

## GLOBAL

# Why Trump Is Thriving in an Age of Distrust

“Populism is people taking authority back from institutions they no longer have faith in.”

URI FRIEDMAN JAN 20, 2017



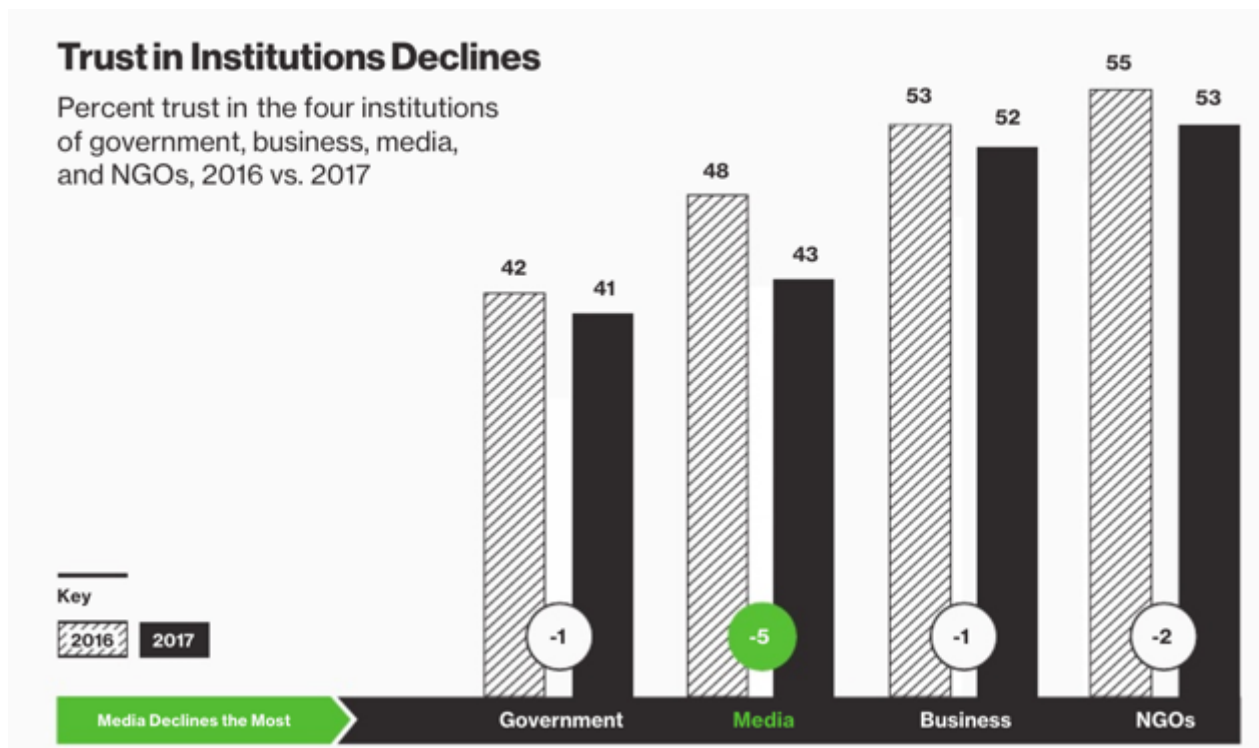
JONATHAN ERNST / REUTERS

There's a paradox at the core of Trumpism: Many of Donald Trump's supporters place great trust in a man who regularly tells them to trust no one: not the "dishonest" media, not the "corrupt" politicians, not the "phony" experts, not his many "crooked" enemies. No one, that is, except Donald J. Trump himself. "Believe me," Trump likes to say.

But the paradox starts to make sense when you consider the findings of a report released this week by the communications marketing firm Edelman. For 17 years, Edelman has been asking people around the world about their level of trust in various institutions. Last year, the firm warned of a growing gap between elites, who largely trusted their country's institutions, and non-elites, who mostly didn't. Now, as 2017 begins, the firm is declaring that trust, an essential element of functioning societies, is "in crisis" in many countries.

