

Contested Authority, Trust in Transition

Making Sense of the American Landscape

A conference hosted by the
Graduiertenkolleg Authority and Trust (GKAT) at the Heidelberg Center for American Studies (HCA)
Heidelberg University

Date: **May 20–22, 2026**

Location: Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Heidelberg

In recent years, discourses on trust and authority in the United States have taken on an alarming tone. The contestation of traditional authorities and the apparent decline of trust in almost all spheres of public life – including politics, religion, education, media, and the global role of the U.S. – has been well-documented by scholars across various disciplines. Critical scholarly examination is necessary to understand which dynamics make up the transformations of authority and trust in the United States, and the deeper roots they have in American history, society, and culture.

Trust and authority thereby emerge as multi-faceted and dynamic phenomena. As traditional authorities are contested and trust-relations are in decline, their erosion also gives rise to new forms of participation, communication, and community. These transformations may include populism and authoritarianism, innovative forms of resistance and democratic participation, religious movements, conspiracy theories, alternative facts, or new media formats, platforms, and voices – both historically and contemporarily.

To tackle the question of how authority and trust are challenged and changed, this conference seeks to explore the contestation of authority and the transition of trust in America from an interdisciplinary perspective. We invite early-career scholars from American studies, political science, history, sociology, philosophy, geography, religious, and media studies to submit proposals that examine these transformations through diverse methodological and theoretical lenses.

The thematic scope of the conference encompasses topics from a broad range of research fields, including, but not limited to:

- Contestation of authority and trust in American politics, culture, and religion
- Crises of democracy and dynamics of populism
- Historical and religious transformations of authority and trust
- Hegemonic meaning-making in the American republic, empire, and nation-state
- Decline and transformation of U.S. global authority, liberal economic and security orders
- Erosion of trust in legacy media and the authority of alternative facts and new platforms
- Literary and cultural reflections of transforming authorities and trust relationships
- Challenges towards science, academia, and knowledge production
- Betrayal, abuse, and exploitation of trust
- Forms of resistance and community building
- Authority of taboos and transformations of truth
- Methodologic approaches and transforming theories of authority and trust

Please submit your abstract (250 words maximum) and a short biography to the organizers (iz8@uni-heidelberg.de). Limited travel grants are available.

Deadline for submission: November 15, 2025.