

# REBUILDING TRUST FROM THE GROUND UP

Strengthening Subnational  
Governance to Reinforce  
Democratic Legitimacy

## ► Summary

When subnational elections are undemocratic and lack transparency, and when political parties have low local presence and candidate selection, trust decreases, not just locally, but at all levels of governance. Lack of democratic standards, transparency, and citizen participation at the subnational level weakens trust at all levels. Without fair elections, inclusive decision-making, and proper integration between national and EU frameworks, subnational governance risks becoming a source of disconnection and discontent, especially since local policies directly shape citizens' daily lives.

Trust in governments is highly conditional on perceived legitimacy, performance, and participatory quality. Trust evaluations are informed by competence, inclusiveness, and responsiveness. Citizens tend to trust governments more when they perceive high legitimacy, good performance and have the feeling that political participation is possible.

Citizens evaluate political actors by their perceived competence, inclusiveness and responsiveness.

Reforms should be guided by treating trust-building as a core goal of governance, and not as a byproduct.

## **What's the problem?**

Political trust is foundational to legitimacy, and legitimacy is what enables governments to govern effectively. Without it, even a well-crafted policy loses traction. This erosion of trust doesn't stay contained, it spreads upward, weakening confidence in the broader political system. When subnational governance lacks strong democratic standards, it poses a serious risk to trust in national and EU-level institutions.

Across Europe, trust in political institutions is uneven, shaped by how citizens perceive and experience governance at more local levels. However, even though people can distinguish between EU, national, and subnational governance, the perceptions at one level influence the others. The ActEU data show that this influence is neither uniform nor unidirectional, meaning there is no clear pattern about the direction of this influence between countries.

The problem is that the architecture of democratic governance often fails to reinforce trust. The quality of democracy at the subnational level, especially in how it ensures fair elections and enables meaningful participation, has significant consequences for broader democratic stability.

## **What does the evidence show?**

The evidence presented by the ActEU research project and recent Eurobarometer data points to a crucial insight: political trust in Europe is not uniform but differentiated across levels of governance. Citizens evaluate subnational, national, and European institutions separately, using distinct criteria shaped by the perceived performance, responsiveness, and legitimacy of each level. This multi-level understanding of trust has important implications. While trust in one

level of government can influence attitudes toward others, it does not automatically transfer. Instead, it depends on the quality of governance experienced at each level.

The findings also highlight that political trust is shaped by subjective evaluations of institutional competence, inclusiveness and responsiveness. Citizens are more likely to trust institutions they perceive as capable of delivering results, acting fairly, and respecting the public's input. These dimensions are most visible and immediate at the local level, where everyday governance is felt most directly. When people see that their local government functions well and listens to them, they are more likely to believe that the political system as a whole is legitimate.

One of the strongest findings is the pivotal role subnational governance plays in shaping overall democratic trust. Where subnational institutions uphold transparent and inclusive practices (especially in electoral processes and participatory mechanisms) citizens are more likely to express confidence in national and EU authorities. Open, accountable, and accessible local level governance becomes a key site for building legitimacy and enhancing the public's sense of political efficacy. Where these standards are lacking, subnational autonomy can undermine trust in national and supranational institutions.

On the other hand, subnational autonomy without strong democratic performance can undermine trust. The evidence shows that regions with more autonomous powers but weak participatory structures or inconsistent governance standards risk weakening public confidence in national and supranational institutions. This finding makes clear that autonomy alone is not enough. What matters is the democratic quality of subnational governance: how decisions are made, how elections are run, and how responsive institutions are to citizens' needs. Political parties also play a crucial role in this

dynamic. Parties that are present and active at the local level and involve citizens in candidate selection and internal decision-making, help cultivate a more participatory democratic culture. Their presence builds familiarity and trust, making politics feel more tangible and accessible. This bottom-up engagement supports the development of trust in institutions at all levels.

Ultimately, the evidence makes clear that

subnational governance is not a secondary concern in the architecture of political trust, it is a cornerstone. To rebuild and sustain trust in democratic institutions, policymakers must invest in the democratic quality of local governance, ensuring it is participatory, transparent, and integrated with national and EU-level frameworks. Without this foundation, efforts to strengthen trust at higher levels will remain fragile and incomplete.

## Key recommendations

► **Institutionalizing electoral fairness at the subnational level:** Local and regional elections must be **systematically monitored for freedom and fairness**. Countries should adopt national standards (backed by independent oversight) to guarantee **consistent democratic integrity** across all regions. EU institutions can provide benchmarks and support mechanisms, especially in states with weaker local safeguards.

► **Treat trust as a governance outcome:** Trust isn't just a feeling, it's a measurable outcome of transparent, responsive, and inclusive governance. Subnational reforms should be designed and evaluated with trust-building as an explicit goal, much like efficiency or policy compliance.

► **Promote participatory governance locally:** Empower subnational bodies to engage citizens through town halls, participatory and local referenda. Investments in civic infrastructure, such as digital platforms for consultation or community assemblies, should be increased. Political parties must be encouraged to maintain permanent local branches and decentralize candidate selection at lower levels, **fostering deeper community ties with local communities**.

► **Balance autonomy with integration:** National sovereignty must be aligned with EU-wide democratic goals. These mechanisms are essential for **creating a common framework of values and expectations** across different levels, helping to avoid fragmentation and ensure coherent policymaking. This includes cooperative legislative forums between national and subnational governments, and structured intergovernmental dialogue supported by EU funding.

**Trust doesn't trickle down; it builds from the bottom up. A democratic system is only as strong as its foundations. By ensuring transparent elections and enabling participatory mechanisms at the subnational level, EU and national leaders can anchor legitimacy where it matters most: in the lived experience of everyday governance.**