

Public Trust in Government: Institutional Performance, Transparency and Citizen Engagement

Mahar Waqar Fazal¹

¹ Ph.D. Scholar, Zhongnan University of Economic and Law, Wuhan, Hubei, China. Email: adv.maharwaqarfazal@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Public trust in government is often discussed as if it were a single attitude that governments can increase through better communication or short-term policy success. The research literature suggests a more complicated picture. Trust is a judgement about whether public institutions are likely to act competently, fairly, honestly and in ways that are reasonably responsive to citizens. It is therefore connected to institutional performance, but it is not reducible to performance alone. This article examines why citizens develop or lose trust in public institutions through a critical narrative review of established theoretical work, empirical studies and recent international evidence. It focuses on institutional performance, transparency, accountability, public participation, corruption perceptions, service delivery, digital government and crisis governance. The article proposes a conceptual framework in which trust develops through the interaction of what institutions do, how they make decisions, how openly they explain those decisions, and whether citizens have meaningful opportunities to be heard. International evidence, particularly from the OECD Trust Survey, is used to show that reliability, responsiveness, fairness, integrity and openness are closely associated with public trust, while the effects of transparency and participation are conditional rather than automatic. The article argues that public trust should be treated less as a communication outcome and more as a cumulative institutional relationship. Policy efforts are therefore more likely to be credible when they improve the everyday experience of public administration, strengthen accountability, provide usable information, and give citizens meaningful rather than symbolic opportunities to participate.

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Mahar Waqar Fazal
adv.maharwaqarfazal@gmail.com



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1. Introduction

Public trust in government has become a difficult but important issue for public administration and democratic governance. Governments need a degree of public confidence to implement policies, collect taxes, deliver services and respond to emergencies. At the same time, democratic citizens are not expected to trust public institutions uncritically.

They are entitled to question decisions, demand information and hold officials accountable. The important issue, therefore, is not simply whether citizens trust government, but why they trust it, why that trust changes, and what institutional conditions make trust reasonable rather than blind. Political trust is commonly understood as a citizen's favourable expectation that a political or public institution will act in an appropriate and dependable way.

Levi and Stoker (2000) distinguish trust from simple approval and emphasise the importance of institutional trustworthiness. Hardin (2002), from a more relational perspective, explains trust partly through the expectation that another actor has interests that are sufficiently aligned with one's own. These approaches point to an important distinction: trust is a judgement made by citizens, while trustworthiness is a characteristic of institutions or officeholders as assessed through behaviour.

A government cannot simply announce that it is trustworthy. Citizens form judgements from experience, information and observation. The question becomes particularly difficult because governments are judged at different levels.

A citizen may distrust a national political executive but trust a local health worker. Someone may distrust parliament but trust the courts or civil service. The OECD's 2024 survey demonstrates this institutional variation clearly.

Across 30 OECD countries, 39% of respondents reported high or moderately high trust in their national government, while 44% reported low or no trust. Yet public confidence in reliability, service delivery and other dimensions varied substantially across institutions and countries (OECD, 2024a). Trust is therefore not a single national temperature.

This article asks why citizens develop or lose trust in public institutions. It focuses on the relationship between institutional performance, transparency, accountability, participation and trust, while also examining corruption perceptions, public services, digital government and crisis governance. The article does not argue that any one factor mechanically produces trust.

The article then considers international evidence and proposes policy implications. The final section brings the strands together and identifies limitations and areas for further research.

Research Method

This article uses a critical narrative review of established scholarship and recent international evidence on public trust in government. The literature was selected to cover the main conceptual debates and the institutional mechanisms most relevant to trust: performance, transparency, accountability, participation, corruption, public services, digital government and crisis governance. Preference was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, official international datasets and reports from organisations such as the OECD, World Bank, United Nations and World Values Survey Association.

The review is interpretive rather than systematic. It does not claim to estimate a pooled effect size or to provide a comprehensive bibliometric census of the field. Empirical findings are therefore reported with attention to study design and limits, especially where evidence is correlational. International datasets are used as contextual evidence rather than as direct measures of the full concept of public trust.

2. Concept of Public Trust

The concept of public trust is difficult to define because trust, confidence, satisfaction, legitimacy and support are related but not identical ideas. A citizen can be satisfied with a particular government service without trusting the government generally. Similarly, a person can support the democratic system while distrusting the government of the day.

Treating these concepts as interchangeable creates problems for both research and policy. Levi and Stoker (2000) describe political trust as a judgement about whether political institutions and actors are likely to perform in a way that is consistent with expectations. Their review also highlights the importance of trustworthiness.

The distinction matters because a government may be trusted for reasons unrelated to current performance, such as historical reputation or partisan identity. Conversely, a government can lose trust after a visible failure even when its overall performance remains reasonably strong. Hardin's (2002) account is useful because it moves attention away from the idea that trust is simply a personal feeling.

Trust is connected to expectations about another actor's behaviour and interests. In public institutions, however, the relationship is unusual. Citizens normally do not know individual officials personally, and they cannot directly observe many government processes.

