



Political Change, Public Trust, and the Evolution of Contemporary Social Relations

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ABSTRACT

Political change has become a major determinant of changes in institutions and governance, as well as the nature of trust, cooperation, and conflict in contemporary social relations. This article explored the consequences of changes in political leadership, policy, institutional performance and public communication on the public's trust in government and in broader social interaction. Based on recent comparative scholarship, official sources and on international trust evidence published from 2018 to 2025, the analysis followed a qualitative documentary approach, structured around the following four themes: political change and institutional confidence, trust and social cohesion, distrust and fragmentation, and digital communication as a mediating factor. The results showed that public trust increased with the demonstration of competence, fairness, transparency, inclusion, and responsiveness of institutions. This trust engendered civic engagement, adherence to policies, community strength, and the peaceful resolution of disagreements. Exclusionary reforms, lax accountability, social inequality, and partisan communication fostered cynicism, polarization, and disengagement from collective institutions, in contrast. Digital platforms increased participation and increased misinformation, echo chambers and hostile engagement. The article asserted that trust played an important role as a link between political institutions and social life in the daily lives. The basis of sustainable legitimacy, therefore, was the ability to secure credible governance, meaningful citizen participation, equitable service delivery, and responsible digital regulation that would safeguard open debate, but also not allow for manipulative information practices in various societies.

Keywords

political change; public trust; social relations; social cohesion; political polarization

1. Introduction

Electoral realignments and institutional reforms, leadership changes, public protests, policy crises, and growing digital engagement have rapidly transformed political systems worldwide. They have changed the nature of government operations, as well as citizens' perceptions of government authority, legitimacy and representation. Modern political transformation is defined more and more by commonplace interactions with public institutions, welfare systems, media, administration, and political actors. Political change cannot, therefore, be judged only by the nature of elections or constitutional change, it must also be measured in terms of its impact on trust, cooperation, participation and social relations.

Public trust is an important factor in democratic stability because it affects citizens' acceptance of public decisions, compliance with policies, civic engagement, and cooperation with institutions. Governments build trust by being effective, equitable, responsive, transparent, and listening to people's concerns. However, recent evidence indicates that there is a lack of "equal trust" among countries, institutions and social groups. Citizens are not satisfied with the opportunities public institutions give for meaningful participation or treat all sections of society equally. In its recent research, OECD highlighted that citizens' trust in public institutions is tied to their perception of its responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness and fairness in complex policy environments (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024).

This trust erosion and trust deficits are especially important in societies that are characterized by polarization, economic inequality, misinformation, and social insecurity. Trust in institutions can impact more than simply citizens' satisfaction with the government. The doubt could lead to a decline in civic collaboration, greater animosity between political parties, a drop in trust with respect to shared norms and a tendency to disengage from collective institutions. Polarization and institutional inflexibility have over time constrained societies' capacity to tackle shared problems and work together effectively at the global level (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Public trust is thus not just a political attitude but a social resource for collective action and peaceful co-existence.

Trust is strengthened with political change where reforms increase accountability, inclusion, and representation. It could also exacerbate distrust if change is seen as exclusionary, arbitrary and advantageous to powerful groups. Nowadays, democratic institutions are under stress due to decreasing checks and balances, diminished oversight, political dissatisfaction, and a shifting nature of civic engagement (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2023). Electoral competition, however, does not necessarily imply democratic progress: political processes can be accompanied by the decline of democratic institutions, polarization, and a lack of democratic freedoms (V-Dem Institute, 2024). The conditions affect the nature of citizens' interactions with the state as well as with people who differ in political, cultural, or social identity.

Previous research has often focused on political change, institutional trust, polarization, civic involvement and social cohesion individually. What has received less focus is the nature of the shift in public trust that accompanies political change and the impact of this trust on social relations in everyday life. This division of itself hinders the comprehension of the wider social implications of political events. This article fills in this gap by exploring the relationship between institutional change and citizen confidence, inter-personal interaction, civic cooperation, and social fragmentation.

