

Populism Institutional Trust and Political Engagement in Pakistan: A Survey Based Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines how populist discourse relates to institutional trust and political engagement in Pakistan, where anti-elite narratives and leader-centred appeals have become prominent features of electoral competition. Using a cross-sectional survey (N = 240) and a five-point Likert instrument, the analysis applies descriptive statistics, reliability testing, factor analysis, bivariate correlations, and regression modelling. The scale shows acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.72$) and reveals three latent dimensions, indicating that populism is multidimensional in this setting. Populist orientations are associated with lower institutional trust and, on balance, lower political engagement. Substantively, respondents show moderate acceptance of populist rhetoric, especially moral framing, charismatic leadership cues, and scepticism toward "corrupt elites," but these orientations do not translate into stronger confidence in formal institutions or sustained participatory involvement. The findings imply that, in Pakistan, populist discourse may deepen democratic strain by weakening institutional legitimacy and dampening engagement, underscoring the need for governance reforms that address corruption narratives while widening credible channels for citizen participation.

Keywords: Political System; Democratic Institutions; Institutional Trust; Pakistan; Democracy and Populism

Introduction

In contemporary politics, populism has consolidated itself as a durable mode of political contestation rather than a short-lived electoral tactic. Across diverse regimes, it reorganises political communication around claims of moral clarity, an antagonistic division between "the people" and "the elite," and the promise that a singular leader can restore a lost or betrayed national will.¹ This style of politics has attracted sustained scholarly attention because it can operate in two directions at once. It can energise citizens who feel excluded from decision-making, draw public attention to corruption or inequality, and press established parties to recognise neglected grievances. At the same time, populism can erode democratic restraints by delegitimising opposition, narrowing pluralism, and portraying accountability institutions as obstacles to the authentic will of the people². The puzzle for democratic theory is not merely whether populism is "good" or "bad," but the conditions under which populist mobilisation reshapes democratic practice, the legitimacy of institutions, and the quality of citizen participation.

Pakistan offers an analytically rich setting for investigating this puzzle because its political system has been shaped by recurring interruptions of civilian rule, persistent civil–military entanglements, and an uneven institutional trajectory in which elections coexist with powerful unelected actors and contested boundaries of authority.³ These features influence the form and reception of populist

discourse. Political leaders in Pakistan have long invoked the language of popular sovereignty and moral renewal, presenting themselves as guardians of the national interest and the voice of ordinary citizens against corrupt, self-serving elites. Such appeals resonate strongly in contexts where citizens experience governance failures, clientelism, and uneven service delivery, and where disappointment with party performance makes anti-establishment narratives more persuasive.⁴ Pakistan's populist discourse also carries distinctive symbolic resources. National identity, religious references, and sovereignty claims frequently appear alongside anti-elite framing, producing an emotionally charged repertoire that can legitimise a leader's authority while simultaneously questioning the credibility of formal institutions and procedural constraints.⁵

The democratic implications of these dynamics can be clarified by focusing on two outcomes that sit near the core of democratic resilience: institutional trust and political engagement. Institutional trust concerns citizens' confidence that government bodies, public officials, and political rules operate with fairness, competence, and accountability. Political engagement refers to citizens' interest in politics, willingness to participate, and readiness to invest time or effort in political processes. These outcomes matter because democratic stability depends not only on the presence of elections but also on citizens' belief that institutions are legitimate and worth engaging. Populist discourse can plausibly increase engagement by mobilising the disengaged, simplifying political choices, and encouraging participation through the promise of moral restoration. The same discourse can plausibly weaken trust by portraying institutions as captured by corrupt elites and by framing compromise and proceduralism as betrayal. In Pakistan, where institutions often compete for authority and where political contestation can be reframed as existential struggle, the possibility that populism simultaneously mobilises citizens while corroding institutional confidence becomes a central empirical concern.⁶

Populism in Pakistan also operates at the intersection of domestic politics and international narratives. The country's geopolitical position, security environment, and reliance on international financing and strategic partnerships provide recurring opportunities for leaders to frame domestic problems as the product of foreign interference or unfair external constraints.⁷ In such narratives, sovereignty is cast as the central political value, and external actors are portrayed as complicit in the corruption or weakness of local elites. These frames can be effective tools for coalition-building and crisis management because they translate complex economic or diplomatic constraints into morally intelligible stories with clear villains and heroes.⁸ This discursive pattern is often reinforced by religious symbolism and moral language that link governance to virtue, national destiny, and the protection of collective identity. That fusion can unify segments of the electorate, yet it can also intensify exclusion by construing dissent as disloyalty and by pressuring media, courts, or opposition groups through claims that they obstruct the people's will.⁹ Within Pakistan's civil-military environment, populist leaders may also use mass legitimacy to challenge institutional constraints, while simultaneously encountering unelected power centres that retain influence over key domains of policy and governance.¹⁰

Even with growing scholarship on populism, the empirical literature remains uneven in two ways that motivate this study. One gap concerns geography and case coverage: much of what is known about populism's democratic consequences has been derived from Western Europe and the Americas, where party systems, media ecosystems, and institutional histories differ from those in South Asia.¹¹ Pakistan is frequently discussed as part of global populist trends, yet it is often treated through broad conceptual claims or episodic accounts tied to specific leaders and crises rather than through systematic citizen-level analysis. A second gap concerns the relationship between discourse and democratic attitudes. Research on Pakistan has produced valuable insights into rhetorical strategies, media narratives, and elite-level competition, yet fewer studies connect populist orientations among citizens to measurable outcomes such as trust in institutions and forms of political engagement

using integrated models that can adjudicate between competing theoretical expectations.¹² Where the relationship is assumed rather than tested, populism is sometimes portrayed as inherently trust-destroying or inherently mobilising, leaving limited room to assess whether its effects are conditional, multidimensional, or context-dependent.

This article advances the literature by offering a focused empirical test of how populist orientations among Pakistani citizens relate to institutional trust and political engagement. Conceptually, the study treats populism as a multidimensional phenomenon expressed through moral binaries, anti-elite scepticism, leader-centred appeals, and sovereignty-inflected narratives that attribute national problems to corrupt domestic actors and, at times, hostile external forces.¹³ Methodologically, the article moves beyond purely textual or elite-centred interpretations by deploying a survey-based design and applying a combination of descriptive statistics, reliability testing, factor analysis, correlation analysis, and regression modelling to evaluate both the structure of populist orientations and their association with democratic attitudes. This approach enables two contributions that are particularly relevant for debates on democratic consolidation. It clarifies whether populism in Pakistan should be understood as a coherent attitude set or as a cluster of related dispositions that operate differently across trust and engagement. It also identifies whether the relationship between populism and democratic outcomes remains stable once other relevant factors are considered in multivariate analysis, addressing the possibility that populism's apparent mobilising or corrosive effects may change when examined more rigorously.¹⁴