They therefore rely on institutional signals: rules, procedures, records, past performance, professional standards, media reports, personal experiences and the experiences of other citizens. A second distinction is between trust and legitimacy. Legitimacy concerns the perceived rightfulness of authority, while trust concerns expectations about how an institution is likely to behave.

Tyler's (2006) work on procedural justice shows why this distinction matters. People can accept decisions that they dislike when they believe the decision-making process is fair and respectful. Fair treatment therefore affects the relationship between citizens and institutions even when the immediate outcome is not favourable.

Trust also operates at different institutional levels. The police, courts, civil service, local government, parliament and national executive can receive different levels of trust. OECD evidence confirms this institutional differentiation.

A healthy relationship is therefore not one in which citizens believe every government claim. It is one in which citizens have enough confidence in institutional processes to accept legitimate decisions while retaining the ability to challenge misconduct.

3. Theoretical Foundations

The literature on political trust contains several explanations for why citizens trust institutions. One broad approach gives greater weight to social and cultural factors. According to this perspective, generalised interpersonal trust, political socialisation and long-term cultural patterns shape the way people view institutions.

Another approach places greater emphasis on institutional performance and citizens' experiences with government. Mishler and Rose (2001) tested these competing explanations using evidence from ten post-communist countries. Their results gave stronger support to institutional explanations, particularly individual-level evaluations of political and economic performance, than to purely cultural explanations.

Their work does not mean that culture is irrelevant. It does, however, provide support for the proposition that institutional experience can matter and that trust is not simply inherited from a fixed national culture. A performance-based perspective is also present in public administration research.

Yang and Holzer (2006) examine the performance-trust link and argue that the relationship is less straightforward than is sometimes assumed. Government performance is difficult to define and measure, and citizens do not necessarily observe objective performance directly. They may instead respond to perceptions of performance, personal experiences and the quality of the measures used to communicate performance.

Van de Walle (2003) similarly warns against assuming a simple causal sequence in which better services automatically produce more trust. Citizens' prior trust can influence how they interpret service performance, while service experiences can influence trust in return. This creates the possibility of reciprocal causality.

It also explains why two citizens experiencing the same service can reach different judgements about government. A procedural justice perspective adds another dimension. Tyler (2006) shows that people care not only about outcomes but also about whether authorities use fair procedures and treat people with dignity.

Applied to public administration, this means that a government can provide a technically successful service and still damage trust if citizens experience disrespect, discrimination, unexplained delays or arbitrary decision-making. A fourth perspective focuses on institutional integrity. Citizens need to believe that public officials are not using public office primarily for private benefit.

Together, these mechanisms can strengthen trust when they operate credibly. If they operate only formally, their effects may be weak or even negative because the gap between official claims and lived experience becomes more visible.

4. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed here is shown in Figure 1. It begins with institutional behaviour rather than public relations. The basic proposition is that citizens form trust judgements through repeated exposure to government performance and governance processes.

Institutional performance, transparency, accountability and participation are therefore treated as connected inputs. Their effects are mediated by citizens' perceptions of reliability, fairness, integrity and responsiveness. Institutional performance refers to the capacity of public organisations to produce intended outputs and outcomes.

Transparency refers to whether relevant information is available, understandable and timely. Accountability refers to mechanisms through which officials explain and justify decisions and can face review or sanction. Participation refers to opportunities for citizens and affected groups to contribute to policy design, implementation or evaluation.

The framework also includes two important feedback loops. First, trust can influence how citizens interpret government performance. A person who already distrusts an institution may interpret an administrative delay as evidence of incompetence or bad faith, while a highly trusting citizen may interpret the same delay as an isolated problem.

Second, trust can affect participation and compliance. Citizens who expect government to listen may be more willing to use consultation mechanisms, provide information or comply with public programmes. Thus, trust is both an outcome and, to some extent, a condition for effective governance.

It is a conceptual synthesis of the literature. Its purpose is to organise the evidence and identify relationships that future empirical studies can test more directly.

5. Institutional Performance and Service Delivery

Government performance is probably the most intuitive explanation for public trust. Citizens expect institutions to perform basic functions: schools should educate, hospitals should provide treatment, licensing agencies should process applications, courts should resolve disputes, and local authorities should maintain public infrastructure. When these functions fail repeatedly, citizens have a direct reason to question whether institutions are capable or responsive.

The difficulty is that "performance" is not a single variable. It can mean efficiency, effectiveness, quality, accessibility, equity, reliability or satisfaction. A service may be efficient but inaccessible to poor citizens.

A government may deliver infrastructure quickly but distribute it unfairly. An agency may meet its internal targets while citizens experience the process as confusing or disrespectful. Therefore, performance indicators need to be connected to the things citizens actually value.

Yang and Holzer (2006) argue that the performance-trust relationship is difficult to demonstrate because performance measurement itself is problematic. Citizens do not observe the entire production process of government. They observe selected encounters, hear about failures and successes through media and social networks, and interpret those experiences in light of prior beliefs.