The purpose of this paper was to explore the impact of political transformation on public trust and the changes in trust on the social relations of the present day. It sought to answer three questions: how did political change impact institutional trust, how did trust impact social cohesion, participation and interpersonal relations, and what conditions could lead to political change strengthening cooperation or increasing fragmentation? Specifically, the article addressed the issue of whether and how political change impacted trust in institutions, how public trust relates to current social relations, and what factors contributed to the shift from institutional trust to social cohesion or social division. The article was important because it brought public trust as the linkage between political institutions and the broader organization of social life.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Political Change

Political change is defined as a change in leadership, priorities, institutional structure, governance, and political communication or forms of citizen participation. This change can take place in the following ways: by elections, by reform, by crisis, by protest movements, by administrative organization, and by public expectation changes. The social impact of institutional change is tied to citizens' perceptions of fairness, responsiveness and inclusion as well as the magnitude of the change. Political change can enhance legitimacy by making decisions more accountable and more representative, but it can also contribute to uncertainty when it seems to be opaque or uneven. In transition times, there is also a strong link between governance capacity and legitimacy (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2020).

2.2 Public Trust

Public trust is the citizens' trust in governments, institutions, and public authorities that they will do their job

competently, fairly, honestly, and in the public interest. It is distinct from interpersonal trust between people, and extends to trust of leaders, administrative agencies, the courts, experts, and political processes. Responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness and perceived fairness are all factors of institutional trust. These dimensions have effects on the citizens' willingness to accept decisions and cooperate with public programmes. International research findings indicate that citizens' trust levels are deeply tied to their perceptions of how responsive the government is, and how involved they feel in public life (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022).

2.3 Contemporary Social Relations

The contemporary social relations are the forms of cooperation, interaction, solidarity, conflict, and participation between persons, communities, social groups and public institutions. Social cohesion, civic engagement, community involvement, intergroup contact, polarization and citizen–state interaction are all indicators of these relations. Trust promotes social coordination by making people feel that they can trust others to act responsibly and in a reciprocal manner. It is shaped by personal experiences, institutional performance, social norms and perceptions of fairness. Experimental studies have revealed that both personal and social factors influence trust, and that trust is crucial for pro-social behaviours and collective relationships (Murtin et al., 2018). A summary of the main concepts analyzed and their related social implications are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Conceptual Dimensions of Political Change, Public Trust, and Social Relations

Core concept	Meaning in the article	Principal dimensions	Expected social consequences
Political change	Alterations in political leadership, policies, institutions, governance practices, communication, and citizen participation	Elections, reforms, crises, protest movements, administrative restructuring, policy shifts	Greater legitimacy when change is inclusive and accountable; uncertainty and alienation when change is opaque or exclusionary
Public trust	Citizens' confidence that governments and public institutions will act competently, fairly, honestly, and responsibly	Competence, reliability, integrity, openness, responsiveness, fairness	Policy acceptance, institutional cooperation, civic participation, and voluntary compliance
Contemporary social relations	Patterns of cooperation, interaction, solidarity, conflict, and participation connecting citizens, groups, and institutions	Social cohesion, civic engagement, community participation, intergroup relations, polarization, citizen–state relations	Cooperation and solidarity under high-trust conditions; fragmentation and withdrawal under low-trust conditions
Political legitimacy	Public recognition that political authority and institutional decisions are lawful, fair, and appropriate	Procedural fairness, accountability, representation, institutional capacity	Acceptance of authority and stability of democratic institutions
Social capital	Trust, shared norms, reciprocal expectations, and social networks that facilitate collective action	Interpersonal trust, networks, reciprocity, community involvement	Resilience, cooperation, civic participation, and collective problem-solving

2.4 Theoretical Foundation

The analysis was inspired by political legitimacy theory and social capital theory. According to the political legitimacy theory, citizens adhere to authority when they believe that institutions are legitimate, just, responsive, and ensure the collective well-being. The social capital theory focuses on the importance of trust, shared norms, and social networks in fostering collaboration, community engagement, and resilience. These notions together help explain the relationship between political change and institutional confidence and how this confidence trickles down into regular social relations. Authorities' overuse of coercion, for instance, where social trust is already low, can undermine voluntary compliance, as legitimacy and social trust are vital for sustained compliance by the public (Schmelz, 2021). Figure 1 outlines the process through which political changes can affect institutional experience, public trust and broader social relations.

