National Civic League

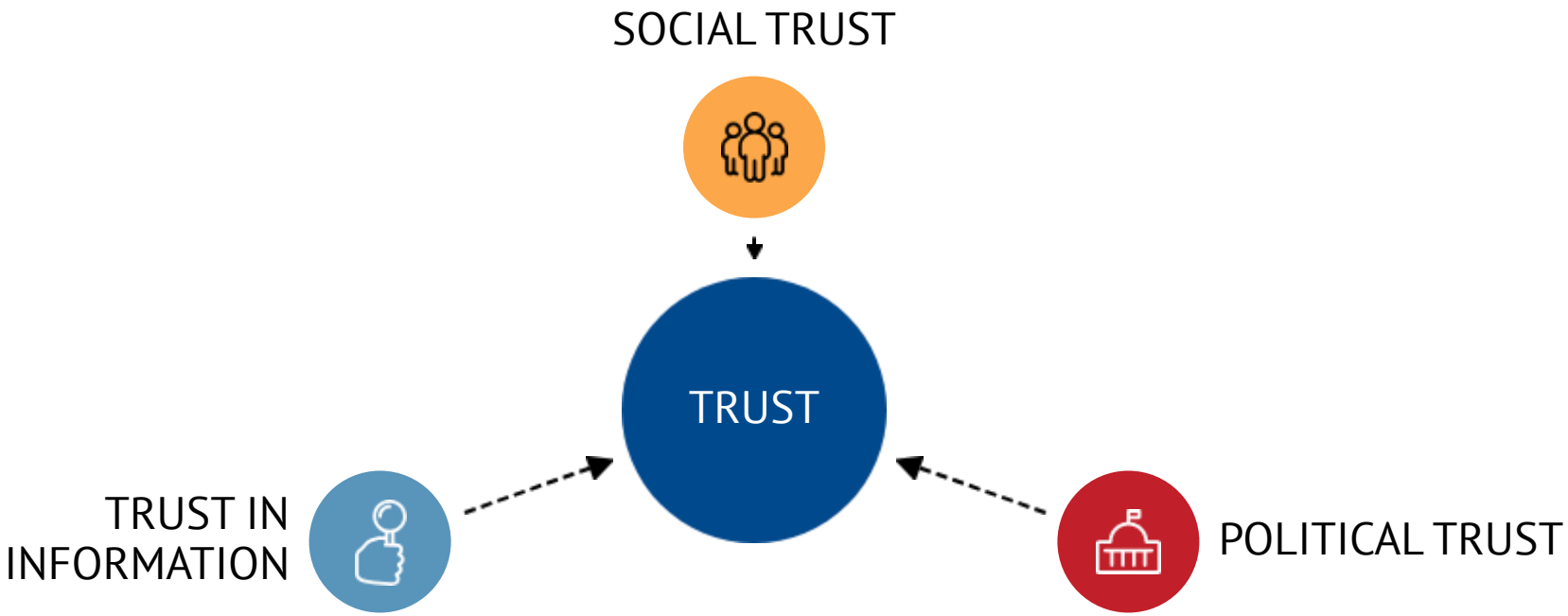
Democracy Innovation

CivicGenius

How We Can Increase Trust

Forms of Trust

Generally speaking, do you believe that most people can be trusted or can't you be too careful in dealing with people? (Uslaner 2018)



THE THREE FORMS TEND TO BE CORRELATED, BUT NOT ALWAYS.

Not All Trust is Good



ORGANIZED CRIME HAS HIGH LEVELS OF TRUST



PEOPLE SHOULD NOT TRUST AUTHORITARIANS OR CRIMINALS



DEMOCRACIES REQUIRE CITIZENS TO DISCERN TRUSTWORTHY RELATIONSHIPS

"What democracies require of citizens is that they should be able to distinguish relationships in which trust is warranted from those in which it is not" (Warren 2018)



