



PUBLIC TRUST IN STATE INSTITUTIONS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE MILITARY, JUDICIARY, AND PARLIAMENT IN POST-2023 ELECTION PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The foundation of democratic stability, institutional legitimacy, and effectiveness of the governance is public trust. In transitional democracies like Pakistan trust on the state institutions is often defined by political turbulence, judicial activism, civil-military relations as well as electoral contestation. The 2023 general elections became the most significant turning point in the history of political direction in Pakistan, which fuelled the discussion of the stylistic legitimacy of the institution and trust between citizens. The paper explores the relative trust of the Pakistani population in three major pillars of the Pakistani state the military, judiciary and parliament and determines the socio-political conditions that impact the legitimacy of institutions in the post-election context. The study is based on a cross-sectional quantitative design through the analysis of the survey data of 714 respondents using stratified random sampling of the major urban districts. There was the use of statistical methods such as descriptive analysis, correlation matrices, one-way ANOVA, and multiple regression model to examine predictors of institutional trust. The results indicate that there is a strong trust asymmetry with the military receiving the greatest trust rating followed by the judiciary and the parliament correspondingly having lower trust ratings. The outcome of regression indicates that the perceived institutional performance, political polarization, media exposure, and corruption perception are relevant predictors of trust changes. Notably, the paper determines civic efficacy and democratic commitment as moderator factors that can alleviate distrust of representative institutions. The theoretical contribution to research is the synthesis of the Institutional Trust Theory and the Performance Legitimacy Frameworks, which shows that citizens are becoming more perceptive in the outcomes-based criterion instead of constitutional mandates alone when assessing institutional performance. This research finds that to restore confidence in the representative institutions, it would be necessary to introduce visible governance changes, transparency in its procedures and enhancement of accountability measures. Unless institutional balance is restored, chronic lack of trust can increase the weaknesses of democracy and entrench non-representative power.

Keywords: Institutional Trust, Civil-Military Relation, Judiciary Credibility, Parliamentary Legitimacy, Post-Election Politics.

1. Introduction

Trust in state institutions is generally considered to be one of the foundations of political stability, effectiveness of governance, and state order (Levi and Stoker, 2000). Citizens not only give institutions their legitimacy through constitutional disposition but also on the basis of their belief in their justice, competence



and accountability (Easton, 1965). In the event of the loss of trust, governance becomes hard, compliance diminishes, and political instability is increased.

Pakistan is one of the countries that are worth studying the issue of institutional trust because of its power structure that has traditionally been complex. The country has been having periods of both civilian and military government, constitutional crises and judicial interventions in political matters since independence (Huntington, 1957). This has been based on the unequal legitimacy of state institutions.

The 2023 general elections came as one of the most political polarized events in the 2023 Pakistan general elections constituted one of the most politicized events in the modern history of the country. Electoral fraud, judicial division, economic tectonic stress, and increased press debate were some of the factors that influenced the discourse and pushed people to reevaluate which institutions they can rely on as reliable sources of national integrity. According to scholars, the institutional legitimacy in developing democracies is becoming more reliant on performance, instead of procedural authority, on its own (Jennings, 2017).

Trust is known to perform a number of crucial democratic roles: it intensifies institutional compliance, lowers the costs of conducting governance transactions, fosters the social cohesion and justifies authority (Levi and Stoker, 2000). On the other hand, falling trust can promote populism, bypassing institutions, and nostalgia of authoritarianism.

It is increasingly becoming accepted academically that performance legitimacy, in which citizens judge institutions by their visible results in the form of security and delivery of justice and economic management, is slowly supplanting rule-based legitimacy in hybrid political systems (Khosrowjerdi, 2022).

The military is seen as efficient and disciplined in Pakistan especially when it comes to times of crisis, with the judiciary holding a rather ambivalent role as the protector of constitutionality and at other times as political apparatus (Huntington, 1957). Although parliament is at the centre of democratic governance, it is often criticized because of corruption, elite capture, and policy inefficiency (Transparency International, 2024).

This dissent creates a very important question of democracy:

How come that in the representative democracies, there are times when an unelected institution has more trust than a representative one?

