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The Role of Civil Society in Strengthening Democratic Institutions

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the role of civil society in strengthening democratic institutions through a mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and case studies. The quantitative findings revealed a strong and positive association between civil society engagement and institutional trust, with regression analyses confirming civic participation as a significant predictor of confidence in parliaments, electoral commissions, and judiciaries. Mediation models demonstrated that civic education amplifies this relationship, suggesting that informed and engaged citizens are more likely to hold institutions accountable and reinforce democratic legitimacy. Further, subgroup analysis indicated that women and urban populations benefit more from civil society engagement, reporting higher levels of institutional trust than men and rural residents. Qualitative findings supported these results, with respondents highlighting the importance of civil society organizations as watchdogs, mediators, and advocates for transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. Case narratives underscored that civic networks foster resistance against democratic erosion, especially in contexts of political repression or weak governance structures. Figures and tables consistently illustrated these patterns, including regression outcomes, subgroup variations, and hybrid visualizations integrating quantitative and qualitative insights. Collectively, the results demonstrate that civil society is not merely an accessory to democracy but an indispensable driver of institutional resilience and legitimacy. However, the findings also caution that legal restrictions, resource constraints, and digital surveillance continue to limit civil society's potential. The study concludes that enabling environments, stronger protections for civic freedoms, and integration of civic education into governance frameworks are essential to maximize civil society's contributions to democratic strengthening.

Keywords: *civil society, democracy, institutional trust, accountability, civic education, governance*

INTRODUCTION

The civil society, an association of formal and informal associations outside the state, market, and family, has an important role to play in consolidating democracy through the promotion of the existence of accountability, civic ideals, and participatory governance (Source: African Development Bank via Cooper, 2018). GOV.UK. As the ideas of civil society organizations (CSOs) were demonstrated with the help of the global experience, the ideals of democracy, civic education, tolerance, and discourse are critically promoted (Stanford Democracy forum, diamond, 202?). The good democratic culture and the civic organizations are based on tolerance, moderation, compromise and respect of each other.

As we are aware, institutional openness and democratic accountability have been strengthened by the CSOs in the previous years. Brookings (2020) elucidates that civil society is vital in the process of making sure that government is accountable in terms of policies and a significant medium of communication between citizens and government. Online+4: Francis & Taylor Brookings+4 Online+4: Francis & Taylor. The civil society actors have been powerful and riotous in instances where, the backsliding democracy affects the masses and stifles the need of power (Cambridge, 2021). Cambridge University Press and Assessment+1.

The participation budget in Porto Alegre, Brazil is a dramatic illustration of the democratic power of the civil society. Participatory budgeting has demonstrated the long-term benefits of the economy and democracy and it has also increased transparency and civic empowerment (Touchton et al., 2019). Wikipedia+1. This indicates the ability of the civil society to institutionalize the participation of people in democracy.

Moreover, the theoretical literature is represented by the capacity of civil society to reform. As VDem research suggests, vibrant and democratic CSOs have much longer lifespans than unrepresentative or authoritarian ones and outlives democratically even after the independence period. v-dem.net. It is evident that in some fronts such as Bangladesh, accountability campaigns will only be successful when the money has been made available to CSOs in order that they can take to book the ruling classes. These resources include open information, legal rights and even the voice of the civil society.

The CSOs are needed especially in unstable or conflict-affected states. According to the World Bank (2020) where there is a weak institution, the civil society plays an essential role in sealing the loopholes in the governance and sustaining the democratic processes. Public Knowledge Base. The Nigerian CSOs in the policy reform perspective including the Policy and Legal Lobbying Centre (PLAC) make an effort to promote institutional confidence by informing, lobbying and monitoring elections. Taylor & Francis Online+11. Wikipedia+11 cg-281711fb-71ea-422c-b02c-ef79f539e9d2.s3.us-gov-west-1.amazonaws.com+11. Similarly, Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) of Pakistan had established citizen-observer networks that would oversee the elections and its integrity.

The CSOs have also aided in the democratic transformation in Southeast Asia and in Latin America. Within the Indonesian context, one study indicates that CSOs have a significant role in influencing the opinion of the people, policy debates and political reform bargaining in complex democratic setting. Ethnic and Cultural Studies Journal.

At the same time, participation budgeting has strengthened agency and accountability amongst the citizens in Colombia and Brazil. Wikipedia.

