

# TRUST IMPERATIVE

Trust is at rock bottom, and we must urgently restore it

Richard Edelman

**THE CORONAVIRUS POSES** an extraordinary threat to global health and economic prosperity. It has also reaffirmed the lack of trust in our institutions by triggering financial market volatility and anger over slow or inadequate government responses.

Before COVID-19, many countries were enjoying strong economic performance and nearly full employment. The major societal institutions—government, business, media, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—should have been trusted. Instead, the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer—published in January—showed that globally people do not trust any institution to do what is right. The key to this paradox is the shifting dynamics of trust over the past 20 years.

In this period, five seismic events significantly altered people’s trust: concerns about globalization, the Iraq War, the global recession of 2008–09, the rise of China and India, and the advent of social networks. The second decade brought a trust divide between elites and the general population, alongside

government failure to lead change. Disinformation and fear became rife.

COVID-19 is the new decade’s first jolt to the system. In this extraordinarily difficult moment, institutions have a duty to outperform expectations and rebuild public confidence. Most people want to resume listening to experts—who have been much maligned in recent times.

Government must demonstrate its competence in responding to the crisis. Media must be an objective arbiter of the facts. Business can provide necessary products and reliable information. NGOs must help develop a vaccine and ensure its fair distribution.

This is the time for institutions to work together, laying the groundwork for a new era of trust. **FD**

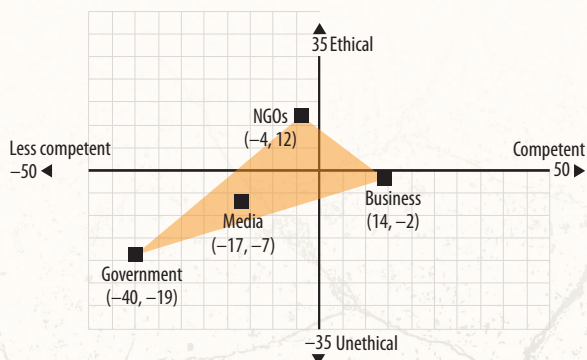
**RICHARD EDELMAN** is the CEO of Edelman, a global communications firm. This feature is based on Edelman’s 2020 Trust Barometer and the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: Trust and the Coronavirus.

## The nature of trust has changed

### Trust: Competence and ethics

Trust today is granted on two distinct attributes: competence (delivering on promises) and ethical behavior (doing the right thing and working to improve society). Currently, no one institution is considered both competent and ethical.

(no institution seen as both competent and ethical, competence score, net ethical score)



### Trust moves local

Trust has moved from a top-down vertical model, dependent on traditional leaders, to a horizontal one, in which people rely more on friends, family, and “a person like me.”

#### Top-down trust

People trust or distrust in response to the decisions and messages of authority figures



**The dynamic shifts in trust**  
How the vectors of trust have changed over two decades

#### Horizontal trust

People trust or distrust based on their interaction with a peer, or “a person like me”



#### Local trust

People trust or distrust based on their interaction with others who are personally close to them in their community, workplace, or family



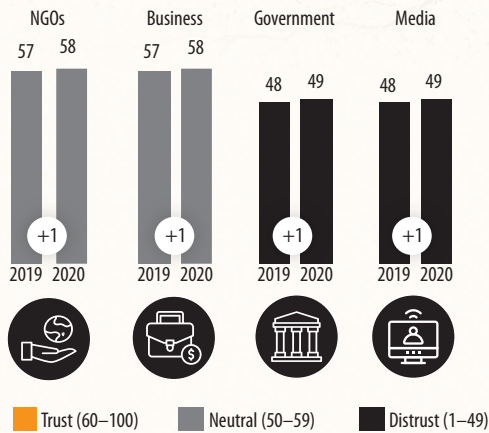
ART: ISTOCK / ULIMI

# Trust in institutions is stagnant overall

## No institution is trusted

Trust is stagnant, with no institution climbing into trusted territory.

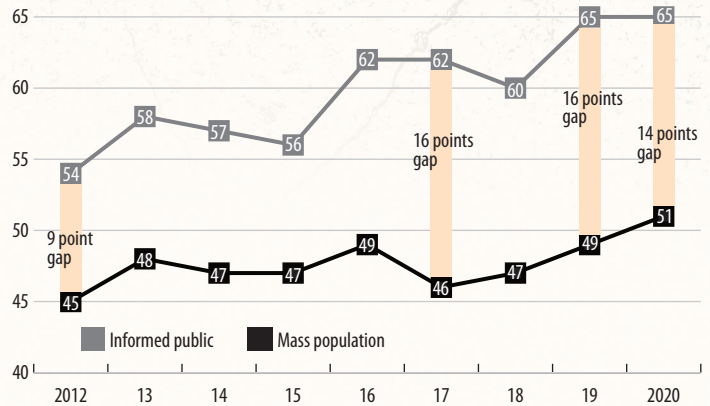
(2020 Edelman Trust Barometer, percent of trust)



## Trust inequality remains high

Trust among the informed public has soared to record highs, while most people continue to distrust institutions.

(Trust Index, 23-market average)



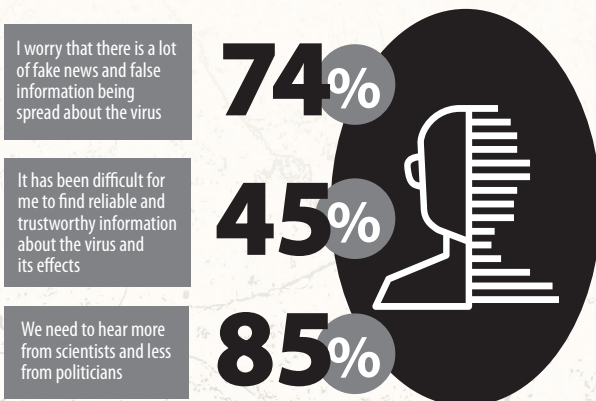
Note: Trust = 60-100, neutral = 50-59, distrust = 1-49.

# COVID-19 has rekindled trust in experts

## Worry about reliability of coronavirus information

Large majorities of respondents are concerned about false information and want to hear more from scientists.

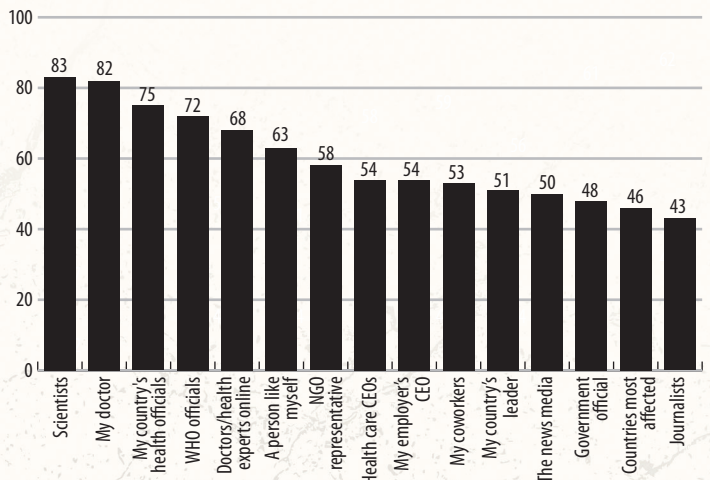
(percent who agree)



## Most trusted spokespeople

Scientists, health officials, and doctors are the most trusted.

(percent who trust each information source to tell the truth about the coronavirus)



Note: WHO = World Health Organization.