



Institutional Trust and Social Cohesion in an Era of Political Fragmentation

Simon linacre

Cabells Publishing, Keighley, West Yorkshire, United Kingdom

Article Information

Received:09/06/2026
Revised:10/07/2026
Acceptance:17/07/2026
Published: 25/07/2026

ABSTRACT

The relationship between institutional trust and social cohesion is investigated in the context of growing political division in the current time. It examines the impact of polarization, ideologization, identity-based cleavage, social media, misinformation, and selective exposure on trust in public institutions and the relationship between social groups. It is found that government performance, public-service delivery, transparency, accountability, corruption control, procedural fairness, representation, and political inclusion are key factors that influence institutional trust. Citizens are more likely to cooperate, respect political differences, comply with the law, and accept the outcomes of the democratic process when institutions are seen as competent, impartial, responsive, and legitimate. Conversely, general distrust can fuel partisan animosity, diminish political participation, radicalize people, and foster the potential for protest, violence, and democratic erosion. Comparative and empirical data show that there are differences in levels of trust and cohesion between countries related to political systems, historical experiences, administrative capacity and institutional responses to crises. The paper suggests that rebuilding trust takes a long time and long-term reforms. There is a critical need for greater accountability, institutional independence, anti-corruption, inclusive participation, public discourse, civic education, ethical journalism, media literacy, and responsible governance of digital platforms. While disagreement among people is a natural condition of democratic societies, responsive institutions and participatory public cultures can keep disagreement from becoming destructive social divisions and can enhance a longer-term democratic resilience.

Keywords

institutional trust, social cohesion, political fragmentation, political polarization, democratic legitimacy

Political polarization, ideological polarization, partisan hostility, social polarization, and a decline in commonality in democratic norms are all indicative of the growing political fragmentation of contemporary societies. That political disagreement is a normal and necessary aspect of democratic life does not become problematic when political identities become rigid social boundaries that impact how citizens think about institutions, political opponents and each other. In such cases, citizens could stop considering competing groups part of the democratic process and instead see them as an enemy of the nation, social values or political stability. This is a polarization of political disagreement into social antagonism, which will diminish the likelihood of compromise and the basis for cooperation needed for democratic governance. The maintenance of trust is especially hard in polarized environments, as citizens increasingly assess institutions based on whether institutions seem to be favoring their preferred political party or ideology (Vallier, 2020).

Emotional polarization of politics has also grown. Affective polarization is the degree to which citizens feel very attached to their own party and distrustful, hostile or resentful of the opposing party. European political systems suggest that this polarization is not restricted to a specific national setting but can be found in different party systems and in different democratic traditions (Reiljan, 2020). Polarized actors can also do so on purpose to attack the credibility of institutions, such as contesting the results of an election, judicial rulings, scientific advice, or public-service agencies. Effective action to address these cleavages must go beyond a political truce, as polarization can quickly become entrenched with institutional dynamics, media messaging and political leadership (McCoy & Somer, 2021).

This is a serious issue, especially in the context of a worldwide decline in democratic rights and democratic institutions. Authoritarian practices, declining checks and balances, limitations on civil and political rights, political interference, and manipulation of public information all pose a threat to democratic institutions in many countries (House, 2022). However, the long-term international research findings also indicate that the pattern of institutional trust is not uniform. There are varying degrees of confidence in different institutions, countries, social groups and historical periods, and therefore, the political and social factors that lead to a loss of trust or its restoration must be studied. (Valgarðsson et al., 2025) The Global State of Democracy report also makes a point of the need to make democratic systems resilient to polarization, inequality, public discontent, and institutional disruption (Quraishi, 2021).

The main research question is how declining institutional trust relates to decreasing social cohesion in politically divided societies. Institutional trust is the citizens' confidence in the competence, fairness, accountability, reliability and responsiveness of public institutions. Social cohesion, in contrast, is the shared sense of belonging, trust, co-operation, inclusion and acceptance between groups. These ideas are linked, as citizens rely on institutions to decide on rules that they all have to follow, to allocate resources, to safeguard rights and to act in the process of collective decision-making when they are in a dispute.

Significantly, the difference between trust, mistrust and distrust is particularly relevant, because citizens don't react in the same way to institutional failures. While mistrust can be characterised as a more negative attitude or evaluation of institutions, distrust can be defined as a belief that institutions are illegitimate, harmful, or dishonest. The various orientations shape the government's actions and response to the people during a crisis (Jennings et al., 2021). It is thus important that institutional legitimacy be maintained not just in the regular governance process, but also in times of emergency when everybody needs to cooperate. The level of trust influences the legitimacy of the social order and stimulates innovation, citizens' participation, and relations between citizens and public institutions (Didenko et al., 2020).