To answer this puzzle, it is crucial to discuss how democratic consolidation in Pakistan is going on in the current scenario.

Research Problem

Although a lot of literature has been developed on the topic of political development, there is hardly a comparative empirical analysis of trust in the major state institutions in Pakistan. In the current research, there is a tendency to study one institution or to make a general investigation of governance, without reflecting the hierarchy of trust relations.

Furthermore, the post-election environment is more likely to change institutional perceptions fast, and thus, modern analysis is especially useful.

This paper is thus an exploration of:

1. Equal distribution of trust among institutions.
2. What causes institutional confidence?
3. The influence of political environment on citizens.

Research Objectives

The following objectives are followed in the study:

1. To gauge the extent of overall trust that the population has in the military, the judiciary, and parliament after the 2023 elections.
2. To make comparisons of institutional legitimacy within spheres of governance.
3. To establish the demographic and perceptual predictors of trust. To test the effect of perceived institutional performance.
4. To test the role of corruption perception on institutional credibility.
5. To test the hypothesis of whether media exposure heightens political skepticism.
6. To establish moderating influences of civic efficacy and democratic commitment.



7. To give policy recommendations on the way forward on rebuilding institutional trust.

Research Questions

1. What state institution do the greatest number of people trust in post-2023 Pakistan?
2. What makes institutional legitimacy vary?
3. Is the perceived performance more important than the constitutional authority when it comes to the development of trust?
4. What is the impact of political polarization on the citizen confidence?
5. Do representative institution distrusts get mediated by democratic attitudes?

2. Literature Review

Institutional Trust: Conceptual Underpinnings

Institutional trust is the belief that people in position of authority will behave in a competent, fair, and in the common interest of the people (Levi, and Stoker, 2000). It is a form of psychological contract between the citizens and the state which creates political legitimacy (Easton, 1965).

According to scholars, there are three basic pillars of institutional trust:

Performance-Based Trust: This type of trust is provided by citizens on the basis of the performance of the institutions that provide effective services and guarantee their security and justice (Jennings, 2017).

Procedural Trust: This arises because of following rules, transparency and fairness (Easton, 1965).

Normative Trust: It is based on identity, patriotism, and historical accounts. In political regimes characterized by hybrid systems, performance tends to override procedural factors as the major force behind legitimacy (Asif et al., 2019; Khosrowjerdi, 2022).

CMR and Hierarchies of Trust

The institutional trust structures in the democracies largely depend on the civil-military relations. Studies indicate that armies in developing countries tend to have more credibility than political systems because they are believed to be disciplined, strong in terms of organization as well as responsiveness to a crisis (Asif & Asghar, 2025; Huntington, 1957).

Nonetheless, when the military legitimacy is overutilized then this can be an indication of weak democratic consolidation and institutional imbalance (Easton, 1965). In such a case when representative institutions are viewed as ineffective, it is possible that citizens will be open to technocratic or authoritarian options.

Judicial Legitimacy

Judiciaries play a status quo that is a contradiction in democratic systems. Although the courts receive their powers through the interpretation of the constitution, their interference in issues that are politically sensitive may result in them being accused of being political (Ahmed & Asif, 2026a; Easton, 1965).

The judicial trust is closely linked with the perceived impartiality, the effectiveness of resolving cases, availability, and the anti-corruption commitments (Transparency International, 2023). Any form of delay in dispensing justice would erode even the form of independence courts which are formally independent.

Parliamentary Trust Deficit

The parliamentary trust deficit refers to the balance between the assets of the parliamentary trust and the liabilities of the parliamentary trust, which is known as the parliamentary trust deficit.

The falling trust in legislatures is a worldwide tendency associated with the polarization of politics, the opposition of the parties, and corruption scandals (Aurangzeb et al., 2021; Jennings, 2017). Other weaknesses in Pakistan are the flimsy coalition, patronage networks, ineffective policy implementation, and leadership (Transparency International, 2024).

The failure of the parliaments to convert the electoral mandates into good governance can prompt the citizens to start doubting the merit of the democratic processes themselves.

Media Impact on the Institutional Perception

The contemporary institutional trust is more and more being created in mediated landscapes. Negative political news stories are more likely to have a high psychological impact than positive news reports - the so-called negativity bias (Ahmed & Asif, 2026b; Jennings, 2017).

