



2021 Edelman Trust Barometer Reveals a Rampant Infodemic is Fueling Widespread Mistrust of Societal Leaders

Business Replaces Government as Most Trusted Institution and Seen as More Than Twice as Competent

Post-U.S. Election Flash Poll Finds that Most Americans Believe the U.S. is In the Midst of a Dangerous Cold Civil War

January 13, 2021 – NEW YORK – The 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals that people don't know where or who to turn to for reliable information. A majority of respondents believe that government leaders (57 percent), business leaders (56 percent), and journalists (59 percent) are purposely trying to mislead people by saying things they know are false. The global infodemic has driven trust in all news sources to record lows with social media (35 percent) and owned media (41 percent) the least trusted; traditional media (53 percent) saw the largest drop in trust at eight points. A December Edelman Trust Barometer Post-U.S. Election Flash Poll found a stunning 39-point gap in trust in media between Biden voters (57 percent) and Trump voters (18 percent); a 15-point drop among Trump supporters since November.

"This is the era of information bankruptcy," said Richard Edelman, CEO of Edelman. "We've been lied to by those in charge, and media sources are seen as politicized and bias. The result is a lack of quality information and increased divisiveness. Fifty-seven percent of Americans find the political and ideological polarization so extreme that they believe the U.S. is in the midst of a cold civil war. The violent storming of the U.S. Capitol last week and the



fact that only one-third of people are willing to get a Covid vaccine as soon as possible crystalize the dangers of misinformation.”

Business (61 percent) has emerged as the most trusted institution, replacing government (53 percent), which fell substantially since its 11-point surge in our mid-year update last May. Business is the only institution deemed ethical and competent; business outscores government by 48 points on competency and is approaching NGOs in ethics. Over the last five months, business seized the high ground of trust by proactively developing vaccines in record time and finding new ways to work. Trust continues to move local, with respondents placing even higher reliance on ‘my employer’ at 76 percent, and ‘my employer CEO’ at 63 percent.

The stark, but radically different realities of escalating stock prices and Great-Recession like unemployment levels have helped trigger a record trust gap of 16 points (informed public at 68 percent, mass population at 52 percent). There are double-digit trust gaps in 25 of 28 markets, versus seven in 21 markets just a decade ago.

This year’s report reveals that the biggest opportunity to earn business trust is guarding information quality. Fifty-three percent of respondents believe corporations need to fill the information void when the news media is absent. Communications from ‘my employer’ is the most trusted source of information (61 percent), beating out national government (58 percent), traditional media (57 percent), and social media (39 percent).

“The events of this past year reinforced business’ responsibility to lead on societal issues such as upskilling workers and racial justice,” said Edelman. “It has also led to new expectations of



business expanding its remit into unfamiliar areas, such as providing and safeguarding information.”

Trust dropped precipitously in the two largest economies. Respondents deeply distrust the U.S. (40 percent) and Chinese (30 percent) governments from the 26 other markets surveyed. Trust among Chinese citizens in the country’s institutions fell 18 points in the last six months to 72 percent. The U.S., in the bottom quartile of countries as of November, dropped a further 5 points post-election (43 percent), a score which would place it ahead of only Japan and Russia.

Given the new expectations of business, there are now new demands of CEOs: Over 8 in 10 want CEO’s to speak out on important social issues such as the pandemic’s impact, job automation and societal problems. More than two-thirds expect them to step in when the government does not fix societal problems, and ‘my employer CEO’ is the only societal leader trusted by both Trump voters (61 percent) and Biden voters (68 percent).

“There is a void in leadership that CEOs must fill,” said Dave Samson, vice chairman of Corporate Affairs. “It starts with a broader mandate for business that focuses societal engagement with the same rigor, used to deliver on profits. Business must work to fulfill the Business Roundtable’s promise of a stakeholder economy, but it cannot be a solo actor. It must partner with government and NGOs to take collective action to solve societal problems.”

Other key findings from the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer include:



- Only one in four respondents practice good information hygiene; news engagement; avoid echo chambers; verify information; and do not amplify unvetted information.
- Among those who practice poor information hygiene there is substantially less willingness to get the vaccine within the first year of its availability (59 percent versus 70 percent for people with good information hygiene). There is even greater hesitancy about the vaccine among Blacks in the U.S., based on past and present medical inequities and mistreatment.
- 56 percent believe the pandemic will accelerate the rate at which companies replace human workers with AI and robots.
- 52 percent of respondents that have a choice to work from home or their workplace choose to work at home and 58 percent of those cite the risk of contracting Covid-19 while commuting or being in the office as the reason.
- Academic experts (59 percent) and company technical experts (59 percent) remain the most credible spokespeople but experienced an 8-point and 10-point drop, respectively. The largest drop was among regular employees (down 14 points to 40 percent) and a person like yourself (down 7 points to 53 percent).