

# Determinants of Citizen Trust in Public Institutions in Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

*Institutional trust is an essential indicator in the governance mechanism involving citizens' confidence in public institutions. The article main goal is to shed light on the theoretical insights into the field of trust in public institutions and what determines the degree of citizen trust in public institutions in Bangladesh. Methodologically, the article is a content analysis involving a literature review of vast secondary materials on books, journals, and websites regarding institutional trust which has been used, interpreted, and reinterpreted to validate the arguments. The article presents an analysis that cultural variables have the strongest overall effect on variations in citizens' trust in public institutions in Bangladesh than institutional or performance variables. Social capital and authoritarianism tend to override the service satisfaction and quality of government variables in determining the trust level in public institutions in Bangladesh.*

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, institutional trust, social capital, authoritarianism, quality of government, public institutions

## Introduction

Citizen trust in public institutions has been a significant concern for scholars in the fields of public administration and political science for many years (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2017). Scholars have increasingly expressed concern about several facets of citizen trust in government and its potential impact on the governance process of societies (Bouckaert, 2012; Mizrahi et al., 2020). The study of trust focuses on evaluating the level of confidence that citizens have toward their public institutions in meeting their expectations (Wang, 2016). In developing countries, such as Bangladesh the public sectors are substantial and have historically

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played a crucial role in delivering fundamental services such as education, healthcare, infrastructure development, law enforcement, and more (Jamil & Askvik, 2015). Citizens' contentment with the performance of public institutions such as bureaucracy, police, parliament, and local government organizations is reflected in the level of trust they have in the government (Van De Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). Citizen trust in government simply refers to the degree of confidence people have in their public institutions' ability to fulfill their needs and aspirations (Miller, 1974).

Why is the concept of trust in government important in the governance mechanism? Is it essential for citizens to bestow their trust in the public agencies of their country? Fukuyama (1995) examines the issue of poor trust among South Koreans and its connection to societal cost and inefficiency inside the country. The lack of trust in the government and other public agencies negatively affects policy development and implementation. This includes a failure to comply with policies and a resistance to accepting changes in government policies (Holzer, 2004). The adoption of organizational and people management practices can improve government policies and the effectiveness of policy enforcement. However, the influence of these policies will be diminished if there is a lack of trust among citizens (Jeong & Han, 2020). On the contrary, having confidence in political institutions motivates citizens to fulfill their tax obligations and endorse reforms that may involve immediate sacrifices but offer long-term advantages (Mingo & Faggiano, 2020).

The COVID-19 epidemic has led to significant instances of distrust in government. The importance of public trust in government lies in its ability to gauge the level of adherence to public order and the government's responsiveness to the requirements of the people (Islam et al., 2023; Jimenez & Iyer, 2016). Effective trust-building in public authority requires meticulous planning and preparation for unforeseen and unfamiliar circumstances, adeptly managing uncertainty and ambiguity, promptly addressing pressing concerns, and meeting the wants and expectations of residents (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). The government's level of responsiveness to socio-economic issues, health-related initiatives, and service provisions for citizens during the coronavirus outbreak was a significant concern in South Asian nations such as Bangladesh (Mia & Griffiths, 2022). Thus, Baniamin (2019) emphasized that it is important to consider the level of trust in the government when assessing the effects of COVID-19-related government performance and success.

## **Rationale of the Study and Problem Statement**

Public institutions in both developed and developing countries need to establish trustworthy relationships with social actors and citizens to effectively manage and respond to the impacts of globalization, economic growth, and the democratization process (Jamil & Askvik, 2016). This is essential for gaining legitimacy and forming partnerships to implement public policies successfully. The level of trust portrays the legitimacy and democratic features present in the public agencies of the country. The legitimacy of public institutions fosters compliance among citizens, prompting them to follow the decisions made by these institutions and act in accordance with the policies implemented, without resorting to pressure or force (Bouckaert & Van De Walle, 2003). Legitimacy is easily accomplished when citizens have confidence in the government and their elected officials (Blind, 2007). Trust in government arises when citizens adhere to official decisions even in the absence of adequate knowledge, based on the belief that those decisions are lawful and safeguard their interests (Kim, 2005).

