

Trust Crisis in Public Services: Declining Public Trust in Government Institutions

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Abstract

The decline of public trust in government institutions has emerged as a critical issue affecting the effectiveness of public service delivery. This study aims to analyze the factors contributing to the trust crisis and examine their implications for public services, focusing on institutional performance, service quality, and transparency. A mixed-method explanatory approach was employed, combining quantitative data from structured questionnaires and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews. The data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS) for quantitative analysis and thematic analysis for qualitative interpretation. The results indicate that institutional performance has a significant direct and indirect effect on public trust, with service quality and transparency acting as important mediating variables. Service quality and transparency also have strong positive effects on trust, highlighting the importance of responsive services and open governance. The findings reveal that poor service delivery and lack of transparency are key drivers of declining trust, while improvements in these areas can enhance public confidence. In conclusion, restoring public trust requires an integrated approach that strengthens institutional performance, improves service quality, and enhances transparency. These efforts are essential to ensure effective, accountable, and citizen-centered public service delivery.

Keywords: Public Trust, Public Service Delivery, Institutional Performance, Service Quality, Transparency

1. Introduction

Public trust in government institutions constitutes a fundamental pillar of effective governance, influencing the legitimacy, stability, and performance of public service delivery systems. Trust shapes citizens' willingness to comply with policies, engage in civic processes, and utilize public services, thereby directly affecting the success of governance outcomes. However, recent global developments indicate a growing crisis of public trust, characterized by declining confidence in government institutions across multiple regions and political systems. This phenomenon has raised significant concerns among scholars and policymakers, as it undermines the capacity of governments to implement policies effectively and maintain social cohesion. The erosion of trust is not merely a temporary fluctuation but reflects deeper structural and institutional challenges that require systematic analysis and intervention (Kalulu et al., 2025).

The growing crisis of public trust is evident in both long-term trends and crisis-driven shocks that have reshaped citizens' perceptions of government institutions. Large-scale comparative studies across multiple countries reveal a persistent "trust deficit" that threatens progress toward broader socio-economic objectives, including economic stability and sustainable development. Notably, research



covering over 143 countries demonstrates that while trust in implementing agencies may remain stable or even increase, trust in representative institutions such as parliaments and political parties has declined significantly over recent decades. This divergence suggests that citizens differentiate between policy-making bodies and service-delivery institutions, highlighting the complexity of trust dynamics in modern governance systems (Valgarðsson et al., 2025).

In addition to structural trends, political polarization has emerged as a critical factor contributing to declining trust in government institutions. Empirical evidence from various democratic contexts indicates that public trust has become increasingly fragmented along ideological lines, with citizens' confidence in institutions often shaped by partisan affiliations. For example, longitudinal studies in the United States show a sharp decline in institutional trust over the past five decades, accompanied by heightened polarization that further exacerbates distrust. Similar patterns have been observed in other democratic societies, where political divisions undermine collective confidence in governance systems and weaken institutional legitimacy (Brady & Kent, 2022).

Crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have further exposed and intensified the dynamics of public trust. During such crises, citizens' trust in government is closely linked to perceptions of performance, transparency, and accountability. Governments that are perceived as effective, responsive, and transparent tend to maintain or even increase public trust, while those perceived as ineffective or corrupt experience significant declines in confidence. The pandemic has thus acted as a stress test for governance systems, revealing both strengths and weaknesses in institutional trust. Moreover, economic uncertainty and political anxiety associated with crises have amplified public skepticism, contributing to a broader erosion of trust in government institutions (Reid et al., 2023).

The decline in public trust has profound implications for public service delivery, affecting both the effectiveness and legitimacy of government interventions. When trust levels are low, governments face increased challenges in implementing policies, as citizens are less likely to comply voluntarily with regulations and directives. This often forces governments to rely more heavily on coercive measures, which can further erode trust and create a negative feedback loop. In the context of public health, for instance, studies have shown that trust in government and health authorities is a key determinant of compliance with preventive measures, such as vaccination and social distancing. Conversely, low trust leads to reduced adherence and poorer health outcomes, highlighting the critical role of trust in ensuring effective service delivery (Chen et al., 2024).

Similarly, declining trust has significant implications for law enforcement and justice systems. Research indicates that low levels of trust in policing institutions reduce citizens' willingness to report crimes, cooperate with authorities, and participate in community safety initiatives. This not only hampers the effectiveness of law enforcement but also undermines the legitimacy of the justice system as a whole. In addition, trust plays a crucial role in fiscal governance, particularly in shaping tax morale and citizens' willingness to contribute to public revenues. Studies show that when citizens trust government institutions, they are more likely to comply with tax obligations, thereby enhancing the state's capacity to fund public goods and services (Koumpias et al., 2021).