Performance information therefore does not automatically translate into trust. The OECD Trust Survey provides useful recent evidence. In 2023, satisfaction with administrative services was associated with a higher likelihood of reporting high or moderately high trust in the national civil service.

The OECD estimates that a one-standard-deviation increase in satisfaction with administrative services was associated with a 4.7 percentage-point increase in the likelihood of high or moderately high trust in the civil service, although the OECD explicitly cautions that these associations should not be interpreted as causal effects (OECD, 2024b). This is important. Service quality matters, but the evidence does not justify the claim that a particular improvement will automatically increase trust by a fixed amount.

Service delivery also creates a repeated-contact relationship between citizens and government. A national policy may be abstract, but obtaining a birth certificate, renewing a licence or applying for a benefit is concrete. Citizens encounter officials, forms, queues, websites and administrative rules.

These encounters provide evidence about whether government is reliable and fair. Citizens also want to know how decisions are made and whether poor performance can be challenged. This leads to the related questions of transparency and accountability.

6. Transparency: Information, Understanding and Trust

Transparency is often presented as one of the easiest ways to build trust. The basic logic is attractive: if government makes information available, citizens can understand decisions, identify problems and hold officials accountable. Yet the empirical literature shows that transparency is not automatically trust-producing.

Transparency has at least three dimensions. The first is availability: whether information exists and can be accessed. The second is intelligibility: whether ordinary citizens can understand it.

The third is relevance: whether the information actually answers the questions citizens care about. A government may publish thousands of pages of budget documents and still be experienced as opaque if the important information is difficult to find or understand. Grimmeliikhuijsen et al. (2013) provide especially useful evidence because they tested the relationship experimentally in the Netherlands and South Korea.

Their results showed that transparency had a subdued and sometimes negative effect on trust, with stronger negative effects in South Korea. The study suggests that the effect of transparency depends partly on national context and on how citizens interpret information. Transparency is therefore not equivalent to positive communication.

The result is not surprising when the nature of public information is considered. More information can reveal failures, delays, disagreements and uncertainty. A transparent institution may therefore appear less competent in the short term because citizens can see problems that were previously hidden.

That does not mean transparency is harmful. It means that transparency should not be evaluated only by whether it produces an immediate rise in trust. The quality of information also matters.

Government communication that is selective, promotional or difficult to verify can create suspicion. During controversial decisions, citizens may want to know not only what the government decided but why it decided, what evidence it considered, what alternatives were rejected and what uncertainties remain. Explaining uncertainty can sometimes be more credible than presenting a policy as unquestionably correct.

Recent OECD evidence supports this broader approach. Citizens do not necessarily trust government because government tells them more. They may trust it when the information enables them to understand decisions, verify claims and see that officials are willing to be accountable for outcomes.

7. Accountability and Institutional Integrity

Accountability is closely related to trust because it addresses the problem of delegated power. Citizens cannot personally supervise most government decisions. They therefore rely on institutions that can monitor officials, require explanations and impose consequences for serious misconduct.

Accountability reduces the distance between those who exercise public power and those on whose behalf that power is exercised. Accountability can be political, administrative, legal, financial or social. Elections provide one form of political accountability, but they occur periodically and may not address individual administrative failures.

Courts provide legal review, audit institutions examine financial management, ombudsman offices receive complaints, legislatures conduct oversight, and administrative disciplinary systems address misconduct. Media and civil society can also provide external scrutiny. Trust does not require citizens to believe that public officials never make mistakes.

In fact, an unrealistic expectation of perfect government may be damaging. A more credible basis for trust is the expectation that mistakes and misconduct will be identified, explained and corrected. This is consistent with the idea of trustworthiness: citizens need evidence that institutions have mechanisms for self-correction.

Integrity is particularly important. The OECD's 2024 Trust Survey found that integrity was one of the weaker perceived dimensions of government across OECD countries. On average, only about 34% of respondents expressed confidence in government integrity, compared with about 49% for reliability (OECD, 2024a).

This difference is significant for policy because it suggests that citizens may believe government can deliver services while remaining uncertain about whether officials act in the public interest. Anti-corruption institutions are part of this problem. The OECD's Anti-Corruption and Integrity Outlook 2024 notes that many countries have strengthened formal integrity rules while implementation remains uneven (OECD, 2024c).

Rules on paper are therefore not enough. Citizens observe whether conflict-of-interest requirements are enforced, whether asset declarations are checked, whether procurement rules apply

equally and whether political influence can override administrative safeguards. Accountability can also fail when sanctions appear selective.

If corruption is punished only when committed by political opponents or lower-level officials, the accountability system may reinforce rather than reduce distrust. It is fundamentally an institutional design issue. Trust is more likely to be supported when citizens can identify who is responsible, what standards apply, how decisions can be challenged and what happens when those standards are breached.