DEMOCRATICALLY LEGITIMATE TRUST MUST BE JUSTIFIABLE

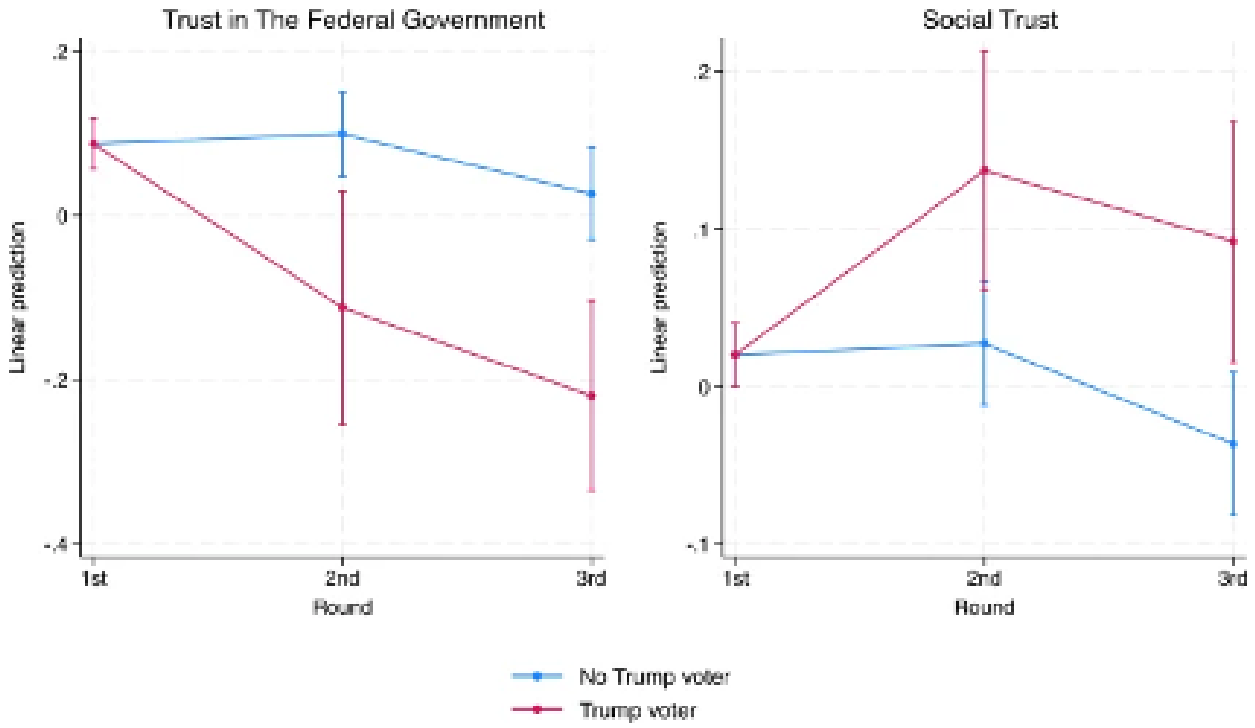
"A trust relationship is democratically legitimate just to the extent that it could be justified to those affected" (Warren 2018)

“Low trust in public institutions is part of the reason why citizens do not engage, and the lack of citizen participation in government decision making negatively affects performance and accountability, which leads to a decrease in trust”

KUMAGAI AND IORIO 2020



Social and Political Trust Diverged During the Pandemic



- "Negative perceptions of pandemic management lead to a decline in political trust and a parallel increase in social trust" (Aassve et al 2024)
- "Societal shocks can prompt individuals to shift from relying on formal institutions to informal ones as a coping strategy" (Aassve et al 2024)