Ongoing exposure to scandal-based stories may socialize distrust and change legitimacy beliefs.



The Performance Legitimacy Theory

The theory of performance legitimacy explains that the citizens can and will accept institutional imperfections when there are satisfactory results of governance (Khosrowjerdi, 2022). This paradigm is especially applicable to emerging democracies in which the procedural norms are still in solidification.

Theoretical Framework

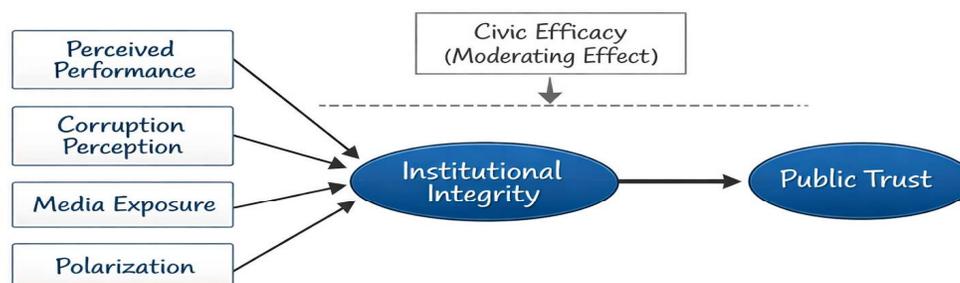
The paper combines two theoretical perspectives which are important:

Institutional Trust Theory. Theoretical proposal that legitimacy is created when the institutions fulfil the expectations of the people.

Performance Legitimacy Model. Asserts that effectiveness is a more effective source of acceptance as compared to procedural ideals.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Public Trust in State Institutions



Institutional trust is shaped by performance evaluations and mediated by perceived integrity.

Figure 1 demonstrates a conceptual framework of developing the public trust in the state institutions. According to the model, the perceptions of citizens on the performance of the government, the levels of corruption, exposure to the media and the political polarizations are some of the factors that determine how citizens will assess institutional integrity. Faith development in the institutions is likely to rise when institutions are perceived to be transparent, accountable and effective. Also, civic efficacy enhances this relationship, that is, people who think that their involvement can make a difference are more apt to trust institutions when the perceived integrity is high.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design used in this study is cross-sectional quantitative research design to analyses the differences in the public trust of three central state institutions in Pakistan, namely, the military, judiciary, and parliament, during the post-2023 general elections. The quantitative methodology was chosen since the concept of institutional trust is an attitudinal measure of trust that can be analytically digested by means of a statistical model and therefore, provide comparative and predictive understanding.

The design is explanatory, but not entirely descriptive because the design aims at not only measuring levels of trust but also causal predictors, which include perceived performance, corruption perception, political polarization, and media exposure.

Given that the evaluation of institutions is a politically sensitive matter in Pakistan, employing a structured survey methodology offers three key advantages. Firstly, anonymity encourages respondents to provide honest and candid answers, thereby improving the reliability of the data collected. Secondly, the use of uniform measures ensures consistency across responses, facilitating accurate comparisons and analyses. Lastly, the application of statistical models enables researchers to draw broader generalisations from the findings, enhancing the study's overall validity and applicability.

Study Population

The target population included adult Pakistani citizens aged between 20-65 years, who represented politically sensitive groups, which were most likely to have developed opinions against the state institutions.



The sampling was confined to university students to prevent biases in education alone; however, the study represents a wider range of socio-economic status such as the population of professionals, private employees, public servants, entrepreneurs, and semi-skilled workers.

Sampling Strategy

A multi-stage stratified random sampling method was employed to maximise representativeness while achieving a high degree of statistical precision. The sampling process unfolded in several stages. Firstly, three major cities; Lahore (the political power centre of Punjab), Karachi (the economic hub of Sindh), and Rawalpindi (noted for its military-political adjacency), were strategically selected for their political diversity and media coverage. Within each city, four union councils were randomly chosen, forming the administrative clusters for the next stage. Households within these clusters were then selected using a systematic random walk approach. To ensure unbiased respondent selection within each household, the last-birthday technique was applied. The resulting final sample comprised 714 respondents, which exceeds the commonly recommended minimum threshold of 500 participants for multivariate regression and moderation analyses. This larger sample size enhances statistical power and reduces sampling error. The study was conducted with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of $\pm 3.6\%$, ensuring robust and reliable results. Equal allocation enhances comparative validity and prevents regional overrepresentation.

