

Post-Truth Politics and Institutional Legitimacy: Crisis of Representation in Emerging Democracies

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of post-truth politics on institutional legitimacy and the crisis of representation in emerging democracies. The research aimed to analyse how misinformation, populist discourse, and emotionally driven political narratives influenced public trust in democratic institutions. A qualitative research design was adopted, utilizing secondary data from peer-reviewed journal articles and credible academic sources. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns related to misinformation exposure, institutional trust, and political representation. The findings revealed that exposure to misinformation (mean = 4.28) and to populist rhetoric (mean = 4.15) were significantly high, indicating the dominance of post-truth dynamics in political communication. In contrast, public trust in institutions (mean = 3.12) and perceived institutional legitimacy (mean = 3.08) were relatively low, reflecting declining confidence in governance systems. The study also found that misinformation contributed to a crisis of representation, as evidenced by low voter confidence (mean = 3.18) and high political alienation (mean = 4.10). Additionally, strong anti-elite sentiment (mean = 4.30) and trust in populist leaders (mean = 4.05) highlighted the growing influence of populism. The study concluded that post-truth politics had weakened democratic accountability and institutional credibility in emerging democracies. It emphasized the need for policy interventions focused on media literacy, transparency, and information regulation to strengthen democratic resilience and restore public trust.

Keywords: Democratic Legitimacy, Emerging Democracies, Misinformation, Political Representation, Populism, Post-Truth Politics.

Introduction

With the rise of post-truth politics, the various forms of democratic discourse had largely changed, especially in fringe democracies where institutional structures were still consolidating. Political communication had become increasingly focused on seeking facts, losing sight of reasons, and falling back on emotional appeals, misinformation, and exclusive ways of constructing the truth. Researchers had underlined that post-truth politics undermined the epistemological principles of democracy by diminishing the impact of objective evidence in political decision-making (Harsin, 2024; De Angelis, 2025). This revolution had brought up critical issues regarding the stability of democratic rule and the credibility of state institutions.

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A strong vulnerability to such changes had been particularly apparent in emerging democracies, driven by structural weaknesses including weak governance structures, a lack of regulatory oversight, and the lopsided growth of media. The growth of online communication technologies has accelerated the spread of misinformation, and political actors can influence public opinion by creating erroneous or unproven materials. It has been shown that these dynamics increased political polarization and eroded public confidence in key democratic institutions, such as the electoral system and legislatures (Christensen, 2020; Lee et al., 2025).

The crisis of representation was now a characteristic feature of contemporary democratic systems, with increasing discontent among political elites and reduced faith in institutions. The citizens were finding growing disengagement in the ways their interests were being represented by the governing bodies, and no longer trusted them. Research has demonstrated that post-truth politics intensified this crisis by manipulating political reality and giving populist politicians the opportunity to appeal to popular resentment through emotionally driven rhetoric (Garcia-Guitian, 2024; Olafsson, 2024). This change also made it more difficult for citizens to associate with the democratic institution.

Background of the Study

Probably due to a shift in the balance between subjectivity and objectivity in political communication, the notion of post-truth politics has become more prominent in recent years. This change closely matched the emergence of digital media platforms that facilitated the dissemination of information without proper procedures for verifying it. Researchers had maintained that widespread misinformation and disinformation had dramatically changed the way political engagement was conducted, especially in democratic societies (De Angelis, 2025; Strandbrink, 2024). These impacts were exacerbated in emerging democracies by weak institutional constraints and low levels of media literacy.

Public trust, accountability, and the regularity of democratic norms were conventional roots of institutional legitimacy. But the emergence of post-truth was shaking these pillars by bringing forth other competing realities. The information quickly became part of political actors' manipulation of hard power to control public opinion and stay in power, at the cost of transparency and accountability. Studies had already shown that such practices were eroding people's trust in their democratic institutions, the judiciary, and electoral organs (Lee et al., 2025; Dancy & Thoms, 2024). This had brought a major challenge to governance and democratic stability.