Political fragmentation can also hurt interpersonal relations. If citizens feel polarized society, they might become less inclined to trust people who are linked to the opposing political groups, so this polarization can lead to a decrease in generalized social trust (Lee, 2022). This loss can harm the level of cooperation, social solidarity and collective problem-solving within communities. Furthermore, democratic decline often stealthily takes place by undermining institutional

constraints, norms, and accountability, before the political system actually fails (Miller, 2021). Thus, institutional trust and social cohesion are important for political stability, democratic legitimacy, peaceful conflict resolution and collective well-being.

This study aims to analyze whether political fragmentation affects the trust in institutions and whether institutional trust changes affect social cohesion. It aims to uncover the key political, institutional, social and communicative drivers of mistrust; examine its implications for democratic engagement, legitimacy, intergroup relations and social cohesion; and assess ways of restoring trust and enhancing collaboration. The study examines the following three key research questions:

1. What is the relationship between political fragmentation and attitudes toward institutions
2. How do institutions affect social cohesion, and in what ways do they foster or undermine it
3. What institutional reforms and participatory processes can help rebuild trust in divided societies

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Understanding Institutional Trust

Institutional trust is citizen expectations of the competence, fairness and accountability of formal institutions (governments, courts, public agencies). It is a sign of legitimacy and effectiveness assessment, which strengthens social order in the reliability of the functioning of institutions (Didenko et al., 2020). It is not the same as interpersonal trust, which involves confidence in people, and is not the same as political trust, which has to do with trusting parties and leaders. Institutional trust is more general and can last even if political actors are not trusted. The difference between trust, mistrust and distrust also exists; trust involves positive expectations, mistrust involves acting with caution, and distrust involves the sense that something is illegitimate (Jennings et al., 2021). Social trust is a “generalized” trust in others, influenced in part by the performance of institutions. Institutional trust is dynamic and can increase during an effective response to a crisis, as occurred in Australia and New Zealand during COVID-19 (Goldfinch et al., 2021). Global patterns, however, differ in context (Valgarðsson et al., 2025) and inequality, grievance, and elite-bias are growing influences on trust (Barometer, 2025). The various types of trust mentioned above are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of Trust and Their Characteristics

Type of Trust	Definition	Primary Focus	Example	References
Institutional Trust	Confidence in public institutions to act fairly, competently, and effectively	Government, judiciary, police, public administration	Trust in courts or parliament	Didenko et al. (2020); Jennings et al. (2021)
Political Trust	Confidence in political leaders, parties, and political decision-making	Politicians and elected representatives	Trust in elected government	Jennings et al. (2021)
Interpersonal Trust	Confidence in other individuals	Family, friends, neighbours, strangers	Trust in community members	Goldfinch et al. (2021)
Social Trust	General belief that most people are honest and cooperative	Society as a whole	Trust in unknown citizens	Valgarðsson et al. (2025); Edelman (2022)

2.2 Understanding Social Cohesion

Social cohesion is a measure of social relations, inclusion and cooperation in society. It combines communal identity, common purposes and the capacity to live in peace with each other when differences arise. Collective action, such as during a

pandemic (Van Bavel et al., 2022), is a demonstration of solidarity, or willingness to support others, especially during crises. Inclusion means everyone is included and there is little exclusion, which enhances involvement in the sense of belonging. Shared identity can foster unity and cohesion, but if too narrowly drawn, it can be exclusionary. Crises can change the national identity, sometimes in a positive way, but also in a negative one, and they can either work to unite or exacerbate divisions (Wamsler et al., 2023). Inclusive identities are the basis for cohesion. Cohesion is maintained by cooperation, by rule following and collective action. Although both trust in institutions and prosocial behaviour are beneficial for fostering positive relationships among people, polarization negatively affects interpersonal trust and cooperation (Lee, 2022; Han et al., 2023).

2.3 Theoretical Relationship Between Trust and Cohesion

According to legitimacy theory, the greater the level of legitimacy, the greater the amount of trust in institutional decisions, which leads to greater compliance. Social-capital theory emphasises trust as a foundation for cooperation, which is necessary for conflict resolution and collective action. Perceived institutional biases may, however, increase polarization and erode cohesion (McCoy & Somer, 2021). Social trust is also influenced by institutional trust. Fair and effective institutions foster greater trust between people, and polarization and bias have the opposite effect (Lee, 2022). Trust thus supports cooperation in pluralistic societies (Vallier, 2020). Fear can be associated with the need to rely on institutions, while anger can be linked to distrust, which can affect reactions towards political events (Erhardt et al., 2021). Lastly, trust helps to encourage political engagement and democratic involvement, but with careful examination. Accountability is fostered by constructive mistrust, while destructive mistrust undermines legitimacy (Jennings et al., 2021). In general, the links between institutional trust and social cohesion are positive and reinforce stable and effective governance. As seen in Figure 1, there is a conceptual link between institutional trust and social cohesion. There is a conceptual connection between institutional trust and social cohesion as seen in Figure 1.