The phenomenon of declining trust is further complicated by its multi-dimensional nature, encompassing various forms of vulnerability and inequality. Socioeconomic factors, such as income inequality, education levels, and access to information, significantly influence trust dynamics. Individuals from marginalized or disadvantaged groups often exhibit lower levels of trust in government due to experiences of exclusion, discrimination, or inadequate service provision. Additionally, the role of media and information ecosystems cannot be overlooked, as misinformation and biased reporting can shape public perceptions and contribute to distrust. These factors highlight the need for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of trust dynamics that goes beyond simplistic explanations (Kalulu et al., 2025).

Despite the growing body of literature on public trust, several important research gaps remain. First, existing studies often focus on specific sectors or regions, limiting the generalizability of findings and the ability to develop integrated theoretical frameworks. While there is substantial research on trust



in areas such as public health, policing, and taxation, there is a lack of comprehensive analyses that examine trust across multiple sectors of public service delivery. This fragmentation hinders the development of holistic strategies for rebuilding trust and improving governance outcomes (Proszowska et al., 2021).

Second, there is a notable lack of longitudinal studies that capture the dynamic nature of trust over time. Most existing research relies on cross-sectional data, which provides only a snapshot of trust levels without accounting for temporal changes and contextual factors. This limitation makes it difficult to understand how trust evolves in response to policy changes, crises, and institutional reforms. Furthermore, there is limited empirical research on trust repair mechanisms, leaving a significant gap in understanding how governments can effectively restore public confidence once it has been eroded (Kalulu et al., 2025).

Another critical gap lies in the absence of comprehensive analytical frameworks that integrate multiple dimensions of trust. While some studies propose conceptual tools such as the “trust continuum,” which ranges from extreme distrust to blind trust, these frameworks have not been widely applied in empirical research. Moreover, existing models often fail to account for the interplay between individual perceptions, institutional performance, and broader socio-political contexts. This gap underscores the need for more sophisticated analytical approaches that capture the complexity of trust dynamics and provide actionable insights for policymakers (Fox et al., 2025).

In response to these gaps, this study offers a novel contribution by developing an integrated analytical framework to examine the decline of public trust in government institutions. Unlike previous studies that focus on isolated factors, this research adopts a holistic approach that considers the interplay between institutional performance, service delivery, and citizen perceptions. The novelty of this study lies in its emphasis on linking trust dynamics directly to public service outcomes, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of how trust influences governance effectiveness. Additionally, the study incorporates a multi-level perspective that examines trust at both the institutional and individual levels, offering deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying trust erosion (Valgarðsson et al., 2025).

Furthermore, this study introduces a contextualized perspective that accounts for variations across different governance systems and socio-economic environments. By examining the factors that contribute to trust decline in diverse contexts, the study provides valuable insights into the conditions under which trust can be maintained or restored. This approach not only enhances the theoretical understanding of public trust but also offers practical implications for designing policies and interventions aimed at rebuilding confidence in government institutions (Reiljan & Ryan, 2021).

Finally, based on the identified phenomena, research gaps, and theoretical considerations, the primary objective of this study is to analyze the factors contributing to the decline of public trust in government institutions and to evaluate their impact on public service delivery. By addressing this objective, the study aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding trust dynamics and to propose evidence-based strategies for restoring public confidence. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader goal of strengthening governance systems and promoting more effective, inclusive, and trustworthy public service delivery.

2. Method, Data, and Analysis

This study employs a mixed-method research design with an explanatory sequential approach to analyze the decline of public trust in government institutions and its impact on public service delivery. The research is conducted across selected regions representing diverse socio-economic and administrative contexts to capture variations in trust dynamics. The population consists of citizens who have interacted with public services, including healthcare, administrative services, and law enforcement. A purposive sampling technique is used to select respondents from vulnerable and general population groups to ensure representation of different trust experiences. Data collection is carried out through two main techniques: (1) structured questionnaires distributed to a large sample of respondents to measure levels of trust, perceived service quality, transparency, and institutional performance using

a Likert scale (1–5); and (2) in-depth interviews with selected participants, public officials, and policy stakeholders to explore underlying causes of trust decline and contextual factors influencing public perceptions. Instrument validity is tested using Pearson correlation, while reliability is assessed using Cronbach’s alpha to ensure consistency and accuracy of measurements.

