



Decoding trust: How transparency, political stability, and leadership shape public confidence in government institutions

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Abstract

This study explores how transparency, political stability, and leadership influence public trust in government institutions through a qualitative approach involving in-depth interviews with 17 diverse key informants. Utilizing thematic analysis and NVivo tools, the research identifies critical themes that highlight the nuanced dynamics of trust-building in governance. Findings reveal that transparency enhances trust by promoting accountability and reducing corruption perceptions; however, excessive transparency without effective communication may lead to confusion and diminished trust. Political stability contributes to institutional confidence through consistent governance and problem-solving, yet excessive stability may result in stagnation if not balanced with adaptability. Leadership emerged as a pivotal factor, demonstrating that ethical and participatory leadership significantly enhances public perception of governance. The study integrates Institutional Trust Theory and Political Legitimacy Theory, proposing a holistic framework where transparency, stability, and leadership interact dynamically to shape public trust. These insights offer valuable guidance for policymakers seeking to strengthen governance by promoting strategic transparency, adaptive stability, and inclusive leadership. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader academic discourse on governance and trust, offering practical recommendations for building resilient and responsive government institutions that align with societal values and expectations.

Keywords: accountability; governance; leadership; political stability; transparency

Background and Significance

Public trust in institutions is fundamental to a well-functioning democratic society, influencing civic engagement, legal compliance, and support for public policies (Newton & Norris, 2020). Trust strengthens institutional legitimacy, enabling governance structures to function effectively. Conversely, when trust diminishes, societal apathy and political disengagement rise, leading to governance challenges and policy resistance (Tyler, 2006). Thus, understanding the factors that build and sustain trust is critical for the stability and responsiveness of democratic institutions.

Research highlights three primary drivers of public trust: transparency, political stability, and leadership (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Alesina et al., 1996; Burns, 1978). Transparency ensures open communication and accountability, fostering perceptions of honesty and integrity within institutions (Meijer, 2013). Political stability provides predictability, reinforcing confidence in governance (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). Leadership shapes public perception through competence, integrity, and responsiveness (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, these factors are often studied independently, overlooking their interdependent influence on trust formation (Putnam, 2000). Moreover, much of the existing research is quantitative, limiting the understanding of nuanced societal perceptions and contextual variations (Inglehart & Welzel, 2019).

This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the interactions between transparency, political stability, and leadership in shaping public trust. By engaging a diverse group of participants, including students, government officials, the general public, business leaders, and academics, this research offers a holistic perspective on trust formation. The findings contribute to political science and public administration by providing empirical evidence on governance-trust dynamics and informing strategies for strengthening public confidence in institutions (Fukuyama, 1996; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Ultimately, this research aims to advance governance models that enhance institutional legitimacy, stability, and responsiveness.

Objective

1. To examine the role of transparency in shaping public trust.
2. To analyze how political stability influences confidence in institutions.
3. To evaluate the impact of leadership on public perception of governance.

Literature review

Transparency and Public Trust: The Double-Edged Sword

Transparency is essential for building public trust by ensuring accessible information, open communication, and accountability (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). It enhances government visibility and understanding, fostering democratic engagement (Hood & Heald, 2006). By providing insight into resource management and policy implementation, transparency empowers civic participation and strengthens trust (Meijer, 2013; Miller & Listhaug, 1999). Digital transparency, through open data platforms and AI-driven governance tools, has further improved public oversight. The Transparency-Trust Hypothesis posits that increased transparency reduces information asymmetry and demonstrates government integrity, thereby

boosting trust (Hood & Heald, 2006). Proactive information sharing mitigates misinformation and speculation, enhancing public confidence (Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007). During the COVID-19 pandemic, transparent communication on health measures and infection data sustained trust more effectively than information suppression. Additionally, digital platforms and social media transparency play a crucial role in trust formation by enabling direct government-citizen interaction.

However, excessive transparency may have unintended consequences, as revealing too much or exposing systemic inefficiencies can erode trust rather than build it (Meijer, 2013). For example, disclosing widespread corruption may diminish public confidence instead of enhancing it (Hood & Heald, 2006). To avoid this trust paradox, transparency must align with public expectations (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013). Additionally, algorithmic transparency in AI-driven decision-making raises concerns about fairness and bias, further complicating trust dynamics. Transparency without context can also lead to misinterpretations, as overwhelming or poorly explained information fosters confusion, skepticism, and disengagement (Miller & Listhaug, 1999). Therefore, strategic communication through clear data presentation and interpretive guidance is crucial to ensuring that transparency reinforces trust rather than undermining it. Governments that integrate transparency with effective messaging and responsive engagement are more likely to sustain higher public trust.

