



Building bridges of trust: An exploratory study on factors influencing public trust in government among university students in Thailand

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Abstract

This paper looks at the factors affecting Thai university students' government confidence. Six main factors public participation, policy implementation efficiency, transparency and communication, accountability and integrity, anti-corruption measures, and crisis management and responsiveness are found by thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with seventeen students from RMUTT, CU, and SSRU. According to statistical analysis, public participation is the most crucial element affecting the evolution of trust, as 82% of respondents think it to be absolutely required. The results underscore the necessity of adopting a different and all-encompassing approach to enhancing public confidence. Specifically, the findings highlight the importance of implementing a comprehensive and varied strategy that includes participatory governance, policy transparency, and effective crisis management. These insights give legislators a meaningful direction for strengthening public trust in government institutions.

Key words: public trust, government, openness, responsibility, crisis management, anti-corruption.

Background and Significance

Public trust in government determines effective government and social stability; but this confidence has declined globally including in Thailand. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2023) shows that barely 35% of Thais believe their government is just. 42% of Thais believe. Global Values Survey 2022 results. Whereas trust improves public administration and democratic institutions, its decrease limits policy conformity, citizen involvement, and government performance (James & Van Ryzin, 2017). This was shown

in the COVID-19 epidemic; countries showing stronger public cooperation shown more confidence (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023).

Transparency, responsibility, honesty, policy efficacy, public involvement, and crisis management were highlighted in Hetherington & Rudolph's (2015) research, which discussed Thailand's ranking of 76th with a score of 38, reflecting notable corruption challenges. According to Transparency International (2023), false information and mistrust are compounded by the fact that over 70% of Thais rely primarily on social media for news consumption (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2023).

The COVID-19 crisis management also affected trust; 58% of Suan Dusit Poll (ONLINE REPORTOR, 2021) respondents expressed unhappiness with uneven policies and vaccine delays. This paper explores trust concerns among RMUTT, CU, and SSRU students by means of theme analysis and qualitative interviews. The outcomes will direct legislators on enhancing public engagement, responsibility, and transparency, thereby strengthening political stability and democratic resilience in Thailand.

Objective

To examine the factors influencing Thai university students' confidence in the government.

Literature Review

Public trust in government mirrors citizens' belief in the state's capacity to act in their best interests, preserve ethical norms, and correctly manage resources (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). It shapes citizen participation, policy compliance, and government effectiveness (James & Van Ryzin, 2017). Competency (service efficiency), integrity (ethical behavior and corruption prevention), accountability (official responsibility), and transparency (open decision-making) define trust, all of which support Cook et al., 2005.

One may theoretically understand popular trust in governance in many various ways. According to Levi & Stoker's 2000 Social Contract Theory, governments have to satisfy public expectations if trust is to grow; failing this causes deteriorating legitimacy. While Brazil suffers with corruption and inadequate government policies, good social programs help Sweden to keep great trust (Avritzer, 2017). Competency and compassion are stressed in trust theory as Hetherington & Rudolph (2015) do. Strong crisis management, such as Germany under COVID-19, increases public confidence, but uneven leadership, as shown in the United States under the Trump administration, lowers trust (Baekgaard et al., 2020). Strong institutions and legal systems underscore in institutional theory their relevance (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Transparency in government helps nations like Singapore to build enormous confidence; meanwhile, bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption in India lead to mistrust.

Comparative analysis shows that the effectiveness of governments determines confidence. Sweden and Finland, among the Nordic nations, have among the highest degrees of trust because of their open policies and solid social systems (OECD, 2021). Political upheaval and government inactivity have led trust to diminish in Hong Kong; events of corruption have caused altering trust in South Korea (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Public empirical studies apply both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Statistical models and survey questions allow quantitative research, that is, openness, government performance, and confidence,

to examine linkages (James & Van Ryzin, 2017). Usually, from confidence, solid crisis management, and honest communication, inspiration is fairly strong. More precisely, research on openness reveals how confidence increases and uncertainty decreases (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Especially in assessing COVID-19 responses, where candor and responsiveness become crucial confidence builders, qualitative research using case studies and interviews investigates citizen attitudes (Peters, 2022). Policy efficiency influences not only the justice of public operations (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

It becomes even more important with political awareness, civic participation, and openness as basic elements influencing young confidence in government. While political unrest as felt in Hong Kong erodes trust, Finland's participatory policymaking inspires great young confidence (OECD, 2021). Though little is known about university students' perspectives of governance, particularly on openness, responsibility, and ethics, contemporary research in Thailand mostly concentrates on macroeconomic performance, institutional stability, and political leadership (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023).

