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Polarization, Performance, Responsiveness, and Trust in Malawian Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Institutions

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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Rodgers Brenner Chawani

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Polarization, Performance, Responsiveness, and Trust in Malawian Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Institutions

by

Rodgers Brenner Chawani

MPhil, Walden University, 2025

MA, University of Malawi, 2007

BS, University of Malawi, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

Political trust matters for good governance and democracy. Although Malawi's constitution affirms trust as a key component of authority, Afrobarometer surveys have revealed broad declines, hindering democratic consolidation and the achievement of the long-term Vision 2063 development goals. Prior researchers studying the country have fixated on qualitative analyses and overlooked affective polarization and differentiation across government branches. The purpose of this cross-sectional quantitative study was to examine the predictive relationship between perceived government performance, responsiveness, corruption, affective polarization, democratic satisfaction, and trust in the Malawi president, parliament, and judiciary, using generalized linear models to apply Easton's political support theory to five Afrobarometer surveys from 2016 to 2025. Results suggest that performance is a prime predictor of presidential trust (χ^2 (1) = 523.62, $p < .001$, $OR = 2.01$) with "expect presidents to steward the economy" (χ^2 (1) = 72.49, $p < .001$, $OR = 1.38$), "parliament to tackle job creation" (χ^2 (1) = 14.23, $p < .001$, $OR = 1.15$), and "judiciary to safeguard distributive justice" (χ^2 (1) = 14.34, $p < .001$, $OR = 1.15$) having higher predictive odds. Democratic satisfaction predicted trust, elevating the odds for the president, parliament, and judiciary by 19%, 23%, and 23%, respectively. Presidential trust was vulnerable to corruption (χ^2 (1) = 47.08, $p < .001$, $OR = 0.76$), and partisan alignment (χ^2 (1) = 22.42, $p < .001$, $OR = 0.48$) and was prominent in crises. Policy makers could foster positive social change through tailored reforms, bolstering democratic governance and aligning with Vision 2063. Their actions could improve governmental responsiveness, foster institutional legitimacy, and mitigate corruption.

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Dedication

I sincerely dedicate this dissertation to my trinity of support and endearment: my beloved wife, Thokozani Grace Chawani, and my adored children, Luther Brenner Chawani and Gabriella Tressa Chawani. Your steadfast love, patience, and understanding have been the foundation upon which this academic journey was built. You endured countless long hours of my absence, embraced the challenges of our relocation to Eastern Europe with grace and resilience, and sustained me through your faithful prayers and encouragement. Your sacrifices have not gone unnoticed, and your belief in me has been a constant source of strength. This work stands as a testament not only to academic pursuit but also to the force of familial love and the unique bonds that make all things possible.

Acknowledgments

First, I give thanks to the Almighty God, for it is in Him that I live, move, and have my being.

Second, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to my dissertation chair, Dr. Steven Matarelli, whose invaluable support, constructive guidance, and scholarly expertise have been the cornerstone of this achievement. My sincere gratitude goes to Dr. Lynn Wilson, my second committee member, whose steadfast support and insightful contributions have been essential to bringing this work to fruition.

I am deeply indebted to my cherished family—my brother, Allan, sisters, Effie, Irene, and Cynthia; and extended family Norman, Sobhuza, Marlene, Juno, Rashawn, Maria, Shaka, Saul, and Nothando—for the constant inspiration and prayers that have anchored this journey.

A special tribute is due to George Lwanda, who embodies the rare combination of college alumnus, former workmate, and trusted colleague, for taking an exceptional interest in my academic pursuits.

Last but certainly not least, I thank my beloved and deceased parents, whose enduring legacy continues to inspire me to attain the highest level of knowledge possible and fuel my determination to honor their memory through excellence.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Political trust is essential for the effectiveness of government, societal cooperation, and the durability of democratic governance (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Brezzi et al., 2021; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024; Gyimah-Boadi, 2021; Muñoz, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2023; Putnam, 1993). Political trust potentially affects outcomes such as voter turnout, policy preferences, and compliance with public policy (Devine, 2024; Hetherington & Husser, 2012; Norris, 2017; Zmerli & van der Meer, 2017). Disenchanted citizens are more likely to push for radical changes, less likely to follow laws and policies, and hesitate to participate in the voting process. Trust is a reservoir of support and an indicator of a healthy civic and democratic culture. Although scholars have studied political trust extensively in established democracies, research on trust differentiation across the branches of government remains limited, particularly in the African context.

