

INTERNET AND POLITICAL TRUST

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Definition

Political trust refers to the “basic evaluative or affective orientation toward the government” (Miller 1974) and towards politicians. Trust in parliaments, governments, courts, and civil service is often described as “institutional trust.” Related concepts include mistrust (doubt or skepticism toward an actor or political institutions), distrust (a firm belief that politicians and institutions are untrustworthy), and cynicism (attributing politicians’ actions to self-serving motives) (Citrin and Stoker 2018, 50).

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped citizen–politician interactions. Social media enables direct, personalized communication, bypassing traditional media and fostering immediacy, emotional messaging, and real-time interaction. This empowers citizens while pressuring politicians to respond quickly, sometimes at the expense of deliberation. At the same time, algorithms amplify polarization through filter bubbles and echo chambers, collectively altering the dynamics of political engagement and trust.

Context

The pathways through which Internet use influences political trust are highly dependent on regime type. A systematic review of 496 studies finds that digital media can increase political participation and information consumption, especially in autocracies and emerging democracies, where these effects may support democratic development (Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2023). In established democracies, however, digital media use is more often linked to declining institutional trust, rising polarization, populism, hate speech, misinformation exposure, and homophily in social networks. These negative associations are particularly robust for political trust, and causal studies reinforce these trends.

Huang et al. (2020) examine how Internet use affects institutional trust across 14 East Asian countries. Their central finding is straightforward: more frequent Internet use is associated with lower institutional trust. The study’s contribution, however, lies in unpacking why and under what conditions this negative relationship holds. The authors identify two psychological pathways. The first is cultural: frequent Internet use weakens citizens’ authoritarian orientation—their tendency to defer to political authority—which in turn lowers institutional trust. The second is institutional: Internet use raises citizens’ expectations of government responsiveness, making them more likely to perceive institutions as falling short. Both pathways are shaped by political context. In less democratic countries, the cultural pathway dominates, as the Internet’s erosion of authoritarian values strikes at the primary foundation of trust. In more democratic countries, the institutional pathway prevails: citizens already expect responsive government, so Internet use amplifies their critical evaluation of institutional performance.

At a broader scale, across 128 countries, digital media consumption generally erodes trust in government. Yet context matters: the effect is strongest in moderately democratic states and weaker in highly democratic or authoritarian ones. Perceived corruption further moderates this relationship—amplifying distrust where corruption is high, and potentially reversing it where corruption is low (Daoudi et al. 2025).

The relationship between the Internet and political trust is multidimensional. It can be examined through the lens of infrastructure (the development and reach of Internet access), individual use (how frequently citizens go online), participation (the types of online engagement, from passive information-seeking to active policy involvement), or censorship (the degree to which states control the online information environment).

Lu, Qi, and Yu (2019) explore this complexity in a comparative study of 36 countries. They find that greater Internet infrastructure is associated with higher political trust, likely because citizens exposed to abundant online information come to rely more on established institutions. Internet censorship, however, produces mixed effects: blocking content strengthens trust by limiting exposure to critical viewpoints, while violating user rights undermines it by provoking civic resistance to top-down control. Online civic participation follows a similarly paradoxical logic. Another study distinguishes three stages: e-information, where governments make public information available online; e-consultation, where citizens contribute to policy deliberation; and e-decision-making, where citizens co-design policy options. The first two stages modestly boost political trust by enhancing perceptions of institutional responsiveness. The third, however, erodes it, as deeper transparency exposes institutional failures and raises expectations beyond what institutions can meet (Lu et al. 2019).

The type of political news consumed further shapes trust outcomes. Across 27 EU countries, reliance on institutional and professional news websites is associated with higher political trust, whereas social media use correlates with lower trust, reflecting greater exposure to anti-political and anti-system content (Ceron 2015). Eurobarometer data reinforce this pattern: press consumption reliably predicts higher trust in national institutions, while social media produces negative effects primarily when it serves as the main source of political information. Traditional media such as television or radio show weaker or inconsistent effects, suggesting that disinformation exposure and echo chambers are key drivers of social media's negative impact (Daminov 2024).

Kiratli (2023) examines how social media use affects trust in the European Union (EU). More frequent social media use is associated with lower EU trust, while television consumption is associated with greater trust. Crucially, this trust-eroding effect is amplified by Internet infrastructure quality: in regions with faster and wider broadband access, the negative relationship between social media use and EU trust grows considerably stronger, as better connectivity increases exposure to Eurosceptic voices and misinformation. Conversely, in low-connectivity regions, social media can actually boost EU trust by raising political awareness among otherwise low-information citizens.

Social media also tends to reinforce existing partisan dispositions rather than challenge them. In the United States, during the Obama administration, frequent social media users who leaned Democratic reported higher trust in government, while Republican-leaning users reported lower trust. The pattern reversed in 2018 under Trump. In both cases, social media appears to

deepen partisan divides in political trust (Klein and Robison 2020). This aligns with findings that social media reinforces trust in partisan-aligned authorities while exposure to political misinformation reduces trust in media (Ognyanova et al. 2020). Across 11 democracies, conspiracy beliefs reduce trust in representative government, governing bodies, and security institutions, though active social media engagement can partially buffer these effects by fostering a sense of community and inclusion (Mari et al. 2022).

Finally, emerging evidence points to the trust implications of AI-generated communication in politics. High-quality, human-supervised GPT-3 responses to constituent inquiries are perceived as more trustworthy and electorally persuasive than generic automated replies. However, explicit disclosure of AI involvement generally reduces these gains, and low-quality AI outputs undermine trust even when disclosed (Kreps and Jakesch 2023).

Most studies focus on established Western democracies or a limited set of East Asian or European countries, leaving the dynamics of digital trust in the Global South, sub-Saharan Africa, and Central Asia largely unexplored. The long-term effects of sustained digital media consumption on political trust remain poorly understood, as most existing studies rely on cross-sectional data that capture only a single moment in time. Lastly, the mechanisms linking specific platform features—such as algorithmic curation, recommendation systems, or interface design—to trust outcomes have received limited attention.

Related Concepts

Digital empowerment; Digital engagement; Digital leadership; Digital media and ethnic minorities; E-democracy; E-government; Fluid Representation; Liquid democracy; Media and information literacy; Online disinformation; Platform politics; Political discourse; Political organization; Political participation; Public Consultations; Rhetorical Citizenship.

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