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Trust In Institutions from 2010 to Present: Drivers, Shocks, and Recovery

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ABSTRACT

Trust in institutions is a fundamental component of effective governance, democratic legitimacy, and social cooperation. Since 2010, institutional trust has experienced significant fluctuations across countries and governance systems, influenced by a combination of performance-related factors, political developments, economic conditions, and major societal shocks. This paper examines the evolution of trust in institutions from 2010 to the present, focusing on the conceptual foundations of institutional trust, the key drivers of trust formation and erosion, and the mechanisms through which institutions recover credibility following crises. The study identifies five principal determinants of institutional trust: perceived performance quality, transparency, corruption, exposure to crises, and media independence. It further analyzes the impact of major shocks, including political scandals, governance failures, anti-corruption reforms, public protests, and the COVID-19 pandemic, on trust trajectories across different institutional contexts. Through a comparative examination of liberal democracies, hybrid regimes, and non-democratic systems, the paper highlights the diverse ways in which institutional structures, governance quality, and socio-political environments shape public confidence. The findings demonstrate that trust is dynamic, context-dependent, and closely linked to perceptions of legitimacy, accountability, and effectiveness. The study concludes that strengthening institutional trust requires sustained commitments to transparency, responsiveness, anti-corruption measures, crisis preparedness, and citizen engagement. These factors are essential for enhancing governance resilience and fostering long-term public confidence in institutions.

KEYWORDS: Institutional Trust, Governance and Legitimacy, Public Confidence, Crisis Management and Democratic Governance

INTRODUCTION

Trust in institutions constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of governance, impacting compliance with laws and regulations, cooperation with government and public services, and the effectiveness of policies and reforms [1]. Tracking the evolution of trust provides key insights into the governance trajectory of each country and the quality of the policies pursued [2]. It also highlights the dynamic interplay between governance, legitimacy, and trust, which is especially critical when major shocks, upset established governance equilibria [2]. In more general terms, trust conveys the confidence one actor has in the expected behavior of another, formed through informal means and hence intimately linked to reputation [1]. This notion of trust can be framed within a broader concept of legitimacy, which denotes the belief among the governed that those governing have the right to do so and is determined by four criteria: performance; process; identity; and commitment [3]t. Performance broadly encapsulates what those in authority do (or do not do) in terms of the services they provide, while process relates to social interaction with authorities and compliance with normative democratic principles. Trust directly affects the likelihood of compliance and cooperation among the governed on the one hand, while a feeling of non-participation diminishes compliance and cooperation on the other hand [3]. Trust thus forms part of a broader system of accountability meditated by legitimacy: the governed assess the actors in authority and their behavior, this leads to the formation of reputation among the governed, trust in the institution, and a subsequent willingness to cooperate and comply[1].

Conceptual Framework and Definitions

Trust in a principle proposed by Fukuyama as a "social virtue" refers to the expectation of public officials acting in the interest of citizens in the fulfillment of their duties [1]. According to Khalil trust and the perception of inequality in a society are inversely related with each other. It is also considered the major factor affecting tax compliance. The smooth transition between successive regimes also affects the levels of trust generated [3]. A substantial literature seeks to characterize and clarify the concept of trust in order to gather appropriate policy orientation. Institutional trust and its determinants have a long tradition of research. Research on public trust and confidence can be traced back to early democracy [2]. Political trust literature has focused on levels of trust, measurement, and the centrality of political trust on democracy, public policy, and political behaviour [4]. Recent Anglophone interest in political trust can be arranged in overlapping clusters. Institutional trust comprises several institutions including government, judiciary, police, military, political parties, parliament, multi-level governance [5]. The major functions of institutions are regulation, conflicts resolution, coordination and provision of public goods, providing fairness and legitimacy, ensuring public service delivery and policy implementation. Political trust is regarded as a general confidence in the legitimacy of the institutional performance, the process of democracy and governance when a political regime change takes place [1, 3].

Historical Backdrop: Baseline Trust Levels across Institutions

Trust in institutions shows a different historical trajectory, characterized by distinct baseline levels, previous shocks, resilience mechanisms, and initial conditions at the beginning of the period under study. In 2010, a wide range of trust measures exhibited very low scores [4]. While official surveys indicated an average institutional trust of around 50%, additional administrative records and survey-based indices revealed that governance institutions generally commanded greater trust than other entities, particularly in liberal democracies [4]. Most principal national actor's parliaments, executives, judiciaries, public administration, monetary authorities, mass media, and political parties emerged from the previous decade with diminished credibility and legitimacy [5]. According to estimates derived from surveys conducted between 1999 and 2009, trust in parliaments, parties, and media had already experienced the most substantial erosion prior to 2010[5]. Many indicators showed a slight recovery during the first years of the following decade, driven by several contextual factors. However, the overall effects of prior shocks on trust in principal actors and the lasting impact of the global financial crisis remained highly perceived across various governance contexts and forms of regime [4].