The progression of democratic institutions in Malawi since the transition to multiparty democracy in 1994 requires carefully examining citizens' trust in branches of government. Political trust carries significant consequences for the consolidation of democracy and the efficacy of governance. There is limited understanding of how citizens in emerging African democracies like Malawi differentiate their trust across branches of government. The limited understanding is problematic for several reasons. Prior research has relied primarily on qualitative approaches limiting the ability to systematically quantify the extent of trust disparities among government branches, test relationships between citizen characteristics and trust trends over time, and provide

broadly applicable, statistically significant insights regarding the factors influencing trust differentiation in multitiered political systems within a developing democracy. Existing studies have not examined how affective polarization influences trust differentiation, including the spatial segregation of ethnic groups in Malawi, and its impact on political trust remains unexplored (Robinson, 2020).

Understanding political trust dynamics is essential for addressing governance challenges evidenced during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Gyimah-Boadi (2021) observed that the Malawi government faced considerable public resistance to antipandemic measures, including a successful legal challenge against a lockdown on the grounds of excessive economic harm. Gyimah-Boadi (2021) argued that the prevailing low levels of political trust in leaders and institutions made citizens hesitate to adhere to difficult but necessary public health safety measures. This practical challenge underscores the necessity of political capital in fostering state legitimacy for future challenges, including the postpandemic recovery and realizing developmental goals.

The explicit anchoring of political trust within Section 12(iii) of Malawi's Constitution offers a compelling rationale for academic inquiry into trust dynamics within Malawi's political ecosystem (Republic of Malawi, 2017). This constitutional provision clearly delineates that the authority to wield state power is contingent upon the sustained trust of the Malawian populace, thereby creating a governance framework where legitimacy is not presumed but must be continuously earned through open, accountable, and transparent government alongside informed democratic choice (Republic of Malawi, 2017).

Conversely, numerous constitutional democracies construe trust as merely implied. The constitutional framework of the United Kingdom functions on established conventions of democratic legitimacy, lacking explicit stipulations that mandate the government to uphold public trust via transparent and accountable governance. In contrast, Malawi as a fully independent member of the British commonwealth adopted its own constitution in 1966 explicitly anchoring the need for sustained citizens' trust. Further, the United States Constitution establishes accountability mechanisms and democratic processes that assume public trust but lacks Malawi's direct constitutional mandate that governmental authority is contingent upon sustained public confidence. Similarly, the Constitution of South Africa (1996), while extensively highlighting the principles of democratic governance, transparency, and accountability, fails to explicitly stipulate that the legitimacy of state power must be perpetually derived from the trust of the public, as delineated in Section 12(iii) of Malawi's Constitution.

Yet Malawi's legal framework positions trust as a constitutional prerequisite for governmental authority, transforming a sociological concern into a fundamental constitutional imperative. The Constitution's intentional focus on sustained trust as a cornerstone for democratic functioning creates a unique analytical lens through which to examine governance failures, institutional shortcomings, and democratic deficits in present-day Malawi. The erosion of trust poses a significant threat to the very foundation of the Constitution, indicating that analyses of trust are not merely theoretical pursuits but vital diagnostics of constitutional well-being within the Malawian context.

I sought to expand upon the recognized significance of political trust for democratic governance. I examined the relationships between government's responsiveness, performance evaluations, affective polarization, corruption, and citizens' differentiated trust in the three branches of government: the executive (president), legislature (the national assembly or parliament), and the judiciary (courts of law). The study's findings can contribute to a better understanding of political trust dynamics in Malawi, informing efforts to strengthen democratic governance, institutional efficacy, and state legitimacy, which are pivotal in realizing Malawi's vision for 2063 of becoming an inclusively prosperous and self-reliant industrialized upper-middle-income nation. This chapter includes the following sections: (a) Background, (b) Problem Statement, (c) Purpose of the Study, (d) Research Questions and Hypotheses, (e) Theoretical Foundation and Framework, (f) Nature of the Study, (g) Definitions, (h) Assumptions, (i) Scope and Delimitations, (j) Limitations, (k) Significance, and (l) Summary.