Political Stability: Balancing Order and Adaptability

Political stability is essential for public trust, ensuring predictable processes, smooth power transitions, and minimal turmoil (Alesina et al., 1996). It minimizes governance disruptions, enabling consistent policy implementation and reinforcing institutional legitimacy (North, 1990). Stability fosters confidence in government reliability and effectiveness, as outlined in the Stability-Trust Model, which links predictability to reduced uncertainty (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019; North, 1990). In democracies, stability paired with transparency and accountability enhances trust (Levitsky & Way, 2010), while in autocracies, stability often stems from coercion, making trust fragile (Diamond, 2019). However, excessive stability can lead to stagnation, as rigid systems struggle to address contemporary challenges like economic disparity and technological shifts (Alesina et al., 1996; North, 1990). Adaptable governance models that balance stability with innovation foster higher trust by demonstrating responsiveness (Diamond, 2019). For instance, digital governance and participatory policymaking enhance both stability and trust.

Political stability indirectly influences trust by fostering economic growth and public welfare. Stable political environments attract investment, stimulate development, and enhance service delivery, thereby reinforcing institutional credibility (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). However, stability alone does not guarantee socio-economic progress, particularly if it is maintained through undemocratic means (Alesina et al., 1996). Effective stability must translate into tangible benefits that meet societal needs (Diamond, 2019).

Leadership: The Catalyst for Institutional Confidence

Leadership plays a crucial role in shaping public trust by influencing governance and public perceptions. Effective leadership, marked by integrity, competence, and responsiveness, reinforces institutional legitimacy through ethical governance and public commitment (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio,

2006). Trust in leadership depends on alignment with societal values and expectations (Nye, 2008). Transformational leadership fosters trust by engaging citizens, creating a shared vision, and demonstrating ethical governance (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Leaders like Nelson Mandela and Jacinda Ardern emphasize empathy, inclusivity, and proactive governance, enhancing institutional trust (Goleman, 2017). Adaptive leadership, which prioritizes crisis responsiveness, transparency, and decisiveness, further strengthens public trust (Kellerman, 2012).

Transactional leadership prioritizes short-term efficiency and structured rule enforcement but may lack the vision needed for sustained trust, making it more pragmatic than inspirational (Kellerman, 2012; Burns, 1978; Nye, 2008). Hybrid leadership models that integrate transformational and transactional elements provide a balanced approach, maintaining stability while fostering trust. In contrast, autocratic leadership, though ensuring political stability, often erodes trust by centralizing power, restricting public participation, and manipulating information, leading to skepticism and disengagement (Goleman, 2017; Kellerman, 2012). Trust based on coercion is fragile and tends to collapse during crises (Nye, 2008). The Leadership-Trust Framework emphasizes that ethical, transparent, and inclusive leadership is essential for institutional confidence (Nye, 2008). Leaders who engage effectively through digital platforms strengthen trust by fostering clear communication and ethical consistency (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Conceptual framework

This research integrates Institutional Trust Theory and Political Legitimacy Theory to examine how transparency, political stability, and leadership shape public trust. Institutional Trust Theory links trust to perceived competence, fairness, and accountability, sustained through ethical governance (Rothstein, 2011; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). Political Legitimacy Theory asserts that legitimacy stems from public belief in the rightful exercise of power, requiring governance to reflect democratic values (Fukuyama, 1996; Tyler, 2006). Comparative frameworks like Social Capital Theory and Public Value Theory provide additional insights—Social Capital Theory ties trust to social networks and civic engagement (Putnam, 2000), while Public Value Theory emphasizes policy alignment with public needs. By integrating these perspectives, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of trust formation in governance and informs strategies to enhance institutional credibility.