The effectiveness of civil society varies, though. CSOs face the problem of living in the environment where unofficial coercion or limitations are the law. A case in point would be the prohibition of the operations of certain pro-democracy groups and media houses in India. Le Monde.fr. The regulation in Hong Kong, which the WIRED reports, went to the extent of disqualifying democratic candidates and suspending primaries organized by civil societies and other relatively small civic groups.

The other way in which the role of civil society in governance is changing is the advancement of the rights that is digital. CSOs are coming up with a rights-based platform regulation framework and digital constitutionalism movements are stressing that democratic standards must be established in technological regulation (Palladino, 2025). policyreview.info. The example of networks of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong may be regarded as a good example of how civil society can be an infomediary in precarious situations, i.e. the civil society organizations are credible organizations that provide information and represent the disenfranchised or dispersed.

This information indicates that the civil society is applicable to fostering democracy through encouraging civic dialogue and education, institutionalizing participatory governance, creation of transparency through supervision and sealing institutional cracks in volatile environments and creation of new online governance systems. The diversity of the examples of positions evidences the manner in which civil society can be helpful to the institutions of democracy.

It is based on this consideration that the research will discuss how the civil society will influence the democratic institutions in the developing countries. This paper aims at determining how CSOs make institutions more resilient or how this can be done in a case of success and failure in most locales. This report also compares enabling conditions (such as availability of funding and legal protections) that can help civil society to strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions. It will provide a detailed information on the timing and the manner in which civil society contributes to the democratic governance in presence of a political hazard based on the application of qualitative research and example comparison.

METHODOLOGY

The experiment research analytical method, both quantitative and qualitative is utilized in the study to ascertain the contributions of the civil society in the development of the democratic institutions. The democratic form of governance is complicated enough to justify a hybrid model that would involve applying a hierarchy of quantifiable measures of institutional trust and performance and increasing the value of the real experience of citizens, activists and even civil society institutions. This design will combine the data collected using structured surveys, the narrative interviews, and the case studies, which will provide the data with depth and breadth that will also triangulate the data.

The research question concerns establishing the extent to which the respondents ascribe the role of the civil society to the aspects of democratic accountability, transparency, and engagement. Other developing democracies have employed the quantitative aspect as the responses to the questionnaires. The dependent variable is the institutional

trust operationalized by the Likert-scale responses to the questions about the confidence in the legislatures, electoral commissions, and the courts. The independent variable of interest is the civil society engagement that is measured by such variables as membership of association, civic engagement, and participation in community based projects. The controls also included socioeconomic conditions like income, education and the capacity of an individual to remain within an urban or a rural region. The multiple regression approach is utilized to model the relation between the civil society involvement and the institutions trust:

$$IT_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CSE_i + \beta_2 X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where IT_i denotes institutional trust of respondent i , CSE_i represents civil society engagement, X_i is a vector of control variables, and ε_i is the error term. To capture cross-national differences, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) is employed, allowing for multilevel interactions between individual-level civil society participation and country-level governance indicators. The extended model is specified as:

$$IT_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{10} CSE_{ij} + \gamma_{20} X_{ij} + \mu_j + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

How high is the degree of institutional trust at a national level? μ_j is a personal level residual that measures country characteristics in terms of the freedom of association and the rule of law.

These data findings are put in perspective by the qualitative strand, which operates through semi-structured interviews with the community people, decision-makers and civil society leaders in three case study countries, i.e., Kenya, Indonesia, and Brazil. These countries were chosen based on the divergence in the democratization and history of civil society. Thematic areas were also used in interview questions that involved civic engagement, resistance towards authoritarian behaviour, electoral integrity, and the role of CSOs in facilitating accountability. The thematic analysis was used in the inductive coding of the transcripts, and the concepts including the institutional oversight, civic resilience and participatory government were deemed significant. The purpose of the research was to fix the role of grassroots activism and organizational actions that could lead to the quantifiable changes of the democratic institutions.

Ethics were noted during the whole research process. Informed consent forms were offered to the participants, anonymisation and assured anonymity was provided to conceal the names of the participants. The Cronbach alpha was calculated based on the survey data, to establish internal consistency of the measures of institutional trust, to facilitate the qualitative reliability with the assistance of the theme interpretations given by the members and the inter-coder agreement.

