

Trust Issues: When Participation Builds Trust – and Why It Sometimes Doesn't



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1 Research Question & Background

Deliberative formats are expected to close the gap between democratic ideals and institutional reality — but do they?

Political participation is frequently prescribed as a remedy for declining democratic trust — yet the evidence is mixed. Bürgerräte (citizens' assemblies) are randomly selected citizen bodies convened to deliberate on specific policy questions. Rooted in the concept of the Planungszelle (since 1972), they have experienced a sharp rise in Germany: from an average of six per year in the 2010s to nearly 30 annually between 2020–2023, bringing the total to approximately 300 formats at federal, Länder, and municipal level (Sack/IDPF & Mehr Demokratie 2026).

This deliberative expansion unfolds against a backdrop of deepening institutional disillusionment. The IParl Parlamentarismus-Studie 2026 (n = 2,050) illustrates the gap: while approximately 80% of Germans are satisfied with democracy as a form of government in principle, only about 15% are satisfied with how the German Bundestag works in practice. The conditions under which participation contributes to trust formation have received comparatively little systematic attention.

~300

Bürgerräte held in
Germany to date

Sack/IDPF, 2026

15,8 %

are satisfied with the
Bundestag's work

IParl, 2026

11.6 %

feel citizens' interests
are represented

IParl, 2026

RESEARCH QUESTION

Under which conditions, and through which mechanisms, does political participation contribute to the formation, stabilisation, or erosion of citizens' trust in democratic institutions?

2 Theoretical Anchoring & Method

Trust is built gradually through what institutions do with what citizens say.

Political trust is usually measured as a state. But deliberation is a process. To understand whether participation builds trust, we need to examine trust formation, not just trust achieved. Large-scale surveys show declining trust, but not when, through which encounters, or at which transition points it changes. Deliberative pre/post experiments capture whether trust changed, but leave the process itself largely black-boxed. This is a crucial limitation, since political trust research has often focused on trust in government or politicians in general, thereby overlooking more specific institutional encounters (Levi & Stoker, 2000). This contribution argues that trust formation unfolds across concrete, evaluable moments: from the initial invitation, through deliberation itself, to the institutional handling of results. It is at these moments that trust is won or lost.

DEFINITION

Rather than a static attitude, trust is conceptualised here as an experience-based, sequential evaluation of institutional responsiveness, shaped by the alignment of critical moments across successive stages of the participatory process.

Semi-structured Interviews n=25 Qualitative Content Analysis 30 hrs. Material

Between mid-December 2025 and early March 2026, 25 participation-experienced citizens were interviewed as part of a teaching research project (R:PART), conducted with seven Master of Public Administration students at the University of Kassel, yielding approximately 30 hours of audio material across a broad range of deliberative formats. The semi-structured interview guide comprises seven thematic blocks mapping directly onto the four analytical phases of the sequential model. Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018) via MaxQDA.

3 Four Phases & Key Moments of Participatory Experience

Phase 1

Procedural Experience

"Is this process fair and transparent?"

Key Analytical Indicators

- Fairness of speaking opportunities
- Transparency of rules and goals
- Perceived neutrality and competence of moderation
- Respect and recognition within the group

High procedural quality creates legitimacy of the process, but does not itself generate political trust.



Phase 2

Perceived Influence

"Am I actually being heard?"

Key Analytical Indicators

- Perceived seriousness with which contributions were treated
- Clarity about how input feeds into decision-making
- Expectations of responsiveness

Without perceived influence, deliberation remains symbolically inclusive but politically hollow.



Phase 3

Output & Feedback

"What will institutions do with our work?"

Key Analytical Indicators

- Visibility of results and documentation
- Feedback from political or administrative actors
- Justification of decisions, including non-implementation
- Perceived seriousness of institutional follow-up

Outcome processing is the critical hinge between voice and trust. Even unfavourable outcomes can sustain trust if handled transparently.



Phase 4

Trust Dynamics

"What did participation leave behind?"

Key Analytical Indicators

- Changes in trust towards institutions and actors
- Willingness to participate again
- Recommendation of participation to others
- Conditional expectations for future engagement

Trust appears as the cumulative outcome of aligned experiences across previous key moments, not an automatic result of participation.

THE CRITICAL HINGE: INSTITUTIONAL UPTAKE

Even when Phases 1 and 2 are experienced positively, trust erodes where the institutional feedback loop fails. Working results dismissed without justification are not experienced as a policy outcome, but as disrespect. Transparent justification, including of non-implementation, is a necessary condition for trust to deepen (or sustain).

4 Key Moments of Trust Formation

The R:PART data reveals empirically grounded critical junctures that determine the trust trajectory. Five such moments were identified across the four analytical phases, each marking a point at which trust either deepens, sustain or erodes.

- 1 Invitation & Initial Contact — Being selected and taken seriously before the process. Symbolic recognition sets expectations the process must fulfil or disappoint.
- 2 Being Heard in the Process — One's contribution reappears in summaries or recommendations. Not abstract influence: "I can see my own wording."
- 3 Acknowledgement of Working Results — Formal handover and acknowledgement before political actors. Absence is read as indifference.
- 4 Uptake by Political Representatives — Direct response from representatives. Visible engagement sustains trust; silence signals dismissal.
- 5 Follow-up & Feedback Loop — The most consistently disappointed expectation: institutional silence retroactively reframes participation as symbolic.

“The results were gratefully received, and then nothing happened. That's when you realise: it was always just for show.”
Participant, Bürgerrat Klima (RP-A-17)

“I would not necessarily say that it leads to better outcomes. But citizen participation certainly helps to bring people along a bit.”
Participant, Mobilitätsrat (RP-I-05)

“When I saw that our exact wording ended up in the final document — that felt like we had actually contributed something.”
Participant, Bürgerrat Bildung & Lernen (RP-A-13)

“In the end, it is about people's experience of self-efficacy.”
Participant, Bürgerrat Demokratie (RP-A-20)

5 Findings & Implications

- Participation alone does not generate trust; what matters is how institutions handle what citizens have said.
- Trust building is a sequential dynamic: it accumulates or erodes at each transition, above all between participatory output and institutional follow-up.
- The Key Moments approach extends beyond deliberative formats: wherever citizens invest civic energy, the same sequential logic shapes whether trust is built or broken.
- From petitions to public consultations to deliberative formats commissioned by representative assemblies: wherever citizens address representative institutions and await a response, the same sequential logic applies — and whether the promise implicit in any democratic invitation is ultimately kept.

Selected References

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