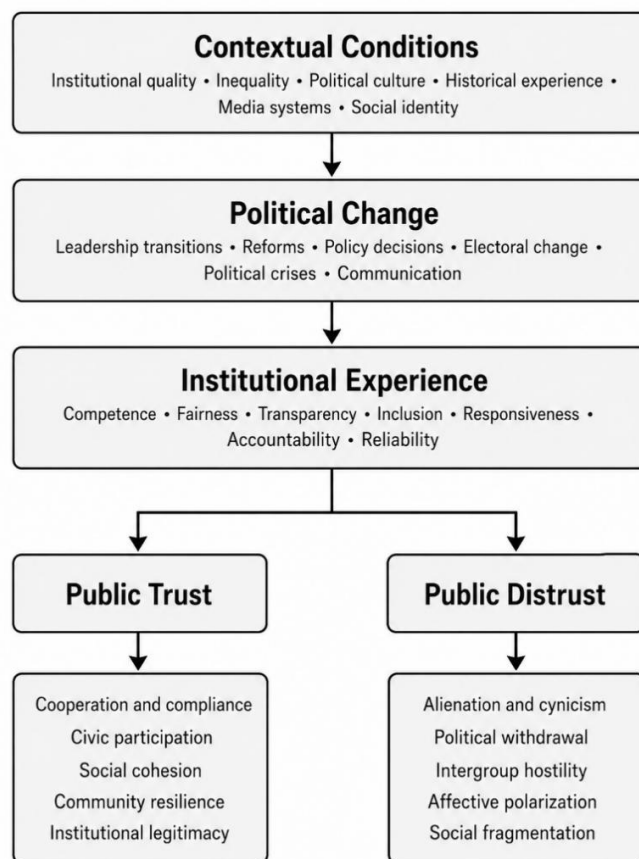


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Linking Political Change, Public Trust, and Social Relations

2. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative and comparative research design with documentary approach, which aims to study and analyze the relation among political changes, public trust and contemporary social relations. Secondary data from various national and institutional settings was analysed for patterns that emerged across the different settings as well as differences in context. This design allowed the researchers to link political shifts to shifts in institutional trust, social cohesion, civic engagement and polarization. The method of documentary was deemed to be suitable due to the investigation being based on the analysis of research findings, official records and comparison.

3.2 Sources of Evidence

The sources of the evidence were peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and chapters, official government publications, international public-trust surveys, election studies, and reports from internationally recognized social and political research institutions. Sources were prioritised from 2018 to 2025 to ensure these are up to date. Literature searches were conducted on political change, institutional legitimacy, public confidence, social trust, civic participation, social cohesion and polarization. If any numerical claims were made the original report or publication was consulted to ensure the study period, geographical setting, characteristics of the sample, and reported findings were correct.

3.3 Selection Criteria

Sources were counted if they directly studied political change, institutional or interpersonal trust, social cohesion, civic involvement, citizen–state relations or political polarization. Studies that included clearly described research methods, identifiable geographic settings, publication year, sample, and verifiable findings (qualitative or quantitative) were prioritized. Peer reviewed research and reports of reputable institutes were preferred. Articles in which the opinions contained in the text were not based on a scientific reference, material published anonymously online, duplicated and sources without methodological transparency. During screening, there were material that had unclear authorship, no statistics or data, or were not relevant to the research questions, which were also eliminated.

3.4 Method of Analysis

Thematic comparison was used for analysing the selected material manually. The arguments, findings and numbers were read many times and classified into conceptual clusters. Four main themes were created: political change and institutional confidence; trust and social cohesion; distrust and social fragmentation; and media, communication, and

political polarization. Within each theme, evidence was analysed and evaluated for similarities and differences in trends and results from the different countries, institutions and social settings. Interpretations were then associated with political legitimacy and social capital perspectives. Throughout the process, no special analytical software was utilized.

4.1 Political Change and the Formation of Public Trust

Public trust was influenced by political change, as citizens evaluated it in terms of performance, responsiveness, fairness and institutional capability. With the pandemic sometimes restrictions led to short-term rises in political support by indicating strong action by the State (Bol et al., 2021). In Sweden, it was found that trust had different levels among different institutions and that the foundations of institutional trust were not always shared with unknown people, implying that the institutional and interpersonal trust have developed along different lines (Esaiaasson et al., 2021). Government trust was also found to be increasing in Australia and New Zealand for credible and coordinated crisis management. Citizens' attitudes towards the reliability, legitimacy and ability of authorities to provide welfare more strongly influenced compliance (Bargain & Aminjonov, 2020).

4.2 Public Trust and Social Cohesion

A spirit of trust ensured social cohesion through cooperation, sharing and acceptance of collective choices. Willingness to follow guidance in national settings was a function of scientific expertise (Algan et al., 2021). During disruption, communities with more social capital were able to coordinate response, provide mutual support, and were less vulnerable (Makridis & Wu, 2021). Social connectedness also enabled individuals to act together when physical proximity was lacking, indicating that networks, norms, and reciprocal expectations could provide some level of solidarity during stress (Borgonovi & Andrieu, 2020). Trust consequently functioned as a social asset, a connection between institutional trustworthiness and community resilience, civic engagement and conflict resolution.