After polling more than 30,000 respondents in 28 developed and developing countries, Edelman recorded slight declines in trust in all four institutions that it

measures: government, the media, business, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

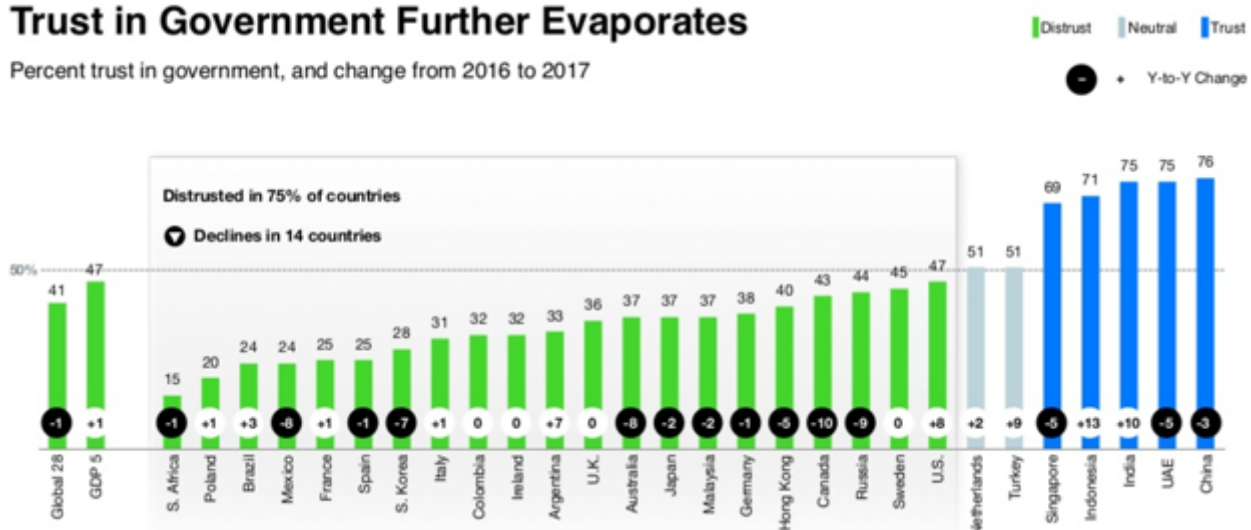


2017 EDELMAN TRUST BAROMETER

Government emerged as the institution that people trusted least to “do what is right,” with more than half of respondents in 21 of 28 surveyed countries expressing distrust in government.

