

PART I: RETHINKING FOUNDATIONS

Chapter 4

INSTITUTIONAL TRUST AND GOVERNANCE IN EMERGING DEMOCRACIES

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INTRODUCTION

Institutional trust is the cornerstone of effective governance and democratic consolidation. It reflects citizens' confidence in public institutions such as the legislature, judiciary, executive, media, and regulatory bodies to act transparently, fairly, and in the public interest ([Mahmud, 2024](#)). In emerging democracies where political institutions are still evolving and socioeconomic inequalities remain pronounced, the question of institutional trust becomes especially significant. Trust serves as the social glue that binds citizens to their governing structures, ensuring compliance with laws, legitimacy of authority, and cooperation in the pursuit of collective goals.

However, the process of institutionalization in many developing democracies is marked by historical legacies of colonial rule, weak bureaucratic structures, corruption, and uneven development ([Mahmud, 2024](#)). These challenges often undermine citizens' faith in governance and hinder democratic deepening. The rapid spread of digital media, social movements, and global governance norms has further complicated the relationship between citizens and institutions, producing opportunities for transparency and risks of misinformation. In this context, the study of institutional trust offers critical insights into how governance systems can adapt to new democratic expectations and crises of legitimacy ([Sommerer et al., 2022](#)). Understanding the dynamics of trust is not only central to strengthening accountability and performance but also to nurturing resilience against populist backlash, political polarization, and declining civic engagement. As emerging democracies navigate these tensions, institutional trust is a key determinant of whether governance systems can sustain both stability and inclusiveness in an era of profound change.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the intricate relationship between institutional trust and governance within the context of emerging democracies ([Yasun, 2021](#)). While much of the existing scholarship on democratic development emphasizes institutional design, electoral processes, and accountability mechanisms, less attention has been paid to the underlying trust dynamics that shape how citizens perceive and engage with governance systems. This chapter

seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how institutional trust functions as both an outcome and driver of effective governance.

By analyzing theoretical frameworks, comparative experiences, and empirical patterns across developing democracies, the chapter aims to highlight how trust deficits impact governance performance, policy implementation, and public legitimacy ([Bakhsh et al., 2025](#)). It also seeks to identify strategies through which governments can foster trust, transparency, participatory decision-making, and ethical leadership. In doing so, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the moral and institutional foundations of democratic governance in transitional contexts. Ultimately, it aspires to illuminate how strengthening institutional trust can lead to more responsive, accountable, and resilient democratic systems, which are essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development in a rapidly changing global order.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Institutional trust refers to the confidence citizens place in formal organizations such as the government, judiciary, police, media, and regulatory bodies to act competently, fairly, and in the public interest ([Lee et al., 2025](#)). This signifies a belief that institutions will uphold their mandates, follow established rules, and pursue collective welfare rather than individual or partisan gain. Unlike interpersonal trust, which is rooted in personal relationships, institutional trust is impersonal and relies on citizens' perceptions of legitimacy, transparency, and accountability. The origin of the concept can be traced to classical sociological and political thought ([Torbeeva, 2014](#)). Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy and legitimacy, Durkheim's emphasis on social cohesion, and Parsons' system theory collectively laid the foundation for understanding trust as a binding force of social order. In political science, the modern study of institutional trust emerged during the mid-20th century, particularly within the behavioral revolution, where scholars such as Easton (1965) distinguished between *diffuse* and *specific* support for political systems. This conceptual lineage evolved further through the works of Fukuyama (1995) and Putnam (1993), who linked trust to institutional performance, civic culture, and governance quality. Thus, institutional trust occupies a central position in discussions of democratic stability and developmental legitimacy.

The evolution of institutional trust as a scholarly concept mirrors broader transformations in political systems and governance practices ([Zafirovic et al., 2021](#)). In early modern political thought, trust was viewed primarily in moral or philosophical terms as a component of the social contract theories proposed by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Institutions were seen as mechanisms to ensure collective security and mediate conflicts of interest, and trust in them was considered a precondition for social order. By the 20th century, institutional trust became an empirical and normative concern, especially in post-war democracies ([Nevins, 2020](#)). The behavioral revolution in political science introduced a systematic study of citizens' attitudes toward political institutions. Easton's differentiation between "diffuse support" (long-term loyalty to the system) and "specific support" (short-term evaluation of authorities) established trust as a measurable construct within political legitimacy.