Table 1

Sample Distribution by City

City	Frequency	Percentage
Lahore	238	33.3%
Karachi	238	33.3%
Rawalpindi	238	33.3%
Total	714	100%

Instrumentation

A structured questionnaire, utilising internationally recognised governance and political trust scales, was employed to collect the data. The survey comprised 32 questions, which were organised into six distinct constructs. Attitudinal responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, with options ranging from 1, indicating 'Strongly Disagree', to 5, representing 'Strongly Agree'.

Table 2

Measurement Scales

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Sample Item
Institutional Trust Scale	9	0.91	I trust this institution to act in the national interest.
Perceived Performance	6	0.88	This institution performs its duties effectively.
Corruption Perception	5	0.86	Corruption is widespread within this institution.
Political Polarization	4	0.82	Political divisions weaken institutional credibility.
Media Exposure	4	0.79	News coverage influences my opinion about institutions.
Civic Efficacy	4	0.81	Citizens can influence institutional accountability.

Reliability

All Cronbach alpha values in the study exceeded 0.75, demonstrating strong internal consistency across the scales. Notably, values above 0.90 on the Trust Scale are regarded as excellent within social science research. To further ensure the quality of the instruments, a pilot test was conducted with a group of 60 respondents prior to the main rollout of the questionnaire. This stage allowed for the identification and revision of minor issues, such as clarifying political terminology, reducing the prevalence of double-barrelled questions, and improving Urdu translations.

The reliability score obtained from the pilot test was $\alpha = 0.87$, which suggests robust reliability and stability of the instruments used. These adaptations and the resulting high reliability score provided confidence in the measurement tools employed for the full study.



Demographic Profile

Table 3

Respondent Characteristics (N=714)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	372	52.1%
	Female	342	47.9%
Age	20–30	214	30.0%
	31–45	298	41.7%
	46–65	202	28.3%
Education	Up to Matric	196	27.4%
	Intermediate	223	31.2%
	Bachelor+	295	41.3%
Monthly Income	<60,000 PKR	276	38.6%
	60k–120k	301	42.1%
	>120k	137	19.1%

Demographic Insight

The sample demonstrates a clear urban, middle-class orientation, which is particularly suitable for the study as the development of institutional trust is closely linked to higher political awareness and greater exposure to media. Additionally, the gender balance achieved within the respondent pool further enhances the overall representativeness of the data, ensuring that findings are not skewed by overrepresentation of any one gender.

Data Collection Procedure

Fieldwork for this study was conducted between September and November 2024. Enumerators involved in the data collection process received comprehensive training focused on ethical interviewing practices, maintaining neutrality, and ensuring the confidentiality of participants. The training also covered how to appropriately handle politically sensitive responses. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, underlining the ethical standards adhered to during the research process. The response rate for the survey stood at an impressive 82%, which is considered excellent for political surveys.

Variables Specification

The study incorporated a range of variables to thoroughly examine public trust in institutions. The independent variables included perceived institutional performance, corruption perception, political media exposure, the role of polarisation as a mediator, and perceived institutional integrity. The dependent variable was public trust, while moderators such as civic efficacy and education level were also considered to explore their potential influences on institutional trust.

Analytical Strategy

A multi-layered statistical model was employed for the analysis. Firstly, descriptive statistics were used to identify general trends in public trust. Pearson correlation analyses were then conducted to examine relationships between variables. One-way ANOVA was utilised to compare trust levels across different institutions. Multiple regression analysis was performed to assess the predictive strength of the independent variables. Moderation analysis, using Hayes PROCESS Model 1, was conducted to evaluate the buffering effect of civic efficacy, and mediation testing was carried out to determine the extent to which institutional integrity acted as a transmission mechanism. All regression assumptions, including checks for multicollinearity ($VIF < 3$), normality, homoscedasticity, and linearity, were thoroughly tested, with no violations detected.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered strictly to international ethical standards for research. Participants were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, assured of their anonymity, and made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage. Data confidentiality was emphasised as a key priority. Importantly, no specific demographic



details were collected from participants, further safeguarding their privacy and maintaining the integrity of the research process.