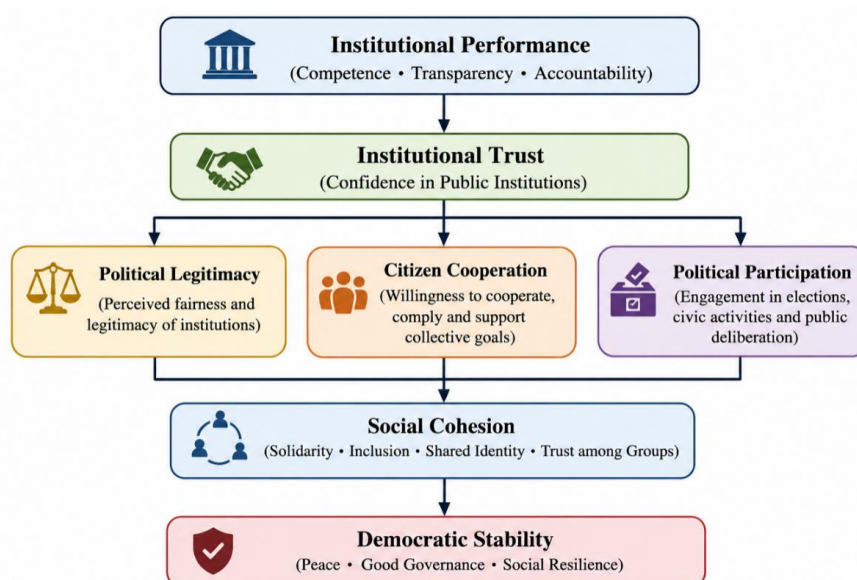


Figure 1. Conceptual Relationship between Institutional Trust and Social Cohesion

3. Political Fragmentation and Its Causes

3.1 Political Polarization and Ideological Division

Political polarization is a process of growing ideological polarization between people and groups. Polarization can be healthy

for a democracy, but it can also be unhealthy if it becomes extreme. Some polarization is healthy for democracy, but extreme polarization is unhealthy for democracy in terms of legitimacy and coopedemocracy,s ideological polarization becomes more acute and rips apart the country over such issues as economic policy, social values, and national identity negotiables become moral conflicts. Emotional polarization, or affective polarization, that happens when people become hostile towards opposing groups, has the potential to increase fragmentation by turning political disagreement into social division (Reiljan, 2020). There is evidence from across the world that polarization is increasing for some democracies, and is influenced by institutions, media and leadership approaches (Boxell et al., 2024). Electioneering can serve to polarize by calling the contests existential crises. Democratic norms are weakened because of the polarization of society in a way that institutions are seen as partisan tools and not neutral institutions (McCoy et al., 2018). These divisions can be exacerbated by political unrest, including frequent elections or territorial tensions, as has happened in Spain (Torcal & Comellas, 2022). Cognitive rigidity and threat sensitivity are other psychological mechanisms that contribute to ideological polarization (Zmigrod, 2022).

3.2 Identity Politics and Social Cleavages

When politics becomes fragmented, it happens in a manner where political competition is based on ethnicity, religion, class, region, language, gender, or national identity, then identity politics is at play. Such identities can help marginalised groups but can also exacerbate divisions when presented as mutually exclusive and antagonistic. Political alignment can also be driven by ethnic and religious divisions, which can lead to exclusion and unequal trust in institutions. Resentment and populist narratives can stem from economic inequality and class divisions. Regional and linguistic identities can give rise to competing loyalties, particularly if autonomy or recognition is challenged. Division is also influenced by gender issues and cultural differences; discussions about values turn into moral battles. National identity can be both cohesive and divisive, with the cohesive forms encouraging a sense of unity, and the exclusivist ones encouraging division. In general, the COVID-19 pandemic heightened threat perceptions, which boosted nationalist and anti-immigrant attitudes (Hartman et al., 2021), but it also instilled a sense of collective responsibility and offered support for public-health policies (Van Bavel et al., 2022). National identity effects are contingent upon its inclusivity. Solidarity among people can either be reinforced or deepened in times of crisis or strengthen the sense of exclusion (Wamsler et al., 2023). These dynamics are amplified by the extreme ideologization of society that divides society into opposing groups (Zmigrod, 2022).