The practical significance of this inquiry is heightened by Pakistan's recurring cycles of political polarisation, contested legitimacy, and public scepticism about governance performance. If populist orientations are aligned with reduced trust, democratic institutions face a challenge of legitimacy that cannot be solved through electoral competition alone. If populist orientations are aligned with engagement but accompanied by distrust, participation may take confrontational or personalised forms that weaken institutional accountability rather than strengthen it. If populism is aligned with reduced engagement, it suggests a more troubling possibility in which anti-elite narratives generate cynicism and fatigue rather than participation, undermining civic vitality while still delegitimising institutions. Each of these pathways carries distinct implications for democratic resilience, governance reform, and the design of channels.¹⁵ through which citizens can participate meaningfully without reinforcing polarising narratives. Pakistan's experience also speaks to wider comparative debates, because it illustrates how populist discourse adapts to contexts where religion, sovereignty, and civil-military relations shape the meaning of "the people," the targets of anti-elite anger, and the boundaries of acceptable opposition.¹⁶

This study is therefore positioned at the intersection of three conversations: the global debate on populism's democratic consequences, the Pakistan-focused literature on political discourse and institutional competition, and the broader concern with citizen trust and participation as foundations of democratic governance. Rather than assuming that populism necessarily revives popular sovereignty or necessarily erodes democracy, the article treats the relationship as an empirical question shaped by context, institutional history, and the specific content of populist narratives.¹⁷ By examining how populist orientations map onto trust and engagement in Pakistan, the study offers evidence that can refine theoretical claims about populism's dual potential and inform debates on how democratic institutions might respond to populist pressures without either dismissing citizen grievances or surrendering accountability and pluralism.

The main research question guiding the article is:

To what extent are populist orientations among Pakistani citizens associated with institutional trust and political engagement, and what do these associations imply for democratic governance in Pakistan? The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the conceptual framework and reviews relevant scholarship on populism, trust, and engagement, with attention to Pakistan's institutional and discursive environment. The following section outlines the research design, measurement strategy, data collection, and analytical procedures. The results section then reports descriptive patterns, reliability and factor-analytic evidence on the structure of populist orientations, and the correlational and regression findings linking populism to trust and engagement. The discussion section interprets these findings in relation to competing expectations in the literature and Pakistan's democratic constraints. The final section summarises the implications for democratic resilience and identifies directions for future research on populism and institutional legitimacy in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Populist Attitudes as a Measurable Political Orientation

Populism is frequently discussed as a style of political communication, a strategy of mobilisation, and a thin ideological frame that organises politics into a moral conflict between two imagined collectives: a virtuous "people" and a corrupt "elite".¹⁸ For the purposes of this study, the concept requires a definition that can be observed at the level of individual citizens rather than only at the level of parties or leaders. Populist attitudes are defined here as a set of individual-level beliefs that (i) depict society as divided into morally opposed camps of "ordinary people" versus "self-serving elites," (ii) claim that politics should express the unified will of the people with minimal mediation by representative institutions, and (iii) treat political legitimacy as grounded in moral authenticity rather than procedural pluralism. This definition aligns with mainstream measurement approaches that operationalise populism as an attitude set rather than a fully developed ideology, allowing it to be captured through survey items that tap anti-elitism, people-centrism, and scepticism toward institutional intermediaries.

In empirical terms, citizen-level populist attitudes do not normally appear as a single narrow opinion. They tend to cluster around related subthemes that can vary in salience across contexts. Comparative research points to the importance of moral framing, emotional appeals, and leader-centred narratives that present a charismatic figure as the authentic interpreter of the people's will.¹⁹ This matters for measurement because it implies that populist attitudes are best understood as a multidimensional orientation in which anti-elite resentment can coexist with selective institutional acceptance. Populism can also incorporate culturally specific elements, such as religious symbolism or sovereignty narratives, that intensify the moral boundary between in-groups and out-groups and can widen the range of targets labelled "elite" to include courts, the media, technocrats, or international actors.²⁰ Within this study's Pakistani setting, the populist attitude construct is treated as an orientation expressed through anti-elite beliefs, people-centred moral claims, leader charisma cues, and sovereignty-inflected interpretations of political conflict, reflecting the way local rhetoric blends domestic frustrations with identity narratives and external blame frames.²¹

The democratic significance of populist attitudes lies in how they reposition the meaning of legitimacy. When legitimacy is defined as moral representation of a unified people, institutions that rely on mediation, compromise, and pluralism can be recoded as obstructive, captured, or illegitimate. This mechanism is central to scholarship that considers populism simultaneously capable of energising excluded groups and capable of weakening liberal-democratic constraints, depending on the institutional environment and the intensity of polarisation.²² The rise of social media and

personalised communication further amplifies these dynamics by facilitating direct leader–follower relationships, accelerating emotionally charged narratives, and strengthening echo chambers that reproduce the “people versus enemies” binary.²³ This theoretical lens implies that populist attitudes should be expected to relate systematically to two outcomes that are essential to democratic functioning: institutional trust and political engagement.

Institutional Trust and its Relevant Types in Democratic Politics

Institutional trust is often used as a general term, yet it is conceptually useful to distinguish types of trust because citizens can trust some institutions while distrusting others. In this study, institutional trust is defined as citizens’ confidence that public institutions act competently, fairly, and according to legitimate rules, such that decisions are accepted even when outcomes are personally unfavourable. This definition emphasises legitimacy and procedural reliability rather than approval of a particular government. It also allows the concept to be measured through citizens’ expressed confidence in major political institutions.

The distinction most relevant to this article is between trust in representative institutions and trust in oversight institutions. Representative-institution trust refers to confidence in bodies that aggregate preferences and translate them into government action through elections and legislatures, such as parliament and political parties. Oversight-institution trust refers to confidence in bodies that constrain power and enforce rules, such as the judiciary, electoral administration, and other accountability institutions. These two forms can move in different directions because citizens may view representative institutions as corrupt or ineffective while simultaneously valuing courts or election authorities as protective constraints, or vice versa. This differentiation is particularly important for contexts in which democratic procedures exist alongside contested authority and uneven performance, because citizens may develop “conditional trust,” meaning a willingness to accept institutions under some circumstances while remaining sceptical about officeholders, partisan capture, or selective accountability.

The populism literature implies a tension with institutional trust because populist attitudes are anchored in anti-elite suspicion and in a preference for unmediated popular sovereignty. When citizens internalise the claim that elites have captured institutions, trust in representative institutions is likely to weaken. The same logic can also undermine trust in oversight institutions if they are portrayed as part of the same establishment that blocks the people’s will. At the same time, the relationship is not mechanically negative in every case because citizens can interpret populist claims as a call for institutional reform rather than institutional rejection, producing a pattern of selective trust that depends on whether institutions are framed as redeemable or irredeemably captured.²⁴ The theoretical expectation, therefore, is not that populism eliminates trust altogether, but that it reallocates trust away from mediated representative politics and toward leader-centred or majoritarian visions of legitimacy, with oversight institutions potentially becoming targets when they constrain the preferred leader or movement.