Trust in government is essential for the successful functioning of democratic governance. According to Easton (1965), the democratic legitimacy of a country's political system is contingent upon the level of trust that the public or citizens have in their government to consistently act in their best interests. For a democratic government to cultivate support for the regime, citizens need to have confidence in public institutions (Gamson, 1968). According to Wang (2016), political trust is crucial for both democratic governments and authoritarian regimes. Trust in government is crucial for the effective operation of democratic institutions in a democratic society. In contrast, under authoritarian regimes, political trust indicates the extent to which these regimes maintain their grip on power, even if that trust involves asymmetrical bias, where citizens are predicted to be more trusting of the authorities than is warranted by the objective evidence of their performance (Norris, 2022; Wang et al., 2006).

## **Methodology of the Study**

This qualitative research has been conducted through a secondary source of data. Secondary data is the data that has been already collected and analyzed by someone and is readily available for use (Kothari, 2004).

For this study, secondary data and information have been collected mainly from books, journals, articles, reports, newspapers, and internet sources. For this study, in-depth theoretical literature has been reviewed.

### **What Fosters Citizens' Trust in Public Institutions?**

Studies have explained the process by which trust in government is generated and erodes in Western countries (Ma & Wang, 2014). In stable democracies, high levels of political trust are typically linked to the performance of the government rather than cultural and societal attitudes (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Norris (1999) argues that the rise of critical citizens in advanced societies results in the decline of political support, whereas Putnam (2000), relates this loss to the reduction of social capital. Research has examined the correlation between trust and authoritarianism in East Asian societies (Ma & Yang, 2014). Can these explanations, which are derived from Western or European and East Asian countries, be easily applied to other countries such as Bangladesh?

Citizens' evaluation of the government's economic and political performance is closely linked to their level of trust in the government (Espinol et al., 2006; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Norris, 2022). When governmental agencies promote economic growth by guaranteeing employment opportunities for the unemployed, assuring access to education for impoverished individuals, and delivering high-quality public services to citizens, it is reasonable for citizens to place their trust in their government. Citizens' trust can be understood by looking into how the public personnel of government institutions carry out their duties in providing services to the people in general (Jamil & Askvik, 2016). Kim (2005) suggests that a greater level of trust among citizens in public institutions is likely to lead to effective governance and the successful execution of public programs. To properly manage public affairs, it is crucial to consider justice, institutional quality, and performance as key factors (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005). The quality of governance, marked by impartiality, commitment to the rule of law, integrity, and efficiency of the members of the institutions, has a crucial impact on establishing and sustaining trust in public agencies. When individuals think that their government functions honestly and upholds their welfare, they are more inclined to trust and endorse those institutions.

The nature of public institutions in countries like Bangladesh, involving favoritism and discrimination allows citizens to be deprived of basic public

services (Jamil & Askvik, 2016). Meyer-Sahling et al. (2021) find evidence of a pattern of politicization in civil service recruitment and promotion in Bangladesh. A situation such as this is likely to generate distrust in public institutions (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Now, despite the quest for good governance and better-quality public institutions, there has been evidence of high institutional trust in Bangladesh (Baniamin, 2019; Jamil & Askvik, 2015; Mahmud, 2021). What may be the reason for such inconsistency? Does the quality of government involving impartiality and integrity not affect the trust in government in these countries? The article aims to discuss the inconsistency.

While citizens are generally quite efficient at evaluating the performance of several public services they use, their knowledge of what certain specific public agencies or even government in general do, is not always reliable (Van De Walle et al., 2008). Norris (2022) provided evidence of errors in the judgment by citizens in evaluating their works of government, sometimes underestimating or overestimating the actions of public agencies.