### Trust in Government Further Evaporates

Percent trust in government, and change from 2016 to 2017

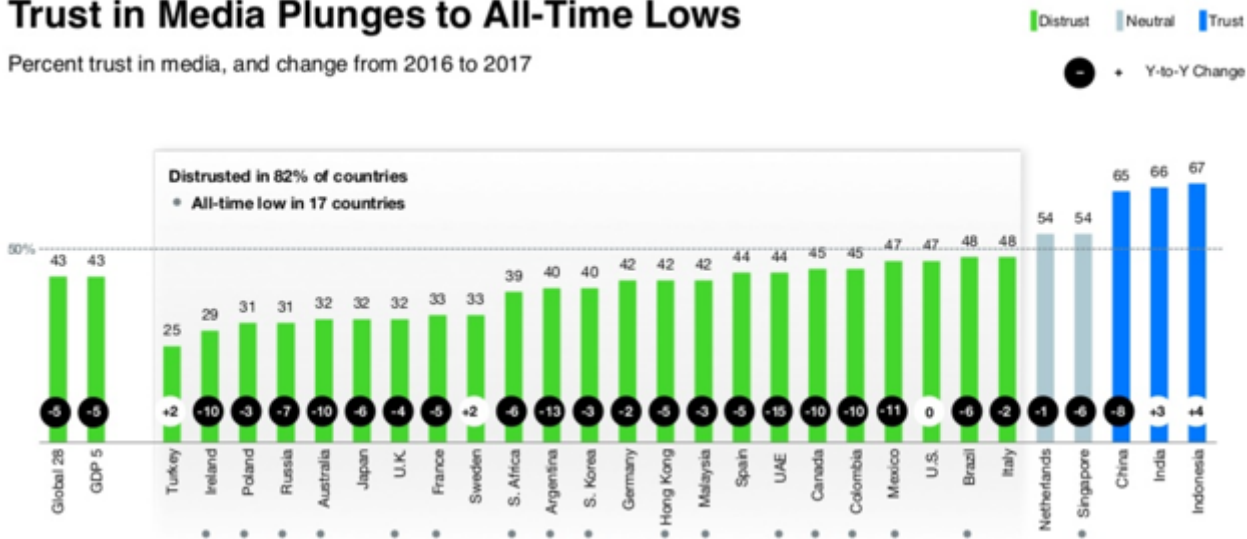


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But it was trust in media that fell most substantially over the past year; the press is distrusted by more than half of respondents in 23 of 28 surveyed countries.

## Trust in Media Plunges to All-Time Lows

Percent trust in media, and change from 2016 to 2017

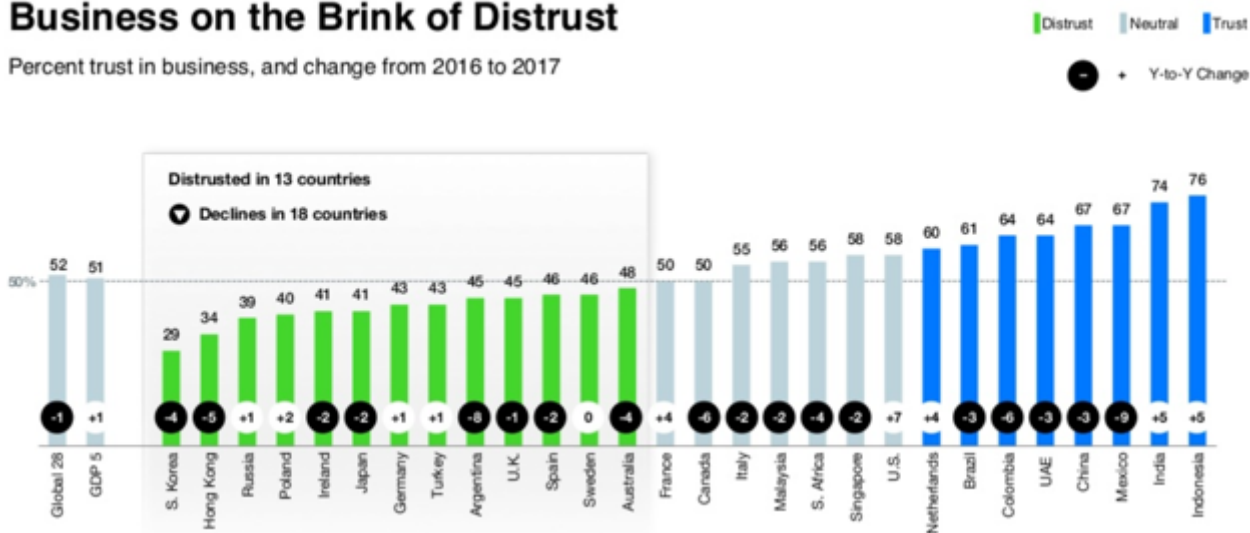


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Business—which, in contrast to government, is still widely viewed as capable of improving people’s lives—is a “last retaining wall, holding back a rising tide of dissatisfaction” with the institutional pillars of society, the report’s authors note.