3.3 Media Fragmentation and Digital Communication

Media fragmentation impacts political communication by generating a fragmented or segmented information environment. All while the digital platforms increase participation in both good and bad ways, by presenting more emotionally charged content and consolidating partisanship, polarization can be intensified (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021). The echo chamber phenomenon and selective exposure reduce interaction with viewpoints outside the boundaries of one's own ideology, and misinformation is rapidly disseminated, which reduces common understanding. Consensus becomes difficult as citizens turn to other sources of information. Digital communication has an impact on trust as well. Narratives can be proactively developed by institutions and corporations, to influence the public perception, thereby raising doubts (Edwards, 2024). Algo-driven platforms further reinforce existing views by directing users towards similar content (Schaefer & Sapi, 2023). Misinformation and a fractured population pose a threat to public institutions' credibility. Transparency, responsiveness and dialogue with sceptical citizens are now essential to good communication (Canel 2025). In general, a combination of interrelated factors contributes to political fragmentation: polarization creates political camps, identity cleavages widen the social cleavages, and media fragmentation makes for misinformation and distrust, and reduces cooperation and shared understanding. The main reasons for political fragmentation outlined in this section are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Drivers of Political Fragmentation

Driver	Description	Impact on Institutional Trust	References
Ideological Polarization	Increasing ideological distance between political groups	Declining trust in institutions	Reiljan (2020); Boxell et al. (2024)
Identity Politics	Politics based on ethnicity, religion, class or identity	Greater social divisions	Hartman et al. (2021); Zmigrod (2022)
Media Fragmentation	Diverse and polarized media ecosystems	Weakens shared information	Kubin & Von Sikorski (2021)
Echo Chambers	Exposure to similar viewpoints only	Reinforces polarization	Edwards (2024)
Misinformation	Spread of false political information	Reduces institutional credibility	Schaefer & Sapi (2023); Canel (2025)

4. Factors Influencing Institutional Trust

4.1 Institutional Performance and Public-Service Delivery

Knowledge and skills in solving problems. Trust is bolstered by positive experiences with healthcare, education, policing and other services, and undermined by delays, inequity, and poor quality. Communication, complaint resolution and adaptability, or responsiveness, are particularly significant in crises. As part of the Dutch and Australian experiences with COVID-19, trust increased after effective and coordinated responses in Australia (Goldfinch et al., 2021) and following decisive lockdown measures in the Netherlands (Oude Groeniger et al., 2021). But this can come haphazardly and unfairly. Trust is also established as competence is developed, including the use of expertise and evidence. The public's perception and actions toward the pandemic were influenced by trust in scientists (Algan et al., 2021). Clear communication also contributes to trust, as in the relationship between government trust and adherence to health measures (Han et al., 2023). Institutional performance has an objective and a subjective component, and is shaped by identity, experience and inequality. Responsiveness and belief in the communication is therefore also essential for effective service delivery.

4.2 Transparency, Accountability, and Corruption

Transparency is when decisions, processes and information are open to public examination and scrutiny, and when uncertainty is minimised. To build trust, however, it must be understandable, accessible and meaningful. Accountability means that there are mechanisms to hold institutions accountable, including elections, courts and oversight bodies. Weak accountability undermines democratic consolidation (House, 2022; Lima, 2024) global trends of weakening safeguards. The erosion of checks and civil liberties with time further eats away at trust (Repucci, 2020). When trust is lost due to corruption (including bribery, favouritism and misuse of resources), it undermines trust and causes perceptions of unfairness and inefficiency. In order to rebuild confidence, there is a need to build accountability and renew democratic safeguards (Quraishi, 2021; Mfege, 2023). Trust is also influenced by perceptions of elite behavior; citizens may lose trust in institutions perceived as serving powerful groups (Barometer, 2025). Moreover, communication within the institutions may be strategic and is often obfuscating rather than transparent (Edwards, 2024). In sum, transparency and accountability go hand in hand, as do transparency and ethical behavior, in such a way that institutions function within a rule-based framework, not one determined by private interests.

4.3 Fairness, Representation, and Political Inclusion

Fairness is essential to trust, both in terms of outcome and how decisions are made. Procedural justice impartiality, consistency and respect – fosters acceptance of decisions, even those that are negative. This is essential because discrimination creates a lack of trust between the groups that are affected. Representation reinforces trust by making sure that various forms of interests are represented in the institutions, and underrepresentation creates an impression of elite control. Polarization creates problems for citizens to trust institutions because they may perceive the institutions from a partisan perspective, thereby reducing social trust (Lee, 2022; Martin, 2026). Consultations and civic engagement can enhance trust if they have impactful results. However, trust also needs to be accompanied by critical questioning and if there is too much distrust, it can impair cooperation (Jennings et al., 2021). Polarization can be minimized and trust restored through inclusive processes and dialogue (McCoy & Somer, 2021). Institutional safeguards play an important role in avoiding democratic erosion and upholding democratic legitimacy (Miller, 2021). Finally, it is when institutions are effective, transparent, fair, and inclusive of participation that trust is strongest. Table 3 details the key factors found in the literature that affect institutional trust.