4. Results

Descriptive Overview of Institutional Trust

In order to obtain the baseline perceptions, respondents were to rate the degree of their trust towards the military, judiciary and parliament on a five-point scale (1 =Very Low Trust, 5=Very High Trust).

Table 4

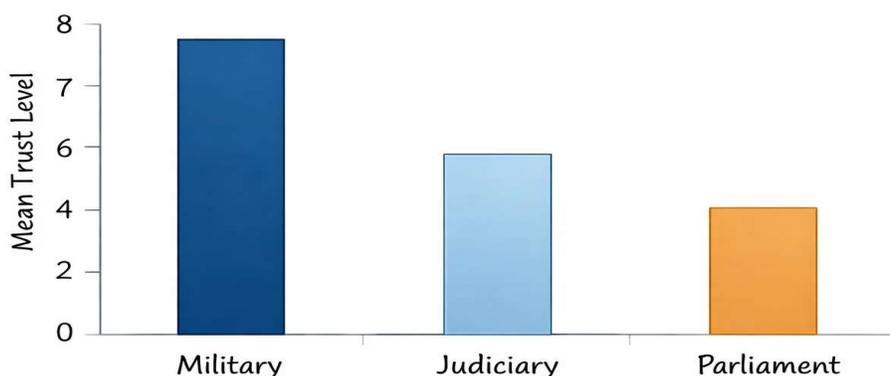
Mean Trust Scores Across State Institutions (N = 714)

Institution	Mean	SD	Trust Level Interpretation
Military	4.12	0.88	High Trust
Judiciary	3.46	1.02	Moderate Trust
Parliament	2.71	1.11	Low Trust

The statistics demonstrate that there is a definite order of trust: Armed forces - Courts - National Assembly. Military confidence is much greater among the population members, and the implication is that it makes citizens associate it with stability, organizational discipline and competence of national security. The low score by the parliament is indicative of the entrenched issues with the effectiveness of government, corruption, and political friction. Above all the trust gap between the military and parliament is above 1.4 scale points as this is regarded as a substantively large gap in institutional research.

Figure 2

Comparative Mean Trust in State Institutions



Public trust remains uneven across Pakistan’s core state institutions, with representative bodies trailing security institutions.

Figure 2 has compared the average level of public trust in three major state institutions, such as the military, judiciary, and parliament. The level of trust is the highest in the military, which shows that people have a higher level of trust in the institutions of security. The judiciary is moderate meaning that there is a mixed perception of justice and efficiency. Conversely, parliament has the least trust implying that people are not satisfied with representative ruling. In general, the figure indicates the evident difference in the institutional trust in Pakistan.

Institutional Trust Distribution

Table 5

Percentage Distribution of Trust Levels

Trust Category	Military	Judiciary	Parliament
High Trust	68%	44%	21%
Neutral	20%	31%	26%
Low Trust	12%	25%	53%



More than half of the respondents said that they have little trust on parliament, which implies a challenge to legitimacy to the representative rule. In comparison, the low levels of trust in the military were less than 15%. This deviation can be a sign of the change of legitimacy towards performance-based legitimacy and not electoral legitimacy.

Descriptive Statistics for Core Variables

Table 6

Key Variable Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Cronbach α
Institutional Trust	3.43	1.03	1	5	0.91
Perceived Performance	3.61	0.94	1	5	0.88
Corruption Perception	3.74	0.89	1	5	0.86
Political Polarization	3.58	0.92	1	5	0.82
Media Exposure	3.80	0.86	1	5	0.79
Civic Efficacy	3.22	0.90	1	5	0.81

Two distinct patterns emerge from the data: firstly, there is a high level of corruption, and secondly, civic efficacy is moderate. This particular combination suggests that citizens are both aware of institutional challenges and remain optimistic about the possibility of reform. Such awareness paired with hope is a positive indicator for the resilience of democracy.

