was devoted to polarization, see <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2023/trust-barometer>

³ The best way to track the erosion of a “*consensus reality*” is probably through the varying trust levels of different political groups. The most extensive data is available from the United States, see Gallup (2025) <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/52272-trust-in-media-2025-which-news-sources-americans-use-and-trust>. But Similar trends exist across different Western societies, see Edelman (2026)

⁴ We are seeing a U-shaped inequality curve where the share of the richest 1% is increasing again after a drop throughout the mid-20th century, see World Inequality Databse, <https://ourworldindata.org/how-has-income-inequality-within-countries-evolved-over-the-past-century>

⁵ According to the Edelman Trust Barometer 2026, only 32% (-4% to 2025) of the sample set of 28 countries answered that they believe that “next generation will be better off” with France and Germany being at 6% and 8% respectively: <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2026/trust-barometer>

⁶One of the landmark cases here is the study of Denmark, see Sønderskov & Dinesen (2014) “Danish Exceptionalism: Explaining the Unique Increase in Social Trust Over the Past 30 Year” <https://academic.oup.com/esr/article-abstract/30/6/782/2800108>. Another interesting (and so far overlooked) case is Argentina—which jumped +8% in recent years.

// The Decline of Trust

When we speak of a decline in social trust, we often have a specific kind of trust in mind. For many people, this refers to trust in certain professions or public roles, such as politicians, business leaders, or scientists. Intuitively, from our gut feeling, we may sense that the standing of these actors has declined in recent years. The empirical literature largely confirms this impression. Across countries, trust levels in these categories have dropped sharply.

▼ I have lost trust in:	Net change	% who say they have	
		Lost trust	Gained trust
National government leaders	-16	40	24
Major news organizations	-11	35	24
Foreign business leaders	-6	30	24

What we are usually less concerned with is a general erosion of trust within families, friendships, or close local communities. Although there are signs of decline even at these levels, interpersonal trust remains comparatively stable.⁷ This suggests that **the decline in social trust does not begin at the level of intimate relationships**. It emerges elsewhere. **The decline of social trust is a result of how we engage with one another in our social and political lives.**

Seen from this perspective, the main drivers of declining social trust become clearer. The increase in loneliness, withdrawal into echo chambers, and social fragmentation appear less as root causes and more as symptoms. Because **the central part of the puzzle about the erosion of social trust seems to be in the polarization of democratic life.**⁸

This trend is not uniform across societies. **Survey data suggest that trust erosion is particularly pronounced in Western, developed democracies** – while trust levels in many developing societies remain stable or have even increased.⁹ This contrast directs attention to the specific dynamics of contemporary democratic politics. Polarization appears to be a key driver of institutional distrust. Partisan conflict reshapes how citizens evaluate governments, parliaments, and political parties. Over time, this dynamic spills over into

⁷ See <https://ourworldindata.org/trust>

⁸ This is an extension of Talisse (2019) "Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in its Place"

⁹ See Edelman (2026).

other institutions that are expected to remain impartial, including courts and the police.¹⁰ **Institutions are no longer judged primarily by their performance or procedures; but by their perceived alignment in political conflict.**

The effects of polarization extend beyond formal politics. Trust in the media and in journalists has declined sharply in many countries. Media outlets are increasingly perceived as partisan actors rather than neutral intermediaries. Trust in social role models and knowledge intermediaries, such as teachers, experts, and public intellectuals, has also weakened. Authority grounded in expertise or professional norms is more frequently challenged and contested.

These actors and institutions play a central role in modern democracies. They mediate information, translate complexity, and provide orientation in times of uncertainty. When trust in them erodes, citizens lose shared reference points. Public debate becomes fragmented. Disagreement becomes harder to manage. **A sense of common identity becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.**¹¹

Taken together, these developments point to a consistent pattern. Trust in institutions erodes faster than trust among individuals; yet, both move in the same direction. This is politically significant. Declining trust is no longer confined to dissatisfaction with elites or governments. It increasingly shapes how citizens relate to one another in everyday life.

In such contexts, polarization and hyper-politicization are not merely consequences of low trust. They also become drivers of further erosion. Trust in institutions weakens. Trust among citizens follows.¹² Together, these dynamics place liberal democracy under sustained strain.