Table 3. Factors Influencing Institutional Trust

Factor	Positive Influence	Negative Influence	References
Institutional Performance	Efficient services	Poor service delivery	Goldfinch et al. (2021)
Transparency	Open governance	Secrecy	House (2022)
Accountability	Independent oversight	Weak checks and balances	Repucci (2020); Quraishi (2021)
Corruption Control	Ethical governance	Corruption and favoritism	Barometer (2025)
Political Representation	Inclusive participation	Political exclusion	Jennings et al. (2021); Miller (2021)

5. Effects on Social Cohesion and Democratic Life

5.1 Social Solidarity and Intergroup Relations

It promotes tolerance and respect for others through respect for rights and fair governance. Trust in institutions leads to a willingness to cross cultures and social differences. Political polarization may lead to lower institutional and interpersonal trust, due to suspicion and lack of cooperation (Lee, 2022). This can be addressed by fostering shared identities which promote collective action, such as when people feel a shared identity during the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Bavel et al., 2022). But a crisis can also amplify feelings of exclusion and nationalism (Hartman et al., 2021), too. Its impact is contingent on whether institutions foster inclusive or restrictive conceptions of belonging (Wamsler et al., 2023). But, on balance, trust encourages cooperation and diminishes social divisions, and distrust promotes group boundaries and hostility.

5.2 Political Participation and Democratic Legitimacy

Institutional trust fosters political participation by rewarding citizens by making them feel their participation is significant. It promotes voting, civic involvement and law abidance. When citizens feel that the electoral and legal processes are trustworthy, they're more likely to accept the results. There is a positive relationship between constructive mistrust and accountability, and a negative relationship between deep mistrust and cooperation and governance (Jennings et al., 2021). Legitimacy is also reinforced through trust, which is manifested by institutional performance meeting public expectations (Didenko et al., 2020). But the level of trust differs between institutions and contexts and must be examined (Valgarðsson et al., 2025; Narayan Acharya et al., 2026). A lack of trust in government in polarized societies can trigger rejection of election outcomes and undermine the stability of democracy. The legitimacy will only be preserved if there is increased inclusion and

5.3 Conflict, Protest, and Social Instability

When the institutions are ineffective or biased, citizens' mistrust can result in protest, unrest, or political violence. Protest is a mechanism that can help catalyze reform, but it can become destabilizing if institutions do not react or respond to it. Weaker rights and oversight result in increased instability and a decline in democracy (House, 2022). Pernicious polarization aggravates conflict by dividing politics into opposing camps (McCoy et al., 2018). Confidence in fair competition can erode further if there is a gradual democratic erosion (Miller, 2021; Under Siege, 2021). Affective polarization fosters intergroup hostility (Reiljan, 2020), and ideological rigidity may also be a factor in radicalization (Zmigrod, 2022). Distrust or rejection of democratic processes can also be caused by misinformation and conspiracy. A sense of distrust does not necessarily translate to instability, but if the institutions are responsive to this, it can also be a catalyst for change. But when neglected or used for the wrong purposes, it poses the danger of conflict. The institutions must be strong, fair and responsive to ensure stability and cohesion. Table 4 outlines the salient (social and democratic) implications of high and low levels of institutional trust. The process of institutional distrust and political fragmentation turning into a vicious circle is described in Figure 2.

Table 4. Effects of Institutional Trust on Democratic and Social Outcomes

Dimension	High Institutional Trust	Low Institutional Trust	Likely Social or Democratic Outcome	References
Social solidarity	Greater willingness to cooperate and support collective goals	Increased suspicion and weaker mutual responsibility	Stronger or weaker social cohesion	Lee (2022); Van Bavel et al. (2022)
Intergroup relations	Greater tolerance and respect across political and social groups	Hostility, exclusion, and stronger in-group attachment	Improved or deteriorating intergroup relations	Hartman et al. (2021); Wamsler et al. (2023)
Political participation	Higher civic engagement and confidence in democratic procedures	Withdrawal from formal politics or anti-system mobilization	Democratic participation or political alienation	Jennings et al. (2021); Didenko et al. (2020)
Acceptance of political outcomes	Greater willingness to accept electoral defeat and institutional decisions	Rejection of election results and institutional legitimacy	Democratic stability or contested authority	McCoy and Somer (2021); Valgarðsson et al. (2025)
Protest and conflict	Peaceful participation through legitimate channels	Increased unrest, radicalization, or political violence	Managed disagreement or social instability	McCoy et al. (2018); Miller (2021); Reiljan (2020)
Democratic resilience	Stronger commitment to constitutional rules and pluralism	Support for authoritarian or exclusionary alternatives	Democratic consolidation or erosion	House (2022); Zmigrod (2022)



Figure 2. Cycle of Institutional Distrust and Political Fragmentation

6. Comparative and Empirical Analysis

6.1 Comparative National or Regional Experiences

The level of trust in institutions and social cohesion is not uniform among countries. Some societies have high levels of trust even though they are not all the same, and others are characterized by distrust and polarization due to electoral practices, leadership, and past patterns of state–citizen relations. Affective polarization is not necessarily steady; in some democracies, it is increasing while in others it is not (Boxell et al., 2024), suggesting that some institutional characteristics and political communication can buffer polarization. Polarization in Europe is shaped by party systems and salience of party attachment, with multiparty systems being more likely to be characterized by dispersed polarization among groups (Reiljan, 2020). Polarization and institutional mistrust deepen under the pressure of territorial conflict and political instability, as in the case of Spain (Torcal & Comellas, 2022). Variation is further accentuated during pandemic times. There was greater trust in Australia and New Zealand for an effective and coordinated response (Goldfinch et al., 2021). However, there are no equalities in the world, and the level of trust in institutions and countries varies, which means a context-specific analysis is needed (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). In general, effective, fair and inclusive institutions are associated with higher levels of trust, whereas inequality, low levels of accountability and polarization are associated with lower levels of trust and cohesion.