## Business on the Brink of Distrust

Percent trust in business, and change from 2016 to 2017



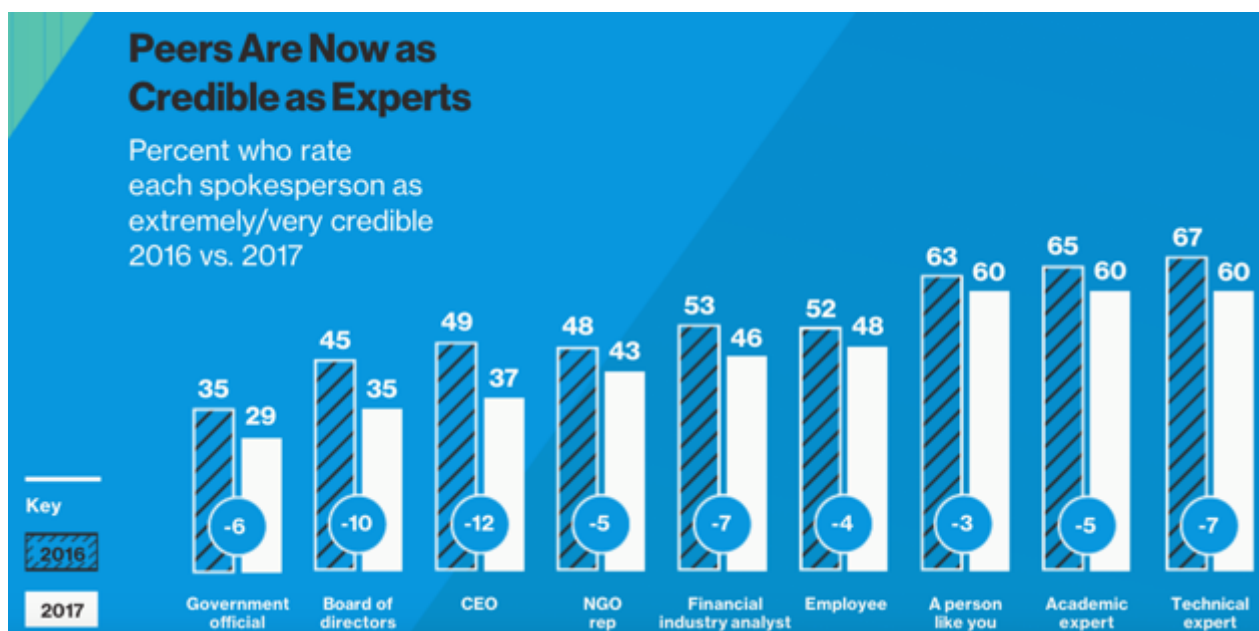
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Trump rose to power in part by tapping into distrust of government and the media in the United States (while trust in the U.S. government actually increased in this year’s Edelman survey relative to last year, most Americans remain mistrustful). But Trump has also benefitted from lingering trust in business. He is the “uber-CEO,” Richard Edelman, the head of Edelman, told me. He presents himself as a man of frenetic action and tangible results, taking over a government tainted by chronic inaction and incompetence. Hence why Trump wants you to first and foremost believe *him*, rather than the political institutions he will soon control.

Trump, however, aspires to be more than an uber-CEO. Improbably for a jet-setting billionaire who lives in gold-hued splendor, he claims to be the “voice” of the “forgotten men and women” of America. In his crude, colorful speaking style, in his dismissal of expertise and authority, in his use of social media to bypass the news media and speak directly and immediately to citizens, Trump is capitalizing on another trend related to trust: ample suspicion of official-sounding sources of information. Seventy-one percent of respondents in the Edelman survey said reformers are more believable than defenders of the status quo. Fifty-seven percent had more faith in spontaneous speakers than in rehearsed speakers. Fifty-four percent trusted those who are blunt and outspoken more than those who are diplomatic and polite.