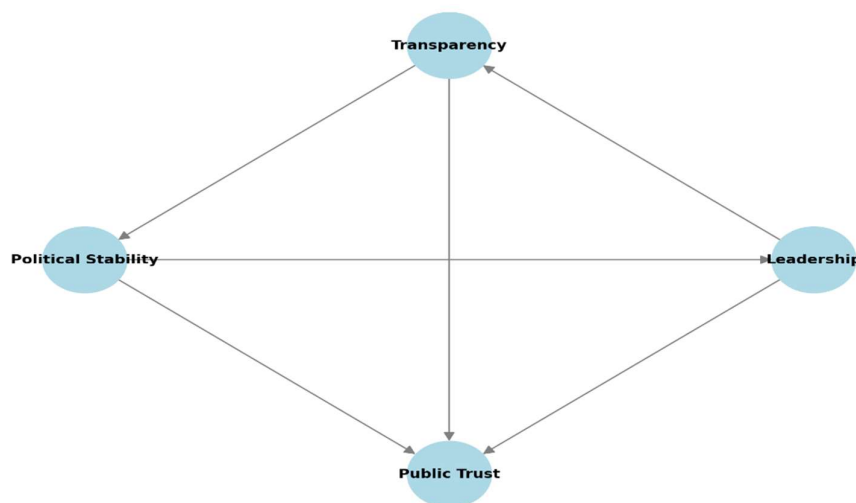


Figure. 1 Research conceptual framework

Methods

1. Population and sample

This study employed purposive sampling to select 17 key informants from six groups: students, government officials, the general public, politicians, business leaders, and academics, based on political awareness, professional experience, and research relevance (Patton, 2014). The sample size of 17 was deemed appropriate based on data saturation principles in qualitative research, where additional interviews are unlikely to yield new themes (Guest et al., 2020). This ensures both depth and efficiency in data collection. The sample included three politically engaged students representing young voters, three government officials from different departments providing policy insights, four members of the general public offering diverse opinions, three politicians (both current and former from different parties) discussing governance challenges, two business leaders highlighting the political impact on the economy (Atugeba & Acquah-Sam, 2024), and two academics contributing theoretical and research-based perspectives (Tisdell et al., 2025; Creswell & Poth, 2021). To minimize selection bias, participants were chosen to reflect a balanced range of perspectives across different political orientations and professional backgrounds.

2. Research tools

This study uses in-depth interviews to analyze how factors such as transparency, political stability, and leadership influence public trust. This approach provides a clearer understanding of participants' real experiences and perspectives, revealing details and contexts that numbers or statistics alone may not fully capture (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Additionally, gathering insights from diverse groups helps ensure that the findings reflect multiple perspectives, offering a more well-rounded and comprehensive analysis (Tisdell et al., 2025).

3. Data collection

Data collection involved semi-structured in-depth interviews, ensuring flexibility while focusing on

key research questions (Patton, 2014). An interview guide with open-ended questions explored informants' views on transparency, political stability, and leadership (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Interviews, conducted in-person or virtually, lasted 60–90 minutes (Creswell & Poth, 2021). With consent, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and field notes captured non-verbal cues (Tisdell et al., 2025; Chitac et al., 2024). Triangulation was applied by cross-referencing responses with policy documents and media reports to enhance validity.

4. Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, a method that helps identify, analyze, and summarize key themes from qualitative data through a six-step process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Creswell & Poth, 2021). This analysis provided insights into transparency, political stability, and leadership, capturing both expected and emerging themes (Tisdell et al., 2025). Coding was conducted manually and with the assistance of software such as NVivo to enhance accuracy (Gambardella, 2023). NVivo was specifically used for thematic pattern detection, word frequency analysis, and sentiment categorization, enabling a more systematic and unbiased approach to identifying key themes across large textual datasets (Welsh, 2002). The analysis considered both explicit content and underlying meanings to ensure a comprehensive interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). One limitation of this qualitative approach is the inherent subjectivity in data interpretation, which was mitigated through researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing. Additionally, while findings offer deep insights, their generalizability to broader populations may be limited (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from Ethics Committee Panel 2 at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (Certificate No. COE. 2-007/2025) and adhered to ethical principles emphasizing respect, integrity, and confidentiality (Patton, 2014). Participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form, detailing the study's objectives, procedures, risks, and benefits, and gave written informed consent, ensuring their understanding of their rights, including the ability to withdraw without consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2021). All personal identifiers were removed, and interview transcripts were anonymized, while audio recordings and documents were securely stored in password-protected files, accessible only to the research team (Tisdell et al., 2025; Aldridge et al., 2010). This study prioritizes minimizing participant discomfort and will present findings honestly and transparently to accurately reflect participants' perspectives without bias (Patton, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Results