6.2 Crisis Situations and Institutional Responses

Institutional trust is put to the stress test during crises, as it brings uncertainty and a need for public cooperation. Outcomes are contingent on the success, fairness, and communication levels, along with the trust level that has already been established. In the context of COVID-19, there was a relationship between more trust and more compliance with public-health measures (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020). While responses to expert advice were influenced by trust in scientists, this differed by context (Algan et al., 2021; Wollebæk et al., 2022). Preventive and prosocial behaviour was also fostered by government trust (Han et al., 2023). Decisive lockdown measures rallied trust in government and science in the Netherlands, but this

could be fleeting (Oude Groeniger et al., 2021). Emotions also play a role: Fear amplifies the use of institutions, anger diminishes trust, depending on the perceived competence and fairness (Erhardt et al., 2021). The same trends apply to economic crises, elections and migration pressures. Consistency and fairness build trust, and inconsistency and a sense of unfairness can erode it. Institutional strengths and weaknesses are made more evident by the crisis but not clearly defined by it.

6.3 Indicators and Methods of Measurement

There are a variety of ways to measure institutional trust and social cohesion. Confidence in institutions is very frequently measured through a survey. Edelman, for example, has created global indexes measuring trust in government, business, media and NGOs, with links between distrust and perceived inequality. Edelman, for instance, has developed global indexes of trust in the government, business, media and non-governmental organisations, and found links between distrust and perceived inequality (Edelman, 2022; Barometer, 2025). Eurobarometer monitors changes in trust in Europe (European Commission, 2017). Indirect measures are provided by the Democratic indicators. Freedom House assesses political rights and civil freedom, which are associated with a decrease in trust. (House, 2022) International IDEA measures democratic performance and institutional resilience (Quraishi, 2021). Social Cohesion measures are social trust, tolerance, participation and intergroup relations. Qualitative approaches such as interviews and case studies are also used to provide more in-depth perceptions and experiences, which are then enhanced by quantitative data. Mixed-method approaches involve the use of both survey and qualitative findings, and longitudinal studies involve following the changes over time. There are challenges to measurement, however, such as different definitions of what trust is and group differences that are not apparent. Altogether, comparative and empirical arguments demonstrate that institutional trust and social cohesion is context specific. Their dynamics and ramifications for democracy are best understood when analyzed cross-nationally, through a crisis analysis, and with various measurement tools.

7. Strategies for Rebuilding Trust and Strengthening Cohesion

7.1 Institutional Reform and Good Governance

Reform to enhance transparency, accountability, independence and effectiveness. This will be achieved through ensuring judicial independence, electoral supervision, anti-corruption policies and the protection of civil society and media. Perceptions of elite bias can be diminished through transparent procurement practices, conflict-of-interest regulations and robust sanctions (Barometer, 2025). Good governance also means responsive public services and communication that is transparent and honest by engaging with the public (Canel, 2025). The rule of law, accountability and rights need to be safeguarded through democratic processes (House, 2025), and institutional resilience and legitimacy must be enhanced (Quraishi, 2021). In polarized settings, institutions need to be neutral and avoid being captured by partisans (McCoy & Somer, 2021).

7.2 Inclusive Participation and Public Dialogue

Citizen participation, such as citizen assemblies, consultation and community forums, can help to restore trust by engaging citizens in decision-making. It is important to have participation that is representative and impactful otherwise, it will foster distrust. Public discourse between conflicting parties can help to decrease polarization and increase cooperation (Lee, 2022). Citizens need to think critically and have trust in institutions (Jennings et al., 2021). Collective action can also be facilitated by shared identities (Van Bavel et al., 2022). To stop the erosion of democracy, there must be safeguards against pluralism and fair competition (Miller, 2021).

7.3 Civic Education and Responsible Communication

The goal of civic education is to encourage awareness of democratic processes, critical thinking, and tolerance. Media literacy is an important component in combating misinformation and algorithmic polarization (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021). Journalists and institutions need to be transparent and ethical, avoiding manipulation (2024, Edwards). Authorities should be open and transparent when engaging citizens and be clear when they are unsure (Canel, 2025), and digital platforms need to be open and transparent, and to reduce harmful content. Communication should not include fear-based or exclusionary stories that serve to divide people (Hartman et al., 2021). Civic education should also foster flexibility of thought, which minimizes ideological rigidity and radicalization (Zmigrod, 2022). In general, trust and cohesion can be enhanced by means of accountable governance, inclusive participation and responsible communication. Based on these experiences, Figure 3 outlines three institutional rebuilding strategies that are interrelated: institutional reform, inclusive participation and public dialogue, and civic education with responsible communication.