Background

Malawi aims to become an industrialized upper-middle-income country by 2063, focusing on political freedom, economic independence, and enhanced quality of life (Republic of Malawi, 2021). The realization of this vision relies on seven enablers, one of which is the establishment of effective governance systems. These systems serve as frameworks that facilitate the efficient and productive utilization of resources to achieve desired outcomes. Consolidating democratic governance is fundamental for attaining an inclusive, prosperous, and self-sufficient nation. After 3 decades of democratic consolidation, the systemic decline in political trust across all tiers of government in

Malawi presents a significant challenge to effective governance. Achieving the Malawi 2063 (MW2063) developmental vision requires the active involvement of the three branches of government: the executive, legislature, and judiciary.

The governance landscape of Malawi experienced a substantial change with the transition from a one-party system to a multiparty democracy in 1994. Historically, governance centered on Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the first and life president representing the Malawi Congress Party. From independence in 1964 to 1994, Banda exerted significant control over parliament and all policymaking government institutions (Chunga & Kayuni, 2022). This setup entrenched a tendency among citizens to primarily focus their political evaluations on the executive branch. Since 1994, Malawi has adopted a multiparty system of government, leading to the election of five democratically elected presidents and fluctuating power dynamics among different branches of government. Examining trust differentiation would inform whether citizens' perceptions have adapted to the separated powers outlined in the 1994 Constitution or if the historic focus of evaluations on the president persists. However, Chunga and Kayuni (2022) argued that political governance represents a hybrid neo-patrimonial state characterized by the coexistence of a formal legal and administrative framework with informal patronage networks.

Patronage, clientelism, opportunism, and corruption persist in Malawi's political landscape, adversely impacting the development of sustainable democratic institutions. MW2063 emphasizes the importance of effective coordination among the executive, legislature, and judiciary to promote good governance and foster an enabling

environment for all citizens, particularly vulnerable and marginalized populations (Republic of Malawi, 2021). Nonetheless, there has been a widespread and systemic erosion of political trust in Malawi's multitiered governance frameworks throughout the past 30 years of democracy.

Political trust refers to individuals' confidence in institutions and the expectation that these entities would uphold normative standards, even in the absence of oversight (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Afrobarometer surveys track responses across different waves to the question, “How much do you trust each of the following … president, parliament/national assembly, and courts of law?” (Afrobarometer, n.d.-a). Historically, the judiciary has garnered more favorable evaluations regarding trust (mean of 2.3 from 1994 to 2022) than the executive and legislature (mean of 1.9 and 1.8, respectively), as indicated by longitudinal Afrobarometer surveys (Afrobarometer, n.d.-a). The Afrobarometer surveys indicated trust levels peaked during the multiparty transition, with increases of 51%, 39%, and 17% for the executive, legislature, and judiciary, respectively, from 1994 to 2012. From 2012 to 2022, a widespread syndrome of diminishing political trust was observed in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, with declines of approximately 58%, 40%, and 21%, respectively (Afrobarometer, n.d.-a). The decline in political trust over the past decade has been widespread, with values falling below those recorded during the early multiparty transition. The erosion of political trust in the past decade has been extensive, with levels dropping below those observed during the formative years of multiparty transition. What factors contribute to the significant and systematic erosion of political

confidence in Malawi's multilevel governance frameworks over the past 30 years of democratic governance?

The erosion of political trust within multilevel governance frameworks poses a significant threat to the consolidation of democratic processes. This deterioration ultimately hinders the aspiration of becoming an inclusively prosperous and self-sufficient upper-middle-income nation by 2063. The advancement of democratic systems is fundamentally contingent upon the public's trust in their governing institutions. In representative democracies such as Malawi, Confucius noted that effective governance relies on essential principles of trust, necessitating that rulers cultivate legitimacy among their constituents (Newton et al., 2018; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008; Uslaner, 2017). Establishing political trust is indispensable for promoting active citizenship, facilitating the efficient delivery of public services, reducing tax evasion, enhancing the acceptance of political dissent, and enabling political consensus and compromise (Mattes & Moreno, 2018; Newton et al., 2018). Furthermore, effective governance, accountable political leadership, equitable opportunities, and a robust economy are imperative for safeguarding democratic societies against increasing fragmentation and the erosion of democratic ideals and principles. Democracy requires a foundation of trust and demands an engaged and vigilant citizenry, characterized by a strong skepticism towards governmental authority. If deemed necessary, the citizenry must be prepared to withdraw trust and reclaim oversight of governmental actions (Mattes & Moreno, 2018; Mishler & Rose, 2007; Newton et al., 2018). Perceptions of adequate representation among citizens

enhance political engagement, strengthen social cohesion, and augment legitimacy, all of which are crucial for effective governance.

