

# Political trust in the UK

Trust in who to do what:  
what does trust really mean?

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Full Fact

# Full Fact is the UK's independent factchecking charity.


## About this paper

Misinformation and disinformation cause real harm to people's lives, health, finances and to democracy. We need good evidence on how to tackle it. Full Fact has set up a research programme to find that evidence and make it useful.

In this briefing, Full Fact's Research Manager **Amy Sippitt** goes beyond the survey headlines to look at what trust really means. We would like to extend our warmest thanks to Bobby Duffy for his comments.

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# Political trust in the UK

Look at any survey data on trust, and you'll see that the majority of the UK public generally says they distrust politicians, journalists and the government. Despite reports to the contrary, this has pretty much always been the case.<sup>1</sup>

But, what do we really mean when we say we distrust politicians, or indeed any other profession or institution? Measuring trust is hard. For starters, our stated amount of trust depends on what we're asking them to do. Asked if we trust the government to do "what is right", more of us say we trust them than when we're asked if we trust politicians or government ministers to "tell the truth".

It also can be a difficult concept to measure through self-reporting. The philosopher Baroness Onora O'Neill has commented how, **"where we can do nothing to check or investigate sources of information and their credentials we often, and reasonably, withhold trust and suspend both belief and disbelief in favour of cynicism and half-belief. We may end up claiming not to trust, and yet for practical purposes place trust in the very sources we claim not to trust"** [↗](#).

That said, some preliminary experimental research by the international economic body the OECD suggests what we say in surveys about our levels of trust in government might not be completely far off from our levels of trust implied by our choices.

While very low trust is undoubtedly difficult for a government, some academics have suggested that at least some distrust can be good if it means citizens are holding democracy to higher standards.<sup>2</sup> As Onora O'Neill has said, **"Nobody sensible simply wants more trust. Sensible people want to place their trust where it is deserved. They also want to place their mistrust where it is deserved."** [↗](#)

## What's the broad picture?

- Politicians are one of the least trusted professions, with about 19% of people in the UK saying they trust them to tell the truth. Trust in government ministers is similar, with 22% trusting them. Trust in journalists to tell the truth is a little higher, with 26% of Brits saying they trust them.

1. See for example Bobby Duffy, 2018. *The Perils of Perception: Why we're wrong about nearly everything* (Atlantic Books: London).  
2. See for example Pippa Norris, 2011. *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

- If you ask about trust to “do what is right” then these proportions increase a little: about 42% of us say we trust the government to do what is right, and 37% trust the media to do what is right.
- Nurses are the most trusted profession, with 96% of Brits trusting them to tell the truth, with doctors following closely behind at 92%.

Low political trust is not inevitable. For example, the Netherlands and Malta came top of [a European Commission poll on trust in government](#) with 63% in each of those countries saying they tend to trust their government in 2018.

## Trust in who to do what: what does trust really mean?

There are many different ways to measure trust, so much so that the OECD has written a 200 page report assessing the different methods.

**Its report distinguishes between our trust in other people — interpersonal trust — and our trust in institutions — institutional trust.** People’s trust in other people is described as an important driver for well-being indicators like income and life satisfaction, while trust in institutions is important for government and the economy.

They also make a distinction between generalised trust – trust in people you don’t know or in situations where the person being trusted isn’t specified – and limited trust – trust in people you do know.

So it’s important to be clear on what type of trust survey questions are seeking to measure. It’s also worth looking at what scale they use to ask about trust. This can vary between those which ask respondents to score on a scale of 0-10 (or similar), those that report results based on a threshold e.g. “7 and above”, and those which ask a binary ‘trust or do not trust’ question. Giving the example of trust in the police, the OECD found these different scales actually altered which country appeared to have the highest and lowest levels of trust in a cross-country comparison. So the scale matters.

The OECD also said we need more research on the extent to which questions about institutional trust measure the concepts and feelings we think they’re measuring.