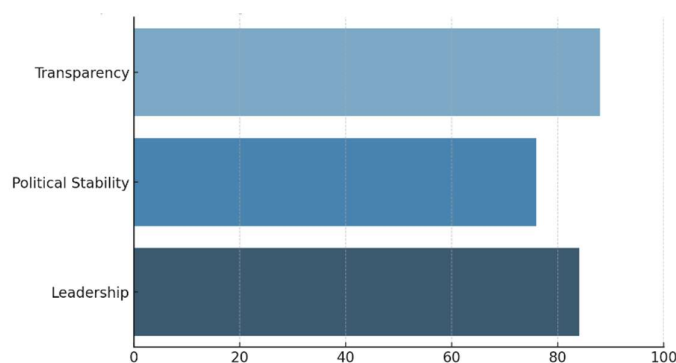


Figure. 2 Important of Key Themes of Public Trust (Based on Interview Data)

Table 1. Comparative analysis of key themes

Key theme	Key terms	Key insights from interviews	Percentage of Respondents Emphasizing	Unexpected findings
Transparency	Disclosure, Budget, Procurement, Verification, Accessibility	Transparency in financial matters and open investigations are crucial for trust. Some concerns about over-exposure of inefficiencies exist.	88%	Some respondents argued that excessive transparency could reduce trust if it exposes inefficiencies.
Political Stability	Stability, Problem-Solving, Economic Development, Consistency, Security	Stable governments enable consistent policies, economic growth, and long-term solutions. However, excessive stability may hinder necessary reforms.	76%	Over-stability may create stagnation and resistance to necessary change.
Leadership	Accountability, Efficiency, Commitment, Reform, Participation	Effective leadership is linked to accountability, policy reform, and citizen participation. Public engagement and ethical consistency were the most valued attributes.	84%	Certain leaders seen as efficient but lacking public engagement were viewed as less trustworthy.

The role of transparency in shaping public trust

1. Word Cloud Analysis: The word cloud of interviews highlights significant transparency terms such as "disclosure," "budget," "procurement," "verification," and "accessibility." "Disclosure" captures the public call for open release of government actions. "Budget" and "procurement" emphasize transparency in finance management, and "verification" underscores public scrutiny. "Accessibility" suggests that information must be accessible and easy to comprehend.



Figure. 3 Word cloud: transparency and public trust

2. Interview Findings: People talked about how clear sharing is key to trust. They all said we need open and true talk. Interviewee 5 said showing budget info, project news, and check-up results makes the government more true. Interviewee 6 noted clean budget facts cut doubt about bad acts. Interviewee 9 and 10 said clear buying makes folks sure that tax money is used right. Interviewee 7 shared that telling check-up outcomes builds trust in fixing wrongs. Interviewee 3 said watching projects openly helps people join in and makes ties between folk and government strong. Interviewee 15 stressed ongoing clear sharing helps fix trust after old mess-ups. Descriptive statistics show that 88% of Interviewees see clear sharing as a big need for trust in groups.

How political stability influences confidence in institutions?

1. Word Cloud Analysis: Political stability's word cloud highlights words such as "stability," "problem-solving," "economic development," "consistency," and "security." "Stability" was a pillar, and "problem-solving" and "economic development" highlight that it's about delivering real-life solutions by the government. "Consistency" indicates that there's a call from the public for consistent policies, and "security" indicates that a stable situation brings security and order and therefore gives institutions' confidence.

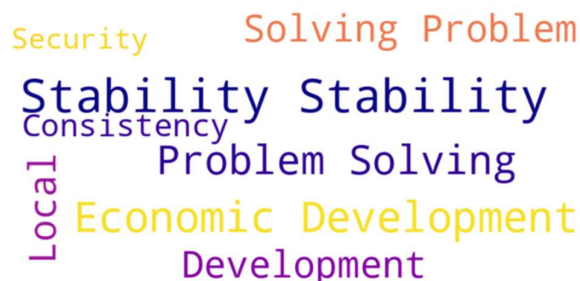


Figure. 4 Word cloud: political stability and public trust

2. Interview Findings: Political stability emerged as a key factor in building public. The Interviewees think that a stability government helps them trust more. Interviewee 17 said fixing money troubles and starting local plans makes trust strong because stability lets good plans last long. Interviewee 4 said that stability leaders tackle big problems like dirty air and crime, which makes people trust more. To back this, Interviewee 17 spoke of firm steps against tiny dust and crime groups, showing good rule. Interviewee 12 said that steady work, not just quick fixes, makes government seem more trusty. Interviewee 2 added that stability brings money and grows in small places, making trust rise when people see changes. Interviewee 15 said that calm lets leaders deal with real troubles without losing focus because of politics. Descriptive statistics show that 76% of interviewees identified stability as essential to fostering institutional confidence.

