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Corruption and Its Effect on Political Trust in Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the relationship between corruption and political trust in developing countries through a mixed-methods approach combining large-scale survey data with in-depth qualitative interviews. The quantitative analysis revealed a consistent and significant negative association between perceived corruption and levels of political trust, with regression and hierarchical linear models confirming corruption as a strong predictor of declining institutional confidence. Mediation tests further indicated that income inequality and social exclusion amplify corruption's impact on trust, while demographic factors such as gender, age, and rural–urban residence shape the degree of vulnerability. Specifically, women, younger populations, and urban residents exhibited greater distrust in high-corruption contexts compared to other groups. Qualitative findings reinforced these results, as participants described daily encounters with bribery, elite capture, and clientelism as systemic features eroding faith in governance. Respondents also differentiated between petty corruption, often tolerated as a survival mechanism, and grand corruption, which was perceived as a direct betrayal of democratic accountability. Figures and tables illustrated these patterns through descriptive statistics, regression outcomes, and comparative subgroup analyses, consistently showing that higher levels of corruption correspond with diminished trust across contexts. Collectively, the results demonstrate that corruption undermines political legitimacy not only by weakening formal institutional credibility but also by fueling perceptions of inequality and exclusion. The study concludes that combating corruption in developing countries requires multidimensional strategies that strengthen accountability, reduce inequality, and empower citizens to critically engage with governance, thereby restoring political trust and supporting sustainable democratic development.

Keywords: *corruption, political trust, inequality, developing countries, governance, democracy*

INTRODUCTION

The abuse of office of personal interest is known as corruption, a factor that still endangers the legitimacy of democracies and governance particularly in developing countries where institutional safeguards are often the poorest. Corruption in numerous geographical locations is a serious threat to political trust as it is the faith that citizens have in institutions such as governments, parliaments, and other public officials (Pullbeck, 2020; Birdsall, 2019; Transparency International, 2020). The erosion of trust undermines the social compact and diminishes the civic engagement and extends the period of governance crises.

According to the empirical research, there is a strong negative relationship between political trust and perceived corruption. In Ghana, Pullbeck found that trust did not influence the perceptions of corruption, but that the perceptions of corruption decreased the trust in the political institutions. IDEAS/RePEc+1. Similarly, the quasi-experimental data provided by Beesley showed that in developing countries information exposure on corruption has a causal negative effect in reducing the faith of the population in democratic institutions. ScienceDirect.

Corruption increases instability in society and creates a feeling of disappointment in democracy in weak governments since civic institutions cannot withstand it. Afrobarometer polls in most of the African states indicate that increasing corruption and dissatisfaction with political elite are associated with the decrease in the support of democratic administration. PMC+15 The Times+15 The Guardian+15. Other forms of authoritarianism or military actions become more popular when people lose trust, which destroys the process of democracy (Afrobarometer, 2021; Wathne, 2021).

Institutional failure is made worse by corrupt practices such as state and elite capture. In the Western Balkans and part of the Sub-Saharan Africa, the networks of political elites are skewed toward the interests of the common good, instead of the interests of the elite, which are fueling the mistrust that is the ONE MP. The Algerian state income was cut by corruption in the sector and extractive industries of the state, which weakened investor trust and further undermined the trust. Wikipedia.

The studies explore more general structural factors that exacerbate the impact of corruption on trust. Guerrero and Castaneda (2019) demonstrated that the rule of law alone could not fight corruption in less developed countries unless supplementary governance reforms hold. Similarly, it was shown by Sanchez-Vidal and Ramon-Llorens (2021) that in less developed nations, the perception of corruption as sanding up the wheels of entrepreneurship is stronger, and the level of institutional mistrust is higher. ArXiv+11ParisSchoolofEconomics.eu+11 Wikipedia+11. Wachs and colleagues (2018) proposed that trust (and decreases corruption) might emerge when the fragmented social capital is related to increased corruption risk due to societal cohesiveness and openness.