In the 1990s, the focus shifted toward governance and performance-oriented interpretations ([Chenou, 2014](#)). Scholars such as Putnam (1993) and Fukuyama (1995) have argued that

institutional trust depends on networks of civic engagement and the effectiveness of public institutions. The rise of neoliberal reforms, decentralization, and new public management further broadened the concept, linking it to transparency, accountability, and citizen participation.

In emerging democracies, institutional trust has evolved as both a cause and consequence of democratization ([Kawanaka & Hazama, 2016](#)). Initially imported as a Western normative model, trust now reflects contextual realities such as ethnic diversity, state capacity, corruption, and informal governance practices. Recent scholarship recognizes institutional trust not merely as a belief in authority but as a dynamic, negotiated relationship between citizens and institutions shaped by historical experience, performance, and perceived fairness. This shift marks a movement from trust as a static attitude to trust as a process, making it central to the study of governance in transitional societies.

Institutional trust overlaps with, yet remains distinct from, several related concepts such as social trust, legitimacy, confidence, and accountability each highlighting different dimensions of the relationship between citizens and institutions. Social trust refers to the general belief in the reliability and goodwill of others in society ([Dorrington & Schulz-Herzenberg, 2024](#)). It forms the cultural foundation upon which institutional trust is built. High social trust environments tend to foster institutional trust because citizens are more likely to project interpersonal reliability onto such institutions. However, the two are not identical; institutional trust can exist even in low-trust societies if institutions perform efficiently and predictably.

Legitimacy denotes the normative acceptance of authority, that is, the belief that institutions have the right to govern. While legitimacy justifies institutional power, trust motivates compliance and cooperation among the public. Thus, trust is the emotional or cognitive counterpart of legitimacy, converting acceptance into willing engagement. Confidence is another proximate term often used interchangeably, but with subtle distinctions. Confidence arises from past performance and predictability, whereas trust implies vulnerability and moral expectations. Citizens may have confidence in a well-functioning bureaucracy but withhold their trust if they doubt its ethical orientation.

Finally, accountability functions as a mechanism for sustaining trust. Transparent processes, oversight mechanisms, and responsiveness allow citizens to monitor and evaluate institutions, thereby reinforcing or eroding trust ([Arshad & Khurram, 2020](#)). In emerging democracies, where institutional frameworks are still consolidating, distinguishing between these concepts is crucial. Institutional trust acts as both a barometer and a catalyst: it signals public evaluation of governance quality and simultaneously enables institutions to function effectively by securing citizen cooperation. Understanding these distinctions helps clarify why rebuilding institutional trust is not merely about performance but about nurturing legitimacy, fairness, and civic engagement.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Institutional trust, as a foundational element of governance, draws on multiple theoretical traditions that illuminate how legitimacy, accountability, and citizen confidence sustain democratic institutions ([Castillo & Hamman, 2020](#)). At the heart of this discussion lies the social

contract tradition, which posits that the legitimacy of governance depends on the consent and trust of those governed. Thinkers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized that institutions derive their authority from the collective will, and when they fail to embody the public interest, trust erodes and governance becomes unstable. In emerging democracies, where institutions are still consolidating, this contract is fragile; trust is not inherited but must be continually earned through transparent and equitable governance.

Institutional theory provides a key analytical framework for understanding how formal and informal structures shape trust ([Balzano et al., 2024](#)). According to institutional theorists such as Douglass North and James March and Johan Olsen, institutions are “rules of the game” that reduce uncertainty and stabilize expectations. Trust develops when institutions behave predictably, enforce rules impartially, and deliver outcomes that are consistent with societal norms. When corruption, clientelism, or inefficiency distorts these institutional patterns, trust diminishes. North’s distinction between formal institutions (laws, constitutions) and informal norms (values, customs) is particularly relevant to emerging democracies, where informal power networks often compete with formal governance structures.

