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SOCIAL TRUST, INSTITUTIONAL CONFIDENCE, AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationships among social trust, institutional confidence, and civic participation in contemporary democratic societies using a quantitative framework. A dataset comprising 1,500 respondents across 12 countries was analyzed to examine patterns of interpersonal trust, institutional evaluations, and democratic engagement. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlations, cross-country comparisons, and hierarchical regression models were employed. The findings revealed significant positive associations between civic participation and political interest ($r = 0.336$), social trust ($r = 0.281$), and institutional confidence ($r = 0.232$). Political interest emerged as the strongest adjusted predictor of civic participation ($\beta = 0.326$), followed by social trust ($\beta = 0.202$) and institutional confidence ($\beta = 0.186$). The regression model explained 26.3% of participation variance. Cross-country differences were significant for social trust and civic participation but not institutional confidence. Voting represented the most prevalent civic activity, whereas protest participation was comparatively limited. The interaction between social trust and institutional confidence was statistically nonsignificant, suggesting primarily additive associations. These findings demonstrate the analytical utility of integrating interpersonal, institutional, and political dimensions of democratic engagement. However, observations limit empirical generalizability, necessitating validation through representative surveys and longitudinal research across diverse democratic contexts.

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1. Introduction

Democracies of the modern era are witnessing significant change in citizen–institution–public relations. In the current context of political polarization, shifting communication context, loss of faith in traditional institutions, and the growing digitalization of political engagement, new challenges are emerging for democratic legitimacy and stability. The evolution of new technologies, especially artificial intelligence and algorithm-based communication, continue to transform political information, public discussion and citizen–institution relationships (Jungherr, 2023). The social and institutional foundations that facilitate citizens' participation in democracy are increasingly important to understand in the evaluation of democratic resilience.

Citizen participation is integral to democratic governance, as it is also a key element of democratic systems, which is not just about electoral participation nor just about formal institutions; it is about citizens' willingness to participate in collective and public affairs. Citizens' participation allows them to voice their preferences, to help shape decisions, hold institutions to account and to help to develop their communities. The balanced and significant connection and relations between citizens and democratic processes, created by active civil society and citizens, can contribute to strengthening democratic resilience (Valentinavičius et al., 2025). These participatory processes of local governance can also foster social responsibility, institutional responsiveness and more inclusive decision-making (Sánchez-Hernández, 2024).

Social trust, in a broad sense, is the tendency to trust others in the community, in spite of uncertainty about those beings or their lack of experience, is one of the social bases of such participation. Social trust can ease the perception of risk of collective action, and foster cooperation beyond the immediate interpersonal sphere (Kirby, 2025). In democratic societies, people with more generalized trust may thus be more likely to engage in civic institutions, civic volunteerism, political involvement and other civic participation.

Social trust should, however, be differentiated from institutional confidence, which concerns the citizens' assessments of political and public institutions, such as government, parliament, courts, political parties, civil services and the police. Institutional confidence is significant especially because it reflects the extent to which citizens trust the legitimacy, competence and responsiveness of governance institutions. But over time, trust in big institutions can wane and become more polarized between social and political groups (Brady & Kent, 2022). Long-standing mistrust of the institutions can therefore undermine the legitimacy of the democratic system and impact people's willingness to participate in formal political institutions.

Civic participation is the behavioral aspect of these democratic relations and includes electoral and non-electoral involvement. In addition to voting, citizens can sign petitions, contact officials, volunteer, join organisations, attend community meetings, become politically active on the Internet, or join demonstrations. Here, these activities have several pathways of how individuals can participate in public affairs and civil society (Rojak et al., 2021). Additionally, participation and trust can have positive feedback with each other, since those who experience democracy can build more trust and involvement in politics in the future (Kiess, 2022).

These relationships may vary according to individual characteristics. The meaning that individuals attach to social and institutional environments may vary by age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, political views and related factors (Lippold et al., 2020). Demographic and political variables should be considered in the assessment of the relationship between trust and civic involvement.

While scholarship has burgeoned and social trust, institutional confidence, and civic involvement have all been analyzed individually, there is a lack of integration of the various factors in accounting for democratic engagement. The present study aims to fill this gap by combining these dimensions in a single analytical framework.