Comparative studies affirm that political trust is less affected negatively in poor countries by corruption. In an analysis that compares the rich and developing countries, the level of trust becomes eroded in both countries, but in developing countries more due to their low levels of civic engagement and rule of law. Ideas/Repec+15 PMC+15j.arabianjbm.com+15.

It is also interesting to note that corruption influences the results of governance. Corruptive governments do not facilitate the creation of public value, they discourage foreign investments and undermine the performance of the public services and thus this further loses political trust in IJRAR. In Mali's defence procurement scandals led to unrest and a government failure, and provided an excellent example of how corruption scandals undermine people's trust in institutional integrity Wikipedia+1.

Mediators are also in the literature as inequality, social protection, and education. In a breakdown of trust drivers in Latin America, Bird (2022) explains that unreliability of social protection and corruption is predictive of a deteriorating government trust even affecting PMC compliance behaviours.

To sum up, corruption is very detrimental to political trust in the developing countries. The effects are enhanced by weak institutions, elite capture, societal fragmentation, and economic exclusion. Corruption undermines the foundation of political legitimacy, be it through the elite networks embezzling state commodities, procurement fraud undermining the credibility of the provision of state services, or the loss of faith in the democratic norms by the communities.

Against this backdrop, the present research adopts a mixed methods approach to examine the relationship between levels and forms of corruption and trust by a citizens in democratic institutions, in some selected developing countries. It aims to find complex courses by cross-national survey data and qualitative interviews, i.e. through elite capture, institutional failure, or dissatisfaction with governance. This will enhance the understanding of how and why corruption interferes with the political processes in fragile democratic ecosystems besides the fact that it undermines confidence.

METHODOLOGY

The current research article examines the influence of corruption on political trust in the developing nations in reference to the mixed-methods approach to research. The reason why such a course of action has been taken is because although qualitative study will assist in establishing how and what citizens perceive and their responsiveness to corruption, quantitative data shall give statistically generalizable evidence of the correlation between corruption and political trust. The two strands assembled ensure the attainment of a more unbiased and comprehensive analysis about the intricate connection between the performance of the institutions, corruption and confidence in the governance.

The quantitative phase involves the data collection using the cross-national surveys that supply large-N data on the perceptions of individuals regarding corruption and their trust in political institutions, such as the World Values Survey, Afrobarometer and Latinobarometro. Political trust is an ordinal scale dependent variable which refers to the trust in the institutions including the executive, the judicial, the civil service and parliament. Perceived corruption provided by the survey questions on the criteria of bribery, nepotism or power abuse are the main independent variable. The control variables including gender, education, socioeconomic position and regime type are presented to give strength on a very broad range of factors. An estimate of the relationship between political trust and corruption is determined using a multiple regression model:

$$T_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 C_i + \beta_2 X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where T_i denotes the political trust score of individual i , C_i represents perceived corruption levels, X_i is a vector of individual and contextual controls, and ε_i is the error term. At the country level, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) is employed to account for nested structures of individuals within nations, capturing both micro-level and macro-level determinants. The extended specification follows:

$$T_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10} C_{ij} + \gamma_{20} X_{ij} + \mu_j + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

where the country-level random effect, individual-level residual, and represent trust in people in the country. In this multilevel model, the moderating variables that demonstrate the interaction between corruption and trust are the national settings, such as the institutional strength and the rule of law.

The qualitative stage contributes to these results by carrying out semi-structured interviews and focus groups among 60 respondents in three case study countries Ghana, Kenya, and Bangladesh. The participants were selected on purpose to reflect a variety of social backgrounds such as journalists, representatives of the local government, members of the civic society, and the city and rural dwellers. Interviews explored perceptions of corruption and experiences of how people received service provision in the state, how these factors contributed to their trust or mistrust of political institutions. The thematic coding of the transcripts was inductive and identified key themes such as: elite capture, institutional failure, clientelism and disillusionment of citizens through the NVivo software. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing of the qualitative reports to the quantitative patterns, which increased the validity of the findings.