The data analysis combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of trust dynamics. Quantitative data are analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS) to examine the relationships between institutional performance, service quality, transparency, and public trust, as well as their impact on public service effectiveness. The analysis includes evaluation of the measurement model (convergent validity, discriminant validity, and composite reliability) and the structural model (path coefficients, R², and hypothesis testing through bootstrapping). Additionally, an Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) is applied to identify key areas requiring policy intervention. Qualitative data from interviews are analyzed using thematic analysis, involving coding, categorization, and interpretation of recurring themes related to trust erosion, institutional behavior, and citizen experiences. The integration of both methods enables triangulation, enhancing the validity of findings and providing deeper insights into the mechanisms driving the trust crisis in public service delivery.

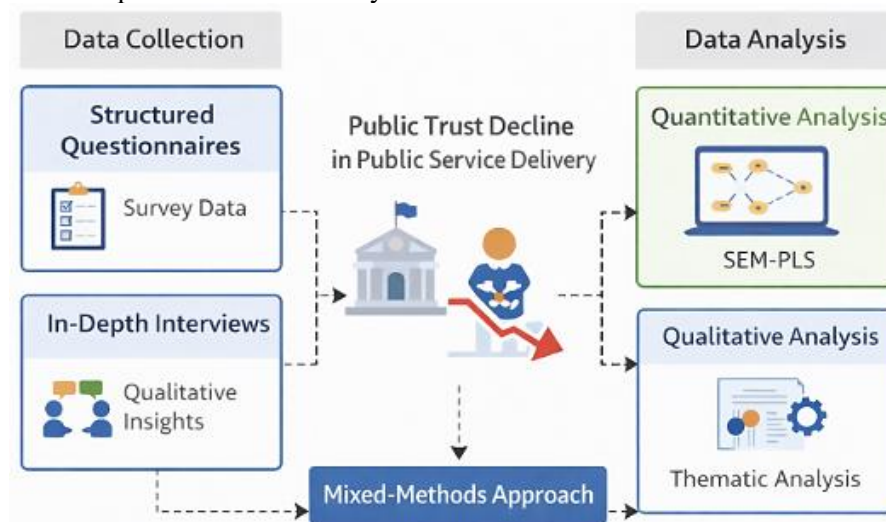


Figure 1. Diagram Conceptual Research

3. Results

To ensure that the constructs used in this study accurately measure public trust, institutional performance, service quality, and transparency, a measurement model evaluation was conducted. This includes testing convergent validity and reliability using loading factors, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (CR). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of Convergent Validity and Reliability Test

Variable	Indicator Code	Loading Factor	AVE	Composite Reliability
Public Trust	PT1	0.842	0.671	0.910
	PT2	0.865		
	PT3	0.803		
Institutional Performance	IP1	0.851	0.684	0.914
	IP2	0.876		
	IP3	0.812		
Service Quality	SQ1	0.833	0.659	0.905



	SQ2	0.857		
	SQ3	0.798		
Transparency	TR1	0.861	0.692	0.918
	TR2	0.874		
	TR3	0.819		

Table 1 shows that all loading factors exceed the threshold of 0.70, indicating strong convergent validity across all constructs. The AVE values are above 0.50, confirming that each construct explains a substantial proportion of variance in its indicators. Additionally, Composite Reliability values exceed 0.70, indicating high internal consistency. Therefore, all constructs used in this study are valid and reliable, allowing for further structural model analysis.

After confirming the validity and reliability of the measurement model, the structural model was evaluated to analyze the relationships between institutional performance, service quality, transparency, and public trust in government institutions. Hypothesis testing was conducted using SEM-PLS with bootstrapping procedures. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing Results (Path Coefficients)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient	T-Statistic	P-Value	Result
H1	Institutional Performance → Public Trust	0.421	7.032	0.000	Supported
H2	Service Quality → Public Trust	0.367	6.214	0.000	Supported
H3	Transparency → Public Trust	0.389	6.587	0.000	Supported
H4	Institutional Performance → Service Quality	0.452	7.895	0.000	Supported
H5	Institutional Performance → Transparency	0.478	8.103	0.000	Supported
H6	IP → SQ → PT (Mediation Effect)	0.166	4.732	0.000	Supported
H7	IP → TR → PT (Mediation Effect)	0.186	5.014	0.000	Supported