Trust is essential for governments to foster resilient economies, enhance growth potential, and achieve sustainable development objectives (Brezzi et al., 2021; Gyimah-Boadi, 2021; Keele, 2007; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017), underscoring the importance of examining the potential attitudinal and behavioral consequences of political trust. The functions of the state and its institutions are essential in influencing political trust (Hutchison & Johnson, 2017). Research demonstrates that leaders' performance, economic management, corruption—exploiting public office for personal gain—and satisfaction with democratic processes significantly affect political trust across various contexts. There is considerable research on the determinants of political trust at both global and regional levels. However, a notable gap remains in examining the traditional antecedents of political trust, particularly in understanding how citizens in developing democracies, such as Malawi, differentiate their trust among various branches of government. Citizens view the political system as heterogeneous, exhibiting differing degrees of trust in various institutions influenced by perceived performance, responsiveness, and affiliations related to tribal and partisan identities (Proszowska et al., 2022).

The influence of affective polarization and its interpartisan and tribal group conflict on political trust is a significant yet underexamined factor (Harteveld et al., 2021; Torcal & Carty, 2022). The tendency of individuals to trust leaders who share similar party-political views or ethnic backgrounds is an underexplored area, yet it plays a

significant role in shaping trust evaluations. Most research on affective polarization has focused on the United States, utilizing the dynamics of a two-party system (Democrats and Republicans), which restricts its applicability to multiparty system contexts. Recent studies indicate that affective polarization is prevalent in various countries, often more than observed in the US (Knudsen, 2021; Reiljan, 2020; Torcal & Carty, 2022; Wagner, 2020). Affective polarization may be evident in partisan alignment, which signifies an affiliation with the same political party as the incumbent leaders, or it may arise from shared coethnicity or identification with the same tribe or ethnic group as the incumbent leader. In-group and out-group sentiments significantly influence perceptions of political trust. Coethnic trust premium emerges, the systematic tendency for individuals to place higher trust in members of their own ethnic group than in others, particularly in politically salient contexts where resource distribution is at stake (Habyarimana et al., 2009; Robinson, 2016, 2020). Coethnic trust premium constitutes the advantage that political leaders enjoy among their ethnic constituencies, which can stabilize political support even when objective performance metrics might suggest otherwise.

I extended prior research by addressing critical gaps in understanding political trust in Malawi beyond traditional antecedents and understanding affective polarization. A thorough analysis of the factors contributing to the decline of trust within Malawi's three tiers of government, especially concerning affective polarization, perceptions of performance, and responsiveness, may advance existing scholarship on trust differentiation in an emerging democracy such as Malawi. The study benefited from currently available extensive longitudinal data sets from Afrobarometer surveys

(Afrobarometer, n.d.-b) and used a novel quantitative generalized linear models approach relevant to the Malawian and cross-sectional data context.

Problem Statement

The widespread erosion of trust significantly challenges democratic consolidation and effective governance, threatening Malawi's developmental aspirations. The post-1994 Malawi Constitution explicitly stipulates that the authority of all state institutions is based on the sustained trust of its citizens (Republic of Malawi, 2017). Despite this constitutional recognition of the centrality of sustained citizen trust, Afrobarometer surveys indicate alarming declines in political trust across all branches of government (Afrobarometer, n.d.-a). The issue is that it remains unclear whether there is a relationship between economic management, living standards, job creation, the performance of the president, the performance of parliament, corruption, partisan alignment, coethnic trust premium, employment, education, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in the president, trust in parliament, and trust in the judiciary in Malawi.

The existing body of literature concerning political trust in Malawi exhibits several limitations. Earlier research has focused on regional comparisons throughout sub-Saharan Africa, revealing a notable scarcity of analyses specific to Malawi (Hutchison & Johnson, 2017; Mattes & Moreno, 2018). Additionally, the limited research on political trust in Malawi has relied exclusively on qualitative approaches, lacking the quantitative rigor necessary to ascertain causal relationships. Furthermore, earlier contributions have implicitly suggested that the factors influencing trust are consistent across the three levels of government, even though evidence indicates that trust in more impartial institutions,