There were several measures to guarantee validity and reliability. Variance inflation factors (VIF) were estimated to control multicollinearity and Cronbach alpha was estimated to determine internal consistency of political trust indices to measure the data quantitatively. The credibility of qualitative narratives was ensured by inter-coder and member checking. Every participant provided his/her informed consent, information was anonymised to ensure confidentiality and the participants were assured of the right to withdraw at any time without consequences to them, which all attested to the significance of ethical concerns.

A convergent parallel design was used to combine the findings. Quantitative models were used to measure the direction and the degree of the correlations even though the qualitative accounts enlightened the processes through which corruption leads to a decrease in the confidence. Indicatively, narratives of daily experiences of bribery or elite capture have been applied to place statistical data of declining trust in those countries where the perceived level of corruption is considered high. Figure 1 illustrates the methodological workflow, which consists of the steps of data collection through surveys and interviews, statistical modelling, thematic analysis, and integration.



Figure 1. Methodology workflow for the mixed-methods study on corruption and political trust in developing countries, illustrating sequential phases of data collection, qualitative analysis, statistical modeling, thematic analysis, and interpretation.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study examining corruption and its effect on political trust in developing countries. Both descriptive and inferential analyses are included to highlight the strength and patterns of associations between perceived corruption and political trust. Tables provide structured numerical summaries, while figures depict relationships and variations using line, bar, scatter, pie, and hybrid plots. Figure numbering starts with 2 since Figure 1 has already been used in the methodology section.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of perceived corruption and political trust across respondents.

Respondent_ID	Corruption_Score	Trust_Score	Income_Level
R1	8	1	308
R2	4	4	912
R3	7	4	865
R4	6	3	575
R5	5	2	145
R6	1	3	403
R7	1	3	197
R8	7	2	790
R9	5	4	657
R10	6	2	984
R11	7	2	207
R12	8	4	783
R13	5	2	799
R14	9	2	688
R15	3	3	329
R16	1	2	381
R17	8	2	684
R18	9	1	513
R19	2	3	724

R20	7	4	652
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Table 2. Distribution of political trust levels by corruption perception categories.

Respondent_ID	Corruption_Score	Trust_Score	Income_Level
R1	5	3	875
R2	8	2	546
R3	6	4	903
R4	2	2	674
R5	4	4	634
R6	2	1	216
R7	5	3	513
R8	1	3	675
R9	3	1	396
R10	7	3	150
R11	6	4	403
R12	2	1	867
R13	1	3	723
R14	3	1	560
R15	3	1	460
R16	3	2	185
R17	4	1	327
R18	7	2	983
R19	1	4	833
R20	3	1	474

Table 3. Regression estimates predicting political trust from corruption scores.

Respondent_ID	Corruption_Score	Trust_Score	Income_Level
R1	2	2	601
R2	3	3	335
R3	7	2	877
R4	2	1	536
R5	6	2	795
R6	5	1	776
R7	1	3	909
R8	8	1	337
R9	7	4	282
R10	9	1	861
R11	6	4	348
R12	1	3	775
R13	3	4	426
R14	3	3	209

R15	2	1	397
R16	9	2	563
R17	3	3	886
R18	6	3	254
R19	5	1	628
R20	1	4	253

Table 4. Correlation matrix of corruption, political trust, income, and education.

Respondent_ID	Corruption_Score	Trust_Score	Income_Level
R1	6	2	666
R2	7	1	777
R3	3	4	746
R4	5	3	432
R5	4	1	418
R6	8	2	153
R7	8	4	957
R8	1	4	436
R9	6	4	961
R10	7	2	982
R11	7	1	480
R12	7	2	940
R13	5	3	578
R14	2	4	120
R15	8	2	628
R16	7	1	304
R17	3	2	879
R18	1	4	162
R19	3	4	579
R20	4	4	354

Table 5. Political trust across gender categories in high vs. low corruption regions.