This research attempts to close this disparity by means of a qualitative approach to evaluate confidence under the effect of public involvement, policy implementation, and crisis management. Among the results will be suggestions for initiatives aimed at boosting public confidence, democratic involvement, and government policy. Beyond the successes of programs, ethical government and justice in decision-making define confidence (Peters & Filgueiras, 2022). Young confidence grows from civic engagement and inclusive communication, therefore enhancing democratic resilience and long-term political stability. This study adds data for legislators aiming at a more involved and trustworthy society as well as helps to improve the intellectual discourse on public confidence.

Methods

This paper investigates elements influencing public confidence in government from Thai university students using a qualitative exploratory research approach. The factors employed in the assessment of a few selected colleges were academic reputation, varied student enrollment, and active participation in governance concerns. While Guest et al. (2006) controlled the sample size, intentional sampling assured a spectrum of points of view. Using their theme approach, Data Saturation Braun & Clarke (2006) examined rich qualitative material produced by semi-structured interviews. To offer insights on openness, responsibility, policy efficacy, public involvement, anti-corruption measures, crisis management, and so on thus fostering public confidence in government this painstakingly gathered and examined data.

1. Population and sample

The comprising seventeen university students from Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (SSRU), Rajamangala University of Technology Thanyabudi (RMUTT), and Chulalongkorn University (CU), this survey targeted a spectrum of academic interests. Participants were carefully chosen depending on their coursework in sociopolitical topics, extracurricular activities engagement, or active social media activity. The selection criteria were enrollment in the accredited colleges, participation in governance-related events or activities, eagerness to participate in a 60–90 minute interview, and capacity to really articulate points of view on governance issues. From social media, student groups, academic counselors, and other sources,

hiring turned out just as needed.

2. Research tools

Using a semi-structured interview guide, one sought aspects affecting public confidence in government performance. This method ensures consistency and lets users jot some notes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Among the very relevant subjects discussed were citizen involvement, government transparency, policy success, anti-corruption laws, and crisis management. To ensure validity and reduce misinterpretation, three government officials evaluated the guide and pilot-tested it with students from a non-sampled university (Seidman, 2006).

3. Data collection

In-depth semi-structured interviews allow participants' points of view to be examined flexibly yet under control (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Seidman, 2006). Each interview, depending on the participant's preference, ran 60 to 90 minutes either online or in person. Interviews were audio recorded with permission for accuracy; field notes recorded nonverbal clues and contextual aspects.

4. Data analysis

Braun & Clarke (2019) employed thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report on data patterns. The process was divided into six key steps: 1) familiarization, which involved transcribing and repeatedly reading the data; 2) initial coding, which was done using open coding with NVivo software (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019); 3) developing themes by grouping codes into broader categories; 4) reviewing themes to ensure coherence and refinement; 5) defining themes to establish a final thematic structure; and 6) reporting findings by presenting themes with supporting quotes. A preset coding technique focused on governance transparency, policy efficacy, and anti-corruption initiatives. To ensure reliability, two independent coders reviewed intercoder agreements and resolved issues through discussion (Saldana, 2021). NVivo software facilitated systematic data organization, boosting the depth and rigor of the research (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

This study has received approval from the Ethics Committee Panel 2 at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (Certificate Number: COE. 2-222/2025) and adheres to ethical standards, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. 2006: Israel and Hay. Study information was provided to participants using aliases prior to obtaining consent; data were stored securely (Smith, 2024). In accordance with the Belmont Report's principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, the study upheld participant rights (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical & Behavioral Research, 1978).

Results

This study analyzed factors influencing public trust in government through in-depth interviews with 17 university students from RMUTT, CU, and SSRU. Using word frequency and thematic analysis: Main problems became public involvement, policy efficacy, openness, responsibility, anti-corruption laws, and crisis management. Emphasizing the need for participatory government in trust-building, public involvement was decided as the most efficient feature. Results of theme analysis, quantitative data (Table 1), and word cloud visualization (Figure. 2) show

how these concepts influence public opinions of government institutions.