As well as general questions on these different types of trust, the OECD outlines four further sets of questions that seek more of an in-depth understanding of trust:

- **Evaluations** — how much do you trust X?
- **Expectations** — what would happen in a given situation e.g. if you complain about a public service, would the problem be resolved?
- **Experiences** — have you... e.g. voiced your opinion to a public official?
- **Experiments** — using experimental techniques and observation to measure trust

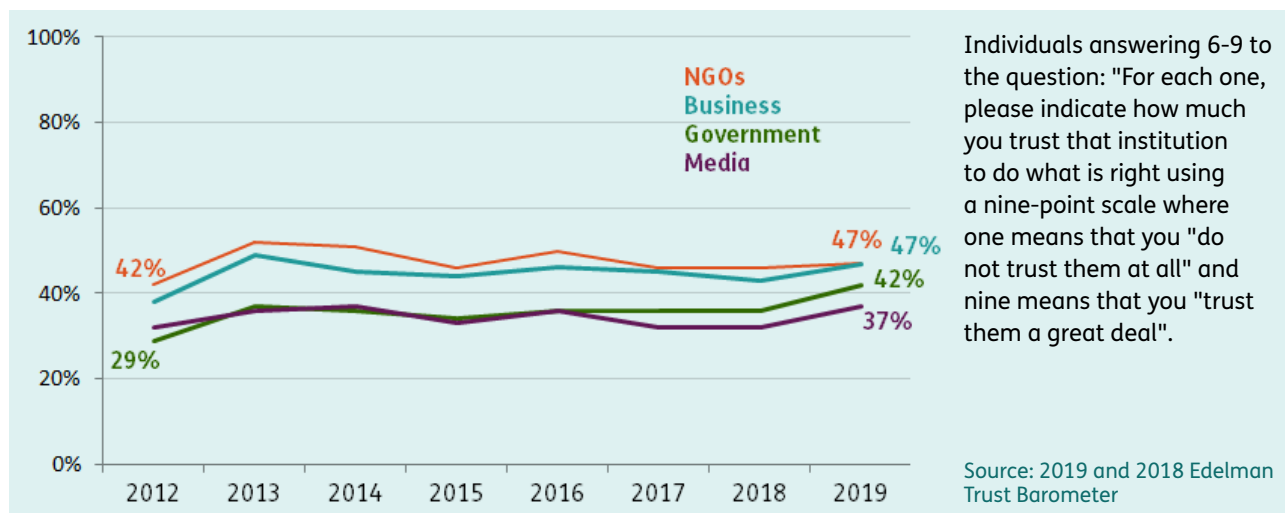
More recent OECD research used some of these experimental techniques with samples of around 1,000 people in six countries to tease out **implicit perceptions of whether they saw the government as trustworthy or untrustworthy** [↗](#). That research suggested that our implicit levels of trust in government may be slightly higher than our self-reported trust. But the study also found that there was a link between how individuals rated their trust in the survey and their implicit level of trust in the experiment—if someone reported low levels of trust in the survey they were also likely to have displayed relatively low levels of trust in the experimental task.

## Edelman: trust to do “what is right”

42% of us say we trust the government to do what is right, according to **Edelman’s 2019 trust barometer** [↗](#) of a panel of 1,150 internet users in the UK.

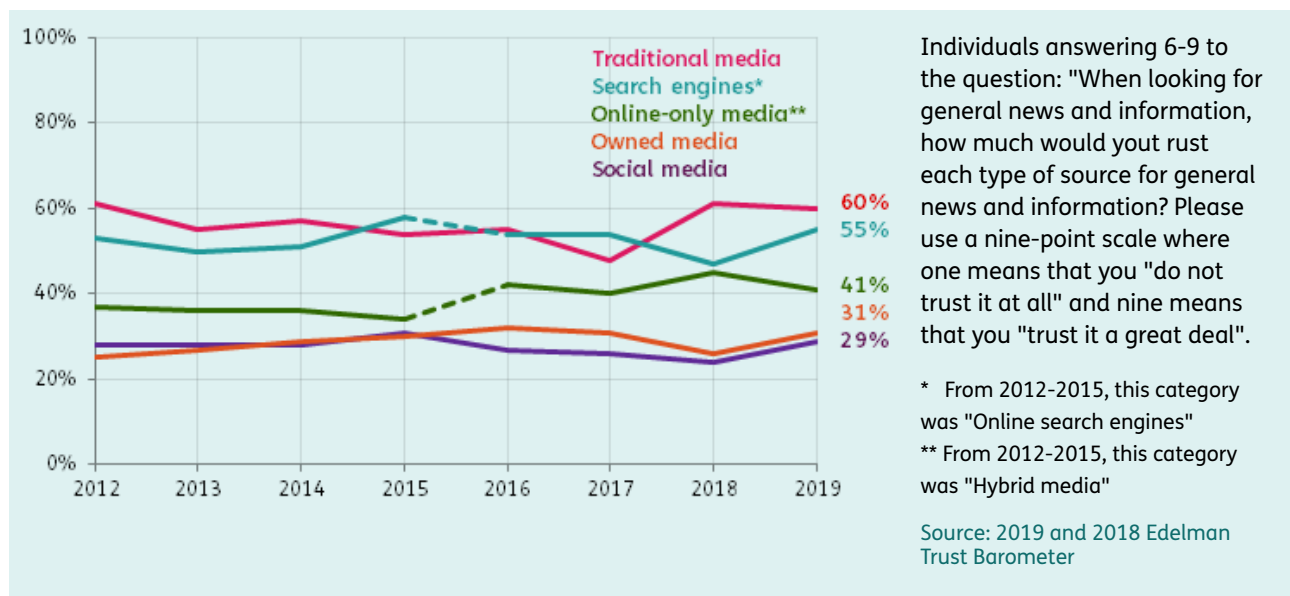
Respondents are asked to respond using a nine-point scale, where one means that you “do not trust them at all” and nine means that you “trust them a great deal”. 42% selected between six and nine.