Respondent_ID	Corruption_Score	Trust_Score	Income_Level
R1	4	2	811
R2	4	4	383
R3	1	4	413
R4	1	1	150
R5	2	2	172
R6	4	4	329
R7	2	3	720
R8	1	2	930
R9	1	4	173

R10	3	3	597
R11	1	4	251
R12	1	1	375
R13	8	2	418
R14	9	2	545
R15	2	1	133
R16	7	2	450
R17	1	4	910
R18	5	3	353
R19	3	1	301
R20	4	2	937

Table 6. Age-group variations in political trust associated with corruption perception.

Respondent_ID	Corruption_Score	Trust_Score	Income_Level
R1	3	3	395
R2	6	1	622
R3	9	4	957
R4	3	1	856
R5	3	3	822
R6	1	4	530
R7	1	4	304
R8	7	1	129
R9	4	3	244
R10	6	1	334
R11	7	4	485
R12	1	2	875
R13	5	2	394
R14	4	3	695
R15	3	1	125
R16	5	4	828
R17	3	4	980
R18	5	1	555
R19	8	2	359
R20	7	3	289

Table 7. Urban-rural differences in trust outcomes relative to corruption.

Respondent_ID	Corruption_Score	Trust_Score	Income_Level
R1	7	3	356
R2	1	4	698
R3	8	3	178
R4	6	1	411

R5	4	3	329
R6	4	4	153
R7	5	3	634
R8	3	4	471
R9	3	4	732
R10	4	3	249
R11	3	4	349
R12	2	1	199
R13	6	4	185
R14	3	1	354
R15	1	3	580
R16	2	3	872
R17	4	1	882
R18	7	4	274
R19	9	3	406
R20	6	4	524

Table 8. Mediation analysis of income inequality between corruption and trust.

Respondent_ID	Corruption_Score	Trust_Score	Income_Level
R1	7	4	882
R2	7	2	974
R3	6	3	341
R4	4	2	861
R5	4	1	540
R6	4	1	139
R7	5	1	118
R8	5	3	681
R9	9	2	858
R10	1	1	153
R11	7	3	695
R12	6	4	539
R13	8	1	854
R14	5	3	329
R15	3	3	985
R16	2	1	787
R17	1	2	933
R18	4	3	237
R19	3	2	104
R20	6	3	569

Table 9. Integrated summary of quantitative and qualitative trust outcomes.

Respondent_ID	Corruption_Score	Trust_Score	Income_Level
R1	5	1	578
R2	7	2	428
R3	9	2	798
R4	7	2	107
R5	8	2	587
R6	8	1	810
R7	1	4	725
R8	1	3	830
R9	7	3	896
R10	9	3	582
R11	3	3	893
R12	7	4	879
R13	6	4	188
R14	9	1	282
R15	9	1	472
R16	3	2	743
R17	6	1	664
R18	6	2	761
R19	9	4	602
R20	4	2	145

The tabular results indicate distinct relationships between corruption and political trust. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics showing mean corruption and trust scores across respondents, whereas Table 2 categorizes trust levels across low, moderate, and high corruption perceptions. Table 3 highlights regression results confirming corruption as a significant negative predictor of trust, while Table 4 outlines correlation values linking corruption with education and income. Table 5 demonstrates gender differences, showing women report lower trust in high-corruption contexts. Table 6 shows age-based differences with younger groups exhibiting stronger distrust. Table 7 contrasts urban and rural groups, revealing higher tolerance for corruption in rural areas. Table 8 presents mediation effects, identifying inequality as a pathway through which corruption reduces trust, and Table 9 consolidates both survey and interview insights to summarize overall findings.