4.3 Political Distrust and Social Fragmentation

Distrust in politics led to deteriorating social relationships as institutional discontent combined with partisan antipathy and exclusion. There is some cross-national evidence of increasing affective polarization in some democracies, but the patterns varied across countries (Boxell et al., 2020). This polarization was magnified in online spaces, as political out-group dismissals garnered more response than neutral or conciliatory postings by the users (Rathje et al., 2021). Shared partisanship also had a positive effect on the likelihood of social ties, which lead to the formation of politically homogeneous networks and lowered interactions across party lines (Mosleh et al., 2021). The increasing mistrust led citizens to become more prone to feelings of alienation, anti-establishment sentiment, selective association, and institutional disengagement from institutions that are perceived as unresponsive or unfair.

4.4 Digital Communication as a Mediating Influence

Digital communication mediated the politics-trust-social interaction nexus, and deepened the politics while expanding participation. Seeing the other side might also lead to more polarization (Bail et al., 2018). Misinformation was spread unevenly, with a small number spreading a lot (Guess et al., 2019). Echo chambers on platforms were found to reinforce selective exposure and ideological separation (Cinelli et al., 2021). Information cascades may re-align social networks on common grounds (Tokita et al., 2021). More broadly, evidence suggested that the impact of digital media on democracy was ambivalent; while some platforms might have an impact, others might not, depending on the political context and the behaviour of users (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). Table 2 provides a synthesis of the four analytical themes, identifying the principal mechanisms and contrasting social outcomes found across the four themes.

Table 2. Thematic Synthesis of the Principal Findings

Analytical theme	Principal mechanism	Trust-enhancing outcome	Trust-reducing outcome	Representative evidence
Political change and institutional confidence	Citizens evaluated political decisions through competence, fairness, responsiveness, and crisis performance	Decisive and credible governance increased institutional confidence	Arbitrary, inconsistent, or poorly communicated decisions weakened confidence	Bol et al. (2021); Esaiaasson et al. (2021); Goldfinch et al. (2021); Bargain and Aminjonov (2020)
Public trust and social cohesion	Institutional and interpersonal trust encouraged cooperation, shared responsibility, and reciprocal behaviour	Civic participation, compliance, solidarity, and community resilience	Weak confidence reduced willingness to contribute to collective goals	Algan et al. (2021); Makridis and Wu (2021); Borgonovi and Andrieu (2020)
Political distrust and social fragmentation	Institutional dissatisfaction combined with partisan identity and out-group hostility	Critical distrust sometimes encouraged accountability and reform	Alienation, homogeneous networks, political withdrawal, and polarization	Boxell et al. (2020); Rathje et al. (2021); Mosleh et al. (2021)
Digital communication as	Platforms shaped information exposure,	Wider participation,	Misinformation, echo chambers, hostile	Bail et al. (2018); Guess et al. (2019);

a mediating influence	political engagement, and network formation	access to information, visibility for marginalized voices	engagement, and ideological separation	Cinelli et al. (2021); Tokita et al. (2021); Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023)
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5. Discussion

The results showed that citizens' perceptions of institutional competence, fairness, responsiveness, and transparency were the key drivers of public trust when considering the impact of political change. The theory of political legitimacy was useful in explaining this increase in confidence when the authorities were seen to be effective in ensuring the general welfare and a decrease in confidence when the decision-making was deemed to be arbitrary, exclusionary and poorly communicated. Political change was thus not sufficient to create the trust, but how the change was experienced and implemented. When times are tough, prompt state intervention can boost public trust in democratic institutions, at least in the short term, by fostering a feeling of “us” against “them” and “us” for “them.” The evidence from the “lockdowns” confirmed that these “rally” effects could enhance institutional trust, but that this might only be partially achieved through performance and accountability, not just through emotional unity. (Bækgaard et al., 2020).

The social capital theory also helped to explain the link between institutional trust and interpersonal relations. Citizens were more likely to cooperate with the authorities, adhere to collective rules, and engage in civic involvement when they felt public institutions were reliable. Citizens who felt public institutions were reliable were more likely to cooperate with the authorities, adhere to collective rules, and participate in civic involvement. These actions fostered reciprocity and instilled a sense of shared responsibility among others to engage in similar actions for shared objectives. Institutional trust may then also be translated into broader social relations, as it fosters solidarity, participation and conflict resolution through peaceful means. Lack of confidence in the government, on the other hand, could undermine inter-personal confidence, particularly where public institutions seemed to be biased towards specific groups or not to be doing much to control inequality. Under these conditions, political discontent may extend beyond feelings of the state to potentially transform inter-community, inter-class and inter-ideological relations.