The media scores the lowest of the four institutions Edelman asks about, with 37% trusting the media to do what is right. 47% trust NGOs and business to do what is right.



Linked to this idea of doing “what is right”, an older survey question in NatCen Social Research’s British Social Attitudes Survey on **trust in governments “to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party”** [↗](#) found declining proportions agreeing with this, from 38% in 1986, to 16% in 2000 and 18% in 2012.

Edelman also asks about trust in various sources for “general news and information”. In this case, traditional media scores the highest with 60% saying they trust it for general news and information, similar to 2018 when it had increased from a low of 48% in 2017.



Social media fared worst when it came to trust for general news and information, with 29% trusting social media for this.

## Ipsos MORI: trust to “tell the truth”... lower

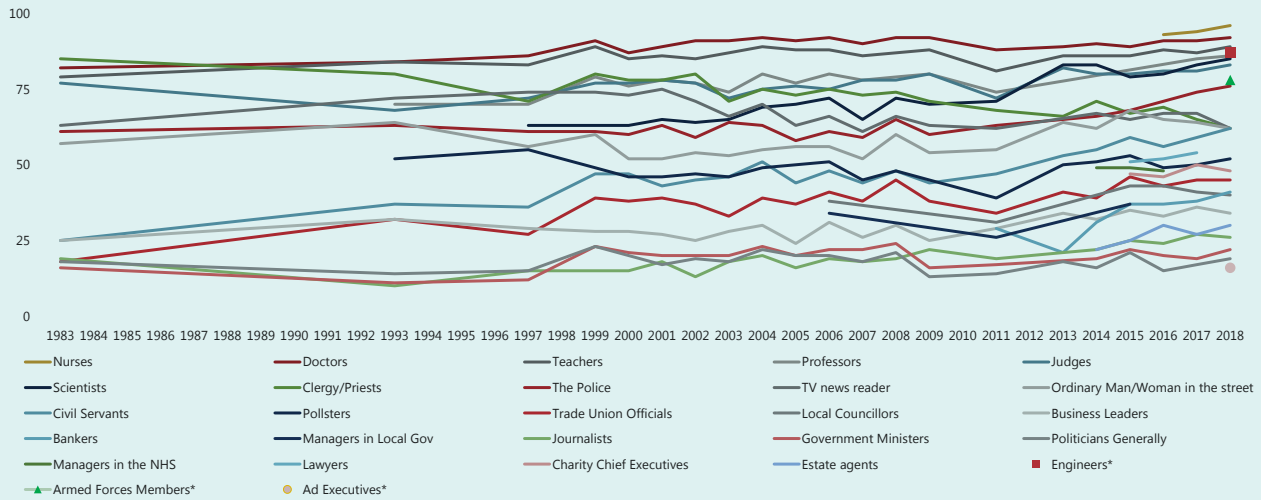
Fewer of us trust politicians to tell the truth. 22% of us say we generally trust government ministers to tell the truth, and only 19% of us say we trust politicians generally to tell the truth. Until 2018, **these were the least trusted professions out of 24 professions asked about in Ipsos MORI Veracity Index** [↗](#). However, they were overtaken by a new entry to the index — advertising executives, who entered at 16%.