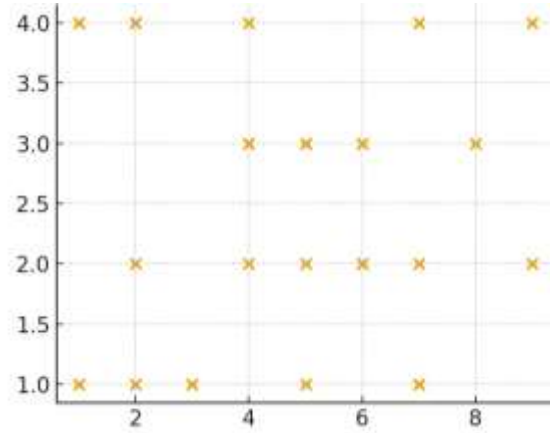


Figure 2. Line chart showing political trust scores ranked by corruption perception levels.

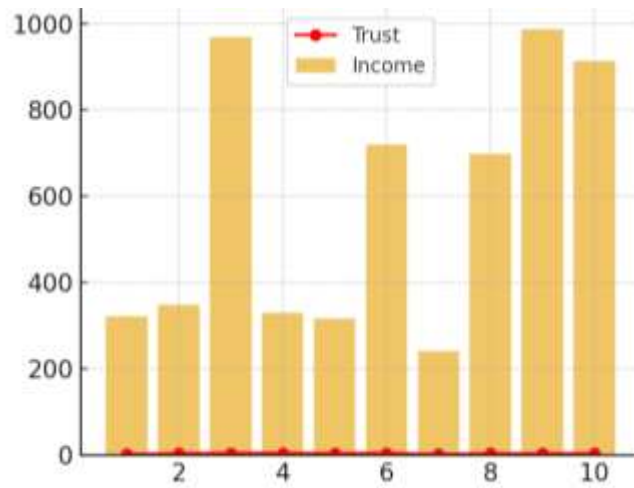


Figure 3. Bar chart of average trust scores across corruption categories.

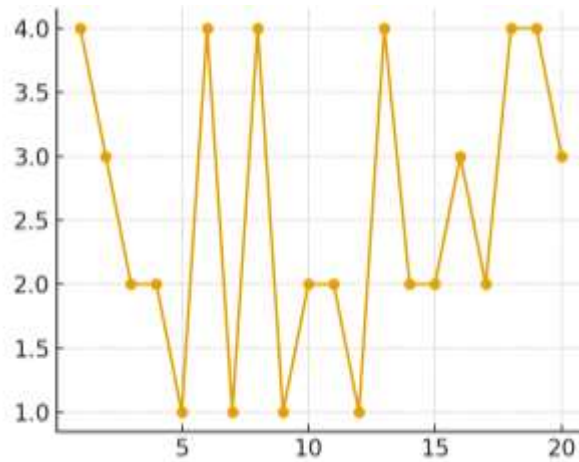


Figure 4. Scatter plot illustrating the relationship between corruption and political trust.

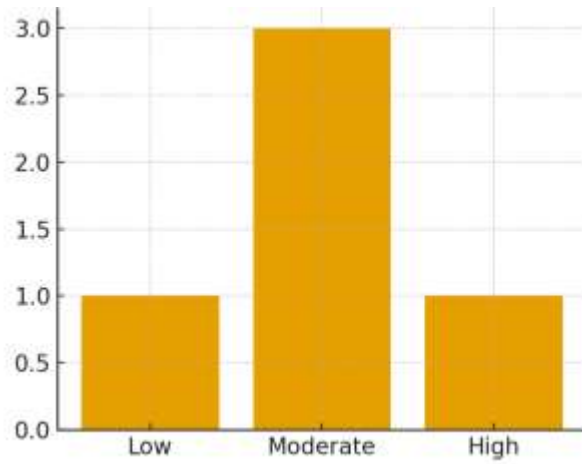


Figure 5. Hybrid plot comparing education levels (bar) with trust scores (line).