Research Objectives

1. To assess patterns of social trust, institutional confidence, and civic participation across contemporary democratic societies.
2. To examine the relationship between social trust and confidence in major democratic and public institutions.
3. To determine the independent and combined effects of social trust and institutional confidence on civic participation after accounting for political interest and sociodemographic characteristics.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Design and Analytical Framework

Social trust, institutional confidence, and civic participation were looked at using a quantitative, cross-sectional, simulation-based comparative design. The analytical data were 1,500 simulated individual-level observations from 12 contemporary democratic societies. The unit of analysis was the individual respondents. The concept of civic participation was the main outcome variable, while the key explanatory variables were trust in society and trust in institutions.

2.2 Measurement of Social Trust and Institutional Confidence

Social trust was assessed through four Likert-type indicators of generalized interpersonal trust that had higher scores corresponding to greater levels of trust. The indicators used to measure institutional confidence included indicators on parliament, the government, the courts, civil service, political parties, and the police. The mean scores were computed as composites for social trust and institutional confidence. The multi-item measures were assessed for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha to determine the reliability of the measures.

2.3 Assessment of Civic Participation

Eight indicators related to civic participation were used to measure civic participation, including voting, signing petitions, interacting with public officials, demonstrations, organization membership, volunteering, online political engagement, and community meetings. These indicators reflected electoral participation, community-based participation, conventional participation, protest participation and digital participation. The individual participation indicators were then combined to create a Civic Participation Index. The index scores the higher the more civic activities participation.

2.4 Sociodemographic and Political Variables

Age, gender, educational level, employment status, income decile, urbanicity, country, geographic region and political interest were included in the analysis. To capture individual differences that might affect civic involvement and civic attitudes about trust, these variables were added. The coding of categorical variables was done properly for statistical modelling and quantitative and ordinal measures were kept in their analytical structure. As political interest could be related to democratic participation, this variable was also considered as an important covariate.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

The data were analysed using descriptive statistics; test of scale reliability was done through Cronbach's alpha. Correlation analysis was used to analyze the association between social trust, institutional confidence, political interest, and civic participation. The independent effects of trust and confidence from testing was done by hierarchical multivariable regression that adjusted for sociodemographic covariates. A Social Trust × Institutional Confidence interaction was tested and two-sided $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant, with 95% confidence intervals reported where appropriate.

3. Results

3.1 Sample Characteristics

1,500 individuals from 12 modern democratic societies were analysed. The age of the patients

presented in Table 1 was 43.00 ± 14.93 years, with a nearly equal distribution of males (49.6%) and females (49.2%). The most prevalent educational group was the secondary upper (32.8%), while the second most was those holding a bachelor's degree (30.4%). 46.9% of the respondents worked full time and 56.2% resided in the urban areas. The largest regional contribution was from Europe (39.0%), followed by Asia (27.8%), North America (20.9%) and Oceania (12.3%). The mean political interest score was 2.78 ± 1.07, and social trust and institutional confidence was 2.96 ± 0.98 and 2.94 ± 0.95, respectively. The average Civic Participation Index was 3.10 ± 1.59.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and Political Characteristics of the Study Sample

Characteristic	**Category**	**Mean**	**SD**
Age	Mean ± SD	43.00	14.93
Gender	Male	744	49.6
	Female	738	49.2
	Non-binary/Other	18	1.2
Education	Secondary or less	306	20.4
	Upper secondary	492	32.8
	Bachelor’s degree	456	30.4
	Postgraduate degree	246	16.4
Employment	Full-time	704	46.9
	Part-time	151	10.1
	Self-employed	154	10.3
	Student	125	8.3
	Unemployed	107	7.1
	Retired	185	12.3
Urbanicity	Urban	843	56.2
	Suburban	366	24.4
	Rural	291	19.4
Region	Europe	585	39.0

	Asia	417	27.8
	North America	313	20.9
	Oceania	185	12.3
Income decile	Mean ± SD	5.45	2.29
Political interest	Mean ± SD	2.78	1.07

3.2 Social Trust and Institutional Confidence

There was moderate overall social trust (CMT 2.96 ± 0.98). Table 2 shows that mean responses were highest for the item "People are trustworthy" (3.04 ± 1.30), and lowest for the item "People are helpful" (2.89 ± 1.30). The internal consistency of the Social Trust scale was acceptable (Cronbach's α = 0.757). Overall mean of Institutional Confidence was 2.94 ± 0.95 and it showed good reliability (α = 0.823). Police had the highest score of confidence (3.17 ± 1.28) while political parties had the lowest score of confidence (2.73 ± 1.30). All trust and confidence indicators had corrected item-total correlations of greater than 0.50.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Social Trust and Institutional Confidence