8. Public Participation and Citizen Engagement

Public participation is often justified on democratic grounds, but it may also affect public trust. Participation can give citizens a sense that government listens to them, while also giving officials information about local needs and potential implementation problems. However, participation is not automatically trust-building.

The quality and consequences of participation matter. Wang and Van Wart (2007) examined the relationship between participation and trust using a model involving consensus building, ethical behaviour, accountability, service competence and managerial competence. Their findings are particularly relevant because participation itself did not explain everything.

Ethical behaviour and service competence were important intermediate factors. Their conclusion was that participation is unlikely to create trust if administrative performance and integrity remain weak. This finding fits the broader framework proposed in this article.

Citizens do not necessarily want to participate simply for the sake of participation. They want to know that participation has some meaningful connection with public decisions. A consultation process that produces no explanation or visible response may be experienced as symbolic.

Participation can take many forms: public hearings, consultations, citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, complaint systems, community monitoring, online consultations and co-production of services. These mechanisms vary greatly in depth. A comment box is not equivalent to a process in which citizens can deliberate over alternatives and receive a reasoned response from officials.

The relationship between participation and trust can also run in both directions. Citizens who already trust government may be more willing to participate. Conversely, citizens who distrust government may participate precisely because they want to monitor it.

Participation can therefore be an expression of distrust rather than trust. This is why simple correlations between participation and trust should be interpreted carefully. Recent experimental evidence adds nuance.

Campbell (2023) used a vignette experiment in South Korea to examine how participatory policymaking affected trust under different performance conditions. The study found a marginal increase in trust from participatory policymaking. The modest size of the effect reinforces the point that participation is not a substitute for competent policy.

It is most credible when government can show what citizens said, what officials did with that information and why. Participation without responsiveness can become another source of distrust.

9. Corruption Perceptions and Public Trust

Corruption is one of the clearest ways in which citizens may question institutional trustworthiness. If public office is perceived to be used for private gain, citizens have reason to doubt whether institutions are acting in the public interest. Yet the relationship between corruption and trust is not

simple because citizens usually encounter corruption through a mixture of personal experience, media information, political claims and perceptions.

Morris and Klesner (2010) show the problem clearly in their study of Mexico. They found evidence of mutual causality between perceptions of corruption and trust in political institutions. Distrust can make citizens more likely to interpret government as corrupt, while corruption perceptions can reduce trust.

This reciprocal relationship means that anti-corruption policy and trust-building can become difficult to separate. International corruption indices should therefore be used carefully. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index measures perceived public-sector corruption using assessments from experts and businesspeople.

It does not measure the number of corruption cases experienced by ordinary citizens, nor does it directly measure trust. The 2025 CPI covers 182 countries and territories and uses 13 external data sources (Transparency International, 2026). It is useful for comparative perception analysis, but it should not be treated as a direct measure of citizen trust.

The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators provide another broad comparative source. The WGI cover six governance dimensions, including government effectiveness, voice and accountability, rule of law and control of corruption. The World Bank revised the methodology in 2025 and recalculated historical estimates to maintain consistency under the revised methodology (World Bank, 2025).

The WGI are valuable for broad comparisons but are also perception-based composite measures. The World Bank itself cautions that they are too coarse to guide specific reforms without more detailed country-level diagnostics. The distinction between perception and experience matters.

A citizen may never personally pay a bribe but may still believe that corruption is widespread. Conversely, a person may experience a corrupt demand but not conclude that the entire government is corrupt. Political communication can also shape how citizens interpret corruption cases.

Citizens are evaluating whether institutions use public authority for public purposes. When the answer appears uncertain, trust becomes fragile.

10. Digital Government and Trust

Digital government has changed how citizens encounter public institutions. Websites, online applications, digital identity systems, automated decisions and electronic payment systems can make public services faster and more accessible. They can also introduce new concerns about privacy, exclusion, cybersecurity and automated decision-making.

Morgeson, VanAmburg, and Mithas (2011) examined the relationship between e-government, citizen satisfaction and trust. Their study is useful because it does not treat digital government as an independent source of trust. Instead, digital government changes the way citizens interact with government and may influence satisfaction and trust through the quality of that interaction.

The UN E-Government Survey 2024 shows the scale of this transformation. It assesses digital government across all 193 UN Member States and reports a broad global increase in digital-government development. At the same time, it identifies persistent differences between national and local digital performance (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2024).

This is relevant to trust because citizens often experience government at the local level even when digital infrastructure is designed nationally. Digital services can support trust when they reduce administrative friction. An online application that is easy to use, provides clear status information and produces a predictable result can communicate reliability.

A system that repeatedly fails, requires users to visit offices after applying online, or gives no explanation for automated decisions can have the opposite effect. Privacy is another important dimension. Citizens need to know why government collects personal information, how it is used, who can access it and how misuse is prevented.

The OECD's Trust Survey found that confidence that government uses personal data for legitimate purposes is associated with higher trust in the civil service (OECD, 2024b). Digital government therefore creates a trust relationship around data as well as service delivery. Digital government also changes transparency.

