Declining Trust

SUMMARY: In the United States, trust in institutions—including government, media, science, and medicine—is falling, with important social, political, and economic implications. This decline in trust could fuel deeper political polarization and further erode social cohesion.

Forecasts

- Growing trust deficits in many areas of American life are creating a need for a rebuilding of trust systems. Fact-checkers—Snopes, PolitiFact, etc.—are early examples of this. Efforts to enhance reproducibility in science are another example.
- As the understanding of filter bubbles, targeted marketing, and "fake news" grows, more people could begin seeking out better information. This response is likely to vary by socio-political segment, however.
- Low trust in institutions of all kinds feeds political populism. If trust continues to decline, more populist political movements could find traction.
- New technologies—realistic fake video and audio and AI—will have further corrosive effects on trust.

Key Uncertainties

Evolution of trust in institutions within various political and cultural groups

•

Societal capacity and methods for rebuilding trust

•

The role of filter bubbles and misinformation

•

Potential rise of new trusted institutions and knowledge sources

•

Evolution of technical means to obscure or fake reality and manipulate people's perceptions

2018© ASAE Foundation

Supporting Trends

- **Declining trust in government.** Americans trust in their government is at historically low levels. This seems to be the case across all demographic groups—racial, political, and generational.
- **Erosion of trust in the media.** Americans trust in mainstream media is at an all-time low. This is driven by the general decline of trust in American institutions, perceptions of arrogance, the rise of alternative sources on the internet, and political polarization.
- **Faking reality.** Technologies for creating convincing fake audio and video are advancing rapidly.
- **Millennials' mistrust of institutions.** Millennials share the overwhelming mistrust of Americans toward government—and this generation also distrusts most other institutions.
- **Trust in science may be waning.** Scientists perceive that public trust in science is diminishing and, indeed, a recent poll shows some loss of optimism about science, though science is still well-respected.
- **Findings of irreproducible science sparking reforms.** A number of studies suggest that a significant proportion of published science may not be reproducible; these results are sparking a variety of reforms.

Related Drivers of Change

- Rejection of Expertise
- The Splintered Society
- Algorithmic Politics
- Nichification

Notable Data Points

CRATERING OF TRUST

Americans' trust in four major institutions of public life—NGOs, media, business, and government—

dropped 37 points between 2017 and 2018.

Source: Edelman Trust Barometer 2018

DECLINING TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

The share of Americans who say they

trust the federal government

to do the right thing always or most of the time

declined from 77% in 1964 to 18% in 2007.

Source: Pew Research Center

AMERICANS BAD AT FACT-SPOTTING

Only 26% of surveyed Americans

could identify five out of five factual statements.

Source: Pew Research Center

2018© ASAE Foundation

Strategic Insights

- Being trusted will be a growing advantage for organizations. High trust is increasing the upside to being seen as relatively neutral, or at least well aligned with the interests and beliefs of members.
- A growing challenge will be that forces beyond its control could shape an organization's perceived trustworthiness. For instance, a perception of taking a side in a social or political debate could trigger attacks on an organization's credibility, even if the organization did nothing untrustworthy.
- Decline of trust will have an impact on donations and fundraising, as organizations have to make a larger effort to convince donors of their integrity.
- Similarly, this will affect lobbying efforts as the motives and ties of organizations are subject to increasing suspicion, and stances on issues are taken as proof of untrustworthiness.
- Transparency can be a means of gaining trust—but it can also be a double-edged sword, providing information upon which doubt can be hung.
- Trust in institutions is even lower in much of the world outside the United States and European Union, especially in emerging markets. When engaging with people and organizations in these places, a basic level of knowledge of how institutions are perceived will help prevent miscues and missteps.

Timing

- **Stage:** Growth, with driving forces still active
- **Speed:** Slow, as trust has relatively deep sociocultural roots

Potential Alternative Futures

- **Post-trust world:** In a post-trust world, nothing is deemed "inherently" true.
- **New structures of trust:** New institutions and systems to support trust are built up, though they may have divided audiences.
- **A million bubbles of one:** As targeted marketing and alternative sources proliferate, filter bubbles could be further refined to single users.
- **Radical transparency:** In a post-trust world, everyone knows everything about everyone. This creates a level playing field of knowledge—but has its own pernicious effects.

2018© ASAE Foundation

Take Action

- **Communicate with care, and be prepared with a crisis communications plan.** How an association communicates has never mattered more now that social media and multiple channels rapidly spread messages to multiple audiences—often without adequate context. People expect prompt response to questions. A crisis communications plan is critical to quick recovery from inevitable missteps.

- **Take these practical steps to build trust:**
  - Have clear and transparent decision-making processes especially with boards, delegate assemblies, and sensitive committees such as government affairs and nominations.
  - Give credit to members who help develop programs or make key decisions. Members trust colleagues.
  - When setting priorities, back up decisions with data and evidence that all voices were heard.
  - Commit to a strategic direction and goals that transcend leadership transitions.

- **Know when you must take a stand and when it is wise to be silent.** Be clear on your values and positions. Be vocal where it matters; don't take positions where members don't want or need you to weigh in.

- **Manage the perception that money can buy influence.** Associations depend on financial support from business partners and sponsors. It's more than money: Companies do content marketing, conduct research, and provide expert speakers. To help members assess how reliable these resources are, disclose the rationale or research behind any guidance or research conclusions, and their funding sources.

- **Know where your members stand within the public trust.** Check public opinion surveys and trust barometers to understand how the public perceives your industry, profession, or cause. Keep a sense of perspective; with distrust widespread, where you stand is relative. Decide how you will censure errant members.

- **Lead in rebuilding public trust.** Associations are the interface between their members and government and society. Strive to be a trusted voice and source.

Keyword Search

To continue researching this change driver, use combinations of these search terms: ***trust, polling, polarization, institutions, partisanship, media filters, media bubbles, social segmentation, diversity, filter bubble, deep fakes***

Who Will Be Affected

Because people give to organizations they trust, philanthropic and charitable organizations are particularly vulnerable. The public has varying degrees of trust in different industries and professions; associations should know where their members stand in public perception.

About ASAE ForesightWorks

ASAE ForesightWorks is a deliberate, evidence-based research program and emerging line of products to provide association professionals with a continual stream of intelligence about the changes facing the association industry, including:

- regularly updated action briefs;
- tools for applying insights from the research in your association;
- guidance in performing environmental scans; and
- opportunities to engage with peers around the research.

Ultimately, the program's mission is to empower association leaders to create a culture of foresight.

Check **asaecenter.org/ForesightWorks** and follow **@ASAEfdn** on Twitter for updates on new findings and events.

2018© ASAE Foundation