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Seyd, Ben, Gillespie, Nicole, Hamm, Joseph A., Latusek, Dominika, Norkin, Svetlana, Osuna, Amanda Isabel, Tomlinson, Edward C., Wasti, S. Arzu and Van der Werff, Lisa (2026) *Trust in our divided world*. *Journal of Trust Research*, 16 (1). pp. 1-5. ISSN 2151-5581.

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TRUST IN OUR DIVIDED WORLD

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In today's world, economic, social and political relations feel increasingly fraught. Social relations across contexts have been strained by cultural squabbles and population changes that are themselves exacerbated by political polarization, geopolitical discord, contentious political figures, divisive policy problems, and inflammatory political rhetoric. At the level of the nation-state, there are as many cases of economic and military division as of concord and mutual engagement. In short, across different aspects of modern life, and from the level of individuals up to national governments, we face a world of frequent and often bitter divisions.

Such divisions can be damaging to trust, both in our fellow citizens and in a range of social institutions. Social categorization processes play an especially important role as various groups are often associated with different levels of presumed trustworthiness (McKnight et al., 1998; Williams, 2001) and can become especially damaging when we they are taken to signal potential threat arising from strong intergroup value incongruence (Bijlsma-Frankema et al., 2015). In general, we are less likely to trust individuals and agencies when we feel they are more distant from or unlike us—especially in terms of their core values and goals—typically because we assume they are less likely to treat us fairly and benevolently. If trust is a trustor's willingness to make themselves vulnerable to another actor, we would expect such a willingness to take a hit if that actor is seen as exacerbating the vulnerability of the trustor or their social group (see Schafheitle, Weibel, & Möllering, 2025).

The current issue has a good deal to say about these dynamics. The studies by Wingen and Kroneberg (2026) and Saide and colleagues (2026), in particular, underscore the potentially damaging effect wrought by such divisions on people's trust in each other. In the first (Wingen & Kroneberg, 2026), the authors demonstrate that ethnic divisions between social groups that are reinforced by a second social division (in this case, gender) are associated with even lower rates of interpersonal trust. The second study by Saide and colleagues (2026) contributes its own investigation of the role played by individual exposure to the news media. They find that as individuals report greater exposure to, and trust in, the news media, they become more likely to hold intolerant orientations towards other social groups, particularly when they are socially isolated and lonely. Bodo and colleagues' (2026) conceptual analysis of how our "digital society" has reconfigured various aspects of modern life takes these dynamics a step further. They argue that the increasingly central role played by digital mediators doesn't just create new targets of trust but fundamentally changes existing relationships by renegotiating and redistributing vulnerability. Additionally, de Blok and Haugsgjerd's (2026) study expands the discussion to the consequences of these divisions, especially for our broader ability to navigate the challenges of modern life. In their study, the authors find that individual feelings of political trust shape perceptions of economic risk, a deviation from the more common assumption that risk shapes trust. Thus, losing trust appears to have important implications via decreasing our individual—and, potentially, collective—ability to cope with the risks produced by economic, social, and political life.

Social divisions may thus have a 'double whammy' effect. First, divisions and dynamics between and within social groups may increase individuals' perceived vulnerability. For example, a member of an

out-group that does not share the trustor's salient core values and interests will often be thought to be more likely to expand vulnerability than would an in-group member. Second, social divisions that weaken feelings of trust may, in turn, undermine our ability to mobilize trust's role as a coping mechanism (e.g., de Blok & Haugsgjerd, 2026). Social and political divisions thus place a significant negative strain on trust in our fellow citizens in other social groups, in workplace colleagues, and in key civic and political institutions. Yet, before we accept such a pessimistic conclusion, we need to address various additional questions whose answers inform our scholarly understanding of trust in a divided world.

Scholarly Questions Ripe for Study

One such question is whether declining trust is always cause for concern. Modern social relations increasingly center interactions with distant institutions and abstract systems and involve fewer connections to familiar individuals (Cook, 2022). In such conditions, high levels of trust may be neither realistic (see Hardin, 2013) nor necessarily desirable as lower trust may reflect prudence. Crucially, low trust does not automatically become distrust (Verhoest et al., 2024). Individuals may remain within a frame of conditional positive expectations while exercising vigilance and seeking verification. The more troubling shift occurs when social divisions harden to the point that expectations become negative and avoidance or conflict dominates (Six & Latusek, 2023). Under such conditions, out-group actors' signals of competence or integrity are readily discounted as manipulative or self-serving. Distinguishing between cautious low trust and entrenched distrust might therefore be essential in assessing the implications of polarisation (Weibel et al., 2026).