Drivers of Trust Formation and Erosion

Across the various phases explored, five critical drivers of trust have been identified: [1] perceived performance quality, [2]the degree of transparency surrounding institutional decisions and actions, [3] the prevalence and visibility of corruption; [4] the extent to which countries are directly exposed to political, economic, or health crises, and [5] the independence of the media. Trust formation and erosion are influenced by distinct mechanisms, highlighting the need to distinguish between proximal and distal drivers. Drawing on the categorization proposed by Peters, drivers are also classified according to the prevailing form of government (democracy, hybridity, autocracy) and the quality of public governance (effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law)[4]. Additional factors may be relevant, such as the responsiveness, inclusiveness, and rule-of-law characteristics of the institutions themselves, which affect the manner in which other drivers bear upon trust levels [4]. The communication ecosystem and the degree of political polarization in society also significantly shape the dynamics of trust across countries and over time [1]. Perceived performance quality (or effectiveness) constitutes the first and most universal driver, exercised through the assessment of how well institutions fulfil their formal mandates [4]. The degree and nature of transparency surrounding institutional decisions and actions represents the second, with expectations of publicity being far more prevalent in democracies and hybrid regimes than in autocracies. Corruption constitutes a third driver [1], reflecting the number of bribery cases and self-reported estimates of corrupt practices. Exposure to crises constitutes the fourth driver and exerted a strong upward influence on trust during the past decade. The independence, professionalism, and reliability of the media serve as the fifth driver [5].

Major Shocks and Their Impact on Trust (2010–Present)

From 2010 onwards, several crises, scandals, and reform episodes have influenced public perceptions of institutional performance and, consequently, levels of trust in institutions [3]. The COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of anti-corruption laws, a birth registration scandal in Kyrgyzstan, and anti-government protests in

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Armenia serve as illustrative examples of events that prompted strong fluctuations in public confidence across a variety of institutions [1]. Analysis of the timing, severity, and perceived nature of these shocks reveals considerable heterogeneity in their effects on trust, suggesting that the nature of events is as influential as their scale. Large events that trigger concern about the legitimacy of public authority, such as controversies related to election integrity, can lead to sharp distrust of central government, whereas local crises such as those surrounding education, health, or crime may primarily affect trust in local government [3]. Institutional structure shapes how events interact with trust dynamics. Shocks related to inter-institutional crises may accelerate declines in trust where the relevant institutions are already relatively weak [1]. In addition, the trajectory of public confidence following an event is shaped not only by the type of performance indicators that the event signals, but also by the corresponding authority and institutional structure involved [5].

Recovery Trajectories and Resilience Mechanisms

Following a shock, the immediacy of recovery differs among institutions, and trust may regain previous levels or realign to a new baseline [3]. Comparative analysis reveals an important distinction between the short-term rebound of trust in central government in many European countries following the pandemic and the long-term historical realignment of trust in public services, political parties, and the media across diverse regional contexts since 2010. Major watershed moments, including the COVID crisis, can also trigger longer-term adjustments in trust trajectories [2]. Recovery is facilitated by institutional reforms, performance improvements, and sustained engagement with social stakeholders. In a context marked by chronic trust deficit, anti-corruption initiatives can nevertheless contribute to a temporary upsurge in trust [3]. A comparison of reforms targeting institutions of higher education and the media illustrates the significance of implementation speed [1]. Transparency and accountability play a critical role in both enhancing trust-generation mechanisms and restoring trust following systemic shocks. Effective crisis management is essential for mitigating the erosion of trust, especially when the anticipated performance signal following a crisis is unfavorable [5].

Comparative Perspectives across Regions and Governance Contexts

Comparative perspectives across regions and governance contexts illuminate variation in trust dynamics since 2010. Countries exhibit distinctive trajectories, often shaped by broader region- and regime-type patterns. Three contrasting groups emerge: liberal democracies, partial democracies, and non-democracies [2]. Trajectories within these categories diverge; notable differences also arise by national wealth, centralization versus decentralization, and public-service delivery quality. Cultural, historical, and institutional-context factors further influence trust responses [3]. Countries across the world reacted to shocks after 2010 with markedly different trust trajectories. Pre-existing norms conditioned institutional trust responses to external pressures. Seven regimes exhibit illustrative patterns: countries shifted among these regimes [4]. Countries facing globalization challenges opted for stronger welfare-state measures, fuelling wider trust deterioration. Others exposed to crisis without policy space, extended coverage through entitlements or technology, preserving or improving post-crisis trust levels. These cases reflect distinct positioning along a continuum of pre-2010 institutional trust [5].