1. Word Frequency

The researchers employed word frequency analysis with traditional qualitative research methods revealing notable variations in popular confidence in the administration. Seventeen RMUTT, Chulalongkorn University, and SSRU students conducted in-depth interviews resulting in rich qualitative data. Their responses were combined into one dataset, and then Python's Counter module was used to find word frequency (McKinney 2010). According to Nivre et al. (2016), common stop words were deleted to improve clarity, with a focus on key concepts like "transparent," "accountability," "policies," and "participation." The findings were presented graphically as a word cloud, with key terms highlighted (Heimerl et al., 2014). Related ideas were also organized into larger themes to provide a logical picture of the fundamental elements influencing public trust (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). Researchers can use this topic of study to investigate public opinions regarding government agencies. Table 1 and Figure 1 show the analytical results.

Table 1. Key Themes Influencing Public Trust in Government

Rank	Theme	Frequency
1	Public Engagement and Participation	23
2	Overall, Trust and Confidence	14
3	Effective Policy and Governance	12
4	Transparency and Communication	8
5	Accountability and Integrity	3
6	Crisis Management and Responsiveness	2
7	Anti-Corruption Measures	2

Table 1. presents, based on thematic analysis of interview data, a quantitative evaluation of primary factors influencing public confidence in government. Ranked best stressing the part public involvement, openness, and inclusive decision-making play in, "Public Engagement and Participation" has a frequency of 23. Frequency of 14, "Generally Trust and Confidence" conveys general impression shaped by consistency, past performance, and government reputation. Emphasizing the relationship between trust and the government's ability to implement policies and meet social demands, "Effective Policy and Governance" runs on frequency of 12.

Moreover, stressed in "Transparency and Communication" (frequency: 8) is exact knowledge and honest communication. Frequency: 3 seems less often, but "Accountability and Integrity" captures society hopes for moral government. Both frequency: 2, post-adjustment, "Crisis Management and Responsiveness" and "Anti-Corruption Measures" reveal worries on crisis handling and corruption. These results underline the need to maintaining public trust in continuous performance in openness, responsibility, participation, governance, crisis reaction, and anti-corruption initiatives.

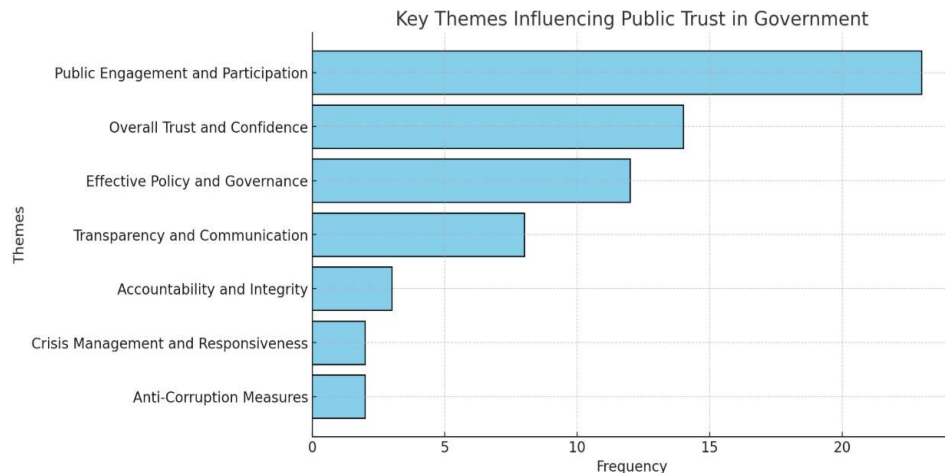


Figure. 1 Bar chart of key themes' frequency in public trust in government

Figure. 1 shows, in a horizontal bar chart, the frequency of important themes from Table 1, thereby enabling a clear comparison of their relative significance. With the longest bar, public involvement and participation emphasize its crucial part in developing confidence. Not only do they obviously affect public opinion, general confidence, and trust, but they also highly value effective government and policy. Though their frequencies are lowered, responsibility and integrity, crisis management, and anti-corruption regulations nevertheless help to establish confidence; transparency and communication are fairly important.