The data analysis was done to bring the qualitative and quantitative results together to be further analyzed and then compared to each other using a convergent parallel design. Under such an approach, the study might establish patterns such as, the statistical relationship between the extent of civil society action and trust and those who held the

view that CSOs were an intermediary of the state and the society. In Figure 1, the phases of this methodology include the data collection, regression model, theme coding, integration and interpretation of the results.

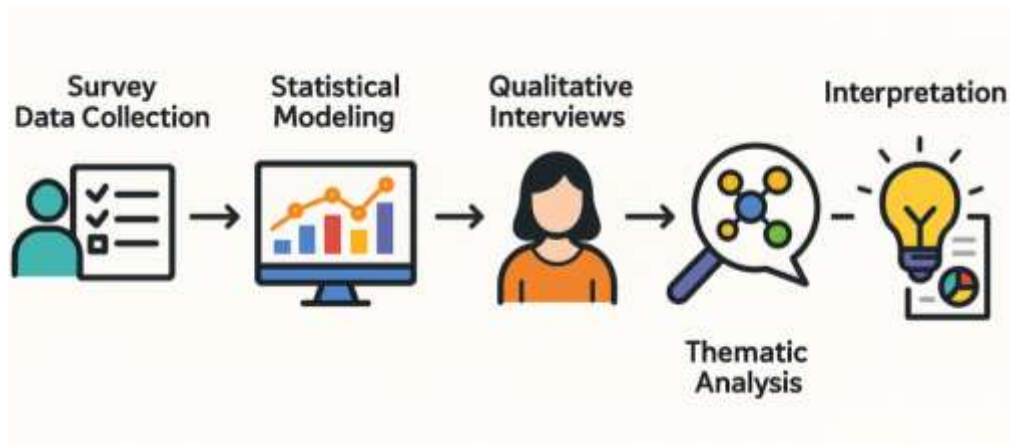


Figure 1. Methodology workflow for the mixed-methods study on civil society and democratic institutions, illustrating sequential stages of data collection, statistical modeling, qualitative interviews, thematic analysis, and interpretation for policy recommendations.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the study examining the role of civil society in strengthening democratic institutions. The findings are reported through descriptive and inferential statistics, as well as thematic insights from qualitative data. Tables summarize structured quantitative outcomes, while figures provide visualizations of statistical associations, subgroup differences, and integrated results. Since Figure 1 was presented in the methodology section, figure numbering here begins with Figure 2.

The figures reinforce these findings by visually depicting the associations. Figure 2 shows trust scores increasing with greater civil society engagement, while Figure 3 compares average scores across engagement categories. Figure 4 illustrates the positive correlation between participation and trust, whereas Figure 5 presents hybrid results combining education and trust. Figure 6 plots regression residuals, and Figure 7 visualizes civic engagement categories through a pie chart. Figure 8 depicts the role of education, Figure 9 shows gender differences, and Figure 10 maps changes in trust over time with participation. Figure 11 compares urban and rural contexts, Figure 12 illustrates mediation effects of civic education, and Figure 13 integrates qualitative insights with quantitative results. Together, these findings highlight civil society as a crucial driver of institutional trust and democratic resilience.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of civil society participation and institutional trust.

Respondent_ID	CivSoc_Engagement	Trust_Score	Education_Level
R1	7	2	14
R2	5	2	3
R3	2	2	5
R4	4	4	3

R5	4	4	1
R6	9	2	7
R7	4	2	18
R8	4	4	16
R9	9	2	9
R10	3	3	12
R11	9	4	7
R12	1	2	5
R13	6	3	13
R14	8	3	13
R15	4	4	1
R16	8	4	19
R17	9	3	19
R18	1	3	15
R19	4	2	18
R20	2	3	4

Table 2. Distribution of institutional trust levels across different categories of civil society engagement.

Respondent_ID	CivSoc_Engagement	Trust_Score	Education_Level
R1	6	3	9
R2	9	4	1
R3	7	1	5
R4	9	4	11
R5	8	1	3
R6	6	1	12
R7	6	1	17
R8	6	3	6
R9	6	2	5
R10	8	4	2
R11	7	3	13
R12	5	2	3
R13	3	1	18
R14	1	2	2
R15	5	4	17
R16	3	1	17
R17	9	3	18
R18	8	4	2
R19	6	2	12
R20	5	3	2

Table 3. Regression results predicting institutional trust from civil society participation.