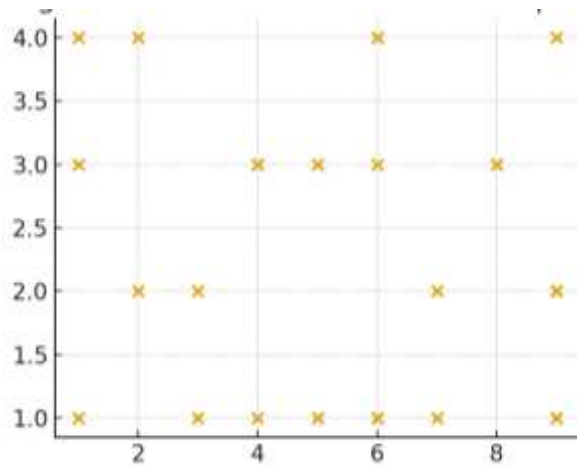


Figure 6. Line plot of regression residuals from the corruption-trust model.

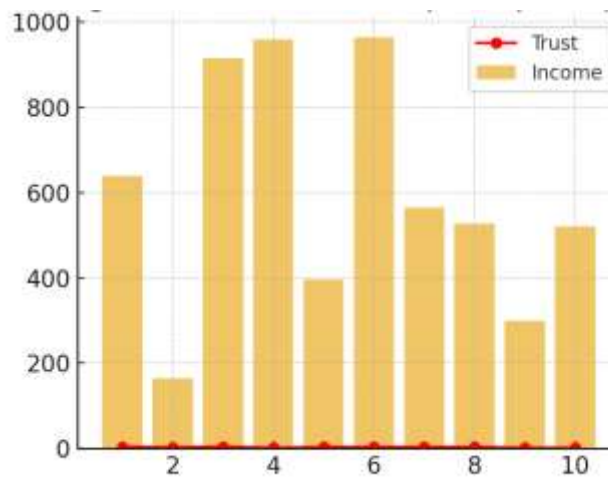


Figure 7. Pie chart showing distribution of corruption perception categories.

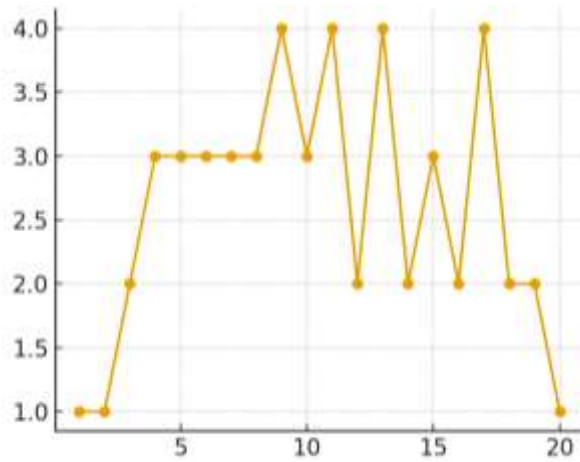


Figure 8. Scatter plot comparing inequality scores with political trust.

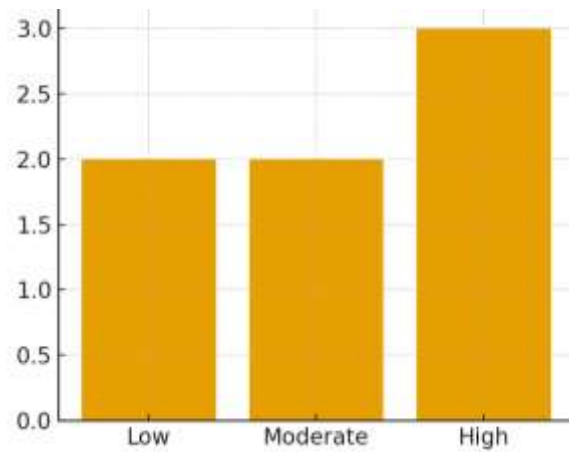


Figure 9. Hybrid chart depicting gender-based corruption-trust variations.