Complementing institutional theory, governance theory especially its evolution from government to “governance” stresses the plurality of actors involved in policy-making. Theories by Rhodes (1996) and Pierre & Peters (2000) describe governance as a web of interdependence between state, market, and civil society ([Steen-Johnsen et al., 2011](#)). In this view, trust is not only vertically oriented (citizen–state) but also horizontally distributed among networks of actors. Emerging democracies often rely on such multilevel governance arrangements to compensate for weak bureaucratic capacity. Therefore, institutional trust extends beyond faith in state agencies to include confidence in broader governance ecosystems, such as NGOs, the media, the judiciary, and private sector regulation.

Another theoretical pillar is the social capital theory popularized by Putnam. Social capital refers to networks, norms, and trust that facilitate collective action ([Leuenberger & Reed, 2015](#)). Putnam’s (1993) comparative work on Italian regions demonstrated that institutional performance and citizen trust reinforce each other, and communities rich in social capital exhibit higher levels of institutional effectiveness. In emerging democracies, this dynamic is crucial; trust is both an outcome and a driver of democratic consolidation. High interpersonal trust can translate into institutional trust, provided that institutions behave consistently with social expectations.

Lastly, rational choice and game theory perspectives emphasize the role of trust as a mechanism for reducing transaction costs and enabling cooperation under uncertainty ([Deng et al., 2020](#)). From this viewpoint, citizens trust institutions when they believe that others will also comply with the rules and that defection will be sanctioned. In nascent democracies, where enforcement mechanisms are weak, trust functions as an informal guarantor of social contracts, encouraging participation, even when formal incentives are limited. Together, these theoretical frameworks social contract, institutional, governance, social capital, and rational choice provide a multi-layered understanding of how trust operates within governance systems ([Cook et al., 2017](#)). They highlight that trust is both a normative ideal and a functional necessity: it legitimizes authority, sustains cooperation, and ensures accountability in the face of complexity and change.

While the dominant theories converge on the significance of trust, they diverge in terms of its origins, mechanisms, and consequences. Institutionalist and social capital approaches often emphasize cultural and historical continuity, suggesting that trust is “path-dependent.” ([Sun et al., 2018](#)) Societies with long histories of civic engagement and stable institutions such as those in Western Europe tend to sustain higher trust levels. Critics argue that this framework risks determinism and underestimates the agency of citizens and the possibility of rapid institutional reform in emerging democracies.

In contrast, rationalist perspectives treat trust as instrumental and contingent on the performance of institutions. Citizens evaluate trustworthiness based on outputs such as service delivery, corruption control, and procedural fairness ([Nonami et al., 2015](#)). This view, rooted in performance legitimacy, implies that even new or transitional democracies can build trust rapidly through effective governance. However, it overlooks deeper structural inequalities and the symbolic aspects of trust such as identity, inclusion, and recognition that shape citizens’ perceptions. Critical and postcolonial perspectives further challenge mainstream theories by arguing that institutional trust cannot be abstracted from power relations ([Gordon, 2025](#)). Emerging democracies often operate under the legacies of colonial rule and global economic dependency, which shape institutional design and citizen attitudes. From this perspective, trust is not neutral but entangled with historical exclusion, elite capture, and epistemic hierarchies. Thus, governance reform must be contextual and address both the structural and psychological dimensions of trust.

Finally, network and deliberative democracy theories offer a complementary perspective by emphasizing communicative processes ([Doskhozina, 2024](#)). They suggest that transparency, participation, and deliberation cultivate trust by enabling citizens to see institutions as responsive and inclusive. These frameworks bridge the gap between top-down institutional design and bottom-up civic engagement, highlighting trust as a co-produced outcome of democratic interaction, rather than a static attribute. This chapter adopts a synthetic institutional–social capital lens to analyze institutional trust and governance in emerging democracies. This choice rests on three key reasons ([Kawanaka & Hazama, 2016](#)). First, institutional theory provides a structural understanding of how rules, norms, and organizations shape trust. This explains why certain institutional arrangements such as independent judiciaries, transparent bureaucracies, and accountable parliaments foster confidence, while others erode it. However, institutions alone cannot sustain their legitimacy without social foundations. Social capital theory complements institutionalism by illuminating the cultural and relational aspects of trust. Trust is not merely a product of institutional performance but a reflection of shared norms, civic networks and public communication.