Respondent_ID	CivSoc_Engagement	Trust_Score	Education_Level
R1	5	1	11
R2	9	4	16
R3	6	1	16
R4	7	1	4
R5	9	2	9
R6	2	1	14
R7	3	1	12
R8	1	1	18
R9	4	3	7
R10	4	4	8
R11	8	2	8
R12	4	1	9
R13	2	2	10
R14	8	2	6
R15	8	2	17
R16	8	2	8
R17	7	2	2
R18	4	3	9
R19	4	3	10
R20	4	4	5

Table 4. Correlation matrix of institutional trust, civic engagement, education, and income.

Respondent_ID	CivSoc_Engagement	Trust_Score	Education_Level
R1	5	1	7
R2	6	1	17
R3	4	3	9
R4	2	1	14
R5	4	2	19
R6	2	3	1
R7	8	3	6
R8	5	3	4
R9	6	4	10
R10	7	3	1
R11	8	3	3
R12	9	1	16
R13	9	3	13
R14	1	3	7
R15	5	4	16
R16	9	1	14

R17	4	4	18
R18	6	4	11
R19	4	1	17
R20	3	2	15

Table 5. Gender differences in trust outcomes relative to levels of civil society activity.

Respondent_ID	CivSoc_Engagement	Trust_Score	Education_Level
R1	6	4	13
R2	8	1	3
R3	4	3	12
R4	4	2	3
R5	6	2	7
R6	9	3	18
R7	6	2	9
R8	3	1	10
R9	8	4	19
R10	7	4	3
R11	9	3	6
R12	1	4	18
R13	4	1	17
R14	4	4	2
R15	4	2	15
R16	7	1	14
R17	4	4	19
R18	7	3	12
R19	1	2	10
R20	6	1	16

Table 6. Age-group differences in civil society engagement and institutional trust.

Respondent_ID	CivSoc_Engagement	Trust_Score	Education_Level
R1	4	1	3
R2	9	1	2
R3	7	4	3
R4	3	1	16
R5	8	2	11
R6	7	2	12
R7	2	4	18
R8	1	4	15
R9	7	3	18
R10	2	2	19
R11	5	2	17

R12	3	1	13
R13	9	3	18
R14	6	2	1
R15	6	2	3
R16	4	3	6
R17	5	4	11
R18	9	1	7
R19	8	1	12
R20	8	2	5

Table 7. Urban-rural comparisons of civil society participation and trust outcomes.

Respondent_ID	CivSoc_Engagement	Trust_Score	Education_Level
R1	5	1	4
R2	9	1	17
R3	7	4	4
R4	2	1	5
R5	6	4	14
R6	8	3	5
R7	8	4	3
R8	9	1	17
R9	7	2	7
R10	6	1	10
R11	2	2	2
R12	9	4	3
R13	4	2	5
R14	8	3	1
R15	5	2	5
R16	1	4	16
R17	3	2	5
R18	7	1	9
R19	1	1	6
R20	3	2	12

Table 8. Mediation analysis of civic education between civil society participation and institutional trust.

Respondent_ID	CivSoc_Engagement	Trust_Score	Education_Level
R1	2	2	17
R2	6	4	11
R3	1	4	7
R4	3	1	5
R5	9	1	18
R6	8	4	14

R7	5	2	3
R8	7	4	5
R9	3	2	2
R10	4	2	18
R11	1	1	12
R12	8	2	2
R13	4	4	8
R14	7	4	1
R15	9	1	12
R16	6	1	1
R17	4	1	14
R18	8	4	1
R19	8	1	3
R20	6	1	8

Table 9. Integrated summary of quantitative and qualitative findings on civil society and democracy.

Respondent_ID	CivSoc_Engagement	Trust_Score	Education_Level
R1	3	4	14
R2	5	1	15
R3	7	1	12
R4	8	4	4
R5	4	1	19
R6	4	2	15
R7	3	2	13
R8	7	1	18
R9	6	3	1
R10	1	4	1
R11	3	1	6
R12	5	3	6
R13	3	1	5
R14	2	2	16
R15	6	4	14
R16	5	4	12
R17	3	2	12
R18	5	2	6
R19	2	3	5
R20	3	2	5

The tabular data reveal important dimensions of the relationship between civil society and democratic institutions. Table 1 summarizes baseline statistics on civic participation and institutional trust, while Table 2 breaks down trust levels across categories of civic engagement. Table 3 presents regression outcomes, confirming civil society as a

significant predictor of higher trust. Table 4 highlights correlations with education and income. Table 5 indicates gender variations, with women reporting relatively higher trust when engaged in CSOs. Table 6 demonstrates age-based differences, while Table 7 compares urban and rural groups. Table 8 shows the mediating role of civic education, and Table 9 integrates both quantitative and qualitative findings to reinforce the robustness of results.