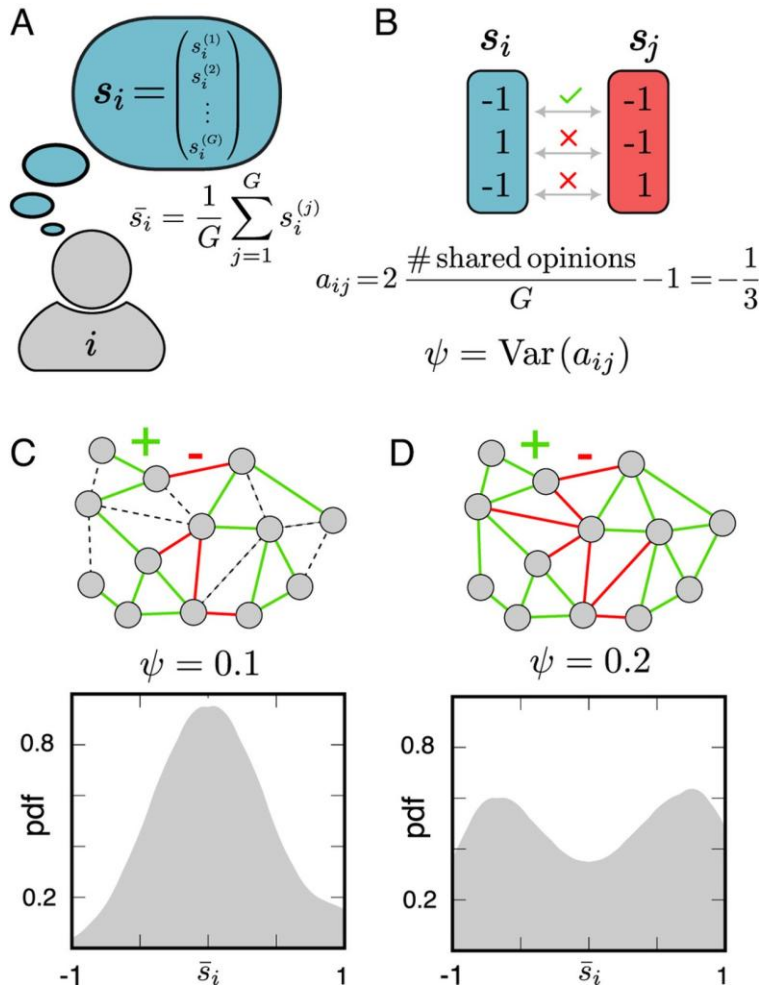
Mistrust and Polarization

Increased social connectivity is associated with increased polarization (Thurner et al 2025)

Polarization decreases trust (Axelrod et al 2021)

This dynamic can be counteracted by:

- Discussing public issues with peers who have different views (Balietti et al 2021)
- Discussing the accuracy of information (Pennycook et al 2020)
- Unity around a shared priority (Axelrod et al 2021)



Factors Correlating with Increased Trust

- EARLY TRUST DEVELOPMENT
- CROSS-GENERATIONAL CONNECTIONS
- HOMEOWNERSHIP
- FREQUENT INTERACTIONS
- PARENTHOOD
- COLLABORATIVE ACTION
- UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATIONS

(USLANER 2018, WARREN 2018, ALLSTATE 2025, KUMAGAI AND IORIO 2020)

What kinds of things can we do to increase trust?

The research suggests that bringing people together in various ways can increase all three kinds of trust – common ingredients include:

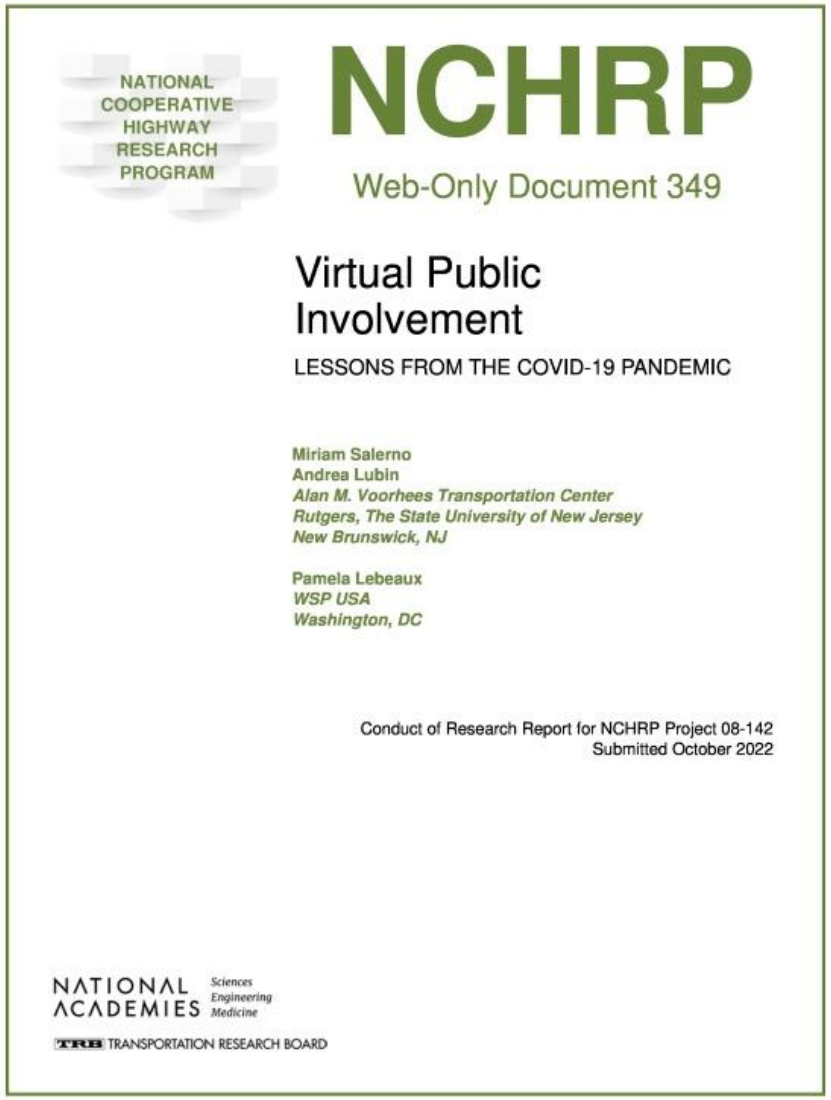
- Frequent, regular interactions
- Good facilitation
- People's personal experiences are honored
- Chances for people to discuss and dissect information
- Deliberative experiences that allow people to understand and assess a range of views
- Opportunities for people to plan for action (from policy recommendations to local volunteerism)
- Activities that include multiple generations are particularly effective

