

DEMOCRACY HAS MANY CRISES, BUT ONE CORE PROBLEM: TRUST

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EDITORIAL



2025 did not offer much democratic optimism. From growing pressures on democratic norms in the United States to brutal repression in Iran, a genocide in Gaza, Russia's continued war against Ukraine and its interference abroad, the international context has become increasingly hostile to democratic systems.

But the pressures on democracy are not just coming from elsewhere. In 2024, Europe [accounted](#) for the second-largest share of democratic decline worldwide. In Spain, for example, [more than one in five people](#) now say Franco's dictatorship was "good" or even "very good". Among younger people, 14% say today's democracy is worse than a dictatorship. Those numbers are hard to read. Not only because they point to a certain support for authoritarianism, but also because they suggest a growing sense that democracy no longer does what it is supposed to do.

This is where political trust comes in. Trust is what makes rules feel legitimate, even when they are inconvenient. And it is what keeps institutions from feeling distant or hostile. When trust fades, everything becomes heavier: governing gets harder, polarisation deepens, and democracies become easier to shake from the outside. Across the European Union (EU), trust in institutions fell by about 10 points between 2004 and 2021. That decline rarely makes headlines, but it quietly shapes how democracy works daily[1].

By looking at three illustrative angles, trust in democratic adaptability, trust in democratic performance and trust in democratic participation, it becomes clear that trust is a necessary starting point for any meaningful discussion about democratic renewal.

Trust in adaptability: Can democracy hold its ground?

It may seem counterintuitive to talk about political trust, something deeply personal and shaped by everyday experience, by starting with geopolitics. But shifts in the international environment are impossible to ignore: power politics are no longer disguised, alliances are becoming only transactional, and international law is questioned, if not violated, on a daily basis.

This is directly connected with trust because providing security, stability, and credible long-term responses to multi-crises is a core mission of our democracies. And that promise feels increasingly fragile when war, economic shocks, disinformation, and climate disruption, to cite only a few, are on everybody's mind. At the same time, illiberal forces are cooperating across borders, coordinating narratives, and using digital spaces to turn democratic openness against itself.

This can easily make people think that democracies are too slow, too divided, and too limited by rules that others do not respect anymore. In sum, that they are not built for this kind of world. So, what does rebuilding trust mean in this context? It means concretely showing that democracies can still act together, decisively and lawfully.

The EU has begun to move in that direction with the Digital Services Act and the Democracy Shield, among others. But without enforcement and real coordination, including with like-minded partners beyond Europe,

[1] Political trust in Europe does not follow a single pattern. It has recovered after crises or remained consistently high in some cases, while in others it has declined. People also tend to judge national and EU institutions differently, with trust in national politics generally holding up better. This means that efforts to rebuild trust need to be tailored to national and institutional contexts. More details available [here](#).

the perception that democracies still do not manage to follow through, despite their late attempts to react, risks growing.

In the end, this is a question of credibility. The problem is not about democratic principles, which are, according to many, one of the main reasons behind indecisiveness. The problem rather lies in equating principled action with passivity. Showing that democratic systems can respond firmly to pressure without negotiating away the rule of law is thus an enabler of trust.

Seen this way, political trust is not only what is at stake - it is also a lever. In a world drifting toward confrontation and raw power, that may be one of the most important political action points democracies still have.

Trust in delivery: Restoring through performance

This challenging international environment does not help in a context where the very basis of democratic performance is being questioned. Across our democracies, frustration today has less to do with abstract principles or procedural debates than with very basic questions: Does the system actually deliver? Do people feel economically secure? Do public services work? Do political decisions make sense in citizens' daily lives?

Housing prices nearly [doubled](#) across the EU between 2015 and 2023. Energy bills [spiked](#) after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. [Inflation](#) has reshaped everyday choices. And inequalities keep widening. Between 2006 and 2021, more people [fell below the poverty line](#) in most Member States. In this kind of environment, trust erodes quietly as basic expectations go unmet.

This matters because low trust is never just theoretical. It changes the way democracy feels and functions day by day. When trust is low, (new) policies are met with suspicion, compromises become harder to defend, and institutional protections start to look like obstacles. The risk is not only disengagement (as worrying as that already is) but the openness to actors who promise quick fixes and "efficiency," while quietly setting accountability aside.

Rebuilding trust at this level is therefore not about new slogans. It starts with making democratic performance visible, fair, and credible again. When people are under economic pressure, distributive fairness matters - and it needs to be felt at the individual level, not only reflected in macro-economic indicators. Accountability matters just as much. What fuels frustration is not only the existence of scandals, but the feeling that consequences are uneven or avoided.

Then comes efficiency, a word often stretched or misused. Efficiency is not speed for its own sake, but the ability to make decisions, explain trade-offs honestly, and follow through. In complex environments, trust grows not from oversimplification, but from transparency about limits, priorities, and choices - especially when those choices are difficult.

Seen this way, performance is not a secondary issue. It is one of the clearest prerequisites of trust. And because trust responds to action, it remains one of the most tangible entry points for democratic renewal.

Trust in the power of civic participation

On a more individual level, civic participation

is another element tightly connected with trust and crucial for democratic renewal. Civic participation is a [broad concept](#) that refers to “the actions individuals take to engage in their communities, influence public policy, or contribute to societal well-being.”

It is through active citizens' engagement that governments are held accountable and that the interests of the population are reflected in decision-making processes. It takes various forms, including voting.

Key questions when discussing civic participation are: Do citizens still believe their voices matter? Are they still engaged? The answers to these two are interlinked: if yes to the first question, then likely yes to the second – and viceversa.

The [Eurobarometer post-electoral survey of 2024](#) reveals that approximately one-third of voters' motivation to go to the polls was to defend democracy and the rule of law (32%). This shows a strong belief amongst European citizens that democracy still matters. When it comes to civic participation, youth are particularly sensitive to their role as active citizens. 24% of young voters believed their vote could make a difference at the EU level, compared with 18% of all voters.

This is where the trust that civic participation matters comes in. People show up because they believe in the transformative power of their voices being heard. This is even more telling when we look at the reasons why citizens did not vote in the European elections. The first one is a lack of trust or dissatisfaction with politics in general (21%). Another reason is the belief that voting has no impact (17%).

It is clear that when trust in the power of democratic participation erodes, citizens can walk away from the ballot box. And it does not happen evenly nor randomly: it hits first, and hardest, those who already feel unheard

or excluded. All this creates a downward spiral. This is why rebuilding trust with and for citizens is investing in democracy renewal.

Rebuilding trust, now

To conclude, democracy in Europe will not survive without constantly working on its model. It requires attention, political courage and a willingness to defend its foundations when they are challenged. It needs trust from its population.

The EU has real responsibility here. It needs to ensure that Member States are acting decisively together, where enforcement and coordination are at the heart of it. It must work on its democratic performance, making sure citizens believe in its fairness and credibility. But trust cannot be rebuilt within borders only; defending democracy has become a shared security concern. That means working with like-minded partners on societal topics that bind us together.

In the end, democratic renewal comes down to something both simple and demanding: restoring citizens' confidence that democratic systems still embody the core values of their societies, still deliver and last. The [ActEU project](#) shows that when institutions act clearly, consistently, and in line with their own values, trust can return. If democracy is to remain credible, trust cannot be treated as an afterthought. It has to be rebuilt, starting from now.

These points will be further discussed in our upcoming podcast series Democracy Cracks, which looks at political trust, participation, and democratic resilience. They will also be at the centre of the [ActEU Final Conference in Brussels on 5 February](#) – come join the conversation!

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

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