// Addendum: What kind of trust are we working on?

Talking about trust is notoriously difficult—and can easily become esoteric. This is partly due to the fact that there is no standard definition that transcends different cultures and languages. That is why the only way to measure trust levels is to ask people about their trust intuitions. This introduces natural limits. **Our very own cultural and linguistic differences shape how we understand and answer questions about trust.** All of this makes a shared conception of trust difficult.

At the same time, debates about trust often suffer from conceptual confusion. Different versions of trust are frequently mixed together, even though they operate at different levels and follow different logics. One contribution of the NECE Festival 2026 is therefore to operationalize social trust in a way that allows attendees to take away concrete insights and workable approaches for restoring trust.

¹⁰ I would highlight the example of Poland here. For the initial general thesis, see Rothstein (2011) "The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective"

¹¹ For example, only 20% of respondents would be willing to live in the same neighborhood as people they strongly disagreed with, see Edelman (2023)

¹² See Martinangel, Povitkina, Jagers , & Rothstein (2024) "Institutional quality causes generalized trust: experimental evidence on trusting under the shadow of doubt" <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/ajps.12780>

In the literature, researchers usually distinguish between **interpersonal particularized trust** and **generalized social trust**. Interpersonal trust refers to trust in people we know, or, in more technical terms, trust embedded in established relationships. Generalized social trust, by contrast, is a broader measure used in surveys such as the World Values Survey or the General Social Survey. It is typically captured through questions like: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?”¹³

In this sense, **generalized social trust is trust in strangers**. It is a marker of a society’s underlying willingness to cooperate beyond familiarity. **Interpersonal particularized trust, by contrast, describes the strength of already-established bonds**. It is largely a consequence of our biology and socialization rather than of political or institutional arrangements. So, when we speak about a decline in trust, we therefore do **not** primarily mean the erosion of close personal relationships. We mean a declining willingness to cooperate with people we do not know.¹⁴ This form of trust is often mediated through public institutions, shared norms, and intermediaries. It is precisely here that tribalism, polarization, institutional distrust, and contested narratives begin to matter.

The NECE Festival focuses on this form of generalized social trust. It concentrates on how trust between strangers is shaped, strained, and sometimes repaired through democratic institutions, civic practices, and facilitated interaction. For this purpose, it also draws on carefully selected insights from mediation research and studies on interpersonal trust-building.

// Civic Education & the Trust Dilemma

As social trust erodes before our eyes, the obvious question arises. Who is supposed to fix it?

And here the list of potential actors is long: Politicians, business leaders, journalists, intellectuals, athletes, and community leaders. They all could contribute to sustaining trust. After all, they all benefit from a high-trust society. Yet, few have strong individual incentives to invest in trust over time. The reason for this is structural. **Trust pays off collectively and slowly. Political and economic rewards, by contrast, are individual and immediate.**

If we look at the world around us, we see exactly this logic at work: Electoral politics rewards mobilization and polarization, not trust-building or reaching across the aisle. The contemporary media landscape competes for attention rather than credibility. Platform dynamics reward outrage, not repair. And even the most well-intentioned actors struggle to make the “business case” for investing resources into trust. This is not primarily a moral failure. It is a systemic one.

Because social trust comes as close to a **textbook collective action problem** as one can get. Everyone depends on it. Almost no one is willing to shoulder the costs of producing it.

¹³ See World Value Survey, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>

¹⁴ Edelman (2026) labels this “*insular trust mindset*.”

In theory, liberal democracy is designed to address precisely this kind of structural problem. It does not assume virtuous individuals who consistently act against their own incentives. It assumes conflicting interests, short time horizons, and imperfect motivations. To stabilize cooperation under such conditions, democratic societies rely on institutions, processes, and intermediaries that sustain the common good despite persistent asymmetries. In the context of social trust, civil society must serve as a key anchor that can absorb societal pressures. In particular, **civic education** – by its very *raison d'être* of translating democratic norms into lived experience through dialogue, reflection, and practice – **shall take a central role in creating spaces for trust repair.**¹⁵

Yet this role cannot be taken for granted. **Many civic education formats were developed for environments in which a basic level of trust could still be assumed.** They often presuppose pluralism and diverse backgrounds, a willingness to listen, to engage in good faith, and to accept shared rules of discussion. Under conditions of heightened polarization, these assumptions no longer hold. Some groups withdrew from civic spaces altogether; others now enter with hardened positions, deep suspicion of the motivations of civic educators, or even grievances.