(Thurner et al 2025, Balietti et al 2021, Kumagai and Iorio 2020, Grandvoinnet et al 2015, Pennycook et al 2020, Allstate 2025, Axelrod et al 2021, Levine 2024)

Effective Trust-Building Practices

- CIVIC ASSEMBLIES
  (Knobloch et al 2019, Boulianne 2017)
- PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING
  (Swaner 2017)
- DELIBERATIVE FORUMS
  (Nabatchi and Munno 2014)
- DIGITAL PROBLEM-REPORTING PLATFORMS
  (Mergel 2012)
- SURVEY PANELS
  (Hoe 2016)
- HYPERLOCAL ONLINE PLATFORMS
  (Kramer 2024)

SEE ALSO KUMAGAI AND IORIO 2020, LEIGHNINGER AND NABATCHI 2015



The Promise of Hybrid Strategies

Hybrid strategies bring digital tools into in-person sessions in order to:

- Enable discussions to happen whenever, wherever people want
- Support in-person discussions in huge numbers over a large area
- Provide information for deliberation
- Aggregate and disseminate results
- Weave together comments and results in a larger narrative

"HYBRID ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES HAVE SIGNIFICANT POTENTIAL TO TRANSFORM THE TRUST–TECHNOLOGY RELATIONSHIP" (SEE DILLON 2024, NATIONAL ACADEMIES OF SCIENCES, ENGINEERING, AND MEDICINE, 2022)

Why are institutions important for trust-building?

Governments, school systems, community foundations, and other institutions are critical because:

- One of the three types – political trust – is based partly on perceptions of institutions
- Institutions can provide the incentives (chances to influence policy or help solve problems) that bring diverse people together to increase all three types of trust

"Citizens' decisions to trust or distrust are fully consistent with an active, critical citizenry" (Warren 2018)

(See also Kettl 2017, Kumagai and Iorio 2020, Warren et al 2014)

Strategic implications of the research

- For the most part, this is local work
- Institutions can play important roles
- Process matters!
- School issues and land use (parenthood and homeownership) are potential beachheads for trust
- Cross-sector collaboration – public, private, philanthropic, k-12, higher ed, faith, nonprofit – may be critical (different groups reach different people)
- Activities and processes work – but how to scale and embed them?
- Hybrid strategies (combining tech and in-person) have promise

Why is this local work?

- In-person interactions are more effective for building trust
- Living in the same place gives people at least one thing in common/one shared interest
- Local institutions more responsive than state/national ones
- Opportunities to volunteer, solve problems, influence policy more doable at local level

People who "worked with others to deal with an issue facing your community," are far less likely to have hostile attitudes toward news media, the schools, and democratic institutions (Levine 2024)