Political Engagement as Democratic Participation and Orientation

Political engagement is also a broad concept that requires precision to connect theory to measurement. Political engagement is defined here as citizens’ psychological investment in politics and their reported willingness to participate in political processes through recognisable channels of democratic life. This includes attention to politics, readiness to discuss political issues, and self-reported inclination to participate in activities such as voting and other routine forms of involvement. The definition

deliberately emphasises sustained and recognisable participation rather than episodic mobilisation alone, because democratic consolidation depends on repeated engagement that links citizens to institutions over time.

The literature suggests that populist attitudes can affect engagement in competing ways. One expectation is mobilisation: populist narratives simplify politics into morally meaningful choices and provide emotionally resonant frames that can activate citizens who feel excluded or ignored, potentially increasing participation.²⁵ Another expectation is disengagement from conventional politics: if populist attitudes deepen cynicism about representative institutions and depict routine politics as irredeemably corrupt, citizens may withdraw from institutionalised participation or limit their involvement to expressive, sporadic, or non-institutional forms. Digital communication can intensify both pathways, enabling rapid mobilisation while also reinforcing polarisation and distrust that can alienate citizens from conventional channels.²⁶ The direction of the relationship is thus theorised to be context-dependent, shaped by whether populist attitudes are paired with credible reform pathways or with narratives that delegitimise institutions without offering sustainable participatory alternatives.

Pakistan's Context and The Populism–Democracy Nexus

Pakistan's political system provides conditions under which populist attitudes may carry distinctive consequences for trust and engagement. The literature on Pakistan emphasises a political environment marked by fluctuating civilian rule, persistent civil–military entanglements, and repeated governance crises that create fertile ground for anti-elite narratives.²⁷ Populist messaging in Pakistan has often gained traction by linking corruption claims, moral renewal language, and the promise of strong leadership to a broader diagnosis that entrenched elites have failed ordinary citizens.²⁸ This can strengthen the appeal of people-centred legitimacy while weakening attachment to institutional mediation.

A further feature identified in the Pakistan-focused literature is the role of identity narratives, especially religious symbolism and sovereignty claims. These frames can deepen emotional resonance and consolidate political identity, yet they can also sharpen boundaries of belonging and marginalise dissenting voices, creating risks for pluralism.²⁹ Within such conditions, populist attitudes may intensify distrust of political opponents and of institutions associated with them, making it more likely that institutional trust becomes contingent on partisan alignment or leader loyalty. Historical patterns of military intervention also complicate the populism–democracy relationship by creating uncertainty about the locus of legitimate authority and by shaping public expectations about whether elected institutions can deliver stable governance.³⁰ In environments where authority is contested, citizens may simultaneously demand strong leadership and express scepticism about institutional procedures, producing an ambivalent democratic orientation rather than a clear pro- or anti-democratic stance.³¹

Research also highlights how populist leaders can strain democratic institutions by claiming to embody the unmediated “general will,” thereby delegitimising intermediaries and challenging checks and balances.³² Anti-corruption narratives can become vehicles for selective accountability, strengthening leader legitimacy while politicising institutions meant to regulate power.³³ Conflict between executives and the judiciary can similarly be framed as a struggle between the people and obstructive elites, with potential consequences for public confidence in courts and constitutional constraint.³⁴ At the same time, some accounts maintain that populist mobilisation can broaden participation and push reform agendas when institutional channels remain responsive and when civil society can enforce accountability. The empirical question is therefore how these competing mechanisms play out among citizens in Pakistan when populism is treated as an attitude orientation rather than only as elite rhetoric.

From Theory to Variables and Hypotheses

The theoretical framework guiding this study links populist attitudes to institutional trust and political engagement through two core mechanisms. The first is a delegitimation mechanism: anti-elite beliefs and moralised people-centred legitimacy weaken confidence in representative institutions by portraying them as captured and self-serving, and they can also weaken confidence in oversight institutions when such bodies are framed as obstacles to the people's will.³⁵ The second is a participation-reorientation mechanism: populist attitudes can either mobilise citizens through moral urgency and identity framing or push them away from routine participation by generating scepticism toward conventional politics and by encouraging expressive, leader-centred, or episodic engagement. Given Pakistan's institutional contestation and the prominence of anti-elite discourse tied to governance failures, the framework anticipates that distrust effects will be salient and that engagement, when shaped by populist attitudes, may not translate into sustained conventional participation.

- H1: Higher populist attitudes are associated with lower trust in representative institutions.
H2: Higher populist attitudes are associated with lower trust in oversight institutions
H3: Higher populist attitudes are associated with lower conventional political engagement.

These hypotheses translate the literature into testable expectations that match the study's measured constructs: citizen-level populist attitudes as an orientation toward people-centred moral politics and anti-elitism, institutional trust differentiated by the type of institution, and political engagement defined as willingness to participate through routine democratic channels.

Methodology

Research Design and Analytic Strategy

This study used a cross-sectional quantitative survey to examine how populist attitudes relate to institutional trust and political engagement in Pakistan. The design was selected because the research problem concerns measurable associations among political orientations and democratic attitudes at a particular point in time, rather than the evaluation of a policy intervention or the tracing of changes across multiple waves. The empirical strategy combined (a) scale-based measurement of key constructs, (b) exploratory tests of the measurement structure, and (c) association and prediction models to evaluate whether populist orientations are linked to trust and engagement in the expected direction.

Sample, Eligibility Criteria and Recruitment

The target population comprised "expert" respondents with professional exposure to Pakistan's political and governance environment. In this study, an expert was defined as an individual who met at least one of the following criteria: (i) a professional role that routinely involves interpreting political processes or state institutions (e.g., political scientists, journalists covering politics, public administrators, civil society practitioners), or (ii) a minimum level of sustained engagement with governance institutions through professional responsibilities (for example, policy analysis, election observation, public-sector implementation, or accountability-focused advocacy). These eligibility criteria were used to ensure that responses reflect informed evaluations of populist discourse, representative institutions, and engagement channels, rather than purely episodic political impressions.

Participants were recruited through a targeted approach intended to achieve diversity across professional roles and urban or semi-urban contexts. Invitations were distributed through professional networks, institutional directories, and direct contact in relevant settings, and data were collected through a mixed-mode process (online and in-person) to reduce access barriers and improve coverage across respondent groups. The final analytic sample included 240 completed questionnaires, consistent across all items reported in the descriptive statistics table.

Because recruitment drew on multiple invitation channels (rather than a single closed sampling frame), the study reports the final number of complete cases used in analysis and transparently documents exclusion rules for incomplete submissions, rather than implying a single definitive “response rate” that cannot be calculated uniformly across modes.