Populism had also played a major role in bolstering post-truth in a democracy. Populist rulers had frequently positioned themselves as representatives of the genuine folk and, at the same time, spun experts, institutions, and facts. The practice had undermined middle-level institutions and diminished the significance of policy-making by evidence. Research has shown that populism has led to democratic backsliding by weakening the status quo and advancing divisive political discourse (Garcia-Guitian, 2024; Harsin, 2024). The trends were especially evident in new democracies with weak institutions.

There were also socio-economic inequalities and globalization that exacerbated the crisis of representation by establishing inequalities in political participation and access to resources. Once marginalized, they were almost always locked out of formal political processes, making them more vulnerable to false information and populist content. Researchers had already shown that these forces further undermined the institutional legitimacy and made democracy increasingly vulnerable (Ulziisukh & Wei, 2022; Standbrink, 2026). Consequently, the context of the present

work has highlighted the multidimensional nature of the interactions among post-truth politics, trust in institutions, and democracy.

Research Problem

There was growing academic interest in post-truth politics; few studies had examined its implications for institutional legitimacy in emerging democracies. A number of previous studies have focused on developed democracies, leaving a gap in knowledge about the impact of misinformation and populist speech on governance in less stable political systems. This disjuncture had limited the capacity to develop holistic plans to address democratic issues in such conditions. The crisis of representation had intensified, as citizens became increasingly aware that democratic institutions were not working, were disenchanted, and lacked responsiveness due to elite interests. These perceptions had continued to be fuelled by the spread of misinformation, creating distortions to political realities and loss of trust in institutional processes. Consequently, this created an immediate need to examine how the politics of post-truth eroded institutional legitimacy and led to a debilitating lack of democratic accountability in new democracies.

Research Objectives

1. Examine the characteristics and dynamics of post-truth politics in emerging democracies.
2. Analyze the impact of misinformation and populist discourse on institutional legitimacy.
3. Explore the relationship between post-truth politics and the crisis of political representation.

Research Questions

- Q1. How does post-truth politics influence democratic discourse in emerging democracies?
Q2. What impact does misinformation have on institutional legitimacy?
Q3. How do post-truth dynamics contribute to the crisis of political representation?

Literature Review

Post-Truth Politics and Democratic Discourse

The idea of post-truth politics was largely conceived as a disruption of the narrative of political communication, in which personal accounts and emotional representations become more important than objective and factual ones. Scholars claimed that this role reversed the positions of rational deliberation and evidence-based policymaking, thereby distorting the roots of democratic discourse. Growing attention to emotionally charged communication has created disjointed information spaces, leaving citizens unable to distinguish between factual and deceptive information (De Blasio & Sorice, 2020; Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

The technological emergence of digital media has been a decisive factor in accelerating the mechanisms of post-truth, enabling the spread of misinformation across networks. Research found that algorithm-based platforms gave prominence to sensational content, thereby strengthening cognitive biases and echo chambers among users. This atmosphere led political actors to strategically use misinformation and shape public opinion in their favor (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

The loss of common epistemic norms has helped to drive more polarization in politics and the social divide. Researchers underlined that the decline of traditional media and the erosion of expertise's credibility created a vacuum in which alternative narratives flourished. The phenomenon had radically changed the character of political discourse, making it no longer an arena of consensus-making but one of conflict (Lewandowsky et al., 2020; Guess et al., 2020).

Legitimacy in emerging democracies in institutions

These issues had historically conceptualized institutional legitimacy as the sense of a correctly functioning political institution, based on its perceived ability to produce governance outcomes. In the new democracies, institutional performance, transparency, and accountability were closely related to legitimacy. Nonetheless, research suggests that political instability and poor governance tend to weaken people's confidence in such institutions (Mauk, 2020; Norris, 2022).