Political change also depended upon the level of trust. Citizens' sense of legitimacy was shaped by political reforms, leadership changes, and policy decisions, though previous levels of trust shaped the citizens' reaction to new reforms, whether accepting, resisting, or viewing them with suspicion. High trust could give governments the social support needed to enact challenging changes, and low trust could result in instability, non-compliance, protest or disaffection with formal politics. Meanwhile, it did not always have to be a bad thing to be distrustful. A sense of critical distrust can lead citizens to challenge authority, seek transparency, uncover wrongdoing, and join reform movements. The democratic challenge, therefore, was not to remove distrust altogether, but to ensure that it doesn't turn into mass cynicism and social antagonism.

The impacts of political change were different depending on the quality of institutions, inequality, political culture, historical experience, and media systems. The reforms that strengthened legitimacy tended to be more inclusive, transparent and responsive to the various groups. On the other hand, reforms that increased insecurity or those that added to the marginalization of already marginalized groups could further alienate people. Digital communication added another layer by the ability of the political actors to influence the public interpretation quickly. Selective, partisan or misleading information could shape information flows that impact institutional confidence and inter-political relations, which in turn can be influenced by political elites. Elite Social Media Sharing research indicated that the political information environment could become asymmetric and for example vulnerable to poor quality or partisan disinformation (Lasser et al., 2022). The link was also cyclical; in other words, people's reactions to political change not only shaped institutional stability but also had consequences for future political change as illustrated in Figure 2.

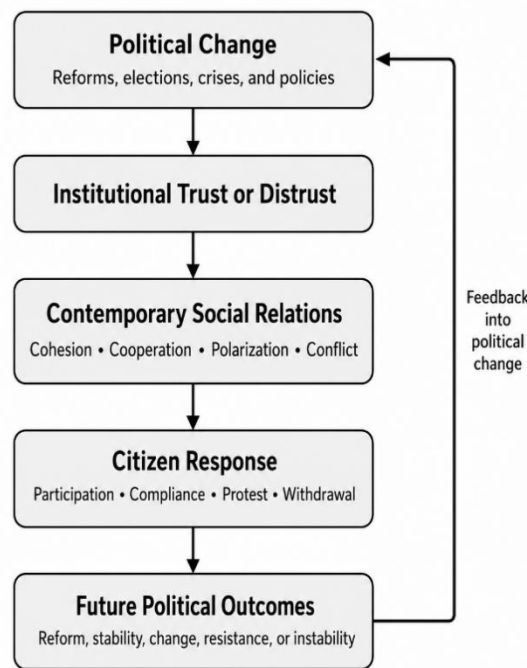


Figure 2. Reciprocal Relationship Between Political Change, Trust, and Social Relations

Overall, it was shown that public trust served as a bond between political institutions and everyday social life. It affected political support, as well as cooperation, civic engagement, social cohesion, polarization and group relations. The primary value of the work was to demonstrate that one should not only watch for political change in relation to elections, reforms or institutional gains but also in relation to its effects on the social relationships that are the foundation of democratic society.

6. Social and Policy Implications

The insights revealed significant policy implications for both governments and public institutions, as well as for civil society and digital-platform regulators. A mere symbolic assurance and communication campaign were not enough to restore public trust. It relied on the regular institutional competence, fairness, transparency and accountability. Governments therefore required to further enhance open decision-making, public access to information, independent oversight and accessible complaint processes. Citizens had a higher probability of developing trust when they knew how decisions were made, how resources were used and how officials were held accountable.

With citizen participation, it was necessary to go beyond the formal consultation. A variety of forums and processes, such as participatory forums, deliberative panels, citizens' assemblies and public hearings, might enable a wide range of individuals and groups to meaningfully participate in policy making. When inclusive, transparent and linked to decision-making practices, such mechanisms can enhance legitimacy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). Marginalised groups, youth, rural populations, language minority communities, people with disabilities and citizens in low-income groups should be involved in participation.

Clear goals, information access, inclusive representation, and clear institutional reactions were necessary for effective participation. Governments should make public statements about how public recommendations were taken on board in the decision-making process, and give reasons for withholding a recommendation. If a child does not receive this feedback, consultation may lead to increased frustration and lack of trust. They were based on participation processes that were well-designed, with clarity, integrity, accountability, inclusiveness and continuous evaluation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022).