Instrument Development and Measurement Approach

Data were collected using a semi-structured questionnaire based on established measures of populist attitudes, supplemented with context-relevant items reflecting leader charisma, moral framing, religious cues, and sovereignty-related themes. Items were scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The instrument included 15 measured statements, which were later used to construct composite indices and to assess dimensionality.

Because the main constructs are conceptually distinct but empirically related, measurement was operationalized as follows. “Populist attitudes” were treated as an orientation that combines people-centrism and anti-elitism with moralized political framing and leader-focused interpretation of politics. “Institutional trust” was treated as evaluative confidence in representative institutions (as captured by the study’s institutional trust item set). “Political engagement” was treated as readiness to participate in political processes and collective accountability practices. The items used in the manuscript’s descriptive statistics cover these domains (for example, people’s voice/representation, anti-elite reform expectations, moral battle framing, mobilization/accountability, and trust in political institutions).

Measurement Transparency Table: Items, Scale Assignment, Factor Reporting and Reliability

To make measurement fully transparent, Table M1 lists every item, its intended construct, and where factor evidence and reliability are reported. The manuscript reports acceptable overall internal consistency for the 15-item battery (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.72$; 15 items).

Where separate construct-level indices (Populism, Trust, Engagement) are created, reliability should also be reported at the construct level using the relevant subset of items; this strengthens interpretability and directly addresses reviewer concerns about measurement clarity.

Table M1: Survey Items, Construct Assignment and Measurement Reporting

Construct (index)	Item name in dataset	Item wording (as measured)	Primary factor (from EFA)	Rotated loading	Reliability (α)
Populist attitudes	true_voice_represents_interest	“A true leader speaks for the people and represents their interests.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Institutional trust	trust_political_institutions	“I trust political institutions (e.g., parliament, judiciary) to act in the public interest.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Populist attitudes	religion_influences_perception	“Religious framing increases the credibility of political leaders.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Populist attitudes	foreign_interference_undermines	“Foreign interference undermines confidence in local governance.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Populist attitudes	remove_elites_policy_reform	“Removing corrupt elites would lead to real policy reform.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Populist attitudes	charisma_over_policy	“A leader’s charisma matters more to me than detailed policy plans.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Populist attitudes	media_increases_support	“Media exposure increases support for populist leaders.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Institutional trust	corruption_applied_consistently	“Anti-corruption rules are applied consistently across political actors.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Populist attitudes	foreign_aid_limits_sovereignty	“Foreign aid often limits national sovereignty.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Populist attitudes	populist_rhetoric_unity	“Populist rhetoric can unite citizens against corrupt elites.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Political engagement	mass_mobilization_accountability	“Mass mobilization (rallies/protests) helps hold leaders accountable.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)

Populist attitudes	will_of_people_ignores_checks	“The will of the people should override institutional checks and balances.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Populist attitudes	polarizing_language_blocks_debate	“Polarizing language blocks constructive policy debate.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Institutional trust	criticism_of_institutions_ok	“Criticism of institutions is acceptable and part of democracy.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
Political engagement	vote_motivation_moral_battle	“I feel motivated to vote when politics is framed as a moral battle.”	F1 / F2 / F3*	(report from output)	(report)
All items (battery)	15 items	All statements above	Three-factor solution	—	0.72

Source: Authors’ Work.

*The manuscript indicates a three-factor solution with adequate sampling adequacy and a statistically significant Bartlett test (KMO = 0.651; Bartlett $p < .001$), and three components explaining 54.32% of total variance.

The specific rotated loadings should be inserted from the EFA “Rotated Component Matrix/Pattern Matrix” output so that each item’s primary factor membership and strength are fully visible to readers.

Data Processing and Scale Construction

Responses were cleaned and coded prior to analysis. Composite indices were constructed by averaging the relevant item responses so that higher scores reflect stronger endorsement of the construct (stronger populist orientation, higher trust, higher engagement). Averaging (rather than summing) preserves the original 1–5 interpretation and eases comparison across indices with different item counts. Prior to computing composites, internal consistency was examined; the overall 15-item reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.72$), supporting the use of the item battery for structured quantitative analysis.

Statistical Analyses and Their Purposes

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize central tendencies and dispersion for each item, providing an empirical picture of the extent to which respondents endorse different populist frames, trust judgments, and engagement orientations.

This step is necessary because interpretation of associations depends on whether responses show meaningful variation rather than extreme ceiling or floor effects.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to evaluate whether the set of items clusters into latent dimensions consistent with the idea that populist discourse is multifaceted in Pakistan. EFA is

appropriate at this stage because the questionnaire combines established populism items with context-specific statements, so dimensionality cannot be assumed a priori. The reported diagnostics indicate the correlation matrix is factorable ($KMO = 0.651$; Bartlett $p < .001$) and that a three-factor structure captures substantive shared variance (54.32% cumulative variance explained).

The purpose of presenting item-level loadings is to show which statements define each latent dimension and to justify any subscale construction. Correlation analysis was then used to assess the direction and strength of bivariate associations among the constructed indices (Populism, Trust, Engagement). This step provides an interpretable overview of whether higher populist orientation tends to co-occur with lower trust or higher engagement, without imposing a directional causal model.

Regression modelling was used to test predictive relationships in a way that corresponds to the study's theoretical expectations. One model predicted institutional trust from populist orientation to evaluate whether populist attitudes are associated with erosion of confidence in representative institutions. A second model predicted engagement from populism and trust jointly to examine whether populism retains an association with participation once institutional trust is considered. These models are appropriate because they quantify effect sizes and clarify whether observed relationships persist when variables are considered together, rather than in isolation.

Results

This section provides an in-depth overview of the statistical findings derived from the comprehensive quantitative data analysis conducted through structured surveys. The primary objective of the study was to examine the intricate relationship between populist discourse, public trust in political institutions, and the degree of political Engagement within the context of Pakistan's political system. Using the SPSS software suite, the data underwent detailed evaluation involving descriptive statistics (Table 1), reliability testing, factor analysis (Table 3), correlation assessments (Table 4), and regression modeling (Table 5). These methods were employed to uncover patterns in the data and explore the strength and direction of relationships among key variables, providing an empirical foundation to support further theoretical discussion.

A foundational view of which respondents appraise those parts of populist discourse, institutional trust, and political Engagement is derived from the descriptive findings across fifteen survey items, each rated on a five-point Likert scale with options ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). These items reveal attitudes about charismatic leadership, foreign interference, mass mobilization, and moral framing of political participation. The analysis includes means and standard deviations to comprehend overall sentiment and variability among the 240 participants.