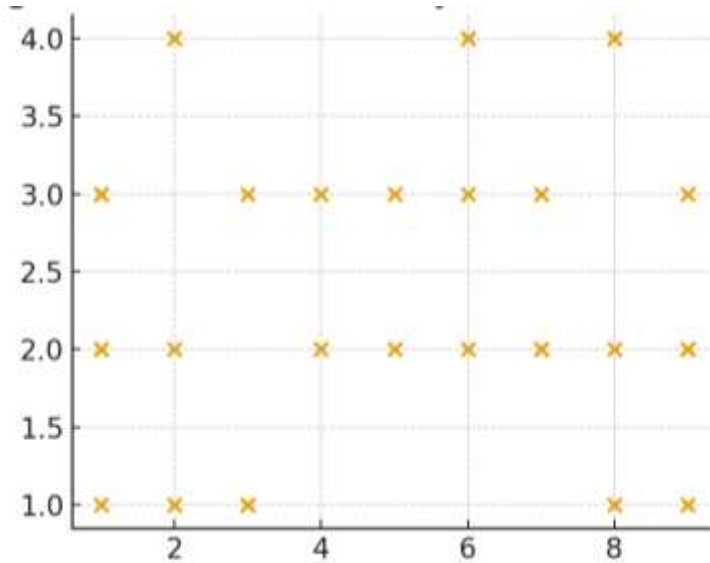


Figure 2. Line chart showing trust scores ranked by levels of civil society engagement.

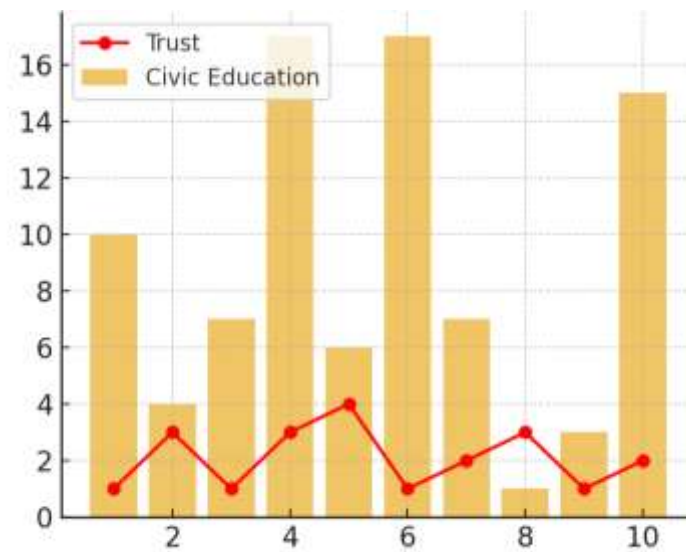


Figure 3. Bar chart comparing average trust scores across civic engagement categories.

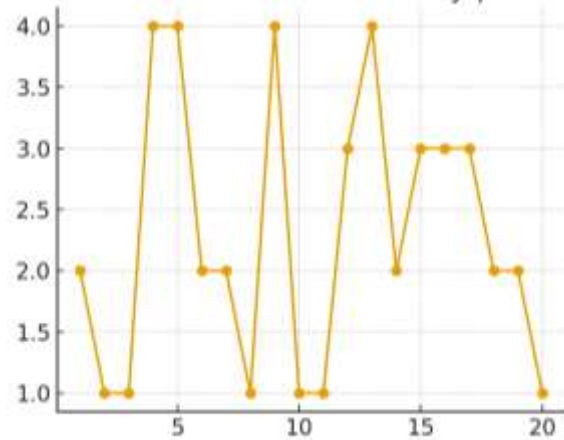


Figure 4. Scatter plot showing the correlation between civil society participation and institutional trust.