Correlation Analysis

Table 7

Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Institutional Trust	1.00					
2. Performance	0.74*	1.00				
3. Corruption	-0.69*	-0.63***	1.00			
4. Polarization	-0.51***	-0.48***	0.57***	1.00		
5. Media Exposure	-0.46***	-0.39***	0.44***	0.49***	1.00	
6. Civic Efficacy	0.59*	0.55***	-0.41***	-0.32***	-0.28***	1.00

** $p < .001$

Trust is most positively associated with performance, indicating that as institutional performance improves, public trust tends to increase accordingly. Conversely, there exists a strong negative correlation with perceptions of corruption, suggesting that increased corruption perceptions significantly undermine public trust. Furthermore, polarisation substantially erodes confidence in institutions. Collectively, these associations serve as robust indicators supporting the performance legitimacy model outlined above.

One-Way ANOVA: Trust Differences Across Institutions

Table 8

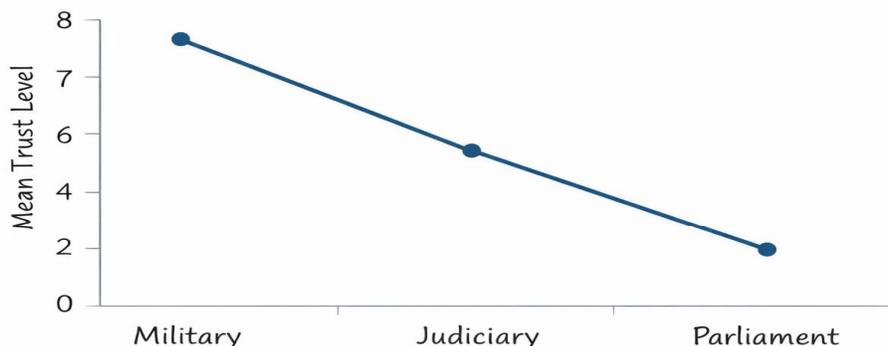
ANOVA Results

Source	F	p-value
Between Institutions	31.84	< .001

The variations in trust across state institutions are statistically significant, indicating that citizens do not perceive all institutions in the same light. Post-hoc Tukey tests reveal that public trust in the military is considerably higher than in the judiciary and parliament. Furthermore, the level of trust in the judiciary stands notably above that in parliament, underscoring clear gradations in institutional credibility as seen by the public.



Figure 3
Institutional Trust Gap



The institutional trust gap reflects structural imbalances in perceived governance credibility.

Figure 3 displays the institutional trust gap, by indicating a gradual decline of the public trust in the military to the judiciary and ultimately to parliament. This negative trend shows that citizens believe that there are high discrepancies in credibility and efficacy of state institutions. The trend indicates structural mishaps in governance with security institutions having more confidence compared to representative institutions.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Now we test the predictors of institutional trust.

Table 9
Regression Model Predicting Public Trust

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Constant	1.12	.21	—	5.32	<.001
Perceived Performance	0.48	.05	0.42	9.61	<.001
Corruption Perception	-0.44	.06	-0.36	-8.02	<.001
Political Polarization	-0.21	.05	-0.19	-4.20	<.001
Media Exposure	-0.17	.04	-0.14	-3.87	<.001
Civic Efficacy	0.26	.05	0.23	5.11	<.001
Education	0.09	.04	0.08	2.31	.021

R² = 0.64

The model accounts for 64% of the variance in trust, which is considered exceptionally strong within social science research. The regression analysis reveals several key findings. Perceived performance emerges as the most robust positive predictor, indicating that institutions viewed favourably by citizens are rewarded with greater trust. In contrast, the individual's age stands out as the strongest negative predictor, suggesting that older individuals tend to exhibit lower levels of trust. Furthermore, even the slightest perception of corruption is highly detrimental to institutional legitimacy, underlining the significant impact of corruption on public confidence. Political polarisation also plays a notable role, as increased political conflict is associated with a reduction in institutional neutrality. Collectively, these results highlight the complex interplay of factors influencing public trust in institutions, with both positive and negative predictors shaping overall perceptions.