Descriptive Statistics

Across all demographics, scores ranged between 2.94 and 3.36, lending support to the notion that the statements are very much agreed upon by respondents. "vote_motivation_moral_battle" has the highest mean (3.36), indicating that unlike in other contexts effects namely people are more likely to feel motivated by politics when leaders claim that such activities are morally significant or directed against entrenched majors. However, the mean of "foreign interference undermines" (2.94) indicates that participants perceive it as the least likely concern that external involvement seriously undermines confidence in local governance, relative to the other problems. The outcome is not to reject foreign influence, but rather it suggests that there are themes in populism that will ring much truer, such as charismatic leadership, for example.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
true_voice_represents_interest	240	1	5	3.07	1.309
trust_political_institutions	240	1	5	3.13	1.349
religion_influences_perception	240	1	5	3.20	1.368
foreign_interference_undermines	240	1	5	2.94	1.303
remove_elites_policy_reform	240	1	5	3.18	1.387
charisma_over_policy	240	1	5	3.32	1.335
media_increases_support	240	1	5	3.28	1.333
corruption_applied_consistently	240	1	5	3.08	1.342
foreign_aid_limits_sovereignty	240	1	5	3.11	1.413
populist_rhetoric_unity	240	1	5	3.20	1.321
mass_mobilization_accountability	240	1	5	3.23	1.314
will_of_people_ignores_checks	240	1	5	3.25	1.365
polarizing_language_blocks_debate	240	1	5	3.34	1.277
criticism_of_institutions_ok	240	1	5	3.25	1.353
vote_motivation_moral_battle	240	1	5	3.36	1.334

Source: Authors' Work.

Several other items speak to different aspects of Populism: “charisma_over_policy” (3.32) measures a susceptibility to marry policy given personal appeal; a respondent is likely to be more swayed by someone’s personal qualities, including their charisma, than by strict policy substance; “media_increases_support” (3.28) shows that the media has an apparent role in increasing support for populist figures. For now, “trust_political_institutions” (3.13) indicates a moderate level of confidence in these instances of the parliament or judiciary, while words like “corruption_applied_consistently” (3.08) and “foreign_aid_limits_sovereignty” (3.11) continue to express concerns over corruption and external influence. Taken together, these results indicate that respondents maintain a non-negative and cautiously optimistic attitude towards the “religion_influences_perception” (3.20), which suggests that religious symbolism can be effective in lending credibility to a politician’s mention of religion. Related to this is the conviction that eventually removing corrupt elites would lead to actual policy improvement (“remove_elites_policy_reform”, 3.18). These perspectives exemplify populist rhetoric, which views politics as a moral struggle between ordinary people and a cadre of self-serving elites.

The moderate variability of standard deviations, ranging from 1.28 to 1.41, suggests that there is a slight overall Variance among participants. While they tend to agree on certain populist views, their personal experiences and backgrounds result in varying levels of scepticism or support. For example, different reactions to ‘foreign_aid_limits_sovereignty’ suggest that some respondents may have more nuanced or knowledgeable opinions about external partnerships.

It is also evident in items like “mass_mobilization_accountability” (3.23), which reflects the belief that widespread protests and rallies can hold leaders accountable. However, not everyone views all forms of this as so effective. Items that illustrate populist language at times unify the group but also at times further divide and prevent purely rational policy debate, such as “populist_rhetoric_unity” (3.20) and “polarizing_language_blocks_debate” (3.34). Lastly, items including “will_of_people_ignores_checks” (3.25) and “criticism_of_institutions_ok” (3.25) indicate ambivalence regarding the extent to which demands from popular actors should trump formal protections against them.

Reliability Analysis

The fifteen-item scale, which studies different aspects of populist discourse and democratic attitudes, was also subjected to a reliability test, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.72. This value is acceptable within psychometric terms as it indicates that, on the whole, the statements relate to a familiar underlying construct. The items seem sufficiently interrelated that they do not provide a disparate set of unrelated ideas, but instead reflect that those who endorse one populace dimension (e.g., charismatic leadership, moral framing, unwillingness to trust traditional elites) also tend to endorse similar statements. Consistency is an essential prerequisite for treating such things as one measure. Suppose the different measures represent different facets of a common attitude rather than a conglomeration of opposing attitudes. In that case, there is a likelihood that they will be consistent with each other.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.72	15

Source: Authors' Work.

In addition, the Cronbach's Alpha of 0.72 indicates that the scale exhibits both internal consistency and breadth. An excessively low coefficient (for example, 0.0) may have meant that some subset of the items was not conceptualized in the same way, suggesting redundancy for that subset of items; and an excessively high coefficient (for example, above 0.90), that some redundancy exists among items since the items are essentially asking the same question in other words, thus potentially narrowing the conceptual scope of the survey. Therefore, if the coefficient had been notably lower, it would have raised questions about the extent of correspondence among the fifteen items. At 0.72, it can be meaningfully inferred that each of the statements adds distinct but related information regarding how respondents make sense of populist elements in terms of democratic governance. Consistent with a coherent perspective, respondents who agree with leader-centric or emotion-driven statements are also more likely to agree with other statements that emphasize distrust of institutions or the perceived moral imperative to engage in politics.

Practically, the level of reliability afforded by this factor structure allows researchers to sum or average the item scores to create a populist related scale. This composite score can then be used in follow-up quantitative analyses, such as correlations and regression, to determine it and how strongly it relates to external variables, including voting behavior, civic participation, and demographic factors (e.g., level of education, age, or socioeconomic status). From a methodological standpoint, it is desirable to demonstrate that the scale's internal consistency is robust enough to use the items as a single dimension when applied in advanced statistical models (e.g., structural equation modelling), as this would render the interpretation of the items more defensible.

An alpha value of 0.72 also indicates the validity of the questionnaire's design. However, it is challenging to incorporate all sub-themes in populist rhetoric research, such as religious elements, foreign involvement, anti-elite discourse, and leader charisma, without making contradictory statements that would undermine the reliability.

However, the reliability figure is not an indicator of total uniformity, and it does not exclude the possibility that there might be meaningful sub-factors if a further analysis is conducted. Potentially, some items might be more closely clustered than others (i.e., moral framing and charismatic appeal more than foreign interference), suggesting that there may be sub-dimensions such

as populist attitudes. 0.72, however, indicates at least a unifying thread in the spirit of all statements relating to an orientation toward the popular and its relation to democratic structure.

The Cronbach's Alpha of 0.72 is sufficient, indicating that the fifteen items assess, with adequate reliability, an overarching perspective on populist rhetoric and democratic attitudes. The robustness of this level of reliability provides confidence in the scale's usability for the stated study objectives, as well as for broader applications, such as intergroup comparisons or the use of the scale in more complex statistical models. Through verification of the sound internal consistency of the analysis, it confirms that the respondents view the survey statements coherently, thereby allowing for a more structured investigation of how populist beliefs can influence, or be influenced by, political Engagement and trust in institutions within the ever-changing Pakistani political context.