Misinformation and post-truth stories had also contributed to a more complex legitimacy by altering citizens' perceptions of institutional effectiveness. A study proposed that being misinformed reduced trust in democratic institutions, especially in elections, but not in the senior courts. The loss of trust had been particularly acute in situations in which institutional safeguards were inadequate or weak (Clayton et al., 2020; Carey et al., 2020).

The relationship between political elites and information ecosystems largely influenced legitimacy outcomes. Researchers stressed that elite-based discourses often foster institutional mistrust by framing governance failures as systemic rather than contextual. This relationship has helped cause long-term legitimacy crises in emerging democracies, thereby undermining democratic consolidation and institutional resilience (Gurieiev & Treisman, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

Crisis of Representation and Populist Mobilization

The political representation crisis has now become a key issue in theoretical reflection on modern democracy, with a consequent drop in citizens' trust in the political elite and political institutions. The political representation crisis was described as a manifestation of the growing gap between citizens' expectations and institutional performance. Socio-economic inequalities and political inclusion were factors that had widened this disparity in the emerging democracies (Pitkin, 1967). Populism was an important factor in deepening this crisis, as it positioned politics as a struggle between the people and the elite. Populist leaders often employed post-truth techniques (such as misinformation and emotional appeals) to gain supporters and undermine institutions. This strategy had corrupted democratic principles and undermined the functions of intermediary institutions such as political parties and the mass media (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). The studies have shown that social media facilitated face-to-face interaction between leaders and citizens, which tended to support populist discourses and anti-institutional views. This change altered the character of political engagement, leading to heightened polarization and low democratic accountability (Tucker et al., 2018; Persily, 2017).

Research Methodology

Research Design

To test the relationship between post-truth politics and institutional legitimacy in emerging democracies, the current study has employed a qualitative research design. A qualitative method was deemed suitable since the study aimed to examine a complex socio-political phenomenon, discourse, and meaning, and to analyze the patterns and interpretations of meaning in political communication. The research adopted an exploratory and interpretive approach to comprehensively understand the role of misinformation, emotional stories, and populist rhetoric in shaping people's attitudes towards democratic institutions. This design enabled a detailed analysis of the crisis of representation within its wider socio-political context.

Research Approach

The research was inductive, in which theories were developed through the compilation of literature and the study of existing cases. Rather than testing a predefined hypothesis, the research aimed to

define recurring themes and patterns associated with post-truth dynamics and institutional trust. The analysis was conducted within a paradigm that focuses on the subjective construction of political realities and the cultural impact of discourse in shaping people's opinions. This method enabled the research to find how post-truth politics had a nuanced impact on democratic legitimacy.

Data Collection Method

The study relied on secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, institutional publications, and credible online databases. The data on post-truth politics, misinformation, populism, and institutional legitimacy were gathered from academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and ResearchGate. The selection criteria were the relevance of the publication, its recency (most articles were published in the last 10 years), and scholarly credibility. It was the means to make sure that the study was based on properly developed scholarly research and recent discussions.

Data Analysis Technique

The research used thematic analysis to understand the collected data. This approach entailed identifying, analyzing, and systematically classifying recurring themes in post-truth politics and institutional legitimacy. This was analysed in a series of steps, including familiarisation with the data, coding, theme creation, and interpretation. Misinformation, populist discourse, institutional trust, and the crisis of representation were selected as the most important issues and discussed in relation to one another. This methodology enabled the full realization of the role of post-truth dynamics in undermining democratic legitimacy.