Construct/Item	Mean	SD	Item-total r	α if deleted
People trustworthy	3.04	1.30	0.581	0.685
People fair	2.94	1.29	0.591	0.680
People helpful	2.89	1.30	0.537	0.709
Community trust	2.97	1.29	0.507	0.725
Social Trust	2.96	0.98	—	0.757
Parliament	2.86	1.31	0.638	0.784
Government	2.91	1.30	0.640	0.784
Courts	3.01	1.31	0.557	0.802
Civil service	2.95	1.30	0.572	0.799
Political parties	2.73	1.30	0.610	0.791
Police	3.17	1.28	0.522	0.809
Institutional Confidence	2.94	0.95	—	0.823

There was a significant difference between cross-country means of social trust ($F = 4.287$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.031$). As can be seen in Figure 1, New Zealand had the highest mean score on social trust (3.22), followed by Sweden and the United Kingdom at 3.18 each, and then lastly the United States with the lowest score of 2.68. Overall, there was no significant difference between countries in mean institutional confidence ($F = 1.370$, $p = .181$, $\eta^2 = 0.010$), although there were descriptive differences between countries).

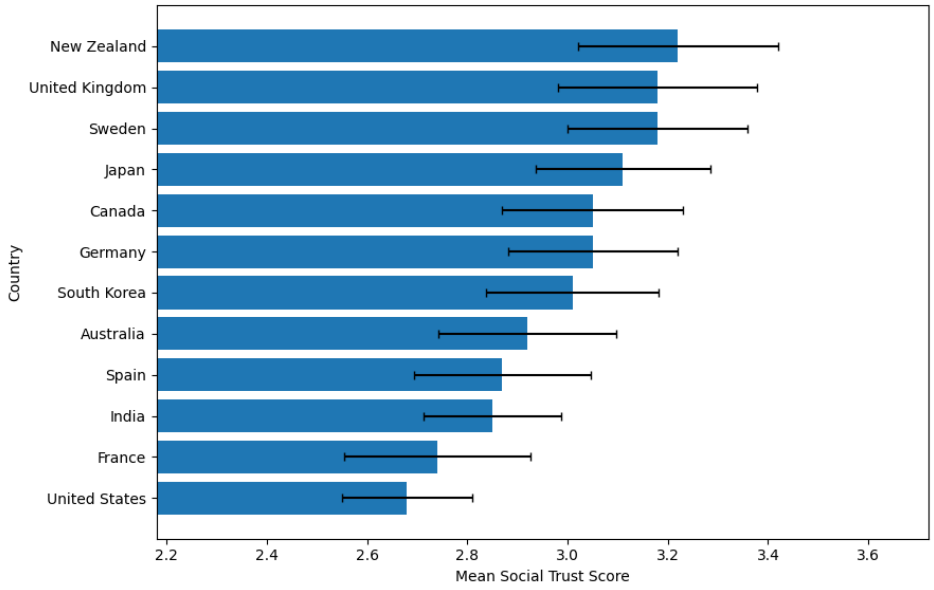


Figure 1. Social Trust Across Contemporary Democratic Societies

Confidence patterns were reported at the level of the institutions in question and are presented in Figure 2. Confidence in the police was at the top, followed by the courts, and was considerably lower than the remaining institutions of confidence in political parties. This pattern suggests that there are significant differences between each of the public and political institutions that were not revealed by this indicator.