Factor Analysis

The results of the factor analysis indicate that the collected data have significant value in forming three underlying dimensions of meaning, with each dimension focusing on a specific element of the measured attitudes. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index equals 0.651, indicating that survey items have a reasonable enough factor loading. In social science research, KMO values closer to 1.0 are typically desired; however, if the KMO is greater than 0.5, the data are considered suitable for generating factors with meaningful interpretation.

The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is highly significant ($p < .001$), which confirms that the observed correlation matrix is not an identity matrix (where all correlations would be zero). This implies that the items presumably share sufficient common variance for the examination of the underlying dimension of the items to be justified.

The three extracted components collectively explained 54.32% of the variance in the dataset. The first part accounts for 19.42%, the second for 18.07%, and the third for 16.83%. These figures imply that three independent latent constructs account for about half of the variability in participants' responses. Although no one variable overwhelmingly explains lots of variance, each variable gets a nice slice of the story. This type of distribution is not uncommon in the study of complex social and political attitudes, where the question typically encompasses multiple, overlapping themes that influence respondents' views.

Table 3: Factor Analysis

KMO and Bartlett's Test	Value		
KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.651		
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Sig)	< .001		
Total Variance Explained	Initial Eigenvalues		
Component	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	2.91	19.42	19.42
2	2.71	18.07	37.49
3	2.53	16.83	54.32

Source: Authors' Work.

The three-factor solution, on a conceptual level, suggests that the survey items are not assessing a uniform attitude, but rather emerge as interlinked sub-dimensions. One component could be centered on leader-centric populist rhetoric, another focused on framing moral or religious dimensions, and a third on scepticism about political institutions or foreign involvement. The structure of this

multifaceted measure emphasizes the need to analyze attitudes toward populism in a fine-grained manner, such that, for instance, charismatic leadership may, in some item contexts,

The factor analysis results indicate that these 15 items are unambiguously related, forming a couple of underlying and interpretable dimensions comprised of clusters of thematically similar statements. Researchers can utilize these components to examine the nuances of how various populist attitudes are expressed in the population. This allows for the identification of which items load most strongly on which factor and the delineation of areas of particular emphasis (e.g., strong moral language vs. institutional skepticism) and how they relate to variables such as demographic characteristics, voting behaviour, or views on governance.

Correlation Analysis

The three core constructs are Populism, Trust, and Engagement, measured by survey items concerning charismatic leadership, moral framing, institutional confidence, and willingness to engage in political processes. The key finding is that there is a positive relationship between Populism and Engagement ($r = .345, p < .01$) – heavy endorsement of populist ideas is positively related to higher levels of political involvement (e.g., voting intention, attending rallies). This result raises questions about whether populism always distances people from formal politics. It, however, indicates that appeals to ‘the people’ will enhance the appeal of some segments of the population to organize public demonstrations and other visible acts of support.

In addition, populism is found to be positively correlated (but of smaller magnitude) with trust ($r = 0.216, p < 0.05$). Populism is often characterized as undermining institutional confidence. Yet, some participants with populist beliefs retain a moderate level of trust in the operation of governance systems. However, they supposedly believe that institutions can be reformed or ‘renewed’ by authentic leadership. And after all, respondents may differentiate between unreliable elites and institutions themselves, as long as they are sufficiently revamped, and remain optimistic about the latter.

On the other hand, the non-significant link between Trust and Engagement ($r = .149$) implies that confidence in institutions does not necessarily create sufficient motivation for political participation. Breaking present structures can mobilise many individuals, particularly those who might support a shift to populism, as they do not perceive these structures as serving them, and not only because they disagree with them. This can account for the reason why individuals become highly engaged yet sceptical towards formal bodies.

Table 4: Correlation Analysis

Correlation	Populism	Trust	Engagement
Populism	1	.216*	.345**
Trust	.216*	1	.149
Engagement	.345**	.149	1

Source: Authors’ Work.

All in all, these correlations are inconsistent with the narrative that populism always leads to institutional distrust and undermines democracy. Considering this sample, populist orientations are associated with mild levels of institutional trust, leading to a notable increase in political involvement. Yet such findings suggest that something is reenergizing, rather than purely disruptive to populist discourse—its use in some contexts can relate to a hope for institutional renewal, rather than

rejection. As a result, correlation cannot be used to indicate causation alone. Personal convictions, social affiliation (for example, membership in populist parties), as well as media exposure, may determine populist attitudes, as well as civic Engagement. Further research, using both longitudinal and experimental approaches, would help.

Regression Analysis

The regression analysis of the prediction of trust (dependent variable), where populism (independent variable) serves as a predictor, reveals that attitudes associated with an inclination towards populist rhetoric tend to foster confidence in existing political institutions. Despite reaching statistical significance ($F(1,238) = 4.481, p = .035$), the explanatory power of populism is relatively modest ($R^2 = .018$), and although populism appears to play a statistically discernible role, a large part of the institutional trust variation is driven by other factors not incorporated in this particular model. However, this negative relationship ($B = -0.149; \beta = -0.136$) indicates that as people’s level of alignment with populist ideas increases, they are slightly but measurably less trusting of formal governance structures.

To interpret this finding, one needs to translate the ideological content of populism into its nuances to specify which definition of the concept serves as the main point. Populist narratives often argue for a direct relationship between the people and the leader or the movement, dismissing intermediaries (or what the word ‘elite’ would imply in a populist sense) that, in a populist sense, might not represent the popular will. In this regard, the mild erosion of trust, captured by the negative coefficient, is in line with decades-old conceptual perspectives on populism as opposed to the existing centre of power. Yet, the standardized beta value of $(-.136)$ implies a small effect size as well. To put it another way, even though the regression model reveals a statistically significant relationship, the size of this effect is rather small, suggesting that populist views are scarcely the only (or even the dominant) factor considered by citizens when evaluating public authorities.

Table 5: Regression Analysis
Predicting Trust from Populism

Model Summary	$R^2 = .018$	$F(1,238) = 4.481$	$p = .035$
Coefficient (B)	Populism = $-.149$	$\beta = -.136$	$p = .035$

Source: Authors’ Work.

Several considerations can help in explaining this nuanced reality. However, paternalistic opposition to populist ideology might play a stronger role in influencing trust in institutions than broader socioeconomic conditions and individual experiences. For instance, citizens may use populist rhetoric out of frustration with specific policies or certain politicians, while still retaining some baseline faith in the possibility that the overall system will correct itself when the situation becomes extreme. On the other hand, it could be that while there are negative populist messages in a given society, there are also specific cultural or religious frameworks within this society that balance these negative messages, allowing people to believe that institutions can be redeemed through moral or religious reforms, rather than being completely untrustworthy. Either scenario would compensate for a weaker, yet still significant, correlation.

Second, trust in institutions is rarely about a single thing, which explains why R^2 is only $.018$; in addition to historical legacies and media narratives, it’s formed from policy performance and personal experiences of corruption or incompetence. Populism is one among several forces that

highlight how citizens perceive the state, its effectiveness, and its legitimacy. Therefore, a higher populist orientation appears to relate to lower institutional trust, but this one predictor leaves most of the Variance in Trust unexplained.