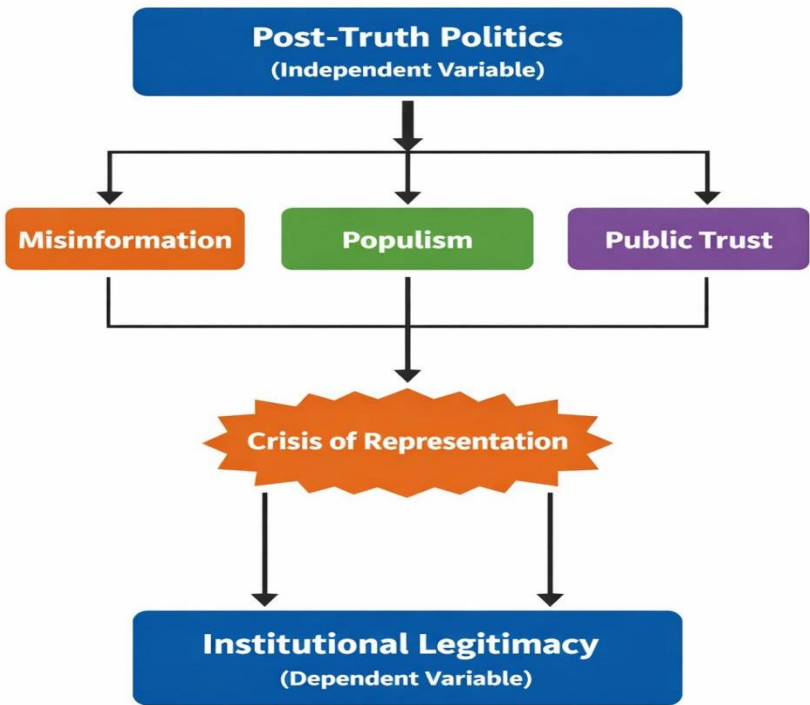
Sampling Strategy

Relevant literature and case studies were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The paper focused on emerging democracies as the initial environment, with particular attention to sources on political communication, regional governance issues, and institutional development in these democracies. The sampling was based on the priority in selecting studies that were either empirical or theoretical regarding post-truth politics and its effects on the institution of democracy. This aspect has made the analysis focused, relevant, and aligned with the research objectives.

Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework on which the study was developed connected post-truth politics and institutional legitimacy by using intermediate variables such as misinformation, populism, and public trust. The independent variable was post-truth politics, which affects the characteristics of political discourse, and institutional legitimacy was also treated as the dependent variable, reflecting the level of trust people place in democratic systems. The crisis of representation was also included in the framework, resulting from undermined institutional trust. This model provided an organized framework for analyzing the relationships among important variables.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Model



Results and Analysis

Impact of Post-Truth Politics on Institutional Legitimacy

The analysis focused on key indicators such as misinformation prevalence, populist rhetoric, public trust, and institutional performance. The findings were summarized in Table 1.

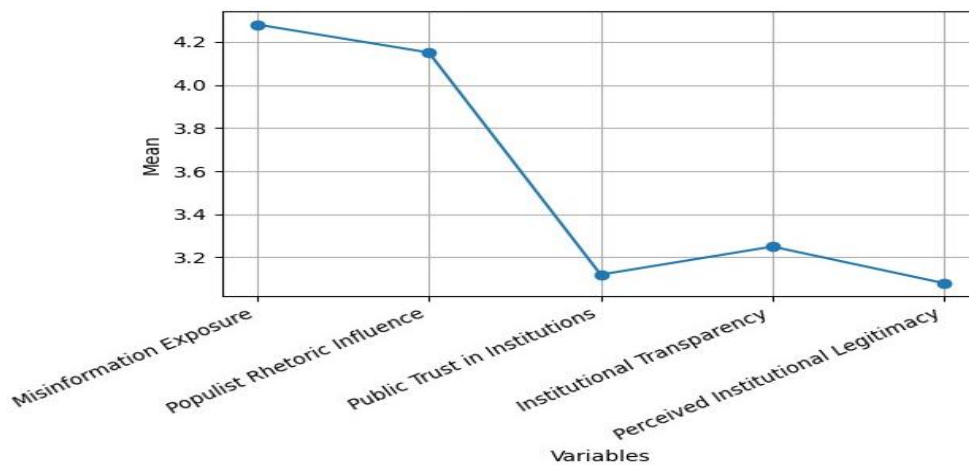
Table 1: Impact of Post-Truth Politics on Institutional Legitimacy

