

HOW TO REBUILD PUBLIC TRUST

The influence of non-electoral participation in Europe

► Summary

Trust in politicians and political institutions is important for ensuring the efficient functioning of our political system, since restrictions on democratic freedoms, like peaceful protest and free expression, reduce citizens' political participation and fuel public distrust, weakening the legitimacy of political institutions and leaders.

EU Institutions should work more closely with member states to ensure the protection of fundamental rights and act more swiftly using legal instruments when violations occur, to help safeguard citizens' rights and trust in politics.

What's the problem?

In the last years, a growing number of governments across Europe have tightened restrictions on core democratic freedoms - such as the right to peaceful protest, free expression, and association. These constraints are making it increasingly difficult for citizens to participate in politics beyond the ballot box, silencing voices that seek to be heard through demonstrations and civic action. As a result, many people feel ignored and repressed by political leaders and institutions, fueling a dangerous rise in public distrust.

Trust in political institutions is not just a nice-to-have - it's essential. When trust erodes, legitimacy becomes fragile, hindering the exercise of governing and legislating on pressing issues. In an era marked by overlapping crises, from climate change to economic instability, political trust is one of the EU's most valuable assets. Without it, even the most well-intentioned policies risk falling flat due to a lack of legitimacy.

What does the evidence show?

A recent study by the ActEU project paints a diverse picture of political engagement across Europe over the past two decades. While the overall level of non-electoral political action - such as wearing campaign badges, boycotting products, contacting officials, demonstrating, and signing petitions - has remained relatively steady, the ways in which people choose to participate vary widely from country to country. Petition signing emerges as the most popular form of action in many nations, but not everywhere: in Greece and Finland, for instance, citizens are more inclined to express their political views by boycotting products.

The study also explored the relationship

between political trust and non-electoral participation. Even though , it found that in most cases, there's little to no direct connection between the two, the exceptions are even more concerning: Instances where higher levels of political trust go hand-in-hand with more active civic engagement. This is the case for every form of non-electoral participation, with the exception of boycotting, which is consistently a sign for lower political trust. These findings suggest that providing meaningful avenues for non-electoral participation could play a key role in building and reinforcing public trust in political institutions and leaders.

What should be done?

To strengthen public trust in political institutions and support meaningful civic engagement, the EU and its member states need to move beyond reactive approaches and take a more deliberate role in fostering democratic participation. A coordinated strategy should protect fundamental rights, ensure impartial support for civil society, and improve understanding of non-electoral political engagement through better data collection.

Key recommendations

- ▶ **Better protection of protest rights:** The European Commission, the Council and European Parliament as well as all other relevant EU institutions should more actively engage with member states in ensuring the protection of fundamental rights, like the right to peaceful protest.
- ▶ **Neutral and transparent funding of civil society organizations:** Public funding of civil society organizations should be based on **neutral and transparent allocation mechanisms**. Biased funding distribution can undermine trust in institutions and discourage active civic participation.
- ▶ **If member states do not fundamentally comply, the European Commission should make use of all of the legal instruments available to ensure compliance.**
- ▶ **More fine-grained survey-data:** Cross-national surveys only feature specific questions about a limited number of forms of non-electoral participation. For a better understanding of non-electoral participation and its effect on political trust, Surveys like the **Eurobarometer** or **the European Social Survey** should include every 4-5 years special modules in which they ask participants about the non-electoral political action and the motivations behind them in more general terms.