2. Word Cloud

The word cloud created from interview responses on "Factors Influencing Trust in the Government" illustrates significant components that shape public trust, with "transparency" emerging as the prominent topic. Transparency emphasizes the importance of open communication, clear information, and honest decision-making (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Along with transparency, terms like "accountability," "integrity," and "honesty" emphasize ethical governance and leadership trust (Peters & Filgueiras, 2022). The use of terms such as "policies," "outcomes," and "performance" highlights the importance of effective governance and demonstrable results in preserving public trust (James & Van Ryzin, 2017). Public engagement is also important, as evidenced by terms like "participation" and "involvement," which emphasize how inclusive policymaking fosters trust (Kim & Kim, 2021). Furthermore, phrases like "crisis," "management," and "responsiveness" emphasize the need of prompt and effective government response during an emergency (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). The terms "corruption," "prevention," and "control" highlight high public expectations for anti-corruption efforts (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023). Finally, the word cloud demonstrates how openness, ethical leadership, policy effectiveness, public engagement, crisis management, and anti-corruption initiatives impact citizens' trust in their government, as depicted in Figure. 2.



Figure. 2 Word cloud of factors influencing trust in the government

3. Factors Influencing Public Trust in The Government

The terms frequency and theme analysis reveal important elements influencing public confidence in governance. Public participation is very important since it emphasizes the importance of participatory government for the formation of policy. Good Policy Implementation also ranks well since it links trust to the government's capacity to produce evident results. Open and honest communication greatly shapes public confidence. Open and honest government contacts support legitimacy and credibility development. Though less often, responsibility and honesty still define popular hopes of moral administration. Emphasizing the need for honest and corruption-free government, anti-corruption laws also drew attention. Ultimately, crisis management and responsiveness highlight the need for a decent government response during crises notwithstanding their declining frequency.

This part examines how each one of these elements influences public confidence in governmental institutions, either in favor of or against.

1) Active engagement is the most crucial component influencing public trust in government since it promotes responsibility, transparency, and inclusiveness. People who see and hear their points of view reflected in decisions come out as more trustworthy. The third respondent, stressing responsiveness noted, "When the government really considers our suggestions, it makes me feel like my input matters." Once more stressing that engagement helps one establish confidence in leadership, another added, "A government that listens is a government I can trust" (Interviewee 7). Including numerous voices and transcending symbolic involvement allows governments to close the distance with their people and produce a more honest and transparent governance approach.

2) The probes revealed Public confidence depends on well-implemented policies. Important buzzwords underlining its relevance are "policies," "outcomes," and "performance." When people perceive real benefits—like improved infrastructure or reduced living expenses—they start to trust the government. The third interviewee is Measurable outcomes are physical objects. Interviewee 10 says, "Promises aren't enough; I need to see economic

stability, healthcare improvements, or education reform." Moreover, strengthening confidence is the reaction of crisis governments: "Their quick response to the floods showed efficiency," the eighth interviewee said. Actually, consistent policies are quite important. Interviewee 15 then says, "clear goals and visible progress earn my trust". Especially combating corruption and injustice enables one to develop confidence. (12th interviewee) These results indicate that responsibility, openness, and flexibility mostly help to build public confidence by means of obvious results.

3) Transparency, communication and honesty define public confidence; so, in relation to "transparency," "communication," and "honesty," they are in financial management and decision-making, proper openness calls for both accuracy and accessibility. Open communication helps to create credibility and lowers uncertainty. "When the government shares required information and clarifies decisions, reassures me that they have nothing to hide," says "When they provide data and reasoning, I trust their leadership more," says Interviewee 1, who understands policy reasons, "which helps one to build confidence". Timeliness of updates is absolutely important during a crisis: "Daily honest updates help to build confidence and lower anxiety" (Interviewee 8). Conversely, left out knowledge increases mistrust: Five of the interview subjects remark, "Lack of transparency makes it hard to trust them". Key also has bearing on financial openness: Commenting, Interviewee 12 says, "Seeing where the budget goes assures me funds are used responsibly". Transparency also defines responsibility: "Governments that communicate openly and listen to feedback show they genuinely care" (Interviewee 7). These results show how the openness, responsibility, and involvement that transparency inspires help to close the divide between public knowledge and policies.