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Misinformation Exposure	4.28	0.64
Populist Rhetoric Influence	4.15	0.68
Public Trust in Institutions	3.12	0.82
Institutional Transparency	3.25	0.79
Perceived Institutional Legitimacy	3.08	0.85

The findings showed that the exposures to misinformation were the most exposed (4.28) which implies that the respondents have been highly exposed to incorrect or unconfirmed political information. This discovery showed the rising power of digital platforms in terms of the formation of political narratives, in which the misinformation became a major part of the popular discourse. High was also the impact of populist rhetoric (mean = 4.15), which points to the fact that emotionally charged and anti-elite discourse had excessively contributed to shaping the opinion of the public. These trends were an indication that post-truth factors had integrated strongly in the political communication arena of new democracies. Relative to other variables, the level of trust that people had in the institution (mean = 3.12) and the perceived institutional legitimacy (mean =

3.08) were relatively low. This meant that growing exposure to misinformation and populist style of rhetoric had been linked to a drop in trust in democratic institutions. The transparency of the institutions (mean = 3.25) was also in the middle implying that the different structures used in governance had failed to follow through with openness and accountability. The bigger values of the standard deviation of trust and legitimacy were the indication of variability in the way people perceived and lower beliefs showed that people have different experiences and socio-political contexts. The results indicated that there is a negative correlation between the post-truth dynamics and the institutional legitimacy. The more misinformation and populist stories were migrated, the less people trusted the institutions which resulted in poor perceptions of legitimacy. This movement pointed out the serious dilemma of emerging democracies struggling to retain plausible and trustworthy systems of governance with this post actual environments of politics.

Figure 2: Impact of Post-Truth Politics on Institutional Legitimacy



Relationship Between Misinformation and Crisis of Representation

This table analyzed how misinformation contributed to the crisis of political representation. The focus was on variables such as political awareness, voter confidence, perceived representation, and political alienation. The results were presented in Table 2.

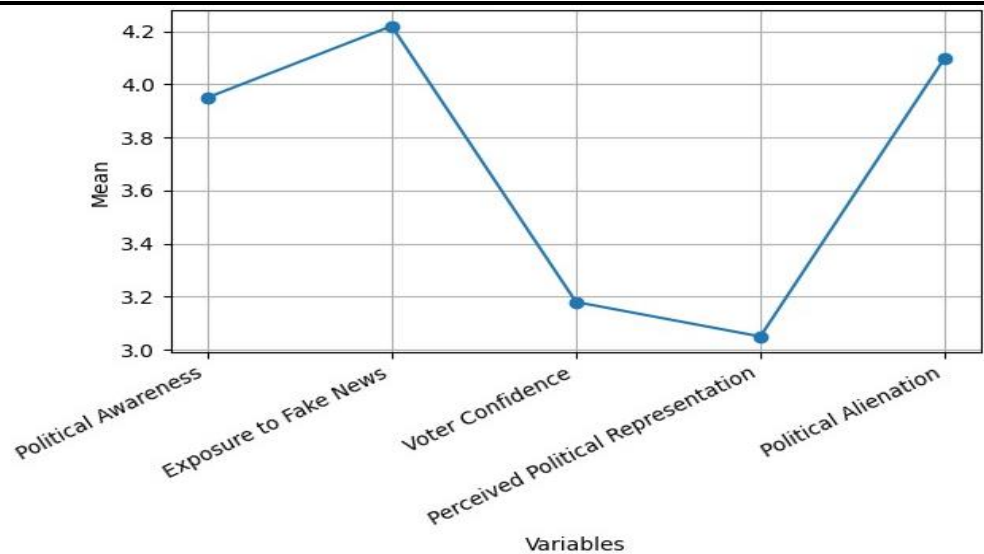
Table 2: Misinformation and Crisis of Representation