This raises difficult questions for the field: Have civic education formats adapted sufficiently to these conditions? Do they reach beyond already engaged and like-minded audiences? And do they offer methods for having difficult conversations or for revealing conflict lines? If civic education is to function as a space for trust repair, it must confront these challenges.

The challenge for civic educators is therefore twofold. **On the one hand, they are expected to contribute remedies to the current crisis of trust; on the other hand, they must protect their own field from the erosion of trust that increasingly affects civic education itself.**¹⁶ All of this demands greater conceptual clarity about what kind of trust civic education can realistically address. Civic education can neither generate trust out of thin air nor compensate for institutional failure or political misconduct. Its contribution lies elsewhere.

// The Role of Civic Education

The severe structural pressures on the sector (i.e., civil society and civic education in particular) in recent years, including severe funding constraints, shrinking civic space, and growing public skepticism, have forced many practitioners and organizations into a **downward spiral of self-reflection and soul-searching.** This is why more and more questions about purpose, legitimacy, and relevance have crept up in the community.

At the same time, the aforementioned empirical evidence of declining trust across democratic societies has presented the field with a distinct opportunity to (re-)assert itself as a key actor in tackling this massive social undertaking. In fact, **taking ownership of the task of restoring trust is a natural fit for civic education**

¹⁵ There seems to be a straightforward empirical relationship between civic knowledge and trust in institutions, see Schulz, W. (2024) "Young people's trust in institutions, civic knowledge and their dispositions toward civic engagement"

¹⁶ On the perception of bias in public service institutions under conditions of political polarization, see van Elsa, Sipma, Meijers (2025) "Citizen perceptions of ideological bias in public service institutions: A cross-institutional analysis in five countries"

- **as it aligns the sector's unique expertise with its very raison d'être.** For example, civic educators are trained to initiate and proceed with difficult conversations.

Sure, civic education cannot resolve all the challenges liberal democracy faces today. It cannot compensate for political failure, institutional misconduct, or structural inequality. **But this is not the promise here.** Rather, civic educators shall be able to reassert themselves as intermediaries in polarized societies. This does not mean positioning them as political arbiters or institutional guardians. But to develop them as TRUST BROKERS with (a) a **clear alignment with the purpose of trust-building**; (b) a **thorough conceptual understanding of trust, its sources of erosion and promotion**; and (3) the access to tools and formats to carry out trust-building initiatives across different environments.

The NECE Festival 2026 aims to operationalize this ambition by designing its program around three interconnected PILLARS OF TRUST - each **explored through an inquisitive, conceptual, experimental, and practical dimension.** Together, these pillars define the PILLARS OF TRUST in which civic education can meaningfully contribute to building, repairing, and navigating trust under conditions of polarization and pluralism. Those pillars are:

(1) Trust in Democracy (Institutional Trust)

The first PILLAR OF TRUST is political. This is where we identify the key drivers of erosion in social trust. It is the space in which dynamics of polarization take shape and where distrust and grievances emerge. The festival will examine these dynamics closely and explore measures that may help alleviate polarization and rebuild trust, including civic tech initiatives, citizen engagement projects, and lessons from door-to-door canvassing.

(2) Trust in Civil Society & Civic Education

The second PILLAR OF TRUST is more self-reflective. It focuses on the status and legitimacy of our own field. The festival will provide the space for civil society, and civic education in particular, has become less trusted over time—and why certain roles within the sector (e.g., teachers) face trust status decline. In this context, we will also address what civic educators themselves should do to function again as an intermediary serving truly plural (and not merely diverse) communities.

(3) Trust in People (Interpersonal Trust)

The final PILLAR OF TRUST focuses on the most immediate form of trust that civic education can engage with: social trust at the interpersonal level. To make this as relevant as possible, we will engage with established practices in which broken relationships have been addressed through facilitation—either in a community or business context. We will share and demonstrate concrete facilitation techniques how conflict lines can be surfaced without escalation, and how trust can be rebuilt through structured interaction. These tools might be used for larger societal interventions.