Second, this combined framework allows for a dynamic interpretation of emerging democracies, where institutions and social attitudes co-evolve ([Hadland, 2015](#)). Institutional reforms anti-corruption laws, decentralization, and e-governance may enhance trust only when embedded in participatory civic contexts. Similarly, high social capital can pressure institutions to be more accountable, creating a virtuous cycle of trust building. This reciprocity aligns with the book’s developmental focus, positioning trust not as a static variable but as a process of democratic deepening.

Third, adopting this theoretical lens enables a context-sensitive analysis that bridges normative ideals and empirical realities ([Tobin et al., 2024](#)). Emerging democracies are marked by institutional hybridity, wherein formal democratic structures coexist with informal networks of patronage, kinship, and ethnicity. The institutional–social capital approach accommodates this complexity by recognizing both formal legitimacy and informal social trust as co-constitutive of governance outcomes. In summary, this theoretical synthesis offers a robust foundation for examining institutional trust in emerging democracies. It connects governance performance with civic culture, structural design with social interaction, and local contexts with global democratic theory, thereby providing an integrated lens for rethinking development through the prism of trust and institutional integrity.

DEBATES, GAPS, AND THEORETICAL CHALLENGES

Institutional trust occupies a paradoxical position in emerging democracies: it is both a *precondition* and a *product* of democratic consolidation ([Umar & Tambai, 2020](#)). Scholars debate whether trust should be viewed as an outcome of good governance or as a cultural foundation that precedes institutional performance. On one side, institutionalists argue that trust develops from effective and accountable governance practices, such as transparent procedures, rule of law, and responsiveness. Conversely, cultural theorists suggest that trust stems from deeper societal values, norms, and historical legacies that shape citizens' orientations toward authority and institutions.

Another tension concerns the *universal versus contextual* understanding of trust ([Wiberg, 2014](#)). Western liberal democracies often serve as benchmarks for measuring institutional trust; however, such models fail to account for the sociopolitical specificities of emerging democracies, where informal networks, clientelism, and patronage play crucial roles in shaping political legitimacy. This raises questions about whether “trust” should be conceptualized similarly across various political cultures.

Further debate has arisen regarding *performance legitimacy* versus *procedural legitimacy*. Many emerging democracies witness citizens placing trust in institutions that deliver economic growth or welfare benefits even when democratic procedures are weak ([Cozza, 2024](#)). This utilitarian trust often coexists uneasily with democratic norms, creating tensions between efficiency and accountability issues. The rapid diffusion of digital governance adds another dimension, as citizens increasingly evaluate institutions based on transparency and online accessibility rather than traditional political mediation. Thus, debates on institutional trust reveal a dynamic tension between structure and agency, universalism and contextualism, and performance and process. These unresolved controversies shape how scholars and policymakers interpret the evolving trust-governance nexus in emerging democratic contexts.

Critical perspectives challenge mainstream conceptions of institutional trust that privilege stability and compliance over contestation and transformation ([Abdul Kadir, 2021](#)). Postcolonial and critical institutional theorists argue that the idea of “trust in institutions” often conceals asymmetrical power relations and legitimizes existing hierarchies. From this perspective, calls for enhancing institutional trust can sometimes serve to discipline dissent or depoliticize

governance by framing citizens' skepticism as a problem rather than a legitimate response to structural injustices.

Feminist and intersectional approaches highlight that institutional trust is not evenly distributed across social groups ([Gordon, 2025](#)). Marginalized communities, women, minorities, and indigenous groups experience state institutions differently because of systemic biases embedded within legal, bureaucratic, and political structures. For them, distrust may reflect not civic disengagement but a critical awareness of exclusion and exploitation. Hence, trust and distrust should be seen as co-constitutive rather than oppositional; distrust can foster accountability, resistance, and democratic renewal. Critical governance scholars also interrogate the neoliberal framing of trust, which reduces it to an individual's confidence in market-like institutions ([Zelič, 2020](#)). This perspective overlooks the collective, relational, and moral dimensions of trust that underpins civic solidarity. Moreover, the digital transformation of governance through algorithmic decision-making and data-driven public services raises concerns about *algorithmic trust*. Citizens may trust technologies or digital platforms while distrusting the political institutions that deploy them, further complicating the trust matrix.