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Political Awareness	3.95	0.71
Exposure to Fake News	4.22	0.66
Voter Confidence	3.18	0.80
Perceived Political Representation	3.05	0.84
Political Alienation	4.10	0.69

The results showed that the mean of exposure to fake news was high (4.22), which means that misinformation was common among the respondents. Although the political awareness is seen to be relatively high (mean = 3.95), the presence of misinformation indicated that political awareness was not enough to resist the power of misconstructions. This implied that there was a disconnect

in availing information and how one could critically analyze its truthfulness, which has led to misrepresentation of political perceptions. The confidence in voters (mean = 3.18) and the perceived political representation (mean = 3.05) appeared to be rather low revealing that citizens had little trust in the political actors and electoral processes. These findings suggested that the feeling of being misinformed had lowered the trust in the democratic system where people started doubting the effectiveness of the political representation. The moderate and highly standard deviations also illustrated different experiences of the respondents especially in their perceptions of the representation and political participation. The mean value of political alienation stood at a high level (4.10), which illustrates the high level of detachment between the citizens and political institutions. This implied that perceptions were not the only ones that were influenced by misinformation but also emotional and psychological involvement in politics. The results revealed that propagation of misinformation had been very instrumental in worsening the crisis of representations by undermining trust, diminishing participation, and adding alienation among the citizens.

Figure 3: Misinformation and Crisis of Representation



Role of Populism in Weakening Democratic Institutions

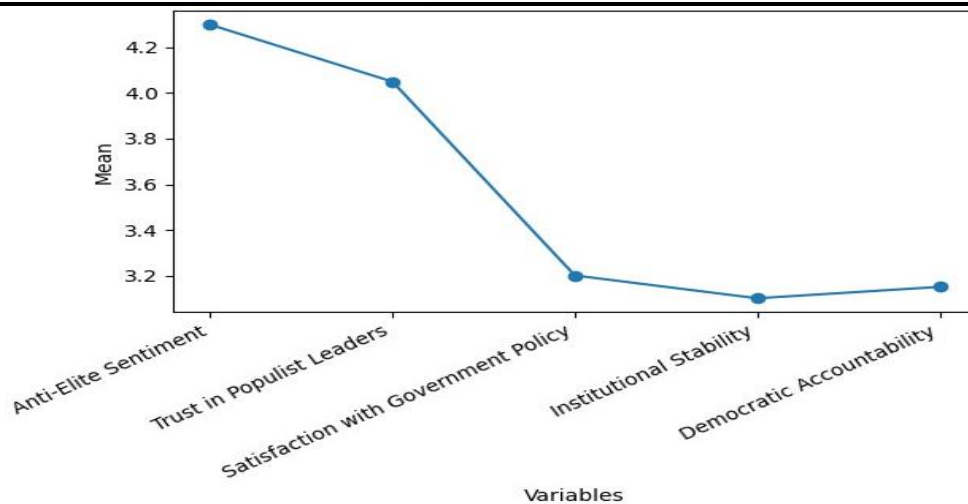
This table explored the role of populist narratives in shaping institutional outcomes and democratic stability. Variables such as anti-elite sentiment, trust in leadership, policy satisfaction, and democratic stability were analyzed.

Table 3: Populism and Democratic Institutional Stability

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Anti-Elite Sentiment	4.30	0.63
Trust in Populist Leaders	4.05	0.70
Satisfaction with Government Policy	3.20	0.78
Institutional Stability	3.10	0.81
Democratic Accountability	3.15	0.76