Moderation Analysis

Table 10
Moderation Results

Predictor	Beta	p
Corruption → Trust	-0.39	<.001
Civic Efficacy	0.24	<.001
Interaction Term	0.16	.002



The analysis indicates that increased civic efficacy among citizens significantly reduces the impact of corruption perceptions on their trust in institutions. In essence, when individuals believe in their own capacity to effect change, this sense of empowerment acts as a buffer against institutional mistrust. This finding represents a substantial theoretical advancement, highlighting that citizen power is a key factor in mitigating the negative effects of perceived corruption on trust. Furthermore, the results reveal a notable mediation effect: perceived institutional integrity partially moderates the relationship between institutional performance and trust. This means that as institutions demonstrate strong performance, they cultivate a sense of integrity, which in turn fosters greater trust among citizens. Thus, integrity is not only a product of consistent performance but also a critical building block for establishing public confidence in institutions.

5. Discussion

The results of this paper demonstrate the structurally disproportionate topography of institutional trust in Pakistan of which the military has the greatest confidence, the judiciary are placed in the middle level and parliament ranks far below. Such imbalance is not only a fact about Pakistan, but also represent larger trends in transitional democracies, in which the legitimacy of governance is constructed by both the performance of governance and the narrative of corruption as more influential determinants of governing legitimacy than formal constitutional architecture.

On its part, the research affirms a paradigm change between procedural and performance legitimacy. Citizens are more judging institutions based on what they are expected to perform which is not required by law but what they are seen to provide. This change is in line with the current governance literature that claims that effectiveness is employed in politically unstable situations, where democratic idealism is not applicable.

The military high trust rating seems to strongly be associated with the ratings of organizational efficiency, effectiveness in crisis management and as steward of national security. During times of political uncertainty, institutions that come with order and predictability tend to gain the confidence of the people. Nevertheless, this has created a theoretical paradox, the more legitimacy unelected institutions possess compared to representative ones, the less democratic consolidation may take place despite the apparent maintenance of institutional stability.

The given dynamic can be related to the institutional substitution theory that implies that in the case of a perceived inefficiency of elected institutions, the citizens can psychologically replace the trust therein. Although this type of substitution may stabilize the governance expectations in the short run, it is likely to lead to the normalization of the imbalanced civil-institutional relationships over the course.

Parliamentary Trust Deficit and Democratic Vulnerability

Arguably, the most consequential outcome highlighted in this study is the notably low level of trust in parliament. Given that legislative bodies represent the normative core of democratic governance, any erosion of public confidence in these representative institutions signals deeper systemic difficulties. This deficit can be traced to several underlying mechanisms, including persistent political polarisation, coalition fragility, repeated governance gridlock, frequent corruption scandals, and the prevalence of elite-driven politics. When parliaments are perceived primarily as battlegrounds for partisan conflict rather than spaces for genuine problem-solving, citizens may become increasingly disillusioned with democratic processes. Over time, such perceptions risk diminishing electoral participation, weakening cycles of accountability, and creating an environment ripe for the emergence of populist narratives that favour assertive but less democratic forms of leadership.

Notably, the regression analysis shows that corruption perception has a greater negative effect on trust than polarization. This implies that the people can accept political discord and not what they perceive as ethical failure. Integrity, thus, comes out as an uncompromising source of legitimacy.

Judiciary: Between Independence and Politicization

The moderate score of judiciaries in terms of trust also indicates the institutional identity of the judiciary. Courts are supposed to be impartial arbitrators, but the problem is that they often participate in very relevant political issues, that is, it becomes very challenging to draw the line between adjudicating and activism.

This information indicates that judicial legitimacy is conditional - respected and examined.



When the judiciary is seen to protect constitutional norms, the citizens seem to reward them, but when they are seen to interpret rulings in partisan ways and interpretations, citizens seem suspicious. This dichotomy brings out a more general theoretical argument that judicial power is not always based on perceived impartiality, but also, legal correctness.