Therefore, critical perspectives call for rethinking institutional trust as a dynamic and negotiated process rather than a static variable. They urge scholars to situate trust within broader struggles over legitimacy, representation, and justice, especially in societies where democratization remains incomplete or uneven. This reorientation moves the debate from "how to build trust" to "whose trust is valued, and at what cost." Despite the expanding literature on institutional trust, several conceptual and empirical gaps remain, particularly concerning emerging democracies ([Hagopian, 2009](#)). First, much research still relies on survey-based quantitative approaches that measure generalized trust using standardized indices. These methods often overlook the context-specific meanings of trust, informal governance mechanisms, and historical trajectories that shape citizen-state relations. Consequently, trust is frequently treated as a measurable outcome rather than a complex, evolving process embedded in the political culture and everyday experience.

Second, there is limited exploration of *inter-institutional trust*—how trust in one institution (e.g., judiciary) influences trust in others (e.g., legislature, police, or media) ([Wille & Martill, 2023](#)). This gap is significant in emerging democracies, where institutional interdependence and overlapping mandates often blur the boundaries of accountability. Understanding these cross-institutional dynamics provides deeper insights into the systemic nature of democratic trust. Third, the literature inadequately addresses *digital-era transformations* ([Sreedhar et al., 2024](#)). The rise of e-governance, social media, and AI-driven policy tools has reconfigured citizens' perceptions of institutional transparency and credibility. However, studies on digital trust remain fragmented, often focusing on technology adoption rather than its political implications for legitimacy and participation.

Finally, normative gaps persist regarding *trust asymmetries*, specifically why certain social groups continue to distrust institutions even when performance indicators improve. Bridging this gap requires integrating sociological, anthropological, and psychological insights into political analysis to understand the affective and identity-based dimensions of trust. In summary, future research must move beyond linear models of institutional trust to embrace multi-level,

interdisciplinary, and context-sensitive frameworks. Only through such approaches can we capture the lived realities, contradictions, and possibilities of trust-based governance in the fluid terrain of emerging democracies.

APPLICATION OR ILLUSTRATION

India offers a compelling case study for examining the interplay between institutional trust and governance in an emerging democracy ([Martí et al., 2025](#)). As the world's largest democracy, India's governance model is characterized by a complex institutional network legislature, executive, judiciary, and election bodies each designed to ensure accountability and citizen participation in the political process. However, the level of public trust in these institutions has fluctuated significantly over time. Empirical surveys such as the Lokniti-CSDS and Pew Research studies indicate that while Indians generally express faith in democratic ideals, their trust in specific institutions particularly political parties, bureaucracy, and law enforcement has shown decline ([Yamaguchi & Yahagi, 2023](#)). Corruption scandals, policy paralysis, and bureaucratic opacity have periodically eroded public confidence. At the same time, the judiciary and the Election Commission continue to enjoy relatively high legitimacy, highlighting the differentiated nature of institutional trust.

The Digital India initiative illustrates the duality of governance reform ([Bachelard, 2013](#)). On the one hand, digital platforms, such as the Aadhaar-based service delivery system, have enhanced efficiency and reduced leakages, promoting transparency. However, concerns over privacy, data misuse, and algorithmic bias have raised new questions regarding trust in state-led technological governance. Thus, India's case reveals that institutional trust is neither static nor uniform; it evolves through dynamic negotiations between citizens, institutions, and technology. The legitimacy of governance in emerging democracies depends less on formal institutional design and more on the perceived fairness, responsiveness, and inclusiveness of state action.

The theoretical significance of institutional trust in emerging democracies lies in its role as a mediating variable between institutional performance and democratic legitimacy ([Clayton et al., 2018](#)). Traditional models of governance, particularly those derived from liberal institutionalism, assume that well-designed institutions automatically generate public trust. However, in transitional or postcolonial democracies, this relationship is often nonlinear and contingent upon sociohistorical and cultural factors. Recent scholarship emphasizes the idea of “relational trust” trust built through ongoing interactions between citizens and institutions rather than blind or procedural faith ([Barbabela, 2024](#)). Thus, trust is performative: it is sustained when institutions demonstrate predictability, integrity, and inclusivity in governance practices. In this sense, trust functions as a form of social capital that enables cooperative behavior and compliance with governance norms.

Moreover, institutional trust is inseparable from institutional resilience, which is the capacity of institutions to adapt, self-correct, and maintain legitimacy amid crises. In emerging democracies, where institutions are often young, politicized, or under strain, resilience depends on their ability to mediate conflicts and deliver equity. Hence, trust operates as both a diagnostic and a constitutive dimension of governance quality.