Trump’s approach is resonating in a world in which, per Edelman’s polling, people are as likely to trust “a person like you” as a source of information about a company as they are experts—and more likely to be influenced by peers than by political or business leaders. Edelman describes a “world of self-reference” where people retreat into “media echo chambers” of like-minded souls and tend to trust search engines more than human editors. You trust you, or you trust someone like you. You don’t trust Them.

Yes, Trump is a businessman. But his business background alone might not have propelled him to the White House (think Mitt Romney). Trump has additionally managed to style himself—in the eyes of many of his supporters, at least—as something of “a person like you.”



Critically, Edelman has also documented a widening trust gap between what the firm calls “mass populations” and “informed publics,” with the latter group defined as those aged 25 to 64 who have a college degree, regularly read news media, and are in the top 25 percent of household income for their age group in a given country.

This year, the difference in average trust in institutions between these two groups was 15 percentage points, up from nine points in 2012. The gap was greatest in the United States (21 points), the United Kingdom (19 points), and France (18 points). In 20 of the 28 surveyed countries, the majority of the mass population distrusted their institutions; the same can be said for informed publics in just six of those 28 countries.

These dynamics help explain why, for example, political and media elites have been so troubled by Trump’s skepticism of U.S. intelligence findings regarding Russia’s interference in the country’s presidential election. They trust government institutions, and they are alarmed by Trump’s lack of trust in those institutions. Likewise, many of Trump’s supporters aren’t troubled by Trump’s skepticism because they too are skeptical of the government.

## Trust Index Mass Population Left Behind

Average trust in institutions,  
Informed Public vs. Mass Population

**Trusters**  
(60-100)

**Neutrals**  
(50-59)

**Distrusters**  
(1-49)

Source: 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer.  
The Trust Index is an average of a country's trust in the institutions of government, business, media and NGOs. Informed Public and Mass Population, 28-country global total.



2017 EDELMAN TRUST BAROMETER

Edelman has been pointing to these trends for many years now; trust in institutions didn’t suddenly plummet when Trump descended The Escalator in 2015. In some cases and in some countries, trust is in fact rising. What’s changed, the firm argues,



is that the erosion of trust has gradually become “systemic.” In this year’s survey, only 15 percent of respondents reported that the system in their country is working, with more than 50 percent saying it’s failing and the remaining third uncertain (the firm arrived at this result through a composite measure of the degree to which respondents had confidence in their current leaders, a sense that society is operating fairly, and hope for the future).

“What does it mean [that] the system is failing?” Richard Edelman asked. It means “we don’t have a sense of equality—the rich get more than others. We don’t have a sense of ... opportunity. We don’t have good leaders. And we ... demand change.”

The report theorizes that trust levels began declining as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, and have continued to suffer as globalization and new technologies increase people’s concerns about their job security and future economic and social status. The firm found that Trump voters were more likely than Hillary Clinton voters to say that the system had failed them and to express fear about issues like immigration, globalization, and technological change. The same was true for those who voted for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union relative to those who voted for Britain to remain in the EU.

The equation Richard Edelman comes away with is pretty straightforward: Lack of belief in system + economic and societal fears + loss of trust in institutions = populism, or at least the potential for populism. “Populism is people ... taking authority back from institutions they no longer have faith in,” he told me, and it’s now ascendant not just in the United States, but in countries like France and Germany as well.

Ultimately, it might be more accurate to describe the present moment as a tug-of-war between trust and distrust rather than a full-blown crisis of trust. Consider, for instance, the sizable percentages of people in the graphs above who *do trust* government, the press, and experts, or the fact that Trump’s message has made him the most unpopular incoming U.S. president in decades. But however you characterize them, the forces identified in Edelman’s survey are helping shape an unstable world. In 2016, as Richard Edelman notes in the report, the incumbent party or elected head of state was deposed or defeated in four of the world’s top 10 economies—Brazil, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States—and in the world’s 11th-largest economy, South Korea, as well. The upheaval may have only just begun.

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