Figure 3. Framework for Rebuilding Institutional Trust

8. Future Perspectives and Challenges

The capacity of democratic societies to address issues of polarization, technological change, economic inequality and new styles of public engagement will shape future perspectives on institutional trust and social cohesion. The other is the increasing gap between citizens and institutions, especially in contexts of government that is seen as unresponsive, partisan, corrupt or dominated by powerful elites. Restoring trust will take more than just short-term communication and engagement campaigns it will depend on changes in service delivery, accountability, fairness, transparency and political inclusion. The other challenge is with digital communication. The power of so-called "echo chambers," artificial intelligence, misinformation, and algorithmic personalisation can also be harnessed for public consultation, civic education, and more widespread information access, if used responsibly. Diversity is becoming a concern for societies as well, and they must keep a balance between it and not have ethnicity, religion, class, language, region, gender and national identity differences become permanent political divisions. To preserve a sense of belonging, inclusive institutions, equal representation, and dialogue between groups will be essential. Further studies are needed on the mechanisms of intergenerational trust, on the impact of crises on institutional legitimacy, and on the factors that explain the resilience of some societies in the face of great partisan disagreement. Local institutions, community networks and informal cooperation should also be considered, as it is likely that smaller variations in the societies are not picked up by national indicators. Another challenge is maintaining critical, but not

cynical, attitudes without losing the courage to act together. Institutions cannot be condemned by citizens without wholesale rejection of the democratic rules. Institutions that are trusted and subject to scrutiny are therefore important for the future of social cohesion. While political fragmentation will not go away, its negative impacts can be mitigated through good governance, participation, civic awareness, media literacy, ethics, and responsible digital regulation.

9. Conclusion

Trust in institutions and social cohesion is a close link in establishing stable and effective democratic societies. This analysis has demonstrated that key dimensions of institutional performance, fairness, transparency, accountability, representation and responsiveness play a key role in building trust in public institutions. Reliable service provision by government and public bodies, impartial application of rules, preventing corruption and involving citizens in decision making increases legitimacy and helps to promote public cooperation. Political polarization, identity divisions, inequality, misinformation and fractured media can undermine trust in institutions and harm inter- and intra-group relationships, however. Loss of trust can lead to less political participation, a lower willingness to obey the law, greater hostility, and higher risk of protest, radicalization, and democratic instability. Comparative evidence also shows that they are not universal: national history, political systems, institutional capacity, and crisis management all lead to varying degrees of trust and cohesion. Confidence can be bolstered during a crisis by the ability of institutions to act competently and fairly, and it can be eroded by their inconsistent, exclusionary, or poorly communicated actions. The key elements include increased accountability, independent institutions, inclusive participation, public discussion, civic education, ethical journalism, media literacy and responsible digital governance. The division between those who disagree on politics and those who agree is a natural part of democracy, but it doesn't have to lead to social polarization.

References

1. Algan, Y., Cohen, D., Davoine, E., Foucault, M., & Stantcheva, S. (2021). Trust in scientists in times of pandemic: Panel evidence from 12 countries. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(40), e2108576118.
2. Bargain, O., & Aminjonov, U. (2020). Trust and compliance to public health policies in times of COVID-19. *Journal of public economics*, 192, 104316.
3. Barometer, E. T. (2025). Trust and the crisis of grievance. URL: https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2025-01/2025%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer_U.S.%20Report.pdf.
4. Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2024). Cross-country trends in affective polarization. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 106(2), 557-565.
5. Canel, M. J. (2025). The rise of sceptical citizens about public administration communication. *Futures for the Public Sector*, 175.
6. Didenko, N. I., Romashkina, G. F., Skripnuk, D. F., & Kulik, S. V. (2020). Dynamics of trust in institutions, the legitimacy of the social order, and social open innovation. *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, 6(4), 111.
7. Edelman, D. J. (2022). 2022 edelman trust barometer. Edelman.
8. Edwards, L. (2024). Trust, Truth and 'Organized Lying': A Critical Study of the Edelman Trust Barometer. In *Routledge Handbook of the Influence Industry* (pp. 303-319). Routledge.
9. Erhardt, J., Freitag, M., Filsinger, M., & Wamsler, S. (2021). The emotional foundations of political support: How fear and anger affect trust in the government in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. *Swiss political science review*, 27(2), 339-352.
10. European Commission. (2017). Standard Eurobarometer.
11. Goldfinch, S., Taplin, R., & Gauld, R. (2021). Trust in government increased during the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia and New Zealand. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 80(1), 3-11.