Major policies should also be communicated in public in language accessible to the general public, explaining purpose, evidence, costs, and outcomes. Communication alone however, was not a replacement for reliable public services and for equitable implementation.

Digital governance was given the same consideration. Governments and platforms should recognize, address, and counteract harmful misinformation and amplify without removing legitimate criticism. To ensure the freedom of expression and enhance information integrity, it is necessary to ensure transparent platform rules, independent review,

Finally, long-term trust required decreasing inequality, fair access to public services, independence of institutions and increased political representation of the poor. Credible performance and citizen participation, equal treatment and consistent respect of democratic rights led to sustainable trust. The results are translated into institutional and policy measures in strengthening public trust and to minimize social fragmentation in Table 3.

Table 3. Policy Measures for Strengthening Public Trust and Social Cohesion

Identified challenge	Recommended institutional response	Expected effect on trust and social relations
Opaque decision-making	Publish decision criteria, resource-allocation procedures, and institutional responsibilities	Greater transparency, accountability, and institutional credibility
Limited citizen involvement	Use public hearings, citizens' assemblies, participatory forums, and deliberative panels	Stronger legitimacy, inclusion, and civic ownership
Tokenistic consultation	Explain how public recommendations influenced final decisions and why proposals were accepted or rejected	Reduced frustration and stronger confidence in participation
Exclusion of marginalized communities	Provide accessible venues, digital options, translation, financial assistance, and targeted outreach	Broader representation and reduced political alienation
Confusing public communication	Explain policy purposes, evidence, costs, benefits, and review procedures in accessible language	Improved understanding and reduced speculation
Misinformation and harmful amplification	Establish transparent platform rules, appeal procedures, independent review, and multistakeholder oversight	Better information integrity while protecting freedom of expression
Social and economic inequality	Ensure fair service delivery, equal treatment, inclusive representation, and institutional independence	Stronger legitimacy, social cohesion, and long-term trust

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited in several ways due to the secondary and documentary nature of the evidence used. Some of the sources reviewed did not use the same definition of public trust; some used it to measure confidence in government, others measured it based on institutions, political actors, experts, or interpersonal trust. There were differences among studies that precluded direct comparison. However, due to the influence of national history, political culture, institutional performance, and social conditions, it is not easy to make broad generalizations about trust. While the World Values Survey provided useful cross-national evidence, data from different countries could not fully reflect local experiences, minority views, or short-term changes in the political landscape within societies (Haerpfer et al., 2022).

Documentary analysis was also unable to account for all personal drivers for trust, distrust, participation or political withdrawal. The published results might have been influenced by geographic representation, as well as technological visibility: data were more readily available for established democracies, and for populations that have benefited from technology. In recent times, scholars have also noted the importance of conducting research on the phenomenon of polarization in more balanced ways, by including more underrepresented areas and contexts, outside of the Western world (Falkenberg et al., 2025).

Comparative surveys coupled with interviews, focus groups, and country-specific case studies should be focused in future research. Longitudinal designs might compare pre-election and post-election (or pre-crisis and post-crisis) or pre-reform and post-reform (or pre- or post-leadership transition) levels of trust. Rural communities, underrepresented groups, the youth, and societies under rapid political transition should be given greater consideration as well.

Conclusion

Political change is not just about institutions, it's about how citizens think about authority, how they interact with each other, and how they engage with others in collective life. The study revealed that public trust is a connecting element between political transformation and current social relations. Where governance is fair, competent, transparent, and responsive, institutional trust can help foster civic engagement, social integration, and decision acceptance. At the opposite end of the spectrum, exclusionary reforms, low accountability, unequal treatment, and communication failures can further erode trust, foster polarization and undermine ties between political and social communities. The relationship is complicated by digital media that provides even greater access to political information and allow the spread of misinformation, hostile engagement, and ideologically closed networks. Trust is thus a social resource that is not simply a result of government approval, but a product of experience, institutional performance, and opportunities for

participation. Meanwhile, a spirit of distrust can serve a positive democratic purpose by fostering checks, accountability, and reform. Achieving sustainable political legitimacy requires a balance of institutional capacity and inclusion, public dialogue and equal treatment. To enhance trust, it's essential to have the following: Cooperative and resilient political systems tend to make those conditions more likely to be reproduced, while others that fail to attend to them risk the prospect of social fragmentation and long-term alienation.

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