These trends have stayed pretty similar since the series started in the early 1980s. We have never been in a ‘golden age’ of trust.

Journalists follow closely after politicians and government ministers, with 26% trust. Nurses are the most trusted profession to tell the truth (96%), followed by doctors (92%).

## All Veracity data, 1983 - 2018

**% trust to tell the truth:**




However, this data also shows how perceptions of broad professional groupings can be more negative than perceptions of specific individuals or brands within those groupings. In this data, “journalists” are viewed far more negatively than “TV news readers”. In the same way, trust in individual news brands is often higher than for trust in news in general (Digital News Report, 2019) ■

Base: c. 1,000 British adults aged 15+ per year


\* This profession listed for the first time in 2018

Source: Ipsos MORI Veracity Index 2018

## Some of us have slightly higher trust in our local MP

There are some **differences between trust in our local MP and MPs in general** . In the British Election Study, about 24% of respondents said they trusted MPs in general when asked in 2015, compared to 37% who said they trusted the MP in their local constituency (based on those selecting 5 or above on a 1-7 scale).

But it's still the case that a significant majority don't say they trust either.

In an analysis of the data by political scientist Professor Philip Cowley, he concluded: **"The idea that we really rate our local MP whilst hating MPs in general is wide of the mark. Most people rate their local MP pretty much the same as they rate MPs in general, and a minority are a bit more positive about their local MP than they are about MPs in general."** 

He said that one of the biggest influences on individuals' reported trust in their local MP was whether they were from the same political party as their preferred party ■



## Reasons for distrust and news avoidance

There are many reasons offered for distrust, and we haven't gone into all of them here.

When asked why they distrust government to do what is right in Edelman's 2018 survey, the most common reason was "they do not deliver on policy promises that protect average people". The next two most common reasons were "they do not communicate honestly when problems arise", and "they do not operate in a transparent and honest way". In other words, from the public's point of view distrust is a rational response to government failing to live up to people's expectations of trustworthy behaviour.

Looking at trust in a wider set of institutions, the research agency BritainThinks has suggested that **while trust has always been low, there may have been a recent shift to the public calling into question the basic competence of their leaders and institutions** [↗](#) — the feeling that they can't even get the basics right.

BritainThinks ran a survey comparing judgements of institutions' competence (asking "Regardless of whether you like them or not, how good or bad do you think that each of the following are at what they do") to judgements of institutions' motivation (with questions asking about trust in institutions to act in society's best interests, and in individuals' own best interests). They found a clear link between average judgements of each, but most institutions tended to be viewed better for their competence than their motivation. So it's easier for individuals to think an institution does its job well than it is to convince them that the institution has good motivations or morals.

Once again politicians fared worst out of 30 organisations, people and institutions asked about, for both competency and motivation. Government was close behind, alongside landlords.

This data excludes those who said "don't know". BritainThinks said the organisations and institutions that were closest to the border between competence and motivation were those with high proportions of those who said they didn't know. They said this suggests it may be harder to actively build trust with these individuals (if many of them are unfamiliar with these institutions), and means there's not much of a core audience of supporters if things go wrong ■

## Who distrusts?

What do we know about who distrusts? Again, slightly different trends and characteristics can be found depending on which measure or dataset we look at. But one clear theme is that people with low levels of income and low education levels are often found to be less trusting.

### More specifically:

- The OECD's research has found **lower levels of education and income are linked with lower levels of trust in other people** [🔗](#), and **lower levels of trust in government** [🔗](#).
- This reflects BritainThinks' analysis which found those less trusting were more likely to be men (62% were men), have a lower income (£23,000 average compared to £29,000 for 'trusters'), be older (with an average age of 51 compared to 46), and travel less.
- Looking at the number of professions in its index that were trusted by different groups, Ipsos MORI found Generation Z tended to trust the most professions on average. Those trusting the lowest number of professions were found to be people who are: widowed, divorced or separated; those who rent their home from a local authority; people with no formal educational qualifications, and those in social grades DE.
- Ipsos MORI's data also finds younger people aged 15-24 and those from London to be slightly more trusting of government ministers to tell the truth ■

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