Now, an explanation of higher institutional trust in under-performing countries involves understanding differences in cultural perspective (Baniamin, 2019). A cultural dimension that is used to explain institutional trust is social capital (Putnam, 2001). Social capital issues like interpersonal relationships involving patron-client relationships result in a sense of trust or distrust in institutions. Individual associationism or socialization experiences influence the level of trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001). According to Haque and Mohammad (2013) in high-power distance countries, where citizens accept and expect that power and authority would be exercised unequally among citizens, like Bangladesh, there is a perpetual dependency on powerful members of society and portraying allegiance to that authoritarian culture, which may foster trust.

### **Theoretical Understanding of Trust in Public Institutions**

The theoretical basis of this research mainly revolves around the conceptual understanding of trust in government. Two schools of thought illuminate the drivers of trust and trustworthiness in government, one is the *performance approach*, and the other is the *sociological approach* (Baniamin et al., 2020; Christensen & Lægreid, 2003; Jamil & Askvik, 2015; Ma & Yang, 2014; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Norris, 2022; Putnam, 2001).

### *Performance Approach*

The performance approach is premised on the idea that trust in government emerges from the citizens when the public institutions perform according to the expectations of the citizens (Mahmud, 2017). The approach highlights the significance of governmental performance in fostering trust and satisfaction among citizens. The performance approach underscores the idea that a government's effectiveness in delivering policies that align with the expectations of its citizens is crucial for building and maintaining institutional trust. The performance approach argues that institutions that perform well generate trust and those institutions that do not generate skepticism and distrust (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Evaluation of the performance of public institutions is based upon the rational choice perspective and assumes that trust arises from rational responses of individuals to the performance of political institutions (Wang, 2016). The government's economic and political performance regarding issues such as security, corruption, and policy responsiveness should also be associated with enhanced trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Mishler & Rose, 2001). Institutional political performance, in the form of providing security, improving policy initiatives, and eliminating corruption expects to be a strong predictor of institutional trust (Espinal et al., 2006). The performance approach that affects the trust mainly involves the *economic, political, and service satisfaction* of the citizens.

There are many reasons to believe that citizens' perceptions of the *economic performance* of governments should affect their trust in government institutions (Espinal et al., 2006). Van de Walle and Migchelbrink (2020) focused on the outcome of the macroeconomic development of government acting as drivers of change in trust in public agencies. They have found that economic well-being and or hardship directly impact trust in public administration. Economic strain is a measure of the difficulty with which people make ends meet on their current income and is generally inversely related to trust in government (Reeskens & Vandecasteele, 2017). O'Sullivan et al. (2014) found that in Ireland trust in institutions has plummeted due to the economic crisis and the public kept blaming the government for the crisis with continuing low levels of trust in government. Norris (2022) showed evidence that confidence in government is associated with the direct experience of citizens living in poorer households with financial insecurity, lack of savings, and declining living standards. Do citizens of developing countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka perceive their financial condition to be a

determinant of trust in government? This article through empirical evidence will try to answer this question.

The *political performance* of the public agencies involving the “quality of government” variables affects the citizens’ trust. The quality of government hypothesis of Rothstein and Teorell (2008) argues that institutions must exercise their authorized power impartially and with integrity in giving services to the citizens. Rothstein (2009) emphasizes the importance of the impartiality of political institutions and the quality of government for creating political legitimacy. Rothstein and others argue that trust and political legitimacy thrive mostly in societies with low levels of corruption, a well-developed social welfare system, and a high quality of public service, especially effective and fair street-level bureaucracies (Gibson, 1989; Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein, 2009). Trustworthiness may involve factors such as responsiveness, fairness, and competency in the institutions. Ma and Yang (2014) argue that citizens trust the government when the institutions are established and operated under the spirit of democracy and operating under a standard operating procedure. Studies have emphasized that trust in government is strengthened by qualities such as good governance, including procedural fairness, impartiality, and integrity (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; Norris, 2022).

