

What Makes Democratic Institutions Trustworthy?

Emanuela Ceva
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Distrust in public institutions is rampant across democracies. In spring 2025, just over half of Europeans said they trusted the EU, while fewer than four in ten trusted their national government or parliament. In the United States, only [17% said in September 2025](#) that they trusted the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time. The [OECD's latest comparative synthesis](#) points to a crucial clue: among people who feel they have a voice in government decisions, trust in national government is more than three times higher than among those who feel voiceless.



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These dynamics are not only about citizens' perceptions of institutional trustworthiness in light of institutional performance and service delivery. They also raise a further question: **to what extent does institutional trustworthiness depend on citizens experiencing themselves as part of the institutional process?** This means asking how trust dynamics in a democracy are conceptually, empirically and normatively linked to citizens' being recognized as agents who can co-shape institutional action and partake in the exercise of authority, rather than merely as recipients of public decisions and policies. Given the centrality of citizens' participation and authority to democratic politics, addressing this question requires a shift of attention from the sociological measurement of public perceptions alone to a more basic normative issue requiring further theorization: **what makes an institution trustworthy in a way that fits democratic government?**

Institutional trustworthiness

Trustworthy institutions are often described in general terms as institutions that act with [integrity, deliver results effectively](#), and are [transparent](#) about their rules and decisions. All of this matters. But these remain generic criteria. They do not yet tell us what is specifically distinctive about an institution being trustworthy *in a democracy*, given democracy's fundamental [participatory commitments](#). An institution may be effective, procedurally clean, and highly communicative, yet still fall short of eliciting the kind of trust that can meaningfully arise from democratic citizenship.

The democratic commitment to "rule by the people" implies that citizens' trust in a democracy cannot and should not be reduced to an **automatic response to service delivery**. Trust is the citizen's attitude; trustworthiness is the institutional quality that makes that attitude warranted. To fit the democratic ethos, **trust relations in a democracy must align with an active view of citizenship**, one ready and committed to [participating in government and exercising mutual authority](#). Correspondingly, democratic trustworthiness is not just a matter of institutions meeting standards of output delivery or disclosure. It is also, and importantly, a matter of [how public power is organized among officeholders and citizens](#).

Institutional accountability: answerability and addressability

A key democratic feature of the organization of public power, attuned to the commitments of democratic citizenship, is [accountability](#). **Accountability** matters to democratic government in at least two senses.

First, democratic institutions must be **answerable** for their actions. Officeholders must be able to explain and justify what they have done. This includes public reason-giving, hearings, reporting duties, and review by oversight bodies. It also includes internal practices: within institutions, officeholders must be able to explain decisions to one another, submit them to review, and open them to contestation. When these practices are weak, **transparency easily degenerates into information release without justification**. This, in turn, risks making transparency provisions idle and therefore insufficient to generate the kind of civic investment through which citizens come to see institutions as trustworthy. The democratic ideal thus commits institutions to organizing transparency and service delivery within active and participatory practices of answerability. Otherwise, if these are experienced as mere bureaucratic tick-boxing exercises, they cannot make a meaningful contribution to institutional trustworthiness or sustain citizens' trust.

But the democratic exercise of public power requires more than explanation after the fact. It also requires what I call [addressability](#): the capacity of institutions to organize public power in ways that treat officeholders and citizens as relevant co-authors who share authority in shaping the direction of institutional action. This is central to the participatory commitment distinctive of democracy. Inside institutions, this means that officeholders should not act as isolated functionaries. They should relate to one another

as **co-authors of institutional action**, through cross-checks and shared responsibility for where the institution is going. Outside institutions, it means that there must be channels through which citizens' claims can be taken up and acted upon, not merely received and archived. Deliberative fora, claim channels with follow-up, and feedback loops into institutional action are all examples. Such participatory channels, which engage citizens' authority, are key to democracy. They are also what can nourish citizens' well-grounded trust, because they allow **trust to take the form of a critical exercise of co-authorship** in collectively binding decisions. From this point of view, it is not enough for institutions to be trustworthy that they act with integrity. Citizens must also figure within institutional action as mutually addressable agents.

Institutional distrust: diagnosis and therapy

This distinction between answerability and addressability clarifies a common **democratic failure**. Some institutions are good at explaining themselves after the fact, yet leave citizens and street-level officeholders with no meaningful role in shaping institutional direction. Others multiply participatory moments, yet remain weak on justification, review, and scrutiny. In either case, the normative conditions of institutional trustworthiness erode. The result is growing citizens' distrust, not just as dissatisfaction, but as a form of **political alienation**.

This has a practical implication for **democratic reform**. If we want institutions to deserve trust, it is not enough to improve communication, publish more information, or demand better performance indicators. We also need **concretely participated institutional practices** that make power genuinely accountable both after decisions are made and before institutional direction is set. Such practices are not just a mere matter of institutional design; they must be sustained by specific training programs aimed at the development of a democratic public ethics of accountability.

Note: This article is based on the presentation "What Makes Democratic Institutions Trustworthy? An Accountability-based framework", given by Prof. Emanuela Ceva at the Aarau Democracy Days on 12-13 March 2026.

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