12. Han, Q., Zheng, B., Cristea, M., Agostini, M., Bélanger, J. J., Gützkow, B., ... & PsyCorona Collaboration. (2023). Trust in government regarding COVID-19 and its associations with preventive health behaviour and prosocial behaviour during the pandemic: a cross-sectional and longitudinal study. *Psychological medicine*, 53(1), 149-159.
13. Hartman, T. K., Stocks, T. V., McKay, R., Gibson-Miller, J., Levita, L., Martinez, A. P., ... & Bentall, R. P. (2021). The authoritarian dynamic during the COVID-19 pandemic: Effects on nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 12(7), 1274-1285.
14. House, F. (2022). Freedom in the world 2022: The global expansion of authoritarian rule.
15. House, F. (2025). The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights.
16. Jennings, W., Stoker, G., Valgarðsson, V., Devine, D., & Gaskell, J. (2021). How trust, mistrust and distrust shape the governance of the COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 28(8), 1174-1196.
17. Kubin, E., & Von Sikorski, C. (2021). The role of (social) media in political polarization: a systematic review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 45(3), 188-206.
18. Lee, A. H. Y. (2022). Social trust in polarized times: How perceptions of political polarization affect Americans' trust in each other. *Political behavior*, 44(3), 1533-1554.
19. Lima, R. (2024). The Decline of Democracy According to Two Research Centres. *Federalist Debate* (16829670), 39(2).
20. Martin, A. (2026). Trust Gap One: Who We Trust and Who We Don't. In *The Trust Gap* (pp. 21-35). Bristol University Press.
21. McCoy, J., & Somer, M. (2021). Overcoming polarization. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(1), 6-21.
22. McCoy, J., Rahman, T., & Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities. *American behavioral scientist*, 62(1), 16-42.
23. Mfege, A. H. O. (2023). Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy, Yana Gorokhovskaia, Adrian Shahbaz et Amy Slipowitz, Freedom House, 2023, 38 p., en ligne. *Esprit*, (11), 136-137.
24. Miller, M. K. (2021). A republic, if you can keep it: Breakdown and erosion in modern democracies. *The Journal of Politics*, 83(1), 198-213.
25. Narayan Acharya, C., Chaiyakot, P., & Yuangyai, N. (2026). Social–Behavioral Determinants of Sustainable Community-Based Tourism Business Management: An Integrated Structural Equation Approach. *Tourism Planning & Development*, 1-25.
26. Oude Groeniger, J., Noordzij, K., Van Der Waal, J., & De Koster, W. (2021). Dutch COVID-19 lockdown measures increased trust in government and trust in science: A difference-in-differences analysis. *Social Science & Medicine*, 275, 113819.
27. Quraishi, S. Y. (2021). Global state of democracy report 2021. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. Available at: <https://www.idea.int/gsod/global-report> (accessed 20 June 2023).
28. Reiljan, A. (2020). 'Fear and loathing across party lines'(also) in Europe: Affective polarisation in European party systems. *European journal of political research*, 59(2), 376-396.
29. Repucci, S. (2020). The freedom house survey for 2019: The leaderless struggle for democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, 31(2), 137-151.
30. Schaefer, M., & Sapi, G. (2023). Complementarities in learning from data: Insights from general search. *Information Economics and Policy*, 65, 101063.
31. Torcal, M., & Comellas, J. M. (2022). Affective polarisation in times of political instability and conflict. Spain from a comparative perspective. *South European Society and Politics*, 27(1), 1-26.
32. under Siege, D. FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2021. Highlights from Freedom House's annual report on political

33. Valgarðsson, V., Jennings, W., Stoker, G., Bunting, H., Devine, D., McKay, L., & Klassen, A. (2025). A crisis of political trust? Global trends in institutional trust from 1958 to 2019. *British Journal of Political Science*, 55, e15.
34. Vallier, K. (2020). *Trust in a polarized age*. Oxford University Press.
35. Van Bavel, J. J., Cichocka, A., Capraro, V., Sjøstad, H., Nezlek, J. B., Pavlović, T., ... & Jørgensen, F. J. (2022). National identity predicts public health support during a global pandemic. *Nature communications*, 13(1), 517.
36. Wamsler, S., Freitag, M., Erhardt, J., & Filsinger, M. (2023). The pandemic and the question of national belonging: Exposure to covid-19 threat and conceptions of nationhood. *European Journal of Political Research*, 62(2), 510-529.
37. Wollebæk, D., Fladmoe, A., Steen-Johnsen, K., & Ihlen, Ø. (2022). Right-wing ideological constraint and vaccine refusal: The case of the COVID-19 vaccine in Norway. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 45(2), 253-278.
38. Zmigrod, L. (2022). A psychology of ideology: Unpacking the psychological structure of ideological thinking. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 17(4), 1072-1092.