

# **An Untrustworthy Barometer: Edelman Polling Promotes Clients' Standing in Society**

## Introduction

Public Relations giant [Edelman](#) just launched the [25th Edelman Trust Barometer](#) at Davos 2025. True to its pattern, the report has once again placed businesses at the center of creating a more stable world amidst the latest trust crisis.

But the Trust Barometer's underlying data is opaque, the methodology and findings are questionable, and researchers have argued that its insights have helped shape an anti-democratic culture and protect the interests of Edelman's high-carbon clients.

## Toplines

- Edelman describes its Trust Barometer as transparent, yet refuses to share data with researchers seeking to understand and replicate findings.
- Edelman claims that businesses are the only institution the public trusts, in stark contrast to a variety of other public, transparent, and peer-reviewed sources.
- Edelman's website claims they think "climate change is the biggest crisis we face as a society" but they worked for more of the companies profiting off of causing climate change than any other PR firm between 1989 and 2020.

[Climate Action Against Disinformation \(CAAD\)](#) - CAAD is a global coalition of leading climate and anti-disinformation organisations.

## Edelman's Mystery Methods- "Organized Lying"

Politico EU Influence reported that at a 2024 Trust Barometer launch event in March, Edelman stated there is "[quite a lot of transparency](#)" around its data without elaborating on what that means. For example, according to PRWeek, in January 2024 Edelman stated its China data "[might be 50% accurate.](#)"

But most practically, **Edelman hasn't shared Trust Barometer data with researchers who subsequently asked for it.**

After the 2023 Global Trust Barometer's methodology and [findings were criticized](#) for attempting to assess global polarization using side-by-side comparison data from autocratic regimes and democracies ([see pg 16.](#)), in April 2024 Edelman produced a "[reanalysis](#)" of its 2023 Global Trust Barometer, "[Navigating a Polarized World](#)". This was to study "what converts ideological diversity on political issues into affective polarization and what to do when this happens", [arguing that its understanding is](#) "critical to maintaining and rebuilding faith in and support for the democratic process."

For its [reanalysis](#), Edelman removed the data from "countries that lack political pluralism", namely UAE, Saudi Arabia, and China.

After altering the methodology, Edelman found that business leaders are in a better position than government leaders or teachers and educators to have a significant influence in "identifying a set of shared values, establishing a sense of common purpose, and encouraging people to work across ideological divides..."

This insight doesn't stray away from the original [2023 Global Trust Barometer](#)'s key finding, "Business must continue to lead," or years prior. In fact, Edelman's polling has found that, [since 2021](#), of the ([limited](#)) institutions they ask about, Business has been the only trusted institution, registering a 63% trust [score in 2024](#).

An [article by Lee Edwards](#), a strategic communications professor at the London School of Economics, criticises this notion, arguing, "The structure of the Barometer creates a neat world where business interests are preserved, and a better future depends on business intervention. The erasure of multiple factual truths is necessary for its argument to survive

scrutiny, and reveals the survey's identity not as an objective data-gathering exercise, but **an exercise in what might be termed 'organized lying'**, and one that has now extended over two decades. The production of trust is focused on business, while mistrust is directed at government and media in particular, as well as citizens (in the form of protesters 'taking things into their own hands'), while NGOs are largely ignored in the results apart from their potential as a trust ally for business." (Emphasis added)

Despite searching, researchers did not find a fully revised version of the 2023 Global Trust Barometer, and it appears the availability of the reanalysis has not been announced on Edelman's website.

## Others Contradict Trust Barometer Findings

The [People's Climate Vote](#), from the United Nations Development Program and University of Oxford, [reported in 2024](#) that "people are unconvinced" by big businesses' climate efforts, with just 39% saying they think businesses are doing well, and, in the U.S., only about 20% of people think big businesses are doing well on climate.

Yet the [2023 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: Trust and Climate Change](#) claimed that, globally, 49% trusted business "to do what is right" on climate, and 40% of U.S. people trusted business to do what is right on climate. Edelman's [topline finding](#) suggested that "fear-based communication" has made people pessimistic, and that, in order to tackle climate change, people need "optimism" to build higher trust in institutions.