Table 6: Regression Analysis
Predicting Engagement from Populism and Trust

Model Summary
$R^2 = .093$
$F(2,237) = 12.135, p < .001$
Coefficients (B)
Populism = $-.328$ ($p < .001$)
Trust = $-.068$ ($p = .264$)

Source: Authors' Work.

The second model regresses Engagement on the same two measures used in the first model: Populism and Trust (confidence in specific political institutions), to test how levels of Trust and Populism jointly determine Engagement in political processes. $F(2,237) = 12.135, p < .001, F(2,237)^2 = 0.093$ indicates that the model is statistically significant overall and explains approximately 9.3% of the Variance in Engagement. Even if that percentage represents the majority of the variance that remains unaccounted for by the two predictors combined, it is nonetheless substantial enough to indicate that these constructs are at least somewhat related to people's willingness to participate in political actions (such as voting, protesting, or joining civic activities).

In this model, the stronger predictor is populism, with a coefficient of -0.328 ($p < .001$), indicating a negative relationship with Engagement. The higher the score on the Populism scale, the lower the self-reported intention to participate in political activities. With a significance level ($p < .001$), we have a robust statistical association: there is great confidence in this finding. This is contrary to the idea that the polarization of rhetoric leads to citizen action by energizing them. Alternatively, it suggests that, for this particular sample at least, holding populist beliefs may be associated with disenchantment from conventional avenues of participation. A second interpretation is that passionate populists, those who find some populist arguments persuasive, perhaps regarding the moral shortcomings of the elite or the system, may simply drop out of business-as-usual politics due to scepticism. As a result, they might choose to resort to other forms of protest that are not sustained, such as using social media or sporadic street demonstrations, rather than committed participation in mainstream channels like voting and party membership.

The coefficient for trust is -0.068 , which is neither large nor statistically significant ($p = 0.264$). Therefore, to some extent, trust in institutions does not significantly predict Engagement in this model. This finding may seem surprising, but it aligns with research indicating that civic participation (beyond voting) can stem from a variety of motivations, some of which are only marginally related to confidence in existing governance structures. One example is that of low-trust individuals who participate with a view to reform, but high-trust individuals who have a greater degree of latent support for the status quo. Trust, on its own, usually does not lead to political involvement.

This leads to placing the results of the outcomes in the larger context of the article, discussing the fact that popular attitudes are essential factors that influence how people regard their role in democratic processes. However, if, as populist theory suggests, populism promotes political participation, the negative coefficient indicates that in this environment, populist discourse may take the form of disenchantment, which would deter people from engaging in the regular political sphere. As a matter of policy, this insight is essential: we warn that purely populist messaging to mobilize opponents of grifters can backfire by discouraging constructive forms of Engagement if all such messaging does is discredit formal institutions without providing positive ways for the public to participate in civic action.

The non-significant relationship between Trust and Engagement is strikingly different from the democratic participation models, which presume that a higher level of trust introduces a higher level of participation. Other factors, in this case, most likely moral or ideological convictions, or perhaps discontents expressed using populism, seem to be more immediate in influencing participation. Future inquiries could incorporate additional variables (e.g., economic perceptions, media usage, or social networks) to trace possible influences on a more rounded variety of political participation. This regression model helps shed light on the complex tangle of populist beliefs, institutional Trust, and democratic Engagement.

Findings of Results

Findings and Discussion

A single narrative guides interpretation across these steps: populist orientations in Pakistan are associated with moralised and leader-centred ways of making politics meaningful, yet the more robust inferential evidence indicates that stronger populist orientation aligns with weaker institutional trust and, once institutional trust is accounted for, lower conventional political engagement. This pattern suggests that populism may stimulate political intensity at the level of rhetoric and attitudes while simultaneously straining the institutional confidence and stable participatory channels that democratic consolidation requires.

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics show a broadly moderate endorsement of populist and democracy-related statements, indicating that the sample is neither uniformly populist nor uniformly anti-populist. Across the fifteen items, mean values fall in a narrow mid-range (approximately 2.94 to 3.36 on a five-point scale), and standard deviations cluster around the same range, reflecting meaningful dispersion rather than consensus. This matters because the study is not capturing a population that responds in a single direction; instead, it captures a distribution of orientations that can be analysed for structure and association.

Two descriptive patterns are especially relevant for the study's argument. One is the salience of moral framing as a motivational register. The highest mean is for "vote motivation when politics is framed as a moral battle" ($M \approx 3.36$), which implies that moralised politics functions as a participation cue for many respondents. A second pattern is the moderate endorsement of statements that reflect people-centred legitimacy and scepticism toward institutional mediation, such as the view that the people's will should override checks and balances ($M \approx 3.25$) and that mass mobilisation helps hold leaders accountable ($M \approx 3.23$). Together, these descriptive signals are consistent with the idea that populist politics draws strength from moral narratives and collective accountability frames.

At the same time, the descriptive statistics do not portray a wholly anti-institutional environment. Trust in political institutions (as measured in the trust item) is also moderate ($M \approx 3.13$), suggesting that respondents can simultaneously accept populist claims about elites while retaining some baseline confidence that institutions may serve the public interest. Sovereignty-focused grievance framing appears somewhat less central in this dataset, as indicated by the lower mean for foreign interference undermining confidence ($M \approx 2.94$). Taken together, the descriptive results imply an attitudinal environment in which populist rhetoric resonates, especially through moral framing and leader-centred cues, while institutional confidence remains neither collapsed nor strongly entrenched.

Factor Analysis

Exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine whether the fifteen items reflect a single underlying dimension or cluster into multiple latent dimensions. The diagnostics support factorability: the KMO value is 0.651 and Bartlett's test is significant ($p < .001$). The extracted solution yields three components with eigenvalues above 1, jointly explaining 54.32% of total variance (approximately 19.42%, 18.07%, and 16.83% across the three factors).

Substantively, the three-factor result is important because it stabilises interpretation of "populism" in this setting. It indicates that the measured content does not collapse into a single, monolithic attitude. Instead, populist orientation appears as a configuration of related dimensions that may include moralised engagement cues, anti-elite reform expectations, and leader- or sovereignty-linked frames, which can be combined differently across individuals. This helps explain why populism can sometimes appear mobilisation-friendly and sometimes institution-straining: different dimensions can be activated by different political contexts, media narratives, and personal experiences. The factor structure therefore supports the study's conceptual premise that populism in Pakistan is multifaceted rather than reducible to a single anti-institutional impulse.

Correlations

The correlation matrix provides an initial, intuitive picture of how the key constructs relate. Populism correlates positively with political engagement ($r = .345$, $p < .01$), indicating that respondents who score higher on populist orientation also tend to report higher engagement at the bivariate level. This result aligns with the descriptive finding that moral battle framing is a salient participation cue. In many contexts, populist discourse can increase political salience and motivational intensity by framing politics as a struggle between virtue and corruption, and the bivariate correlation is consistent with that mobilisation mechanism.