Satisfaction with various *public services* that meet the needs of the citizens is also an important evaluation of institutional performance affecting trust (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005). When an individual’s experiences with public services are largely good, one tends to trust the institutions (Kumlin, 2002; Rothstein, 2011). In the relationship between trust and satisfaction, it has been seen that there is a positive influence on the degree and level of trust through customer satisfaction (Rosanas & Velilla, 2003; Shabbir et al., 2010). The importance of customer satisfaction in the delivery of public services by the government cannot be understated in finding out the level of trust in public institutions. The performance-based theory of institutional trust focuses on the quality of the performance of the institution. The more the positive attitude about the performance of the institutions the more would be the trust in institutions. The performance of the government is the main thrust of the institutional trust, client or citizen satisfaction acts as the proxy for government performance involving various functions carried out by the institutions both internally and externally (Van De Walle & Migchelbrink, 2022). Satisfaction with the government’s provision of public services should be a strong predictor of trust in government institutions (Espinal et al., 2006).

### *Sociological Approach*

The cultural theory perspective can explain the sociological approach. Cultural theory assumes that institutional trust emerges from the basic form of social relations (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Cultural theory sees citizens' trust in public institutions as an extension of interpersonal trust and hypothesizes that trust in a public agency is deeply rooted in cultural norms and is communicated through socialization. Proponents of the cultural approach believe that trust is affected by the cultural values and beliefs of the people, which have been learned through socialization in early life (Wang, 2016). Citizens' evaluations of government performance and their trust in government can be shaped by cultural norms and values (Almond & Verba, 1963).

This study will test the cultural theory of trust in public institutions through the concept of *social capital*-based trust given by Putnam (1994), and *authoritarian culture*-based trust theorized by Ma and Yang (2014). It focuses on the “relational” aspect that emerges through experience, which leads citizens to trust or distrust depending upon interactions. The cultural perspective views “social capital” as one of the main explanatory variables in determining trust in government (Baniamin et al., 2020; Newton & Norris, 2000). Putnam defines social capital as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency by facilitating coordinated action” (1994). He also referred to social capital as “connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000).

Social capital involves features of social organization such as networks and norms that facilitate coordination and cooperation between service recipients and providers. Civic engagements in the community and interpersonal trust have been shown to contribute to institutional trust (Putnam, 2000). Robert Putnam's social capital approach indicates that social interaction fosters social capital, mainly understood as a generalized trust in society (Rousseau et al., 1998). This theory considers citizen trust as an extension of trust between individuals and proposes that institutional trust is based on cultural norms and is transmitted through socialization. Social capital focuses on the “relational” aspect that emerges through experience, which leads citizens to trust or distrust depending upon interactions (Mahmud, 2021).

Authoritarian orientation as a particular element affecting citizen trust in government has been proposed by Ma and Yang (2014). They suggested that the presence of an authoritarian culture in the governance system is a

possible cultural factor in explaining high institutional trust in East Asian countries. Cultural orientations are deeply rooted in South Asian societies where paternalism and authoritarianism are widespread (Baniamin et al., 2020). In countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, hierarchy, patron-client relationships, paternalism, and informal relations are closely connected and are deeply entrenched in governance (Jamil & Askvik, 2015). The governance in the three South Asian countries may be characterized by patronage, rather than the rights-based or meritocratic system, whereby obedience, loyalty, and allegiance become crucial elements of the social order (Jamil & Baniamin, 2021). Ma and Yang (2014) suggest that the presence of pervasive hierarchical or authoritarian values may foster institutional trust. Hence, this explains that authoritarian culture is relevant for explaining variations in institutional trust.