In sharp contrast, [Potential Energy Coalition's 2023 climate survey](#) found "The data says that fear versus hope is the wrong debate. The big motivator is protecting what we love." Their CEO John Marshall [explained in a July 2024 Cleaning Up podcast](#) that "it's a fad to say that it's time to stop being negative, it's time to start being positive...So the issue isn't people in a small bubble feeling super worried...They're not worried enough."

The [2023 Trust Barometer](#) found that 68% of respondents felt that "Brands celebrating what brings us together and emphasizing our common interest would strengthen the social fabric." The [2024 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: Brands and Politics](#) found that 6 in 10 people surveyed "buy brands to express their politics."

But that brand-friendly finding is contradicted by Reach Solutions [research which found](#) just over 1 in 10 of its mainstream audience give factors like “a brand's position on social issues” or “political stance and affiliations” a role in their buying decisions.

Beyond just being convenient to protecting the interests of business, researchers at [Everyday People argue](#) that “Edelman has been at the forefront of pushing the spurious idea of a new brand democracy led by young belief-driven buyers” (based on [posts like this](#)) and that the “marketing industry's obsession with ‘brand democracy’ and social purpose has been at the forefront of shaping [an] anti-democratic, pro-market culture.”

## Edelman Works For Big Oil Despite Climate Crisis

Edelman [states on its website](#) that they “believe climate change is the biggest crisis we face as a society” yet they continue serving the industry profiting off creating the crisis.

In 2024 Edelman [worked for](#) a state-owned company and a state-backed investment [fund of the United Arab Emirates](#), a country that has [been accused of human rights abuses](#). In 2023, [reports](#) alleged that Sultan Al Jaber, CEO of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company and COP28 President, planned to use his position [to facilitate oil and gas deals](#). Following COP28, [the UAE endorsed the consensus](#) on transitioning away from fossil fuels, yet its latest climate plan “fails to address fossil fuel phaseout”, [according to experts](#).

Peer-reviewed research [in 2021 found](#) that Edelman was engaged by oil/gas, utilities, and coal/steel/rail sectoral clients more than any other PR firm between 1989 and 2020. And in 2022, Edelman was [one of the largest vendors](#) to the Charles Koch foundation.

[PRovokeMedia reported](#) that in May 2024, Edelman inked an estimated 8-figure global PR deal with Shell, just two months after Shell [scaled back](#) its 2030 emissions target and [scrapped its 2035 target](#). Edelman's relationship with Shell goes [back to at least 1997](#).

In its [2024 F-List report](#), Clean Creatives found that in addition to Shell, Edelman was working with Butagaz, Chevron, CLP Group (Aprava Energy), ConocoPhillips, Engie, SABIC, and TotalEnergies.

Edelman may claim to believe climate change is a crisis, but it's still working to [improve the public image](#) of the companies continuing to cause the crisis and obstruct solutions.

## Conclusion

The Barometer was started in response to left-wing criticisms of big business, a point driven home by the [1999 Seattle protests](#) of the World Trade Organization. Decades later, however, Edelman is advising its corporate clients about the opposite set of ideological attacks from the right. Despite the diametrically opposed nature of the organic, grassroots, bottom-up progressive critiques of capitalism from the left, and the well-funded, top-down, regressive backlash to even token DEI or ESG efforts from the far-right, the business-friendly solutions Edelman suggests remained exactly the same.

In 2023 and 2024, Edelman's Trust Barometer described a public lack of optimism behind dropping levels of trusts in institutions. This year, Edelman blames "grievance culture" for the same trust-dampening effects, but again, as [Lee Edwards of the London School of Business pointed out in an op-ed in \*The Drum\*](#), the bottom line remains consistent, that businesses, as "trusted leaders," are best-positioned to act.

But, Edwards warned, those who "buy blindly into the Barometer's trust narrative may achieve exactly the opposite of their reputational goals. They may receive a nasty shock from increasingly knowledgeable and vocal audiences, who point out when businesses are being duplicitous - for example, making promises that they cannot (or will not) keep, abusing workers in their supply chain, or saying they support social causes while lobbying governments to work against societal interests."

By creating a metric by which their business clients consistently appear to be trusted institutions, and ignoring other [highly trusted experts like scientists](#), Edelman portrays themselves, and their clients, as socially responsible civic leaders, instead of polluters, profiteers, and propagandists.