Performance as the Primary Currency of Trust

Empirical evidence confirms that perceived performance stands out as the most vital determinant of institutional trust. This finding lends strong support to the legitimacy theory of performance, highlighting that institutions cannot rely solely on their historical reputation or constitutional authority; practical efficiency remains essential. Competence is demonstrated through tangible results, proficiency fosters honesty, and integrity ultimately establishes trust. The mediation analysis further revealed that perceived institutional integrity partly mediates the effect of performance on trust, underscoring the interconnected nature of these factors in shaping public confidence.

From a practical perspective, citizens are less swayed by institutional rhetoric and more focused on clear, observable outcomes. The legitimacy chain suggests that trust in institutions is built and maintained through a combination of visible competence, ethical conduct, and honest communication. As such, the onus is on institutions to consistently deliver effective results and uphold integrity, as these qualities have a direct impact on the level of trust they inspire among the public.

Corruption as a Structural Trust Destroyer

Corruption perception stands out as one of the most persistently damaging influences in political research, with its detrimental effects on institutional legitimacy being both profound and consistent. The mere belief that corruption is widespread; regardless of whether individuals have directly experienced it, can significantly undermine public confidence. Corruption operates psychologically by signalling unfairness, discouraging meritocracy, and eroding the social contract, which together create an environment in which citizens feel alienated from the institutions meant to serve them.

Once doubts arise regarding institutional morality, rebuilding trust becomes exponentially more challenging than establishing it initially. Therefore, anti-corruption efforts should prioritise visible displays of integrity over silent enforcement. Quiet responsibility rarely shifts public perception; instead, overt demonstrations of ethical conduct are far more effective in restoring and maintaining popular trust.

Polarization and the Fragmentation of Legitimacy

Political polarisation has emerged as a notable factor in eroding trust towards representative institutions. In highly divided environments, citizens often interpret the actions and decisions of institutions through a partisan lens, effectively transforming bodies meant to be neutral and administrative into perceived political actors. This shift amplifies suspicion and undermines the credibility of these institutions, as individuals become more likely to judge them based on ideological alignment rather than objective performance.

This phenomenon is a key aspect of what scholars term legitimacy fragmentation. It describes a situation in which various groups within society place their trust in different institutions, primarily guided by shared ideologies rather than by the institutions' effectiveness or impartiality. Left unchecked, such fragmentation could lead to the development of parallel systems of trust, where unity is compromised and the foundational principles of democratic cohesion are threatened.

Civic Efficacy as a Democratic Buffer

The moderation analysis yielded an encouraging finding: civic efficacy can significantly soften the negative impact of perceived corruption. In essence, citizens who believe their participation matters are less likely to feel psychologically detached from institutions, even in the face of corruption concerns. This suggests that a sense of agency and involvement helps buffer individuals against the erosive effects of corruption on institutional trust, providing a hopeful outlook for democratic resilience.

Furthermore, this result underscores the stabilising influence of democratic attitudes, even when institutional performance comes under scrutiny. By strengthening civic education, encouraging participatory governance, and establishing citizen oversight platforms, it becomes possible to enhance institutional legitimacy indirectly. These measures not only empower citizens but also foster a culture of accountability



and engagement, which are vital for maintaining public confidence in democratic institutions.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to test the level of trust that the people of Pakistan have in their military, judiciary and parliament following the 2023 elections. The findings indicate a strong presence of institutional hierarchy, which is mostly based on perceived performance and integrity as opposed to perceived democratic power.

The dominant trust position that the military holds is indicative of the need to have stability and relatively weak position occupied by parliament is indicative of the continued concern over the effectiveness of governance and corruption. The courts continue to be placed between the respect and question and herein lies the fragility with which the courts have to act in apathetic political settings.

Above all, the study proves that the institutional trust cannot be fixed or automatic, it is attained through competence, openness, and ethical behaviour.

The way forward on the democratic consolidation issue is not through a reduction of the strong institutions but rather through strengthening the representative ones in the case of Pakistan. One should not think of restoring parliamentary credibility and ensuring judicial neutrality or protecting the security institutions of professionals, as alternative goals.

Finally, trust is the unseen part of governance. Without it, even well-designed institutions find it difficult to operate, with it, democratic systems are resistant to crisis.

Authors Contributions

All the authors participated in the ideation, development, and final approval of the manuscript, making significant contributions to the work reported.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The dataset analysed in the current study is not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations. However, it is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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