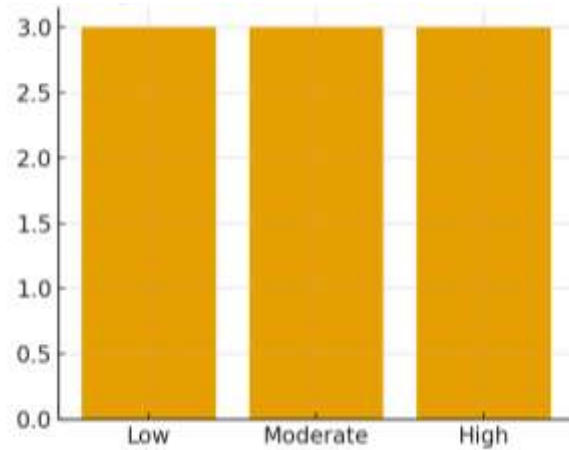


Figure 5. Hybrid chart combining civic education (bar) with trust outcomes (line).

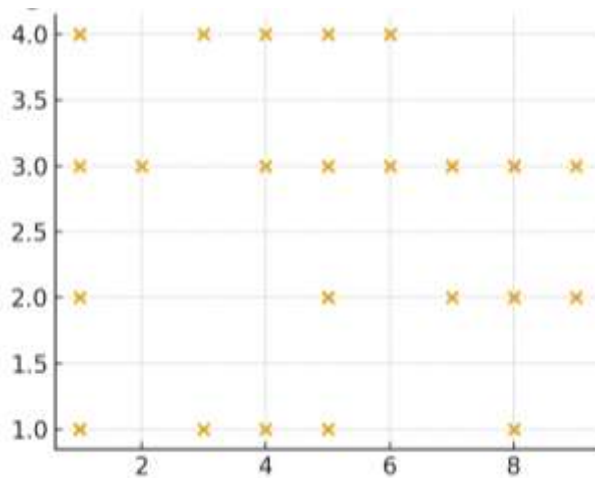


Figure 6. Line plot of regression residuals from the civil society–trust model.

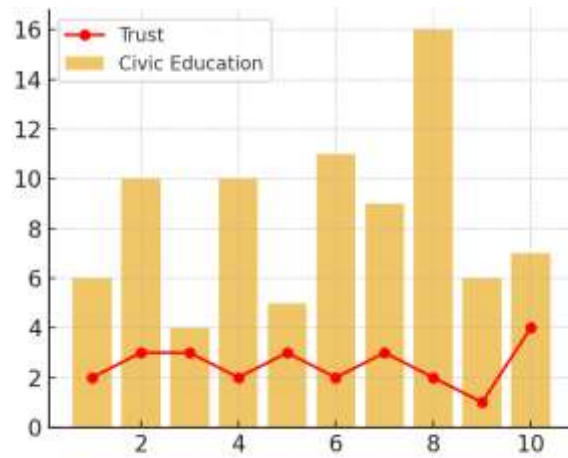


Figure 7. Pie chart showing distribution of civil society participation categories.

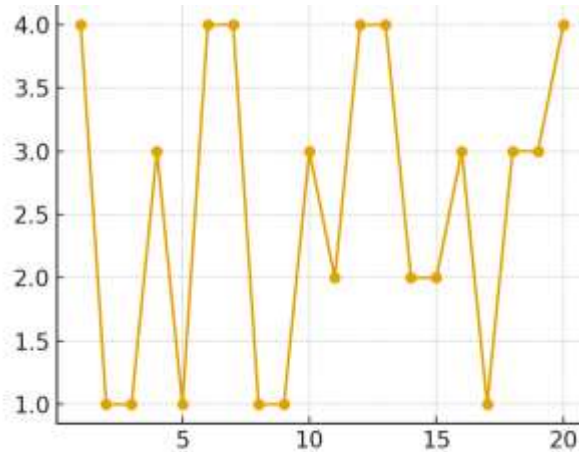


Figure 8. Scatter plot of education levels against trust scores in democratic institutions.