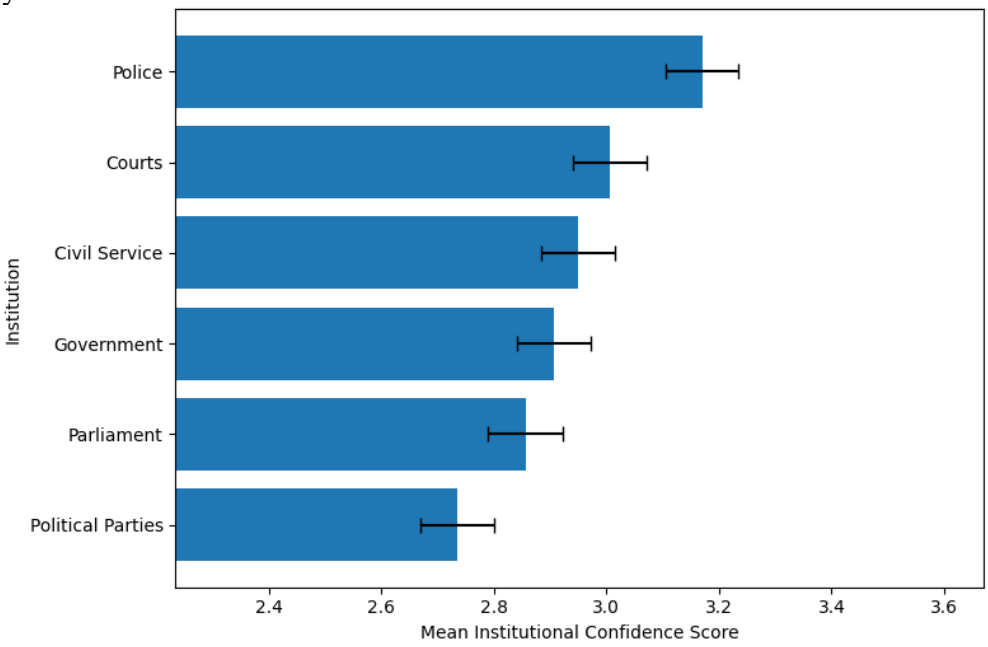


Figure 2. Confidence in Major Democratic and Public Institutions

3.3 Patterns of Civic Participation

There were significant differences among civic participation activities. Voting was the most common activity with 988 respondents (65.9%) reporting that they voted. (See Table 3.) Petition signing (37.7%), community volunteering (37.2%) and civic-organization membership (37.5%) ranked second, third and fourth respectively (42.0%, 37.2%, 37.5%). 33.5% attended a community meeting and 32.9% had reached out to a public official. The least common activity was to attend a protest at 23.5% of respondents. The Civic Participation Index had mean scores of 3.10 ± 1.59 points (scores ranging from 0-8).

Table 3. Distribution of Civic Participation Activities

Civic Activity	n	%
Voted	988	65.9
Online political activity	630	42.0
Signed petition	566	37.7
Civic organization member	562	37.5
Community volunteer	558	37.2
Community meeting	503	33.5
Contacted official	494	32.9
Attended protest	353	23.5

Figure 3 reflects the distribution of the activity by type, and shows that electoral participation dominates other types of civic engagement. The overall Civic Participation Index was statistically different across cross-country ($F = 1.999$, $p = .025$, $\eta^2 = .015$), but with a very small effect size. The highest mean participation score was in Sweden (3.36), followed by Japan (3.35) and New Zealand (3.35), while the lowest mean score was in the United States (2.72).