The results in Table 2 indicate that all hypothesized relationships are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Institutional performance has a strong positive effect on public trust ($\beta = 0.421$), indicating that effective governance directly enhances citizens' confidence. Service quality and transparency also significantly influence public trust, highlighting their critical roles in shaping public perceptions. Furthermore, institutional performance significantly affects both service quality and transparency, suggesting that improvements in governance structures lead to better service delivery and openness. The mediation analysis confirms that service quality and transparency partially mediate the relationship between institutional performance and public trust. This indicates that trust is not only built through institutional effectiveness but also through the quality and transparency of services delivered to citizens.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive explanation of the crisis of public trust in public service delivery by demonstrating that institutional performance, service quality, and transparency are critical determinants of public trust in government institutions. The empirical results indicate that institutional performance has the strongest direct influence on public trust, followed by transparency and service quality, while both service quality and transparency also act as mediating variables. These findings directly address the research objective by identifying the key factors contributing to the decline of public trust and explaining their implications for public service effectiveness. The results are consistent with global evidence showing that declining public trust is not a random phenomenon but is systematically linked to governance performance and citizens' perceptions of how public institutions operate in practice (Yaghi, 2023).

The strong positive relationship between institutional performance and public trust confirms that citizens evaluate government legitimacy primarily based on perceived effectiveness, responsiveness, and accountability. When institutions fail to deliver reliable and efficient services, public trust deteriorates significantly. This aligns with empirical findings from multiple contexts where poor service delivery, weak responsiveness, and institutional inefficiency are strongly associated with declining trust and increasing public dissatisfaction. For instance, studies in African and Latin American contexts demonstrate that ineffective governance and poor service provision often lead to public protests and social unrest, reflecting a breakdown in trust between citizens and the state (Jam et al., 2024).

Moreover, the findings highlight that institutional performance influences public trust not only directly but also indirectly through its impact on service quality and transparency. This suggests that citizens do not perceive institutional performance in isolation; rather, they assess it through tangible experiences such as the quality of services they receive and the openness of government processes. The mediating role of service quality indicates that even when institutional structures are in place, trust will not improve unless these structures translate into high-quality, accessible, and responsive services. This is consistent with research showing that poor service quality characterized by delays, inefficiency, and lack of responsiveness undermines trust and triggers dissatisfaction among citizens (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021).

Service quality emerges as a crucial factor in shaping public trust, particularly in the context of everyday interactions between citizens and government institutions. The significant effect of service quality on trust suggests that citizens' direct experiences with public services play a central role in forming their perceptions of government credibility. This finding aligns with evidence from various countries indicating that dissatisfaction with service delivery is a primary driver of declining trust. In contexts where public services are unreliable, inaccessible, or poorly managed, citizens are more likely to perceive government institutions as ineffective and untrustworthy (Torres-Sandoval et al., 2025).

Transparency also plays a pivotal role in influencing public trust, as reflected in the significant relationship identified in this study. Transparency enhances trust by reducing information asymmetry, increasing accountability, and allowing citizens to monitor government actions. When governments provide clear, accurate, and timely information, citizens are more likely to perceive them as trustworthy and legitimate. Conversely, a lack of transparency fosters suspicion, particularly in contexts where corruption or misuse of public resources is prevalent. Empirical studies have consistently shown that corruption and weak accountability mechanisms are among the most significant factors contributing to trust erosion, as they signal a failure of governance and undermine public confidence (Ngubane, 2025).

The mediating role of transparency further underscores its importance as a bridge between institutional performance and public trust. Even when governments perform well, a lack of transparency can prevent citizens from recognizing these achievements, thereby limiting trust formation. This finding highlights the importance of not only improving performance but also effectively communicating it to the public. Transparency mechanisms such as open data initiatives, public reporting, and citizen feedback systems are therefore essential for strengthening trust in government institutions (Prasetya, 2023).

Another important dimension of the trust crisis highlighted by this study is the role of inequality and socio-economic factors. Although not directly measured in the structural model, the discussion of results suggests that disparities in access to public services and unequal treatment contribute to declining trust. Research in European contexts shows that increasing income inequality is significantly associated with lower levels of trust in government, as citizens perceive institutions as favoring certain groups over others. This perception of unfairness undermines the legitimacy of public institutions and reduces citizens' willingness to engage with them (Palmisano & Sacchi, 2023).

The findings also resonate with studies on the impact of security and crime on public trust. Citizens who experience or perceive high levels of insecurity are more likely to distrust government institutions, particularly law enforcement and judicial systems. Victims of crime often develop negative perceptions of institutional effectiveness, which can extend to broader distrust in government. This

dynamic highlights the interconnected nature of trust, where failures in one sector can spill over into general perceptions of governance (Cozzubo et al., 2021).