4) Though less often mentioned, public confidence relies on integrity and accountability. Words like "accountability," "integrity," and "ethical government" call attention to the requirement of moral leadership and high moral standards among government officials. Accountability assures governments of their ownership of their policies and acts. "It makes me trust the government more when it keeps its word and owns when things do not go as planned," said Interviewee Five. One further major obstacle is financial openness. "I expect the government to be open about any mistakes made and produce clear reports on how budgets are spent," the 12-year responder stated. Integrity closely relates to honesty and constancy in leadership. A government that values integrity acts as it promises and carries out advised policies. There should not be hidden objectives (Interviewee 7). Notes Interviewee 10, ethical leadership increases confidence much more. "It defines the standard for the entire government if leaders by example exhibit moral behavior and integrity." Maintaining confidence mostly depends on effective government structures including regulatory oversight and anti-corruption policies. "I want to see not just words but actions how the government handles corruption cases and whether officials are really held accountable," says interviewee 16. Though public opinion might not always focus on ethics and accountability, their impact on confidence is really important. Public confidence is developed by openness, moral leadership, and forceful action against government corruption.

5) Anti-corruption reflects the great demand for competent government; initiatives against corruption assist to inspire public confidence. Strict policies, openness, and execution are thus rather important since corruption influences institutions, changes policies, and reduces confidence. Interviewee

16 believes, "holding high-ranking officials responsible proves the government's commitment to justice." Tight application of well defined rules also instills confidence: "Knowing corrupt individuals face real consequences reassures me" (Interviewee 10). Openness in public procurement, financial planning, and service delivery fosters confidence; "Seeing how public funds are used reassures me there's no misuse" (Interviewee 12). Encouragement of integrity goes beyond mere punishment; "it's not just about punishing corruption but also about preventing it from the start" (Interviewee 7). Regular audits, whistleblower protection, and citizen control help to increase public confidence even more. Results suggest that proactive transparency and collaborative legal action conducted together offer fair governance since a system free of corruption obtains confidence by way of responsibility and effective use of resources.

6) Less often acknowledged, public confidence mostly hinges on crisis reaction and management. Keywords like "crisis," "management," and "responsibility" point out how governments should approach problems. Good and efficient governance inspires people to have faith in government capacity in handling political, financial, natural disasters, or public health concern. "The way the government handled the most recent floods really surprised me in speed. They could, in my opinion, manage crises " (Interviewee 8). Moreover, quite crucial is honest communication. "Government daily updates during the epidemic gave me protection and knowledge. Maintaining my trust becomes really important (Interviewee 3). Apart from quick reaction, proactive crisis handling builds confidence. Interviewee 12 points out, "A government that prepares for crises rather than only reacts shows me they are serious about protecting the public." Dealing with local governments, NGOs, and international organizations allows one to gain confidence; good planning is built on adaptable public services, qualified personnel, and emergency response plans. Those governments that give welfare and safety top priority foster public confidence. "I have to see that the government is putting people first, particularly considering hard times," respondent five said. As much faith in ability grows as in compassion and care for the welfare of the people. While crisis management is not always required, everyday problems ironically undermine confidence. Combining planning, quick response, open communication, and a people-first mentality by governments guarantees resilience and legitimacy, therefore assuring continued public confidence under demanding conditions.

Discussion

This suggests that confidence in governance procedures also influences public trust, rather than merely being dependent on government outcomes, as observed in other studies on public confidence in governance (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; James & Van Ryzin, 2017). Particularly in Thailand, this study underlines the increasing relevance of public engagement and crisis response in developing trust even in cases when conventional values like transparency, responsibility, and policy efficacy are still somewhat relevant. Studies linking participatory government to increased transparency and inclusivity support results suggesting that public engagement is mostly a responsibility of raising confidence. This is in line with the 2019 case study on public involvement in decision-making by Levi & Stoker (2000), which shows how better the social compact between the government and the people is developed. But this research contributes to other studies by providing context-specific qualitative insights showing how public involvement helps Thailand's institutions to be credible. Likewise, good policy execution is the basis of trust-building; thus, it

reinforces Hetherington & Rudolph's (2015) finding that people's confidence increases upon seeing real policy gains. This especially relates to countries experiencing social and economic poverty applying Creswell & Poth's (2016) idea of performance-based trust.