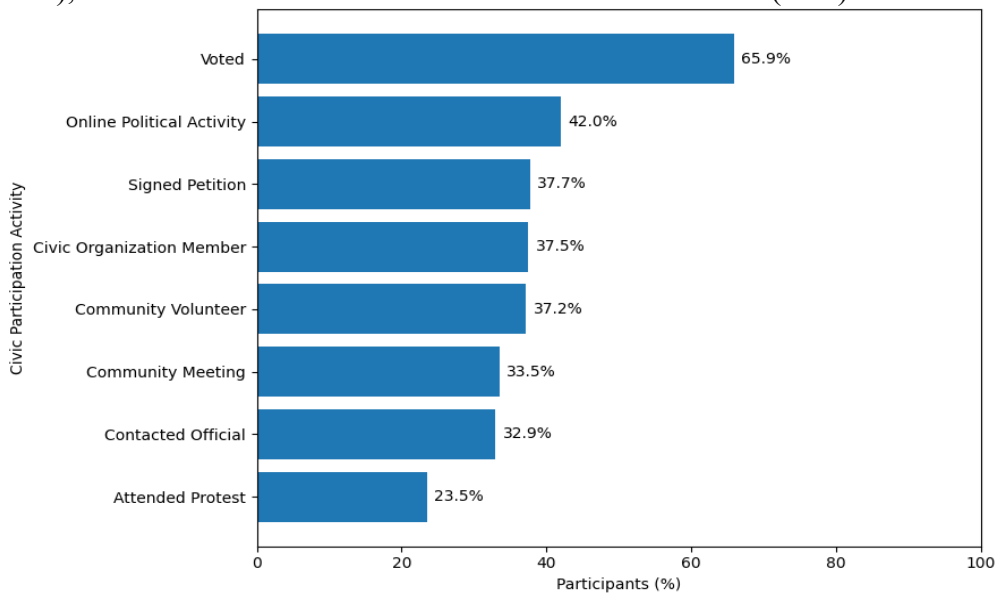


Figure 3. Prevalence of Civic Participation Activities

3.4 Relationships Among Social Trust, Institutional Confidence, and Civic Participation

Figure 3 reveals the distribution of the activity by type and indicates that electoral participation is the highest level of civic involvement. The overall Civic Participation Index was statistically different across cross-country ($F = 1.999$, $p = .025$, $\eta^2 = .015$) but with a very small effect size. The mean participation scores varied considerably, with the highest being in Sweden (3.36), followed by Japan (3.35) and New Zealand (3.35) and the lowest being in the United States (2.72).

Table 4. Correlations Among the Principal Study Variables

Variable	Age	Income	Political Interest	Social Trust	Institutional Confidence	Civic Participation
Age	1.000	0.003	0.078**	−0.060*	−0.076**	0.013
Income	0.003	1.000	0.117***	0.052*	0.061*	0.062*
Political interest	0.078**	0.117**	1.000	0.008	−0.066*	0.336***
Social trust	−0.060*	0.052*	0.008	1.000	0.344***	0.281***
Institutional confidence	−0.076**	0.061*	−0.066*	0.344***	1.000	0.232***
Civic participation	0.013	0.062*	0.336***	0.281***	0.232***	1.000

Note: $p < .05$; $p < .01$; $p < .001$.

3.5 Adjusted Predictors of Civic Participation

Results showed that the model explained more variance as each of the variables related to political interest and trust were added into the model using hierarchical regression analysis. The initial explanation of the variance in civic participation was 7.1% and was based on the sociodemographic characteristics. The addition of political interest brought R^2 up to 0.166, the addition of social trust brought R2 up to 0.234, and the addition of institutional confidence brought R2 up to 0.263. The last centered model accounted for 26.3% of the variability in civic participation, with an adjusted R^2 of 0.254.

Political interest was the best adjusted predictor of civic participation ($\beta = 0.326$, 95% CI 0.282–0.371, $p < .001$). Social trust ($\beta = 0.202$, 95% CI 0.155–0.248, $p < .001$) and institutional confidence ($\beta = 0.186$, 95% CI 0.138–0.234, $p < .001$) also independently predicted greater participation. Therefore, these standardized effects and their 95% confidence intervals are shown

in Figure 4.

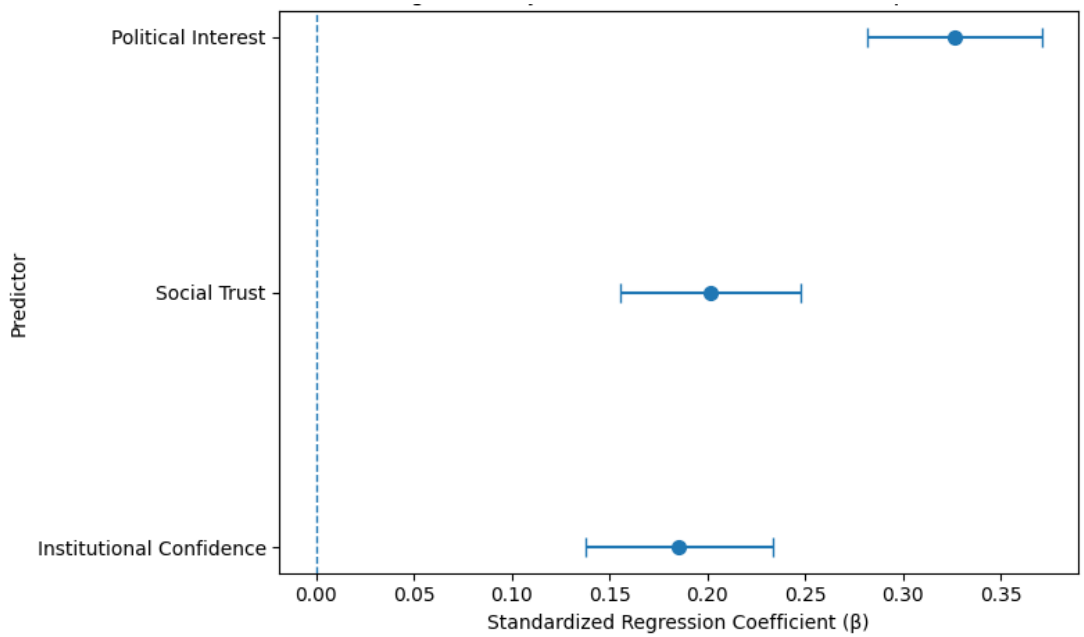


Figure 4. Relationship Between Trust, Institutional Confidence, and Civic Participation