Impact of leadership on public perception of governance

1. Word Cloud Analysis: The word cloud brings to light several essential terms that people associate with good leadership and governance. For instance, "accountability" points to the public's expectation that leaders should own up to their actions and maintain high ethical standards. "Efficiency" reflects a demand for quick, effective service delivery and policy execution. The term "commitments" reminds us that leaders must follow through on their promises, while "reform" signals a strong desire for progressive change. Finally, "participation" emphasizes the importance of leaders who actively engage with citizens in decision-making processes. Together, these insights suggest that effective leadership is measured not just by its policy outcomes but also by the quality of its processes and the level of community involvement.

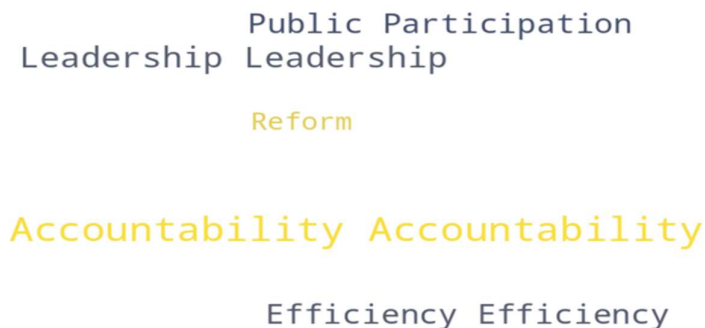


Figure. 5 Word Cloud: Leadership and Public Perception of Governance

2. Interview Findings: Interview data link key leadership qualities—accountability, efficiency, participation, reform, and commitment—to public trust. Interviewee 1 emphasized that keeping promises and following through on commitments builds trust by aligning actions with public expectations. Interviewee 11 noted that reforms improving bureaucratic efficiency not only expedite services but also signal a commitment to quality governance—a view shared by Interviewees 14 and 15. Interviewee 3 highlighted that creating channels for public participation makes governance more inclusive and transparent, thereby bridging the gap between government and citizens. Additionally, Interviewee 15 stressed that a willingness

to reform outdated practices demonstrates a forward-thinking approach that bolsters public confidence. The descriptive statistics show that 84% of participants associated leadership with public trust, emphasizing accountability and participation as top factors.

Addressing Unexpected Findings

Most people agreed there is a strong bond between openness, steadiness, good lead, and trust, but a few had other thoughts. Person 8 said that too much openness can show bad parts, making people doubt more than trust. Person 13 pointed out that too much steadiness might look like no change, stopping needed political changes. These points show how complex it is to build trust and the need for evenness in ruling. To make these points clear, a table that compares important ideas, main words, thoughts from talks, and how much each point was stressed by the people interviewed.

In summary, this study gives a full look at how clear acts, stable politics, and good leaders affect how much people trust government groups, showing key things that help both school thinking and real rule. Not like past looks that checked these parts one by one, this study shows how they link up, making it clear that people's trust comes from a mix of clear acts, firm politics, and right leaders, not just one part by itself. The study shows that while clear acts build trust by open talks and being answerable, it needs smart handle to not give too much info or wrong ideas. Political stability helps people trust systems more by keeping things the same and fixing issues well. But too much steadiness with no change can make things stale and lower trust. Good leaders are key. Leaders who are fair, open, and let people have a say tend to boost how the public sees rules being managed. These points back up ideas from theories on Trust in systems and Politics being fair, by showing that systems in charge need to keep real and always get better to meet what people hope for.

Discussion

This study looked into how clear actions, steady politics, and good leaders shape how much people trust their government bodies. By using detailed talks, main points came out. These points give a clear look at what makes or breaks trust. The results matched with what books and theories already say, but they also gave fresh views on running governments and keeping public trust.

The findings support prior research on transparency as crucial for public trust (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007). The word cloud emphasized "disclosure," "budget," and "procurement," indicating the public values open government information. Interviews reinforced this, highlighting the need for greater transparency in budget spending and procurement to curb corruption and boost credibility. These findings align with Institutional Trust Theory, which links trust to competence, fairness, and transparency (Rothstein, 2011), and Political Legitimacy Theory, which ties legitimacy to transparent and effective governance (Fukuyama, 1996; Tyler, 2006). However, excessive transparency without clear communication may cause misunderstandings and erode trust, underscoring the need to present information in an accessible and comprehensible manner.