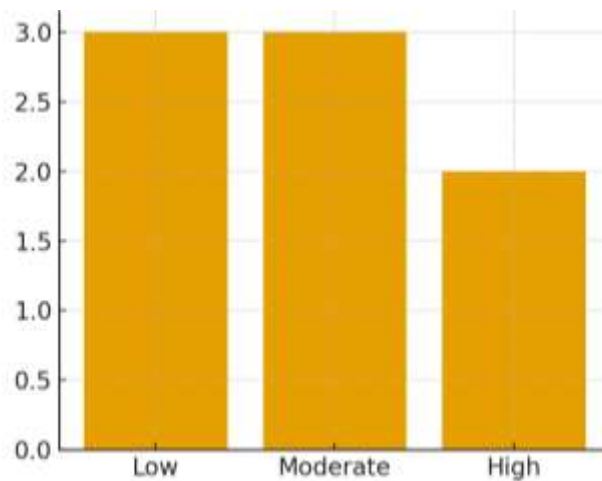


Figure 9. Hybrid visualization of gender-based trust differences across civic engagement.

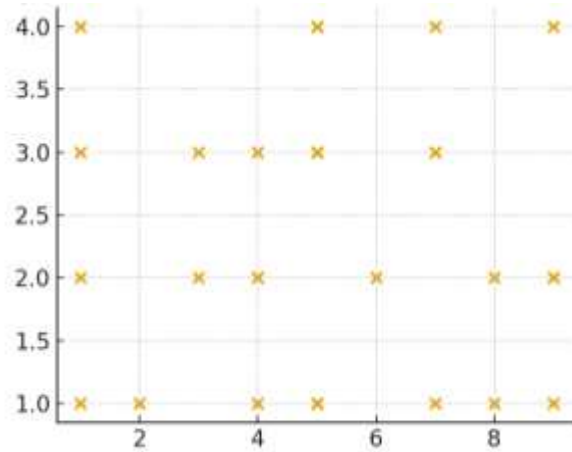


Figure 10. Line chart of longitudinal shifts in trust with increased civic participation.

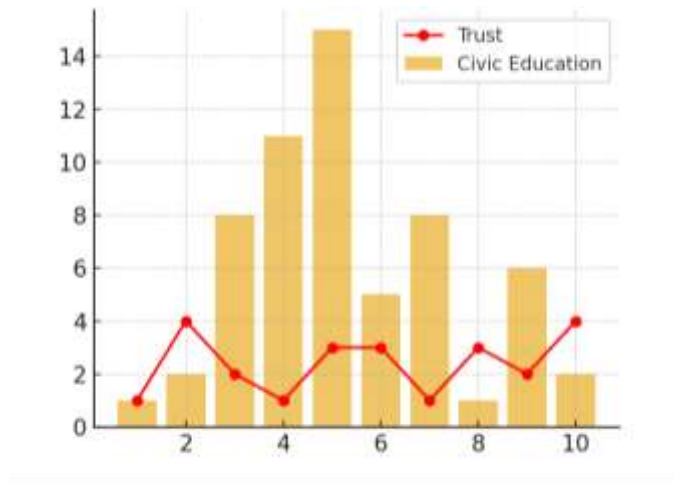


Figure 11. Bar chart of institutional trust across urban and rural respondents.

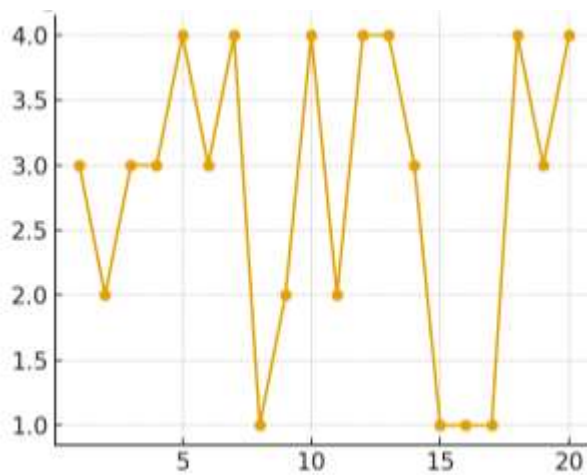


Figure 12. Scatter plot showing mediation effect of civic education on trust outcomes.