such as courts, is generally stronger than trust in explicitly political entities like parliament and cabinet (Newton et al., 2018; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008; Zmerli & van der Meer, 2017). In the context of Malawi, a significant gap exists in understanding how citizens discern their trust across the different branches of government. There is a need to explore whether elements such as affective polarization, corruption, and perceptions of government responsiveness and performance serve as distinct foundations for assessing trust at each level of governance.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this cross-sectional quantitative study was to examine the predictive relationship between citizens' perceived government responsiveness in managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs, presidential performance, parliamentary performance, corruption, partisan alignment, coethnic trust premium, employment, education, and satisfaction with democracy (independent variables; IV), and trust in the president, trust in the parliament, and trust in the judiciary (dependent variables; DV) in Malawi. The study aimed to provide valuable insights into how these factors influence differentiated trust across governance structures. By analyzing these relationships over time, the study intended to contribute to the formulation of policies and interventions that enhance democratic governance and institutional legitimacy, ultimately supporting the objectives of MW2063.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: To what extent do citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations

(president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium) predict trust in the president, when mediated by employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy, and controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens?

$H_0$1: There are no statistically significant predictive relationships between citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium), mediating variables (employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy), and trust in the president, controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens.

$H_1$1: There are statistically significant predictive relationships between citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium), mediating variables (employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy), and trust in the president, controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens.

RQ2: To what extent do citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium) predict trust in the parliament, when

mediated by employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy, and controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens?

$H_0$2: There are no statistically significant predictive relationships between citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium), mediating variables (employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy), and trust in the parliament, controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens.

$H_1$2: There are statistically significant predictive relationships between citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium), mediating variables (employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy), and trust in the parliament, controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens.

RQ3: To what extent do citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium) predict trust in the judiciary, when mediated by employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy, and controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens?

$H_0$3: There are no statistically significant predictive relationships between citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium), mediating variables (employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy), and trust in the judiciary, controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens.

$H_1$3: There are statistically significant predictive relationships between citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium), mediating variables (employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy), and trust in the judiciary, controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of the study primarily drew from Easton's political support theory (EPST). Originating from systems theory, EPST provides a framework for distinguishing between specific and diffuse forms of political support. It posits that citizens evaluate institutions based on perceived benefits derived from responsiveness and performance. The theory has been thoroughly reviewed in the literature, and Norris (2017) developed a nested model for analyzing elements of political support as a

multidimensional phenomenon operating on a continuum from the most diffuse to the most specific levels of political trust.

The framework's key elements consist of Easton's categorization of tiers of political support objects, which encompass authorities, regime, and community. Specific support pertains to public endorsement for individuals in positions of authority, such as presidents, whereas diffuse support signifies general sentiments towards the state and its institutions. Easton argued that specific support is inherently unstable, influenced by short- and medium-term factors such as context, performance, and partisan demographics. Diffuse support upholds the legitimacy of the state, its agencies, and officeholders despite public criticism concerning policy outcomes or processes. Norris posited that, at the broadest level, citizens' attachment to their nation serves as the foundation, succeeded by consensus on regime values, evaluations of regime performance, trust in particular institutions, and ultimately, at the most specific level, support for current officeholders and political parties.

The nested conceptual framework proposed by EPST and Norris provided a practical, theoretical foundation for examining the complexity of trust differentiation in Malawi's governmental institutions, as it effectively recognizes the complex and multifaceted nature of political support that this research aimed to investigate. The theory distinguishes between specific support, related to incumbents and institutional performance, and diffuse support, which indicates broader regime legitimacy. This distinction was pertinent to the research questions, which sought to determine whether citizens' trust varies systematically among different branches of government, influenced

by performance evaluations, partisan affiliations, and socioeconomic factors. EPST's emphasis on the influence of performance assessments on specific support corresponded directly with the independent variables, including economic management, perceived corruption, and institutional performance. Furthermore, EPST improved the analysis of affective polarization by recognizing that rational evaluations do not solely determine individuals' feelings towards political entities, as emotional factors are also significant. EPST, akin to affective polarization, acknowledges the effect of group identities on forming political attitudes.

This nested framework illustrates the interconnectedness of various forms of support, highlighting how particular assessments of current authorities reside within wider attitudes toward the political system. Through the application of EPST within the political landscape of Malawi, I sought to ascertain whether trust manifests as a broad disposition toward the political system in its entirety or as a nuanced evaluation attuned to the specific functions, performances, and attributes of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. I aimed to enhance the theoretical understanding of the mechanisms underlying democratic legitimacy in emerging democracies.