When social divisions do harden into distrust, self-amplifying cycles characterised by cynicism, self-protection and avoidance often become entrenched, augmenting polarization and within-group convergence on pervasive negative perceptions of the outgroup (e.g., 'us versus them'; Bijlsma-Frankema et al. 2015). Once distrust triggers avoidant behavior, individuals are less likely to be exposed to credible or genuine signals of the outgroup's competence, benevolence or integrity, closing off routes towards reinvigorating trust (Hamm et al., 2023). This opens up a second question of the potential role for trust repair strategies (see Sharma et al., 2023). In cases where social division damages people's trust in other individuals and agencies, what steps might be taken to attenuate such damage and even to repair trust? Recent research has explored this in the context of organizational workplaces marred by polarised relationships and finds that trust repair and restoration are likely to require a particular focus on the perceived values alignment and benevolence of work colleagues and teams (Tomlinson, 2025). Even in the relatively contained context of organizational settings, however, this task is a tall one. In the wider body politic—where relations between groups tend to be based on often 'tribal' values, affiliations and loyalties—the task of convincing in-group affiliates of an out-group's benevolence becomes even more daunting (Gillespie et al., 2021). Importantly, the state of this science demands attention to the locus of this repair. Appeals for citizens to simply be more trusting likely misdiagnose the problem. If trust entails a willingness to accept vulnerability, its restoration cannot be secured independently of the conditions that make such vulnerability reasonable. Trust emerges, if at all, from practices and institutional arrangements that render trustworthiness visible and verifiable over time.

A third question concerns which type of trust relations might suffer from the strain of social divisions. Where close family, friendship and workplace relations become politicised, it is not surprising that feelings of trust may attenuate. Even in the context of school classrooms, social divisions around ethnicity and gender may influence pupils' trust of fellow students (Wingen and Kroneberg, 2026). Yet where social relations are not politicised or subject to clear divisions, is trust similarly affected? To be sure, we have watched trust among strong partisans decline in countries like the US where scientists' and doctors' roles were politicised during the coronavirus pandemic. More broadly, periods of heightened contestation around expert authority and institutional credibility do appear capable of straining trust. Outside these divisive cases, however, trust in professional actors appears to have largely maintained (Seyd, 2026). This raises the question of the potential limits to these effects, especially where divisions can be downplayed or where they do not clearly impact vulnerability.

A fourth question concerns the mechanisms by which these effects arise. Assessing the trustworthiness of other people and agencies is often a complex and challenging task for which we often rely on readily available information about the actor's social position or identity. This information is likely especially salient in a situation of social division, where in-group and out-group status feels especially important (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In these conditions, we would expect out-group members to be judged as less trustworthy because their perceived misalignment in values and low benevolence which, troublingly, have been shown to undermine trust even when other dimensions of trustworthiness are assumed (Tomlinson, 2025). Yet this assumed mechanism linking social division to trust would benefit from more explicit testing across a range of contexts. How far do social divisions—in both small and personalised settings such as workplaces, and in larger arenas such as national politics—shape trust via perceptions of particular aspects of an actor's trustworthiness, notably their benevolence and/or integrity? Might such perceptions lead to 'unwarranted' trust or distrust if easy—but potentially erroneous or misleading—signals about an actor's benevolence operate at the expense of considerations of their competence and integrity? Do social divisions potentially encourage 'shallow' trust judgements, that are heavily reliant on easily communicable signals of social group position and membership, over more effortful trust judgements? Relatedly, scholarship is needed to better understand how the impact of polarisation and social divisions on trust is influenced by the *source* of trustworthiness signals. For example, is the negative impact of social divisions on trust greater when the main source of trustworthiness cues comes from 'borrowed' sources (e.g., social media posts, judgements from other ingroup members), rather than first-hand interactions and observations of the other party (Bitektine et al., 2025)?

Fostering Trust in a Divided World

Across a range of contexts—from the home, organizational workplaces, local communities, national politics and relations between states—today's world feels more divided, with potentially troublesome implications for people's trust in each other and for social actors. Despite this relatively pessimistic view, however, the final article in the current issue offers a potentially helpful lens for charting a path forward. Lalot and colleagues (2026) consider the relationship between regulatory focus and trust and specifically the extent to which individuals motivated to promote positive outcomes are more likely to report a willingness to accept vulnerability to others (that is, to trust). Conversely, they find that people whose worldview underscores the need to prevent harm tend to be less willing to trust others. Although their research centers on chronic, between-person differences, they leave open some potential for pushing around these frames. Thus, anything done to focus our attention to the threats posed by our differences likely makes trust harder. Conversely though, efforts to refocus our collective attention on the promotion of superordinate goals that groups share may have real potential for motivating a trusting norm.

We urgently call for novel inquiries and integrative efforts to build the research basis needed to understand the implications of social divisions for trust and to identify ways in which trust might be (made) resilient to such forces. We hope readers of this journal might pick up the baton.

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