Online publication can make budgets, regulations and administrative information easier to access. Technology can make trustworthy administration easier, but it can also scale administrative failure. The relevant question is not whether government is digital, but whether digital systems make public administration more reliable, fair, transparent and responsive.

11. Crisis Governance and Public Trust

Crises provide a particularly revealing test of institutional trust. During emergencies, citizens often need government to act quickly under conditions of uncertainty. They may accept restrictions or policy changes that would be contested in normal circumstances.

At the same time, crises expose the quality of government communication, coordination and administrative capacity. The early COVID-19 experience illustrates this dynamic. OECD evidence shows that trust increased in many countries during the first stage of the pandemic, consistent with a temporary "rally around the flag" effect.

However, in 18 of 22 OECD countries with comparable data, average trust fell between April/May and June/July 2020 (OECD, 2021). This suggests that an initial increase in trust should not be confused with a durable improvement in institutional trustworthiness. Crisis governance therefore has at least three components.

First is capacity: can government act effectively? Second is legitimacy: do citizens regard the actions as appropriate and procedurally acceptable? Third is communication: can government explain what it knows, what it does not know and why it is changing policy?

Christensen and Lægreid (2020) discuss the Norwegian COVID-19 response in terms of governance capacity and legitimacy. Their analysis highlights the role of professional bureaucracy, communication, pragmatic decision-making and pre-existing trust. The Norwegian case should not be treated as a universal formula because institutional and social conditions differ across countries.

It nevertheless demonstrates the interaction between administrative capacity and legitimacy. A later comparative analysis of Norway and Sweden similarly emphasises the interaction between capacity and legitimacy. Christensen et al. (2023) distinguish input, throughput and output dimensions of legitimacy.

Input legitimacy concerns participation and responsiveness; throughput legitimacy concerns procedures, fairness and transparency; output legitimacy concerns policy effectiveness. This distinction fits closely with the framework developed in this article. Crisis communication is particularly important because uncertainty cannot be eliminated.

Citizens may accept changing advice when institutions explain why information has changed. It is that institutions should develop the capacity and legitimacy that make trust reasonable. Crisis periods make these qualities more visible because citizens are paying close attention to government action.

12. International Evidence and Comparative Perspective

International comparison helps identify broad patterns, but it must be used carefully. Trust is shaped by national institutions, political systems, economic conditions, historical experience and survey design. A country ranking can show differences but cannot by itself explain why those differences exist.

The OECD Trust Survey is one of the strongest current comparative sources because it directly measures trust and several potential drivers in the same survey. The 2023 survey covered 30 OECD countries. Across the sample, 39% reported high or moderately high trust in national government, compared with 44% reporting low or no trust (OECD, 2024a).

The survey also found that people were more positive about reliability than about integrity and responsiveness. This is significant because it suggests that citizens may believe governments can perform some basic functions while remaining doubtful about how decisions are made or whether officials act in the public interest. The survey also shows the importance of political voice.

Only around 30% of respondents felt they had a say in what government does. The OECD analysis found that people who believe they have political voice are more likely to report higher trust in national government, while perceptions of evidence-based decision-making and intergenerational fairness are also strongly associated with trust (OECD, 2024b). The World Values Survey provides a broader global source.

Wave 7 contains 64 country and society surveys conducted between 2017 and 2022, with more than 80,000 respondents, and includes questions concerning political and institutional trust (World Values Survey Association, 2022). Its strength is global coverage and the possibility of examining trust alongside values, political participation and social attitudes. Its limitation for the present article is that fieldwork occurred over several years and institutional questions differ across countries.

It is therefore better suited to broad comparative analysis than precise annual measurement. The World Bank's WGI offer a different perspective by measuring governance dimensions rather than trust itself. The revised WGI cover more than 200 economies and six dimensions of governance (World Bank, 2025).

Government effectiveness and voice and accountability are particularly relevant to the present argument. Context determines how citizens interpret information, participation and government action. Comparative research therefore works best when it asks how similar institutional mechanisms operate under different conditions rather than simply asking which country has the highest trust.

13. An Integrated Explanation: Why Trust Develops or Declines

The literature reviewed above suggests that citizens develop trust when government repeatedly provides credible evidence of competence, fairness, integrity and responsiveness. They lose trust when the opposite pattern becomes persistent. The process is cumulative rather than instantaneous.

The first element is performance. Citizens need evidence that institutions can perform basic responsibilities. Reliable services, predictable procedures and competent crisis responses create a foundation for trust.

But performance is interpreted through experience, so governments should measure not only outputs but also the quality of citizens' interactions with institutions. The second element is transparency. Citizens need enough information to understand what government is doing and why.

Transparency is strongest when information is timely, relevant and understandable. It is weaker when governments publish large quantities of technical material without explaining the decision or when information is selectively presented. The third element is accountability.