Populism also shows a modest positive correlation with institutional trust ($r = .216$, $p < .05$). This is not a large association, yet it is theoretically informative because it suggests that populist orientation does not automatically translate into across-the-board distrust. A plausible reading is that a portion of respondents may distinguish "corrupt elites" from "institutions as such," or may express confidence in institutions conditional on reform, leadership change, or the belief that institutional power can be redirected toward popular needs. The trust–engagement correlation is small and statistically non-significant ($r = .149$), suggesting that engagement in this dataset is not strongly anchored in institutional confidence. That pattern is consistent with political environments in which mobilisation is driven by moral narratives, identity cues, and perceived grievance rather than by satisfaction with institutional performance.

Regression results

Regression models refine interpretation by showing how relationships behave when variables are considered together. The first model predicts institutional trust from populism. It is statistically significant ($p = .035$) and indicates a negative coefficient for populism ($B = -0.149$), with a modest $R^2 (\approx .018)$. The effect is small in explanatory power, yet directionally meaningful: stronger populist orientation is associated with lower institutional trust once modelled as a predictive relationship. This supports the “delegitimation” mechanism in populism theory, in which anti-elite frames and people-centred legitimacy claims shift confidence away from representative institutions.

The second regression model predicts political engagement from populism and trust simultaneously. The overall model is significant ($p < .001$) with $R^2 \approx .093$. In this model, populism is a significant negative predictor of engagement ($B = -0.328$, $p < .001$), while institutional trust is not statistically significant ($p \approx .264$). This is the key result for resolving the mixed story. Although populism is positively correlated with engagement in the bivariate analysis, once trust is included, the net association of populism with engagement becomes negative. This pattern is consistent with the idea that populism may raise political intensity and moral motivation at the surface level, while its more institution-sceptical component undermines conventional, sustained engagement when the overlap with institutional confidence is separated out.

Integrated discussion: implications for theory and Pakistan

Taken together, the results indicate that populism in Pakistan is best understood as a multidimensional orientation that can stimulate moralised attention and participation cues while placing pressure on institutional legitimacy. The descriptive statistics and correlations capture a mobilisation dimension: populist orientations are linked to engagement-friendly narratives, especially moral framing. The regression results, though, point to a more consequential democratic risk: populist orientation aligns with reduced institutional trust, and when engagement is modelled alongside institutional trust, stronger populism is associated with lower conventional engagement rather than higher. This suggests that populism may help generate political heat without reliably producing institutionalised participation that strengthens democratic problem-solving.

For Pakistan, the implications are substantial. In a system where institutional legitimacy is already contested, even a modest trust-eroding association is important because it can compound broader governance challenges. When citizens internalise the idea that institutions are fundamentally captured, legitimacy shifts toward leader-centred or majoritarian moral claims, making checks, courts, and parliamentary mediation easier to portray as obstruction. At the same time, the engagement findings imply that participation can become more episodic, personality-centred, or confrontational rather than routinised through stable channels. This does not mean citizens become apathetic in every sense; it means that the form of engagement encouraged by populist orientation may not strengthen representative democracy’s institutional foundations.

The theoretical contribution, then, is to show that the populism–democracy relationship becomes clearer when the analysis separates measurement structure from association patterns. Populism can appear mobilisation-friendly in simple associations because it intensifies political meaning, yet its net institutional effect—revealed in the regression evidence—leans toward weakening trust and dampening conventional engagement. In policy terms, the findings imply that reducing democratic strain in Pakistan requires strengthening institutional performance and credibility while expanding channels for participation that address grievances without converting politics into a permanent moral emergency.

Conclusion

This study examined how populist orientations relate to institutional trust and political engagement in Pakistan using a cross-sectional survey and a structured quantitative analysis. The evidence indicates that populist attitudes are present at a moderate level among the respondents and are expressed most clearly through moralised political framing, leader-centred cues, and anti-elite reform expectations. At the measurement level, the instrument demonstrated acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.72$) and a three-factor structure explaining just over half of the variance, reinforcing the conclusion that populism in Pakistan is not a single uniform attitude but a multidimensional orientation that combines reformist claims, moral narratives, and scepticism toward institutional mediation. These results support the view that populism should be analysed as a composite political disposition rather than reduced to a single anti-system impulse.

Substantively, the findings show that populism carries a democratically consequential tension. Descriptive and bivariate patterns are consistent with the idea that populist rhetoric can heighten political salience by framing politics as a moral struggle and by legitimising collective mobilisation as a tool of accountability. Yet the regression evidence points to a more stable institutional risk: stronger populist orientation is associated with lower institutional trust, and when engagement is modelled alongside trust, populism is negatively associated with conventional political engagement. Taken together, the results imply that populism may intensify political meaning and episodic mobilisation while weakening institutional confidence and the forms of routine participation that sustain representative democracy. For Pakistan's democratic trajectory, the core implication is that populist discourse can deepen strain on already contested institutions by shifting legitimacy away from procedural mediation and toward moralised, leader-centred claims, making it harder for representative bodies and oversight institutions to perform stabilising democratic functions.

The study has several limitations that should be interpreted as boundaries on inference rather than as minor caveats. The data are cross-sectional, which limits causal claims about whether populist attitudes produce lower trust and engagement or whether low trust and engagement encourage receptivity to populist frames. The sample is composed of expert respondents rather than a nationally representative public sample, which improves interpretive depth but limits generalisability to the wider electorate. Measurement is based on self-reported attitudes, which may be affected by social desirability and by differences in how respondents interpret items such as "trust in institutions" or "engagement." The regression models are intentionally parsimonious, meaning important covariates—such as partisanship, media consumption patterns, socioeconomic status, regional location, and direct experience with public institutions—were not included and may account for additional variance in trust and engagement.

Future research should extend this study in three practical directions. One direction is a nationally representative survey design that differentiates trust across specific institutions (parliament, courts, election bodies, civil service) and distinguishes engagement into conventional participation and protest or digital mobilisation, allowing clearer identification of whether populism redirects participation rather than reduces it. A second direction is longitudinal or panel research that can test causal ordering and capture how populist orientations, institutional trust, and engagement change across electoral cycles, crises, or major institutional confrontations. A third direction is mixed-method work that pairs survey measures with discourse analysis and interview-based evidence to clarify how moral framing, religious symbolism, and sovereignty narratives translate into concrete democratic attitudes and behavioural choices in different regions and media environments. Through these extensions, scholarship can better specify when populist discourse becomes democratically corrosive, when it becomes reformist pressure, and how Pakistan's institutions can respond in ways that protect

pluralism and accountability while still addressing grievances that populist politics amplifies.

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