Political stability often goes hand in hand with public trust because it shows good rules and the

skill to solve problems (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019). This study points out that clear policy work and seen acts, like tackling PM 2.5 dust, make people believe more in the system. The word cloud puts "stability," "problem-solving," and "economic development," making this link clear. But too much stability can make things slow and less quick to answer, making trust weak in the end. Levitsky and Way (2010) say that in mixed kinds of rule, stability often costs how much people can join in. After WWII, Japan had long calm under the Liberal Democratic Party which made money grow but also led to slow political moves, needing big changes. This fits with what Levitsky and Way (2010) said: stability needs the power to change to keep trust strong.

Leadership's impact on public trust was evident, emphasizing accountability, efficiency, and keeping promises. The findings support the Leadership-Trust Framework, which links ethical and transparent leadership to institutional trust (Nye, 2008). Interviewees highlighted that reform-driven actions, public engagement, and efficiency improve governance perceptions. The word cloud emphasizes "accountability" and "participation" as key themes. Practical applications suggest structured leadership training in transparency, ethical governance, and public engagement could enhance trust. Implementing leadership evaluation metrics ensures ethical decision-making and responsiveness. Additionally, public participation fosters shared governance, reinforcing transformational leadership theories, which argue that engaged and inspiring leaders build lasting trust (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

The results show that trust grows differently in various cultures. In lands with a lot of freedom, clear acts and shared rules link well to the trust of the people, like in Nordic lands with open ruling ways. In strict leadership, trust mostly comes from firmness and seen skill more than from shared rule. For example, in China, people's trust ties to how well the government works and how the economy does more than to open democracy. This points out that while being clear, steady, and having strong leaders are key everywhere, the way they build trust changes with the kind of government and rule in place.

Body of knowledge

1. Transparency is often seen as a key factor in building public trust. However, our study shows that the issue is more complex. When governments clearly disclose information about budgets and procurement, it can reduce concerns about corruption and build trust. On the other hand, too much information without clear communication may confuse the public and even lower trust. Ultimately, efforts to promote transparency should focus on both openness and ensuring that the information is easy for the public to understand.

2. The preservation of political stability is of paramount importance in fostering trust because it allows an element of predictability in the environment. But rather than a static paradigm, we can outline that stability does not have to be totally static. In authoritarian contexts, a very considerable amount of stability enables a government to be trusted by the people, but too much rigidity leads to stagnation. If the government appears to be unresponsive to shifting needs, there is a loss in trust. In sum, maintaining order while simultaneously being receptive to change is an essential component of long-term trust.

3. How Leaders Build Trust by Joining in and Making Changes: A big new find from this work is how leaders both make people trust them by being open and get them to take part more. Unlike old views on leading, which care mostly about making choices and working well, this work shows that leaders who get involved really build trust. They do this by making everyone feel like they all have a part in running things. Also, leaders who push for changes and updates in slow systems show they are looking ahead. This makes people feel good about their plans. These ideas make us think about the link between leaders and trust in a new way, adding to how important it is to get people involved.

4. New Trust Plan: The blend of Trust Idea from the office and Legit Rule of the land in this work crafts a fresh way to see how people trust. The data hint that being clear, firm, and well-led are not lone parts but mix in ways that change how people see things. For instance, good leaders who push for clear acts can boost the good bits of social calm on trust, while calm can help clear ways of rule get good. This whole view tells us that ways to run things need to cover many parts at once, like being clear, firm, and well-led, to make trust from the public better.

Suggestions

1. Suggestions for applying research results

1.1 Governments must mix open sharing with smart talk to keep info clear and stop too much data. They should make sure clear messages go with transparency efforts to put data in context and stop wrong ideas.

1.2 Stability needs to be flexible, not stiff, to keep trust as time goes on. Groups must use easy-to-change rules that let them keep policies steady but still meet new needs from society.

1.3 Leaders should act right and include everyone to keep trust for a long time. Training should focus on working with the public, being answerable, and leading in the right way to build deeper trust in institutions.

2. Suggestions for future research

Future work needs more people in the studies to count and show patterns, and make sure new ideas are strong with numbers. We should compare between countries to see how culture and politics change the way people trust the government and find the best ways in different places. By focusing on flexible steadiness, clear plans, and leadership that includes everyone, this study gives good tips for leaders who want to build strong trust with the public and create tough, quick-to-react ways of leading.

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