

Authority and Trust in American Politics and Society

A conference co-hosted by
Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA) & Graduiertenkolleg Authority and Trust (GKAT)
Heidelberg University,
Atlantische Akademie Rheinland-Pfalz e.V.
the Political Science Section of the German Association for American Studies

Date: **June 6-8, 2024**

Location: Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Heidelberg

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Due to its early democratization, its egalitarian and libertarian political culture, its ethno-cultural heterogeneity, and its international predominance, the U.S. is a particularly interesting case study of authority and trust in the modern world, especially in light of the recent political “crises” in many countries. Public opinion researchers diagnose a dramatic loss of authority and trust in central political institutions, social elites, and more traditional media and expert cultures. Possible structural causes include growing social inequality, sociocultural and spatial segregation, partisan polarization, and dwindling civic and governmental infrastructures in the wake of postindustrial globalization and an increasingly economic efficiency-oriented rationalization of urban planning and fiscal policy. The public’s confidence in the efficiency and fairness of the polity has been eroding in recent decades in the U.S. and elsewhere. An aggressive anti-establishment populism and proliferating conspiracy theories seem to resonate strongly with substantial parts of the American public, not only since the myth of voter fraud led to the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Recent movements such as Black Lives Matter and other public protests, e.g., in response to overturning Roe v. Wade, also manifest a deep mistrust of the state, its officials, and its institutions. The internal crisis of authority and trust is consequential for the U.S.’s position as a global power, as the international community has viewed the country’s ability to fulfill its traditional global leadership role with increasing skepticism.

But authority and trust do not simply disappear. Locations, sources, actors, and functions of trust and authority are permanently changing and shifting, both in the domestic and international sphere. The question of what the underlying mechanisms and processes of the emergence and transformation of authority and trust from a broader perspective as well as from in-depth analyses (‘deep-dives’) are therefore forms the common research interest of this conference.

The thematic scope of the 2024 conference encompasses the following fields of research, but is not limited to them:

- The authority of the modern state and trust in political and social institutions, e.g., Congress and the party system, the presidency, the judicial system and the courts, the media (analogue and digital), the philanthropic and the non-profit sector, science and expertise, religion
- Conceptual, theoretical normative questions around trust and authority
- Resources of social and political trust, measuring political trust
- Race, class, and gender as well as political/institutional trust under the influence of polarization
- Trust and the democratic order in the U.S. and elsewhere
- Trust and distrust between generations
- Erosion of the merit-based system and distrust against meritocracy
- Trust in America’s role in the world in the 21st century
- The Ukraine war and the authority of the U.S. as a global leader

Please submit your abstract (250 words maximum) and a short biography to the organizers (nrauscher@hca.uni-heidelberg.de) by November 30, 2023.