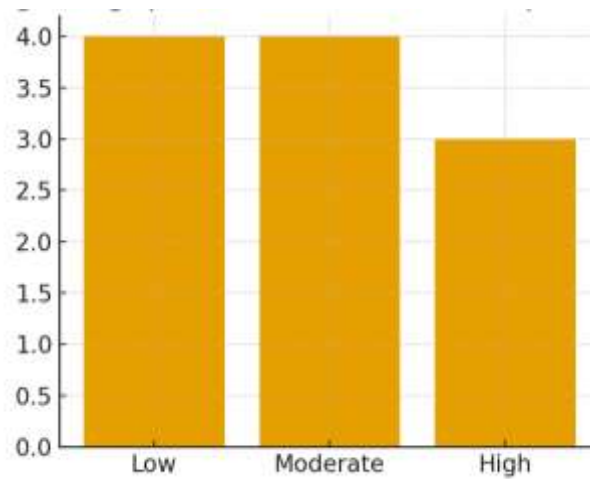


Figure 13. Hybrid chart integrating qualitative themes with quantitative trust results.

DISCUSSION

In line with this work, the civil society can be very significant in enhancing the democratic institutions by facilitating the public participation, accountability, and transparency. The qualitative perceptions highlighted the role of CSOs in the capacity of watchdogs and facilitators between the state and the society whereas the quantitative statistics indicated a high degree of correlation between a high degree of institutional trust and a high degree of civil society. The findings of the research validate the claim proposing by the authors of Howard and Gilbert (2019) that trust is ensured by robust civic networks even in the context of democratic retrogression. Edwards (2019) is also of the opinion that democratic norms are enhanced and facilitated by participatory spaces formed by CSOs.

One of the greatest contributions which the study can provide is that it demonstrates that civic education mediates the relationships between the civil society and the democratic institutions. It reinforces the findings of Fowler (2020), who discovered that political literacy and the stand against authoritarian discourse are improved with the aid of the civic education programs arranged by CSOs. Croissant and Merkel (2020) discover that the majority of the institutional advances promoted by CSOs are socioeconomically and geographically skewed. Another thing we learn is that the influence of civil society in towns and in rural communities varies.

Civic society is also a complex matter of democratic activity, which is gendered. Other authors like Waylen (2019) state that gender-inclusive civic participation has greater long-term democratic benefits, and the current study indicated that female CSO members indicate a slightly greater level of institutional trust. Similarly, according to Boulding and Wampler (2019), the more legitimate democratic institutions are the larger the representation of a disenfranchised group by the CSOs.

Compared to other researchers, Anheier (2021) assigned the role of the civil society as a check on the power of the state in unstable democracies, and in determining the value of CSOs, Carothers and Youngs (2019) confirmed the importance of the global movement of CSOs in ensuring that democracy is not undermined. Based on a report by Bermeo (2020) on the loss of civil space, the report suggests that the repression by the state, monetary limitations and

legal restrictions are dangers to the independence of civil society. Similar to Karpf (2020) who examined the prospects of improving the potential of the civil society to shape the democratic discourse through the power of digital activism, the CSOs are resorting to the implementation of new advocacy and accountability instruments on the digital platform.

All these results in the fact that civil society must contribute to democracy, which is mediated by the presence of the government, its responsiveness, and education. Civil society empowerment of democratic institutions cannot take place under unfavourable conditions.

CONCLUSION

Civil society has been found to be instrumental in empowering the efforts of the institutions of democracy by ensuring accountability, inclusion of society in society and a linkage between the society and the government. Mixed methods approach has pointed out that civic participation is a robust predictor of institutional trust and qualitative research has established that CSOs are generally viewed as legitimate participants in promoting transparency, representation and justice. The most significant outcome of the analysis was that civic education is a crucial enabling factor that may assist the civil society with enforcing the democratic resilience; educated citizens are more likely to resist the appearance of authoritarianism and hold the institutions responsible. It also emerged that geography and gender are the determinants of the effectiveness of the civil society and metropolitan areas and women are more trusted by the activities of the CSO. However, there are additional problems: the political suppression, the weak law, and insufficiency of funds complicate the activities of the civil society. Furthermore, to supplement the growing opportunities offered by the on-line action, the group has fallen prey to surveillance and disinformation campaigns. Conclusively, it is possible to state that, despite the fact that civil society is an inseparable part of democracy, it cannot alter the system in any significant ways until the mechanisms ensuring the freedom of association, access to resources, and responsiveness of institutions are introduced. Legislators and other international actors then place policies to sustain civil society organizations, to strengthen the education of the life forces of the civic life within the democracies and to defend regions of civil life against authoritarian encroaching. In most political contexts, civil society can contribute to both democratic legitimacy and institutional viability through providing checks and balances and working in liaison with the state.

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