Citizens need confidence that officials can be questioned and that serious misconduct will have consequences. Accountability makes trust more rational because it reduces the risk associated with delegated power. It also provides a route for correcting failures.

The fourth element is participation. Citizens need opportunities to express views and, importantly, to see that their participation has been considered. Participation supports trust when it is meaningful and inclusive.

It can undermine trust when it is merely symbolic. These four elements interact. Performance without accountability may look efficient but untrustworthy.

Transparency without participation may provide information without voice. Participation without performance may create frustration because citizens are consulted but services do not improve. Accountability without transparency is difficult to observe.

The framework therefore depends on the combination rather than any single instrument. The process is also affected by information and political context. Citizens do not experience government in isolation.

Media, political parties, civil society and social networks shape what people know and how they interpret government action. OECD research increasingly emphasises information integrity because citizens need reliable information to form informed judgements about public institutions (OECD, 2024d). Trust should instead be treated as an outcome that provides information about whether citizens believe public institutions are functioning properly.

In this sense, the question is not "How can government make people trust it?" The better question is "What institutional conditions would make reasonable trust more likely?" This shift is important because it places the emphasis on public administration, legal safeguards and citizen experience rather than persuasion.

14. Policy Implications

The literature suggests several practical implications for governments that want to strengthen public trust. First, governments should improve the everyday quality of public services. This means reducing unnecessary delays, making procedures predictable, treating citizens fairly and responding to complaints.

Service reform should be measured using both objective indicators and user experience. The OECD evidence suggests that satisfaction with administrative services is meaningfully associated with trust in the civil service, but governments should avoid presenting this relationship as mechanically causal (OECD, 2024b). Second, transparency should be designed around usability.

Public information should be accessible, understandable and connected to decisions that affect citizens. Budget publication, procurement disclosure, regulatory information and performance reporting should be accompanied by explanations that ordinary users can follow. Transparency should include difficult information, including uncertainty and mistakes.

Third, accountability institutions need practical independence and capacity. Oversight bodies that lack resources, legal authority or access to information will struggle to influence trust. Accountability should also be visible enough for citizens to understand how complaints and investigations are handled.

Fourth, anti-corruption policy should focus on implementation rather than only legal frameworks. Conflict-of-interest rules, procurement safeguards, asset declarations, audit systems and whistleblower protections need credible enforcement. Selective enforcement is particularly harmful because it can make formal integrity rules appear politically motivated.

Fifth, governments should make participation consequential. Consultation processes should explain how public input was used. Where proposals are rejected, officials should provide reasons.

Participation should also be designed to include groups that are normally less able to participate, including people who face digital or economic barriers. Sixth, governments should invest in reliable digital services while protecting privacy. Digital transformation should be assessed not only by the number of services placed online but by completion rates, accessibility, user satisfaction, data protection and the ability to obtain human assistance when automated systems fail.

Seventh, crisis governance should combine speed with transparency and accountability. Emergency decisions may need to be made quickly, but governments should explain the evidence behind them, acknowledge uncertainty and establish review mechanisms. Governments change, but citizens interact repeatedly with the state.

Institutional reforms that remain credible across changes of government are more likely to create stable expectations of trustworthiness.

15. Limitations and Future Research

This article has several limitations. First, it is a critical narrative review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. The literature was selected to represent major theoretical approaches, empirical findings and recent international evidence, but the article does not claim to include every publication on public trust.

Second, much of the empirical evidence is based on survey data. Survey measures are necessary for studying trust, but they are vulnerable to question wording, timing, political context and respondent interpretation. Cross-national surveys also face challenges of comparability because citizens may use response scales differently.

Third, many studies identify associations rather than causal effects. The OECD's recent regression analysis, for example, explicitly cautions against treating its drivers of trust as causal because perceptions and trust may influence each other (OECD, 2024b). This limitation is central to the field.

Future research should make greater use of experiments, longitudinal designs, administrative data and natural experiments. Fourth, the literature is disproportionately developed in OECD and European settings. Important evidence exists from Asia, Latin America and other regions, but more research is needed in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Research in these settings should examine how service delivery, informal institutions, corruption experiences, digital government and political participation interact with trust. Future research should also examine trust at the institutional level rather than only at the national-government level. Citizens may distinguish sharply between elected politicians, civil servants, courts, police, local authorities and independent regulatory bodies.

Automated decision-making, digital identity, data sharing and artificial intelligence may alter citizens' perceptions of competence, fairness and accountability. Future studies should investigate whether digital systems strengthen trust by making government more predictable or weaken trust when decisions become difficult to challenge or understand.

16. Conclusion

Public trust in government is not produced by a single policy instrument. It develops through a relationship between citizens and institutions, and that relationship is built through repeated experiences of government performance, fairness, openness, accountability and responsiveness. The literature reviewed in this article supports a cautious institutional explanation of trust.