Transparency and communication are also rather important in line with Braun & Clarke (2019) and Grimmelikhuisen et al. (2013), who underline that easily available information encourages confidence. Research supports Patton's (2002) assertion that openness during crises reduces false information and builds public confidence as well. Furthermore, dependent on ethics and obligation is confidence; hence, underlining even more the need for moral leadership and systems of responsibility (Seidman, 2006; Peters & Filgueiras, 2022). This study supports earlier studies showing that corruption still seriously lowers confidence (Cook et al., 2005; James & Van Ryzin, 2017). It supports Merriam & Tisdell's (2016) claim that institutional legitimacy is defined by both punitive and preventive anti-corruption efforts. Moreover, crisis management turned out to be a major determinant, thereby supporting the (2020) assertion of competent government reactions during crises building public confidence. But this study goes beyond others since it shows how political and cultural background impacts ideas of crisis management, especially in Thailand more than in others.

Results show variations even if they generally support existing theories. Public involvement seems to be more necessary for trust-building than earlier focus, suggesting that participatory government is always more crucial in defining confidence. Moreover, this paper highlights the growing importance of crisis responsiveness in impacting public trust, even if past studies have largely targeted normal governance. This study has restrictions even with its contributions. The limited sample size can limit generalizability; so in order to improve external validity, the next studies should employ more diverse, larger samples. Dependency on qualitative interviews could result in response bias, that is, replies from participants that are socially desirable whereby Triangulation methods using observational data could be included in the next research to raise dependability. The focus of the research on Thai university students lowers relevance to more broad groups. More detailed research should include poor areas, politicians, and elderly persons to present a more whole picture. Moreover, while this study provides only a peek of public confidence, longitudinal studies are necessary to examine how it evolves with time.

This study contributes to the academic discussion on public confidence in government, stressing fundamental governance concerns influencing young people's confidence in Thailand. Public participation and crisis reaction are beginning to take center stage even while traditional principles like openness, responsibility, and policy efficacy are still rather significant. Still, one should take into account as one looks at the results the limits of the research on sample size, response bias, and contextual specificity. Larger samples, hybrid methodologies, and longitudinal research can enable the next studies to simplify these challenges and offer a greater knowledge of popular faith in government over history. Those legislators who give these elements first importance will be able to create more inclusive, open, responsive government structures, thus increasing public confidence and civic participation.

Body of Knowledge

This study complements other studies by concluding that public participation and involvement are the most crucial components in developing confidence in government, hence transcending openness, responsibility, and policy efficiency. Unlike earlier research on institutional performance and ethical governance (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015), this study shows young people in Thailand value active participation since it supports inclusivity, transparency, and a feeling of ownership in decision-making.

The study also simplifies crisis management by showing how effective good communication can reduce suspicion even under heavy load (James & Van Ryzin, 2017). New studies show that people want anti-corruption programs to be both preventative and responsible, therefore fostering long-term confidence.

These findings confirm our theoretical understanding of public confidence by include the opinions of young people and have practical implications for legislators aiming to create solid, honest, transparent government structures.

Suggestions

To establishing digital feedback systems, public forums, and cooperative decision-making projects together with giving citizen involvement top importance would help governments to raise public participation. Encouragement of several points of view promotes confidence and inclusion between people and their administration. Engagement could be raised by means of a platform for policy comments, participatory budgeting, and real-time public opinion collecting. Particularly during crises, the government should give honest, open communication high priority since it helps to prohibit false information from spreading and so raise public confidence. Publications of government performance reports, policy repercussions, and state finances help to increase openness. Moreover, enhancing control are independent monitoring groups and media cooperation.

Moreover, performance criteria, whistleblower protection, and independent audits will help one to improve responsibility and so guarantee competent and ethical government. Good crisis management depends on communication and readiness at last. React strategies should be developed by governments, personnel assigned, and communities engaged in sequence of coordinated action. Real-time crisis communication, crisis simulations, and building emergency response teams help to increase public confidence and readiness. Future studies on public confidence in government during crises could juxtapose generational views on accountability and openness. Knowledge of the success of public participation projects all around will help to shape laws. Including research results in policy agendas allows governments to boost public confidence, strengthen democracy, and improve responsiveness by means of policies.

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