## Discussion

What factors illustrate citizen trust in public institutions in Bangladesh? According to rational choice theory, the performance approach involving service satisfaction and quality of government should play a role in determining the degree of trust in public institutions (Baniamin, 2019). When a public institution performs its duties properly (e.g., ensures good quality of governance such as fairness and corruption-free services) and provides the services efficiently (e.g., healthcare and education), it should receive higher trust (Baniamin, 2019). However, research has shown that the logic of consequences does not work to determine the degree of trust in Bangladesh (Baniamin, 2019, 2021; Baniamin et al., 2020; Jamil & Askvik, 2015; Jamil & Baniamin, 2021; Mahmud, 2021). The performance approach gains less support than the cultural approach in Bangladesh (Mahmud, 2017). Why does the performance approach play a dormant role in affecting citizens' trust?

The logic of appropriateness plays an important role because cultural orientation is found to have a statistically significant effect in determining citizens' level of trust in Bangladesh (Baniamin, 2019). Cultural orientation affects trust in public institutions, regardless of institutional performance. Bangladesh is exposed to widespread inequalities in society in terms of accessing major services from government institutions (Rahman & Ashaduzzaman, 2005). Historically Bangladesh inherited a high-power distance society, where citizens accept and expect that power and authority would be exercised unequally among citizens. The tolerance of inequality involving norms of elitism has led citizens to be involved

in networks and associationism that enable stakeholders to act together to pursue their shared objectives. Granovetter et al. (1985) stressed that social relations and structures that exist in a society that facilitate mutual benefit, are very much responsible for the production of trust in government. According to Van de Walle et al. (2002) cultural explanations and societal issues are important measures for trust in institutions. The culture of providing privileges in service provisions based on social relations has led to the unquestioning loyalty and positive attitude of the people toward the public authorities in Bangladesh (Haque & Mohammad, 2013).

Social capital involving associationism is positively related to institutional trust in Bangladesh. There is considerable evidence for such a proponent. In societies where people express more solidarity with others and are inclined to share resources, people are generally happier with life (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Studies such as those of Jamil and Askvik (2015) found a significant impact that membership in various associations generates trust in public institutions in Bangladesh. Mahmud (2021) found that citizens in collectivist societies, such as in Bangladesh, tend to be included with various associations to achieve something together, which also has a positive spillover effect on individual achievement. Bangladesh bears a society where citizens heavily rely upon networks of kinship to get things done from public institutions. People portray unquestioning allegiance to their networks and establishing linkage with those involved in public institutions is an important means of getting services. The theory of social capital states that building social and associational networks is vital for achieving higher trust which affects positively institutional trust. Thus, with higher institutional trust in public institutions, the relation between high social capital and high institutional trust may seem to be valid.

Public institutions in Bangladesh produce a host of rules and regulations for those who fail to provide monetary benefits or for those who do not have social relations with service providers. The legal loopholes allow service providers to have discretionary power which is “abused” to provide favoritism and patronage to provide services to friends or relatives. Those not belonging to any special interest groups had to go through strict rules and regulations which causes delay in the processing of the services and the normative expectations were not fulfilled. Thus, it can be argued that the presence of strict rules and regulations may not yield high trust and those getting favors would provide their commitment and pledge toward the institutions which is expected to enhance institutional trust.

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that the logic of consequences, when assessing different institutional services (such as healthcare and law and order) and when mapping the quality of governance (such as when assessing the level of corruption and equal treatment) tends to have less effect than the logic of appropriateness such as the cultural approach. This is consistent with the claim of Ruscio (1996) that people opt for a calculative approach to form their institutional trust level. Bangladesh still bears a society involving unquestioning obedience and allegiance in one's associationism which seems to be portrayed in the institutions as well. It can be implied that social relations, socialization, and accepting the use of power in service provision seem to explain most in the way of how citizens trust public institutions. Political favoritism is deeply embedded in the institutional setting in Bangladesh, thus how impartially or fairly services are provided may not be an important determinant of institutional trust in terms of procedural maintenance of services. Many studies suggest that performance is the dominant predictor of trust, however, in the political and societal context of Bangladesh, cultural approach tends to be a stronger determinant of trust in public institutions.

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