Methodological Approaches and Data Sources

The current study adopts a mixed-method approach to construct a historical narrative of trust variations since 2010. Trust is conceptualized as the expectation that an institution will perform its functions effectively and in a manner perceived as legitimate [3]. Rather than observing trust as a single stock, the study examines it as a dynamic variable exposed to shocks whose trajectories may differ among institutions [4]. The analysis relies on publicly available datasets comprised of existing survey and administrative data, complemented by information from international indices. Advanced econometric techniques are not employed since the goal is the systematic description of a phenomenon rather than accurate estimation of causal effects [1]. Existing datasets are used creatively to simulate an increase in the number of cases, enabling observation of region-grouped effects for at least three shock episodes. A set of indicators monitoring governmental functions may track variations in trust at the macro level for countries without dedicated surveys [1]. Surveys remain at the core of the analysis. Existing instruments, questions, and response scales were harmonized in advance to enhance comparability. The notion of institutional trust refers to countries with multi-institutional systems, where the government, judiciary, media, and civil service are regarded as distinct entities and count among the most catalysing actors of trust [2]. Trust in the central bank and banking institutions would also be relevant in this context. In any scenario, for a trust reconstruction commencing in 2010, no socio-economic surveys directly accounting for institutional trust were available [2]. The intention is to capture formal and operational trust through the general citizen-ground-based performance-trust indicator proposed by Felipe Lagos. Such trust serves as a precursor to the construction of the general-performance trust variable concerning institutional settings [1].

Policy Implications for Strengthening Institutional Trust

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Despite substantial contextual variation, certain generic reform agendas can be gleaned from the analysis: widespread dissatisfaction with many institutions, elevated demand for governance improvements, and recurrent concerns about corruption indicate that credibility-enhancing measures are broadly pertinent [1]. Trust in the political, regulatory, and economic systems remains crucial for crisis preparedness. Mechanisms to reduce supply-and-demand mismatches in institutional performance and to alleviate the impact of politicization on trust are similarly relevant [2]. Trust in political institutions is generally associated with perceptions of procedural fairness, integrity, inclusiveness, and accountability. Consequently, policies to address deteriorating signals that govern such perceptions, and hence trust itself, remain highly pertinent [4]. When the timing of one or more shocks remains uncertain, preparations for a possible acute deterioration of system performance become imperative. The capability of key institutions to respond effectively to crises influences not only immediate resilience but also long-term prospects for recovering and reconfiguring trust and other aspects of legitimacy [4]. Effective management of shocks and strengthening of crisis-preparedness procedures therefore emerge as pivotal governance and credibility issues. Throughout the operational cycle of evolving emergencies, the capacity to maintain channels for both information dissemination to the public and feedback collection from citizens has proven pivotal for sustaining performance signals and transparency, thereby securing policy compliance, cooperation, and longer-term effectiveness [5]. Strategies to curb corruption also remain relevant. Actions complementing signals of system responsiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency but geared specifically to countering corruption receive attention from countries across the spectrum of credibility. A large diversity of communications and media arrangements exists worldwide [4]. Regimes facing severe integrity deficits typically adopt measures to enhance civil society monitoring, press freedom, and public participation, regardless of whether such interventions consistently produce decisive returns.

CONCLUSION

Trust in institutions remains one of the most important determinants of effective governance, democratic stability, and social cooperation. The period from 2010 to the present has demonstrated that institutional trust is neither fixed nor uniform; rather, it evolves in response to institutional performance, governance practices, societal expectations, and major political, economic, and public health shocks. Public confidence in institutions is shaped by perceptions of effectiveness, transparency, accountability, fairness, and integrity, making trust a critical indicator of institutional legitimacy. The analysis reveals that perceived performance quality, transparency, corruption levels, exposure to crises, and media independence consistently influence trust formation and erosion across diverse governance contexts. Major events, including political scandals, anti-corruption initiatives, social unrest, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly altered trust trajectories, often exposing underlying institutional strengths and weaknesses. While some institutions have demonstrated resilience and recovered public confidence through effective responses and reforms, others have experienced prolonged trust deficits due to persistent governance failures and credibility challenges. Comparative evidence further shows that trust dynamics vary across political systems, socio-economic environments, and cultural contexts. Nevertheless, certain principles remain universally important. Institutions that demonstrate competence, openness, responsiveness, and accountability are more likely to maintain public trust, particularly during periods of uncertainty and crisis. Effective communication, citizen participation, and strong mechanisms for oversight and integrity also contribute to sustaining confidence in public institutions. Ultimately, strengthening institutional trust requires long-term investments in good governance, transparency, anti-corruption efforts, and crisis preparedness. As societies continue to confront increasingly complex challenges, trust will remain an essential resource for securing public cooperation, enhancing policy effectiveness, and preserving the legitimacy of governance systems. Policymakers must therefore prioritize trust-building strategies as a central component of institutional resilience and democratic development.

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