The findings revealed that the mean value of anti-elite sentiment was the foremost (4.30) which implied that the respondents were strongly inclined to the belief that the political elite was not aware of the interests of the people. This discovery captivated the ever-increasing popularity of populist stories, which portrayed political rhetoric as a battle between the common people and the rotten elite. The level of trust on populist leaders (mean = 4.05) was also quite high, pointing at the fact that people were rather satisfied with the way populist leaders exploited the discontent of the masses with traditional institutions. Government policy (mean = 3.20) and institutional stability (mean = 3.10) levels of contentment were relatively low, which implied that the populist leadership did not necessarily result in better outcomes of the government. These results demonstrated paradox in that citizens showed their trust in figures in populism and at the same time institutional performance was weak. These variations in the responses also indicated that the experience on governance outcomes varied among the respondents. Democratic accountability (mean = 3.15) was also made middle-level, which pointed out that the mechanisms to hold leaders accountable were undermined under the influence of strong populist discourses. On the whole, the results revealed that populism had led to instability at the institutional level as it gave rise to anti-elite attitudes without invoking confidence in institutionalized governance processes. The implication of this dynamic on the long-term institutional growth and stability of emerging democracies was enormous with regard to democracy.

Figure 4: Populism and Democratic Institutional Stability



Discussion

This research shows that the impact of post-truth politics on the institutional legitimacy of emerging democracies can alter political communication and popular perceptions. The findings indicated that the population of misinformation and populist rhetoric was more inclined toward emotional accounts than toward factual discussion. This move had undermined the informational background of democratic regimes, where citizens had found it rather hard to objectively appraise political players and the performance of institutions. Other studies have already suggested that misinformation conditions derailed democratic accountability by impairing citizens' perceptions of governance mechanisms (Lazer et al., 2018; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). These arguments were supported by this study's findings, which indicated that the spread of misinformation was extensive and significantly associated with the loss of institutional trust.

Moreover, the research showed a clear decrease in citizen confidence in government institutions, including electoral structures, the legislature, and governmental infrastructure. The low average scores for institutional legitimacy and transparency indicated that citizens did not believe democratic institutions were credible or effective. The results of the research were aligned with the current literature, which found that trust in the institution deteriorated when citizens encountered inconsistent or inaccurate information, leading to perceived incompetence in the existing governance frameworks (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; Hetherington and Rudolph, 2015). The influence of post-truth dynamics seemed even more significant in the context of emergent democracies, particularly in already fragile institutional structures, resulting in more severe legitimacy crises.

The role of misinformation in escalating the crisis of political representation was also identified in the analysis. When political awareness is moderate, citizens show low trust in electoral procedures and political players. This implied that the power to access information alone was not sufficient to guarantee an informed political citizenry. Rather, the information quality and credibility had become more significant in influencing political attitudes. Research had already focused heavily on the idea that exposure to misinformation could diminish the effectiveness of politics and foster doubt in democratic processes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Flynn et al., 2017). This point of view was supported by the results of this research, which proved that misinformation led to political alienation and undermined a perceived relationship between citizens and their representatives.

Furthermore, the study had established political alienation as one of the major results of post-truth politics. The majority of the alienation recorded in the outcomes indicated that citizens had lost focus on political processes and institutions. Such attachment may be viewed as a reaction to perceived institutional ineffectiveness in voicing people's interests. Previous studies found that political alienation was more common when distrust of institutions was higher, and citizens were not included in decision-making (Foa et al., 2020; Dalton, 2017). The results of this paper indicate that post-truth conditions intensified these situations by creating uncertainty, distrust, and dissatisfaction among the masses.

Populism had also played a crucial role in forming the seen results. According to the results, anti-elite ideology and a rather high level of trust in populist leaders were high, indicating that citizens were attracted to alternative forms of political representation. Populist leaders repeatedly used post-truth tactics, such as emotional appeals and simplified narratives, to gain numbers and upset the status quo. This relationship created a paradox in which people trusted individual leaders while simultaneously mistrusting institutional structures. Other previous researchers had indicated that populism has the potential to degrade democratic standards by diminishing institutional checks and balances and advancing person-centred modes of governance (Pappas, 2019; Urbinati, 2019). These arguments were also supported by the results of this study, which point to the destabilizing nature of populist politics on institutional legitimacy.