Mishler and Rose (2001) found substantial support for institutional explanations of political trust in post-communist societies. Research on public services shows that performance matters but that the performance-trust relationship is affected by measurement and reverse causality (Van de Walle, 2003; Yang & Holzer, 2006). Research on transparency shows that information disclosure can have different effects depending on context and interpretation (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013).

Research on participation suggests that citizen involvement is more likely to support trust when it is connected to ethical administration and competent services (Wang & Van Wart, 2007). Corruption research shows that perceptions of integrity can interact with trust in both directions (Morris & Klesner, 2010). Recent international evidence reinforces these findings.

The OECD's 2024 Trust Survey shows that citizens distinguish between reliability, responsiveness, openness, fairness and integrity. It also shows that many citizens remain uncertain about their ability to influence government decisions. The overall pattern is therefore not simply one of citizens wanting a more efficient government.

They want institutions that are capable, fair, understandable and responsive. The conceptual framework developed here connects four institutional dimensions: performance, transparency, accountability and participation. The framework suggests that trust is most credible when these dimensions reinforce one another.

Performance provides evidence of competence; transparency makes government action visible; accountability makes power answerable; and participation provides citizens with a meaningful voice. Weakness in one area can undermine the others. The policy lesson is straightforward but demanding.

Governments should not ask how to persuade citizens to trust them. They should ask what they can do to become more trustworthy. It is a form of justified trust in which citizens have reasonable grounds to believe that public institutions are competent, fair, transparent and capable of correcting their own mistakes.

That kind of trust is slower to build, but it is also more consistent with accountable democratic government.

Figures and Tables

The figures and tables below provide a visual summary of the conceptual argument and selected international evidence used in the article.

Conceptual framework: institutional pathways to public trust

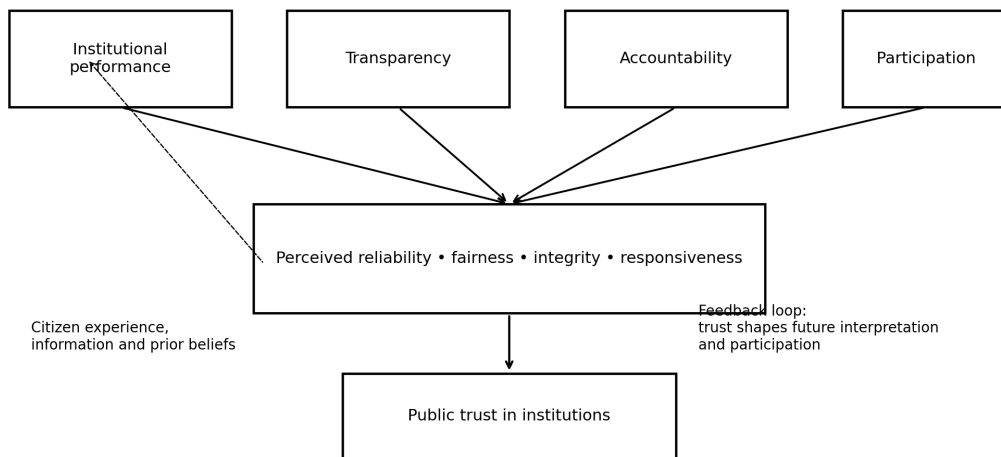
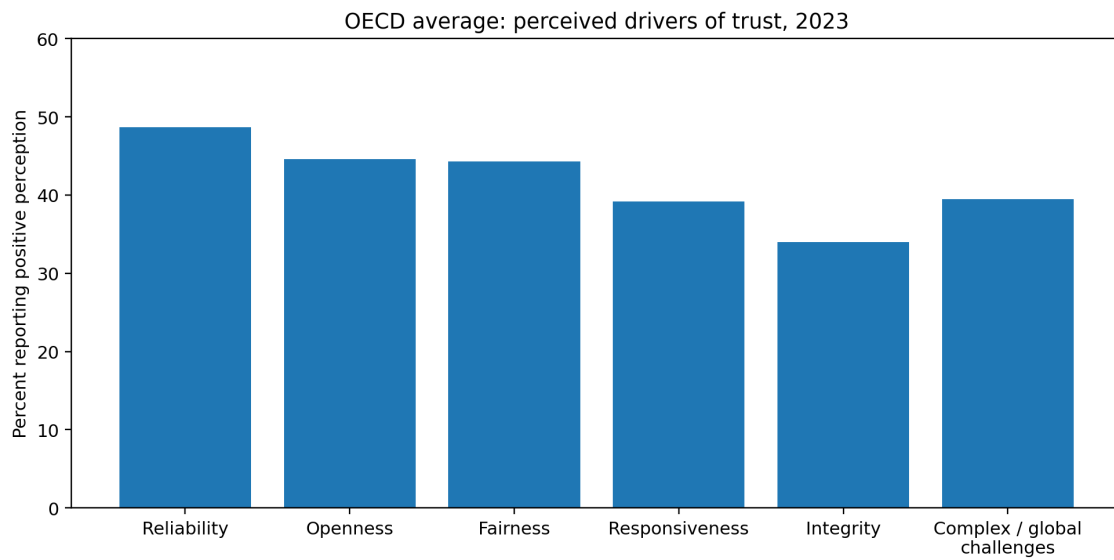


Figure 1. Conceptual framework connecting institutional performance, transparency, accountability, participation and public trust.
 Author's synthesis of the reviewed literature.