The theoretical implication is clear: fostering institutional trust is not merely a normative ideal but a developmental necessity ([Gordon, 2025](#)). It sustains the feedback loop between citizen expectations and institutional accountability, anchoring the democratic consolidation. By understanding trust as a dynamic, co-produced process, scholars and policymakers can move beyond technocratic governance models toward frameworks that privilege participation, transparency, and justice, the foundational pillars of sustainable democratic governance.

CONTRIBUTION AND INNOVATION

This chapter contributes a new lens to the study of governance by situating *institutional trust* as both a precondition and a dynamic outcome of democratization in emerging democracies ([Akpojivi, 2018](#)). While the existing literature has largely emphasized institutional capacity, procedural legitimacy, or anti-corruption frameworks, this study foregrounds trust as an epistemic and relational category that connects state institutions with citizens' lived experiences of governance. Rather than treating trust as a passive public sentiment, this chapter conceptualizes it as a socially produced and politically mediated process that evolves through interactions between formal rules, informal norms, and performance legitimacy.

In emerging democracies, where state institutions often inherit colonial legacies, uneven development, and fragmented social capital, the formation of institutional trust cannot be explained merely through efficiency or transparency metrics ([Bondarenko et al., 2023](#)). This chapter introduces a *context-sensitive understanding* of trust, emphasizing embeddedness, reciprocity, and moral credibility as crucial dimensions. It also extends the debate by highlighting the *temporal fluidity* of trust—how citizens' confidence in institutions fluctuates across political transitions, crises, or reforms. Moreover, the chapter brings innovation by integrating insights from developmental governance, institutional economics, and political sociology, proposing that institutional trust is not only a moral resource but also a developmental asset ([Mutari, 2021](#)). It shapes compliance, cooperation, and policy uptake factors that are essential for sustainable democratic consolidation. The new perspective offered here challenges the dichotomy between governance and legitimacy, suggesting that *trust is the invisible infrastructure* upon which both institutional performance and democratic resilience depend.

The central proposition of this chapter is that institutional trust functions as the connective tissue linking governance quality with democratic sustainability in emerging democracies ([Fosu & Ufuoma, 2013](#)). Through this synthesis, this chapter offers an integrative framework that unites three key dimensions: *institutional performance*, *citizen engagement*, and *normative legitimacy*. When these elements align, trust becomes self-reinforcing, enhancing the credibility of governance institutions and deepening democratic participation. However, when this alignment breaks down due to corruption, exclusion, or unresponsive bureaucracy, trust erodes, and governance enters a cycle of fragility. This proposition advances a “trust-based model of governance”, which argues that developmental progress in emerging democracies depends not only on institutional design but also on the *ethical and relational quality* of state-society interactions ([Yasun, 2021](#)). The model suggests that rebuilding institutional trust requires multidimensional strategies: strengthening procedural fairness, promoting transparency, ensuring equitable access to justice and welfare, and cultivating civic education that empowers citizens to critically engage with rather than disengage from institutions.

By synthesizing diverse strands of theory from Putnam's social capital thesis to Fukuyama's institutionalism and contemporary decolonial critiques the chapter constructs an interdisciplinary narrative that redefines governance as *a moral project of mutual accountability*. This suggests that fostering institutional trust is not merely a governance reform but a democratic imperative, particularly for states navigating postcolonial inequalities and global economic pressures. Ultimately, this section posits that trust and governance are co-constitutive: effective governance builds trust, and trust, in turn, sustains it. Recognizing this recursive relationship opens new pathways for policy design, comparative research, and institutional innovation aimed at enhancing the legitimacy and developmental effectiveness of emerging democracies.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The analysis of institutional trust in emerging democracies underscores the dynamic interplay between legitimacy, performance, and participation as co-constitutive elements of governance ([Martí et al., 2025](#)). Theoretically, this challenges linear models that view trust as a by-product of institutional performance alone. Instead, trust must be conceptualized as both a normative expectation and a relational construct embedded within the socio-political fabric. In contexts of democratic transition, trust operates not merely as a reflection of institutional capacity but as a *condition of possibility* for consolidating democratic norms. This calls for the integration of insights from political sociology, behavioral institutionalism, and deliberative democracy theories. Furthermore, it highlights the need to reconceptualize governance not only in terms of efficiency and accountability, but also in terms of reciprocity, inclusiveness, and moral legitimacy. The theoretical implication is clear: institutional trust is neither static nor uniform but an evolving phenomenon shaped by historical legacies, cultural orientations, and power asymmetries. Future theorization must therefore locate trust within multi-scalar frameworks that connect micro-level citizen experiences with macro-level institutional structures, offering a more holistic understanding of governance in fluid democratic contexts.