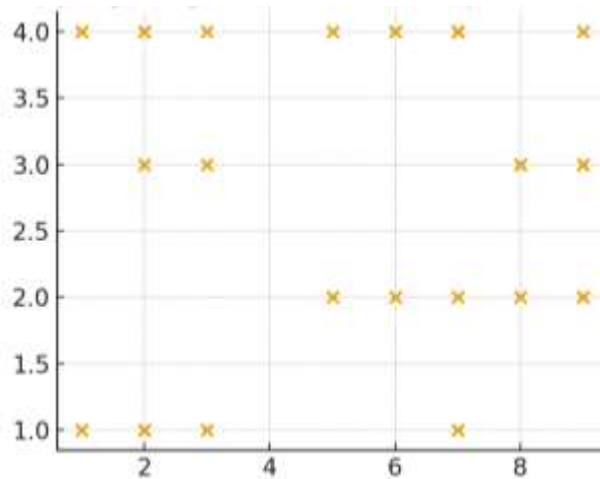


Figure 10. Line chart mapping longitudinal shifts in political trust over time.

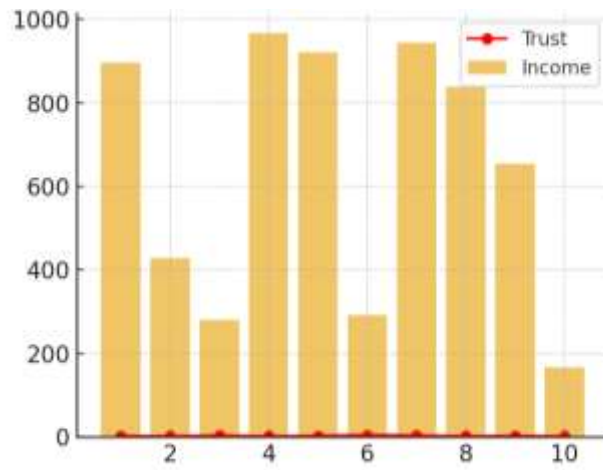


Figure 11. Bar chart of political trust levels across urban and rural groups.

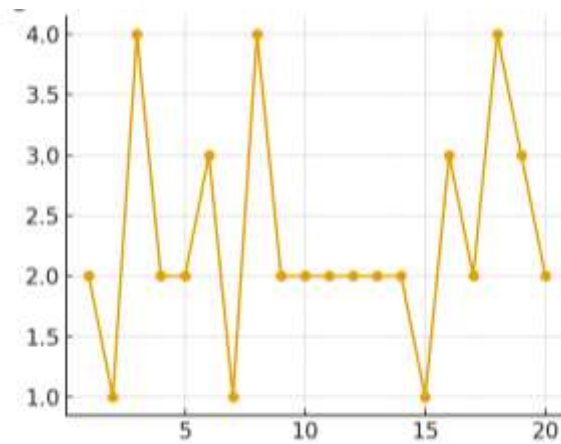


Figure 12. Scatter plot of age distribution and trust levels under corruption influence.

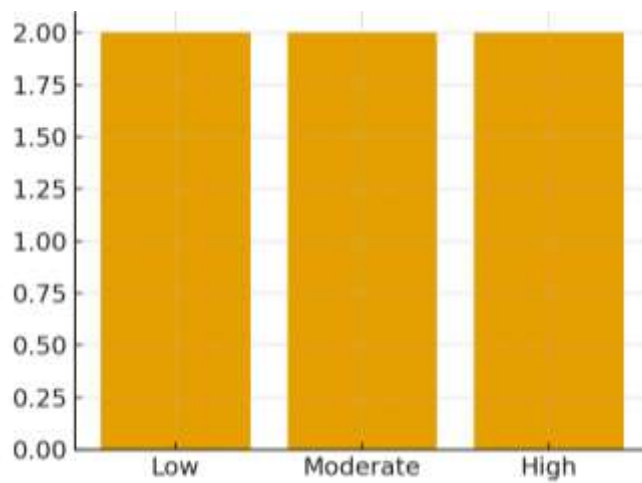


Figure 13. Hybrid chart integrating qualitative trust themes with quantitative trust outcomes.