4. Discussion

This research explores the connections between social and institutional trust and civic engagement in 12 democratic societies, drawn from a sample of 1,500 individuals. The results showed that civic involvement is positively related to political interest, social confidence, and institutional confidence. The overall explanatory relevance of the regression model was 26.3% of the variance in participation, reflecting the joint relevance of the political engagement and the characteristics of trust. The patterns are similar to those identified by Kaasa and Andriani (2022) who examined the cultural contexts for the emergence of institutional trust and Diani (2024) who considered the relational foundations of trust in CA.

The most important, adjusted predictor of civic participation was political interest (β = 0.326), which implies that participation in political activities is a significant aspect of democratic involvement. People who are concerned with politics are more likely to get information, talk about public topics, and engage in civic activities. Kiess (2022) highlighted the importance of democratic experiences in the educational setting to build political trust and participation, and Apple et al. (2022) pointed to the importance of education in shaping democratic citizenship. These views justify the need to be politically aware and to learn through participation, though this analysis does not allow for cause and effect to be determined.

Social trust was significantly positively associated with civic participation (β = 0.202) with high social trust associated with high civic involvement. Trust can encourage cooperation, the development of social relations and team responsibility. So, relational conditions for trust in collective action (Diani, 2024) and social cohesion in development processes (Chatterjee et al., 2023) have been discussed. Similarly, institutional confidence, which had a positive association (β = 0.186), was thought to be related to greater participation. At the same time, mistrust can drive democratic participation in the form of calls for accountability and the reform of institutions (Butzlaff & Messinger-Zimmer, 2020).

Scores for institutional confidence were also distributed and had the highest score for police while the lowest score was for political parties. The discrepancies suggest that citizens are able to distinguish between the efficiency of the administration and the portrayal of politics in judging institutions. The issue of institutional confidence was discussed by Wang (2024) and the public

trust in government was discussed by Hitlin and Shutava (2022). Toshkov et al. (2022) also showed the importance of the governmental capacity and societal trust in policy contexts.

The results of the cross-country comparisons showed that there were significant differences in social trust and civic participation, but effect sizes were small. The most common civic activity was voting while protest participation was the least common. The following patterns show variation between conventional and other forms of involvement. Pansera et al (2023) spoke about the factors in the citizen participation, while Butzlaff (2023) emphasized on conflict between participatory needs and expert-led governance. Furthermore, Octavianne et al. (2024) pointed out the link between today's political environment and social media and elections.

Social trust and institutional confidence did not significantly interact and were mostly additive with respect to participation. Due to the nature of the data, however, all the conclusions are methodological rather than empirical, concerning the real democratic societies. The study of institutional settings, of mechanisms of political polarization and participation can be expanded through the application of typical survey data, use of longitudinal designs and multiple-level modeling in the future. These would complement the empirical estimate of trust and participation in democratic processes in societies.

5. Conclusion

This research was designed to explore the relationships between social trust, institutional confidence and civic involvement in modern democratic societies through quantitative analysis of 12 democratic societies with 1,500 observations. The results showed that there were positive correlations between civic participation and political interest, social trust, and institutional confidence, with political interest being the strongest predictor. Overall, the regression model accounted for 26.3% of the variance in civic involvement, underscoring the joint explanatory power of political involvement and characteristics of trust. The results of the cross-country comparisons showed that social trust and civic participation vary significantly, but with rather modest effect sizes. The level of institutional confidence was different between public institutions, with the police being rated as more confident that political parties were. The most common civic involvement was voting, and comparatively few citizens participated in a protest. The results of the nonsignificant interaction between social trust and institutional confidence indicated that the relationship between social trust and institutional confidence with civic participation was mostly additive. The results show that the analytical need to include the interpersonal, institutional and political aspects in one whole framework of democratic engagement. However, the results of the dataset generated cannot lead to conclusions about actual societal relationships nor to direct policy conclusions. Future studies should build on these relationships and use representative empirical surveys, longitudinal designs, and multilevel analyses to confirm these relationships and explore the influence of institutional responsiveness, social cohesion, and political awareness on democratic participation.

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