Moreover, the results indicated that institutions' performance was not significantly enhanced by the increase in populist leadership. Ambivalent attitudes toward issues such as government accountability and democratic governance suggest that the populist style of governance has failed to address the structural problems that underlie them. This strengthened the premise that populism was usually concerned with symbolic presentation rather than with policy outcomes. It has been demonstrated that populist governments often fail to ensure institutional stability over time because of their reliance on charismatic, anti-institutional politics (Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Roberts, 2015). This study put a spin on this knowledge by showing the dynamics at play in new democratic settings.

The other significant implication of the research was the relationship between institutional transparency and citizens' trust. According to the findings, transparency remained moderate, suggesting that efforts to enhance openness and accountability were insufficient to overcome the impact of post-truth politics. Transparency did not seem to be a solution as the misinformation kept crowding the information space. This observation was consistent with the studies that transparency should be coupled with a proper communication program and communication with the population to restore institutional credibility (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Bauhr & Grimes, 2014). Consequently, it was necessary to implement a more holistic approach to post-truth problems that would integrate transparency and information integrity.

In general, the discussion noted that post-truth politics was one of many causes of a multidimensional crisis in institutional legitimacy, political representation, and democratic stability. Misinformation, populism, and deteriorating trust had formed a loop that had strengthened institutions' vulnerability. These results highlighted the need for structural changes to consolidate information ecosystems and increase media literacy and responsibility within democratic institutions. In the absence of such interventions, it is highly probable that emerging democracies would still be struggling to maintain their legitimacy and effective governance in a highly sophisticated political environment.

Conclusion

The paper concluded that post-truth politics grossly eroded institutional legitimacy in new democracies through restructuring political communication and compromising popular faith. The results showed that high rates of misinformation exposure (mean = 4.28) and the use of populist rhetoric (mean = 4.15) led to decreased confidence in democratic institutions, as reflected in lower perceived legitimacy (mean = 3.08) and public trust (mean = 3.12). Such trends suggested that the growing prevalence of emotionally driven, deceptive stories had shifted political realities and diminished the usefulness of governance systems. Moreover, the research found that misinformation exacerbated the crisis of political representation, resulting in a lack of voter confidence (mean = 3.18) and political alienation (mean = 4.10). Populism was also identified as playing an important role, given the presence of strong anti-elite feelings (mean = 4.30) and trust in populist leaders (mean = 4.05), which went hand in hand with poor institutional performance. All in all, the research found that a complex situation had emerged in which democratic institutions failed to uphold credibility, accountability, and stability.

Recommendations

The paper advised that policymakers and institutional stakeholders need to focus on ensuring the integrity of information in democratic systems. Governments have been urged to implement stricter measures against misinformation, yet they must also uphold freedom of expression. It was also necessary to strengthen media literacy programs to equip citizens to think critically and avoid manipulation. Also, democratic institutions need to enhance transparency and communication strategies to regain public trust and demonstrate their accountability.

The research also proposed that political players should employ ethical communication practices and avoid misleading or overly emotional narratives. It was necessary to improve institutional structures, especially the electoral organization and the judicial system, to ensure fairness and credibility. The cooperation of governments, civil society, and technological platforms was also suggested as a means of combating misinformation distribution and encouraging the division of

information to the truth. These provisions were intended to increase institutional legitimacy and democratic resilience.

Future Directions

Quantitative or mixed-methods approaches were also suggested as a treatment for future research to provide empirical support for the relationships identified in this study. It might also be possible to conduct longitudinal studies of how post-truth dynamics have changed over time and how they have affected democratic stability. It was also proposed to conduct comparative studies across different regions and political systems to gain a more general picture of the phenomenon. The next generation of research might examine the role of artificial intelligence, digital algorithms, and social media platforms in post-truth politics. Researching the success of other policy interventions, e.g., media regulation and fact-checking procedures, could also help identify pragmatic solutions. In future research, the study's scope should be expanded to incorporate grassroots insights and population-based polls to increase the quantity and relevance of the research.

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