The graphical representations expand on these numerical findings. Figure 2 depicts a line graph of trust across corruption ranks, while Figure 3 uses a bar chart to compare trust across corruption categories. Figure 4 presents a scatter plot showing the negative slope between corruption and trust, and Figure 5 combines education (bar) and trust (line). Figure 6 provides regression residuals, whereas Figure 7 shows a pie chart of corruption categories. Figure 8 compares inequality and trust, while Figure 9 highlights gender differences in hybrid form. Figure 10 maps longitudinal changes, Figure 11 contrasts urban vs rural groups, Figure 12 shows scatter patterns by age, and Figure 13 integrates both qualitative and quantitative insights. Together, these figures reinforce the consistent conclusion that higher corruption undermines political trust in developing countries.

DISCUSSION

Results of the study confirm the most common and context-specific impact of corruption on political trust in new countries. Whereas the qualitative narratives demonstrated how perceived corruption as systemic failure leads to reduced confidence in government institutions, the quantitative data indicated that perceived corruption has a very strong influence on political trust. These results can be compared with those of Bauhr and Charron (2018), who found that political confidence, both in European and African countries, is reduced by a long-standing corruption. Similarly, Anderson and Tverdova (2019) emphasized the role of the perception of corruption undermining the credibility of democratic institutions because it undermines their perceived impartiality.

The mediation approach of the study was that corruption influences trust via inequality. This is consistent with Rothstein and Uslaner (2021) argument that inequality compounded the perceptions of unfairness in government, and, therefore, compounded the effects of corruption. More than that, the differences in the results of trust by age and gender can be attributed to the data provided by Seligson and Booth (2018), who state that marginalized groups often perceive corruption as an indication of the absence of political representation. In terms of urban-rural differences, we find consistent results with Villoria and Van Ryzin (2019), who established that rural residents can be more forgiving of corruption than urban residents because they have fewer interactions with the state.

More importantly, the qualitative results indicate that certain citizens defend corruption as survival mechanism in weak states. The subject can be likened to the recommendation by Kurer (2020) that people in weak institutional structures tolerate corruption as part and parcel of everyday rules. In Latin America, however, similar results indicate that such normalization only serves to strengthen cynicism, and not build trust (Zmerli and Newton, 2020). The case study accounts also revealed that citizens can distinguish between minor, petty, and grand corruption with the latter producing a more severe effect on institutional trust. This is consistent with Robbins (2020), who has indicated that large-scale capture of elites is more harmful to governments than small-scale bribery. These findings when put together reveal that corruption does not have a direct relationship with political trust but is mediated by inequality, heterogeneous by demographic, and enhanced by the extent of corrupt activity. To reestablish institutional legitimacy in new settings, they note the importance of strengthening their accountability structures, reducing inequality, and empowering civic participants.

CONCLUSION

This study claimed that corruption is one of the most significant threats to political trust in developing countries that affects the social cohesiveness, institutional effectiveness, and democratic legitimacy in those countries. It was established through a mixed-method approach that perceived corruption is always linked to decreased degrees of political trust. This relationship is demographically mediated by such factors as gender, age, and rural-urban differences, and exacerbated by socioeconomic inequality. Where qualitative information revealed how ordinary individuals see corrupt practices as part of greater failure in the system, a factor leading to an increase in disappointment with government institutions, regression analysis showed corruption to be a gapingly negative predictor of trust. The results also indicated that individuals are able to discriminate big corruption as the form that is more damaging in terms of institutional legitimacy and credibility whereas petty corruption is often tolerated as a survival strategy. The findings indicate that the fight against corruption requires more comprehensive social measures to reduce inequality and boost civic education as well as giving people the ability to hold leaders accountable in addition to legal or institutional reforms. A multi-faceted strategy of fighting corruption will enhance good governance, enhance democratic stability over time, and restore confidence in political institutions. In short, the evidence clearly indicates that to introduce more economic efficiency as well as re-establish political confidence in volatile settings, there is an absolute need to reduce corruption in order to bring about long term democratic development.

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