Table 1
 Theoretical pathways linking institutional characteristics to public trust

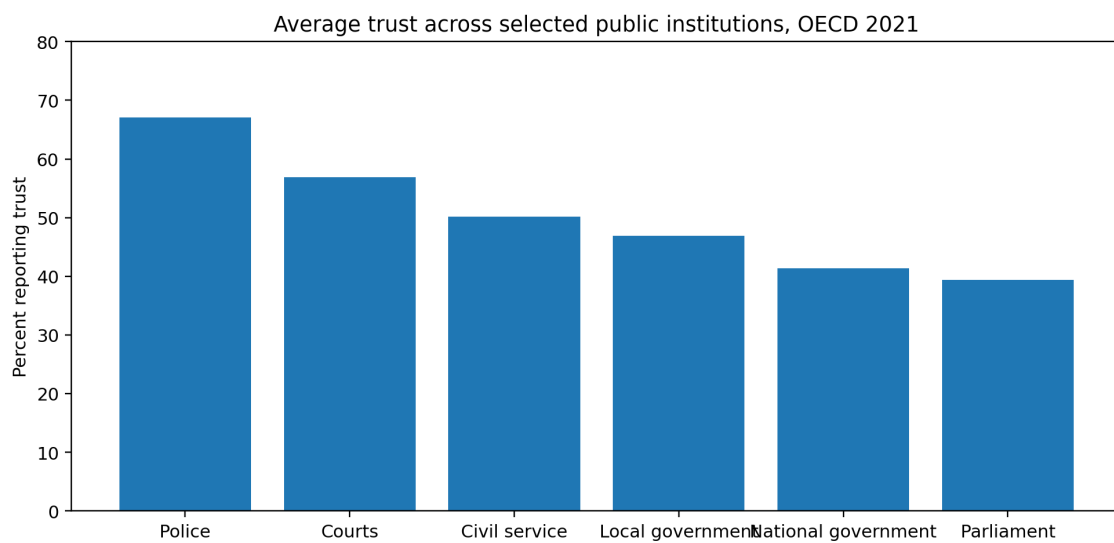
Dimension	What citizens observe	Potential trust mechanism	Main caution
Institutional performance	Service quality, reliability, access, outcomes	Signals competence and reliability	Performance is partly perceived; causality can run both ways
Transparency	Information, explanations, data, reasons for decisions	Reduces uncertainty and supports scrutiny	More information can expose failures or overwhelm users
Accountability	Audits, complaints, review, sanctions, oversight	Shows that power is answerable and correctable	Formal rules may have weak implementation
Participation	Consultations, hearings, feedback, co-production	Creates voice and procedural legitimacy	Symbolic participation can increase frustration

Note. Conceptual synthesis based on the literature reviewed in the article.



Source: OECD Trust Survey 2023; unweighted OECD averages.

Figure 2. OECD average perceptions of selected governance drivers of trust, 2023. Source: OECD Trust Survey 2023.



Source: OECD, Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy (2022), based on 2021 Trust Survey.

Figure 3. Average trust in selected public institutions across 22 OECD countries, 2021. Source: OECD (2022), based on the 2021 OECD Trust Survey.

Table 2

Selected empirical evidence on public trust and institutional drivers

Study/source	Setting/data	Main finding relevant to this article	Interpretive limitation
Mishler & Rose (2001)	10 post-communist countries	Institutional explanations, especially individual evaluations of performance, received stronger support than purely cultural explanations.	Historical setting; not a universal causal model.
Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2013)	Experiments in Netherlands and South Korea	Transparency had subdued and sometimes negative effects on trust; effects differed by context.	Experimental treatments and two-country comparison.

Study/source	Setting/data	Main finding relevant to this article	Interpretive limitation
Wang & Van Wart (2007)	Public administration participation study	Participation was associated with trust, but ethical behaviour and service competence were important intermediate factors.	Manager perceptions and cross-sectional design.
Morris & Klesner (2010)	Americas Barometer, Mexico	Corruption perceptions and political trust showed a mutually reinforcing relationship.	Country-specific evidence; causal direction remains difficult.
OECD (2024a, 2024b)	30 OECD countries, 2023 Trust Survey	Reliability, responsiveness, openness, fairness, integrity and political voice are associated with trust; service satisfaction is also important.	Associational survey evidence; OECD-country focus.
OECD (2021)	OECD/Gallup and other comparative evidence	Trust increased early in COVID-19 but declined in most observed OECD countries during 2020.	Crisis timing and changing survey periods affect interpretation.

Note. Findings are paraphrased from the cited sources and are not presented as causal effects unless the underlying study used an appropriate causal design.



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