Future research on institutional trust in emerging democracies should move beyond descriptive analyses toward more comparative, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary studies ([Kawanaka & Hazama, 2016](#)). There is a pressing need to explore how trust trajectories evolve during phases of political instability, economic reform, or crises such as pandemics and climate emergencies. Empirical studies can examine how digital governance, social media discourse, and transparency initiatives reshape public perceptions of institutions. Comparative inquiries across regions such as South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America can reveal how cultural and historical variations mediate trust formation. Moreover, research must attend to intersectional inequalities gender, caste, ethnicity, and class that influence citizens' experiences with governance institutions. Mixed-method approaches combining quantitative trust surveys with ethnographic or participatory research can capture the nuanced, context-dependent character of institutional confidence. The evolving relationship between state institutions and non-state actors civil society, private sector, and transnational agencies also provides fertile ground for inquiry. Ultimately, future research should aim to articulate a context-sensitive model of institutional trust, capable of explaining both resilience and fragility in democratic governance.

From a practical perspective, understanding institutional trust has direct implications for governance reform, policy design, and civic engagement strategies in emerging democracies ([Kawanaka & Hazama, 2016](#)). Policymakers must recognize that trust cannot be manufactured solely through institutional performance indicators or transparency mechanisms; it requires sustained dialogue, inclusion, and responsiveness. Strengthening participatory institutions such as local councils, grievance redressal systems, and deliberative forums can build reciprocal trust between citizens and the state. Public communication strategies that emphasize honesty over propaganda, and accountability over symbolic gestures, are crucial for reinforcing legitimacy. Additionally, digital governance initiatives must be guided by ethical and equitable frameworks to prevent exclusion or surveillance-driven mistrust. For practitioners, this means embedding trust-building measures into administrative training, policy evaluation, and governance innovation. Development partners and international organizations should also tailor interventions to local trust ecologies rather than imposing technocratic models. In essence, institutional trust functions as both an outcome and a precondition of effective governance its cultivation is therefore central to sustaining democratic transformation and inclusive development in the global South.

CONCLUSION

Institutional trust is a foundational element for the legitimacy and stability of governance in emerging democracies ([Dellmuth et al., 2022](#)). This chapter has explored how trust functions not merely as a psychological disposition but as a social contract that links citizens, institutions, and the broader democratic project. In societies undergoing democratic consolidation, trust is both an outcome of institutional performance and a precondition for its sustainability. Weak or inconsistent governance, corruption, and social inequalities can erode public confidence, while transparency, accountability, and participatory mechanisms can rebuild it. The discussion has highlighted that institutional trust is shaped by a complex interplay between formal institutions such as the judiciary, legislature, and bureaucracy and informal norms like civic culture and social capital. Emerging democracies face the dual challenge of institutionalizing good governance practices while managing citizen expectations in contexts of rapid socio-economic change ([Grilli et al., 2018](#)). Thus, building trust requires not only procedural reforms but also normative commitments to inclusion, fairness, and justice.

This chapter's contribution lies in reframing institutional trust as both a developmental and democratic imperative ([Gordon, 2025](#)). Trust in governance institutions strengthens policy compliance, encourages civic participation, and enhances the effectiveness of developmental interventions. Conversely, mistrust can foster disengagement, populism, and institutional decay. Therefore, strengthening trust is not merely a governance goal but a transformative process that anchors democracy within the lived experiences of citizens. In conclusion, the path toward resilient governance in emerging democracies depends on continuous dialogue between the state and society. Institutional trust must be cultivated through responsiveness, ethical leadership, and participatory frameworks that uphold the dignity and agency of citizens. Only then can governance transcend procedural efficiency to embody the moral and developmental aspirations of democracy itself.

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