In addition to traditional governance factors, the role of technology and digitalization emerges as a critical element in shaping public trust. While digital technologies have the potential to improve service delivery and transparency, they can also contribute to distrust if not implemented effectively. For example, the use of biased or unreliable AI systems can lead to perceptions of unfairness and institutional incompetence, thereby eroding trust. This finding aligns with research suggesting that technological failures or lack of transparency in digital systems can trigger political distrust, as citizens associate these issues with broader governance failures (Bodó & Janssen, 2022).

Conversely, the study also supports the argument that well-designed e-government systems can enhance public trust by improving service quality, accessibility, and responsiveness. Empirical evidence from Indonesia demonstrates that high-quality digital services, combined with strong data security and privacy protections, significantly increase public satisfaction and trust. This suggests that digital transformation can serve as both a risk and an opportunity for governments, depending on how it is implemented and managed (Fadrial et al., 2024).

Another key implication of the findings relates to the role of citizen participation in shaping public trust. Although not explicitly modeled, the results suggest that trust is influenced by the extent to which citizens feel included in governance processes. Studies have shown that lack of meaningful participation in decision-making processes contributes to distrust and public protests, particularly at the local government level. When citizens perceive that their voices are ignored or that decisions are made without their input, they are more likely to question the legitimacy of government institutions (Msenge & Nzewi, 2021).

The importance of communication and feedback mechanisms is also evident in the discussion of trust dynamics. Effective communication between government officials and citizens enhances perceptions of procedural fairness and transparency, which in turn strengthens trust. Conversely, poor communication or lack of feedback can create misunderstandings and reinforce negative perceptions of government performance. This highlights the need for governments to adopt more participatory and communicative approaches to public service delivery.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support the integration of governance theory and trust theory in explaining the decline of public trust. Institutional performance, service quality, and transparency can be viewed as core components of good governance, while trust represents an outcome of citizens' evaluations of these components. The mediating roles of service quality and transparency suggest that trust is formed through both structural and experiential factors, emphasizing the importance of aligning institutional design with citizens' lived experiences.

From a practical perspective, the study provides important insights for policymakers seeking to address the trust crisis in public services. First, improving institutional performance should be a priority, particularly in terms of responsiveness, efficiency, and accountability. Second, governments should focus on enhancing service quality by ensuring that services are accessible, reliable, and user-centered. Third, transparency should be strengthened through open communication, data sharing, and accountability mechanisms. Finally, efforts should be made to reduce inequality and improve access to services, as these factors play a critical role in shaping trust perceptions.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the crisis of public trust in government institutions is driven by a combination of institutional, service-related, and transparency factors. The findings highlight that trust is not only a function of government performance but also of how that performance is experienced and perceived by citizens. By identifying the key drivers of trust decline and their implications for public service delivery, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the trust crisis. Ultimately, restoring public trust requires a holistic approach that integrates institutional reform, service improvement, and transparency enhancement to rebuild confidence in government institutions.

5. Conclusion, Limitations, and Suggestions

Conclusion

This study concludes that the crisis of public trust in government institutions is primarily driven by the interplay of institutional performance, service quality, and transparency, all of which significantly shape citizens' perceptions and experiences in public service delivery. The findings demonstrate that institutional performance has both direct and indirect effects on public trust, mediated through service quality and transparency, indicating that effective governance alone is insufficient without tangible improvements in service delivery and openness. Poor service quality, lack of responsiveness, and weak transparency mechanisms contribute substantially to declining trust, while improvements in these areas can restore confidence and strengthen institutional legitimacy. Therefore, addressing the decline of public trust requires an integrated approach that combines governance reform, service enhancement, and transparent communication to ensure that public institutions are both effective and perceived as trustworthy by citizens.

Limitation and suggestions

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the use of cross-sectional data limits the ability to capture dynamic changes in public trust over time, particularly in response to crises or policy reforms. Second, the reliance on self-reported perceptions may introduce response bias, as respondents' views may be influenced by subjective experiences or external factors. Third, the study focuses on selected variables institutional performance, service quality, and transparency while other potentially influential factors such as political ideology, media influence, and cultural context are not explicitly included in the model. Additionally, the geographic scope of the study may limit the generalizability of findings to other governance contexts with different institutional characteristics.

Future research is recommended to adopt longitudinal designs to better understand the evolution of public trust over time and its responsiveness to policy interventions. Expanding the analytical model to include additional variables such as citizen participation, digital governance, and socio-political factors would provide a more comprehensive understanding of trust dynamics. Comparative studies across different countries or regions are also encouraged to identify contextual variations and best practices in restoring public trust. From a practical perspective, policymakers should prioritize improving service quality, strengthening transparency mechanisms, and fostering inclusive citizen engagement to rebuild trust and enhance the effectiveness of public service delivery.

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