Nature of the Study

The study employed a quantitative approach using cross-sectional survey data analyzed through a generalized linear model (GLM), specifically ordinary logistic regression. The DV — trust in the president, trust in the parliament, and trust in the judiciary — were measured on an ordinal scale, necessitating an analytical approach that accommodates the ordered categorical nature of the outcomes. The IV included

perceptions of government responsiveness — managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs; performance evaluations — of the president and parliament; corruption; affective polarization — partisan alignment; and coethnic trust premium. The study included mediating variables (MV) — level of education, employment status, and satisfaction with democracy- and control variables (CV) — age and gender.

The GLM framework boded well for the study. GLM effectively accounts for the categorical characteristics of dependent variables while accommodating various types of independent predictors, including ordinal and continuous variables. GLM appeals for allowing the inclusion of wave-fixed effects, enabling the tracking of changes over time. Notably, GLM captures potential nonlinear relationships between predictors and political trust outcomes. The study data source was five waves of Afrobarometer surveys conducted in 2016, 2019, 2022, 2023, and 2025 (Afrobarometer, n.d.-a). Each wave of surveys covered 1,200 nationally representative respondents. Afrobarometer employs a clustered, stratified, multistage area probability sampling design that ensures representation across demographic groups (Afrobarometer, n.d.-c). Analyzing Malawians' assessments of governance performance and responsiveness, alongside the influence of affective polarization on trust in political institutions over time and across government tiers, may provide valuable insights for strengthening democratic governance.

Definitions

Affective polarization: The tendency of individuals to develop strong negative emotions and attitudes toward political outgroups while maintaining positive views of their political ingroup. This phenomenon represents the increasing emotional and social

distance between partisans, extending beyond mere policy disagreements to include personal animosity and social prejudice (Harteveld et al., 2021; Knudsen, 2021; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2020).

Coethnic trust premium: Incremental trust that citizens display toward coethnic political figures compared to equally qualified non-co-ethnic counterparts, reflecting in-group favoritism and identity-based expectations of preferential treatment (Habyarimana et al., 2009; Robinson, 2016, 2020).

Corruption perception: Citizens' perceptions of the level of corruption in government and how well the government is handling corruption (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; della Porta, 2000; Uslaner, 2017; You, 2017).

Executive: The branch of government headed by the president, responsible for implementing laws and policies.

Judiciary: The branch of government represented by the courts and judiciary, responsible for interpreting and applying laws.

Legislature: The branch of government represented by parliament, responsible for making laws.

Partisan alignment: The extent to which citizens' political preferences align with those in power, measured through partisan alignment and regional alignment with the president (Harteveld et al., 2021; Knudsen, 2021; Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2020).

Political trust: An evaluative attitude that indicates citizens' confidence in political institutions and their expectation that these institutions will operate in

accordance with normative standards, even without continuous oversight (Bertsou, 2019; Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Marien et al., 2011; Proszowska et al., 2023).

Performance evaluation: Citizens' assessments of how well the president, parliament, and judiciary fulfill their roles and responsibilities (Harteveld et al., 2013; Muñoz, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2022).

Satisfaction with democracy. Citizens' subjective assessment of how well their democratic system functions in practice, compared to their expectations of how democracy should work ideally (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Linde & Ekman, 2003).

Trust differentiation: The degree to which citizens distinguish their levels of trust among various political institutions and actors, rather than displaying a uniform attitude of trust or distrust toward the political system overall (Denters, 2002; Proszowska et al., 2022; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017).

Assumptions

I made several assumptions when conducting this study. First, I assumed that the Afrobarometer survey accurately measured the study concepts, as Afrobarometer has refined its survey instruments over multiple iterations since 1999, ensuring their validity and reliability across diverse contexts (Afrobarometer, n.d.-d). Second, I assumed that respondents provided honest and accurate responses to survey questions. Third, I assumed that Afrobarometer's stratified, multistage area probability sampling design yields nationally representative samples, facilitating generalizations to the broader Malawian population. Fourth, I assumed that the GLM framework, specifically ordinal logistic regression, was appropriate for my methodological approach due to the ordinal

nature of my dependent variables. Fifth, I assumed a certain level of stability in the meaning of political trust across various survey waves, which facilitated meaningful comparisons over time. These assumptions were essential for the study's meaningfulness, supporting the data's validity, the analytical approach's suitability, and the generalizability of the findings.

Scope and Delimitations

The study focused specifically on Malawi, a developing democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, and examined data from five Afrobarometer survey waves conducted between 2016 and 2025. This temporal scope allowed for the analysis of trust dynamics across different political administrations while remaining current enough to inform contemporary governance challenges. The research deliberately limited its focus to core constitutional governance structures — executive, legislature, and judiciary — rather than peripheral governmental entities such as the police, military, and the electoral commission, examining trust dynamics across distinct political administrations while maintaining contemporary relevance. The study established methodological boundaries by employing repeated cross-sectional surveys rather than longitudinal panel data and prioritized aggregate-level analysis over individual trust trajectories. Theoretically, the investigation operated within the EPST framework and trust-as-evaluation approaches, specifically explored five key predictors: government responsiveness, performance evaluations, corruption perceptions, democratic satisfaction, and affective polarization—intentionally excluded potential influences such as social trust, media consumption patterns, and international factors. The study acknowledged geographical limitations to

the Malawian context, recognized constraints on generalizability while suggesting potential applicability to comparable sub-Saharan African emerging democracies facing similar governance challenges.

Limitations

The quantitative cross-sectional study had inherent limitations. The reliance on Afrobarometer's secondary data restricted variable selection and ensured measurement consistency between survey waves. Additionally, issues of measurement validity arose from the intrinsic challenges of operationalizing political trust components across diverse cultural contexts, compounded by possible social desirability bias in self-reported political attitudes. Furthermore, although the study employed a rigorous analytical method via GLM, the ordinal characteristics of the dependent variables imposed specific constraints on statistical modeling compared to continuous outcomes, including the potential failure of the proportional odds assumption in ordinal logistic regression across all predictors. The possibility of differential nonresponse across survey waves might have introduced bias if certain demographic or political groupings were consistently more likely to refuse participation. Although Afrobarometer staff employed weighting techniques to correct sampling discrepancies, residual bias might have persisted. The study addressed these constraints and utilized demographic controls, conducted thorough diagnostic tests of statistical assumptions, transparently acknowledged potential biases, and employed contextual triangulation with Malawi's political environment.

Significance

This research can make substantive contributions. First, the study can advance theoretical understanding of political trust by examining differentiation across the executive, legislature, and judiciary in their trust assessments. By applying EPST (1975) within the Malawian context, I can extend theoretical frameworks of political trust to emerging African democracies, where such applications remain limited (Hutchison & Johnson, 2017). Second, the study can introduce novel considerations of how partisan alignment and ethnic spatial segregation influence political trust patterns in Malawi. Third, the study can provide empirical evidence through quantitative analysis of political trust, addressing methodological limitations and capturing longitudinal trends with data spanning multiple political administrations. The approach can significantly contribute to scholarly understanding of how trust dynamics evolve in response to changing political landscapes (Chunga & Kayuni, 2022), while the comprehensive examination of multiple determinants—including government responsiveness, performance evaluations, corruption perceptions, satisfaction with democracy, and affective polarization—can generate empirical evidence on factors uniquely shaping political trust in Malawi's democratic context, extending work by Proszowska et al. (2022) on trust in multilevel political systems.

The study has provided practical insights for policymakers to build political trust and strengthen democratic governance. The findings offer strategic and procedural recommendations for practitioners across all three branches of government, advancing evidence-based approaches to enhancing institutional legitimacy and public confidence

(Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). For the executive branch, insights into how performance evaluations and perceptions of responsiveness influence trust can guide policy priorities and communication strategies. For the legislature, understanding the determinants of trust can inform parliamentary reforms and constituent engagement approaches. For the judiciary, the findings can support efforts to strengthen judicial independence and public confidence in the legal system (Norris, 2017). Additionally, the analysis of the role of partisan alignment in shaping trust assessments can inform strategies for mitigating affective political polarization (Keele, 2005), while insights regarding perceptions of corruption can guide the financing of anticorruption initiatives and transparency efforts (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Uslaner, 2017), collectively enhancing governance practices across all branches of Malawi's government.

The foundation for positive social change in Malawi can emerge through the results' potential to strengthen democratic governance and institutional legitimacy, thereby addressing the challenge of eroding trust that threatens the country's aspirations to become an inclusively wealthy and self-reliant industrialized upper-middle-income country by 2063 (National Planning Commission, 2063). By providing empirical evidence on factors influencing differentiated political trust, the research can inform efforts to enhance government responsiveness, improve institutional performance, increase transparency, and reduce corruption across the three branches. According to Newton et al. (2018) and Warren (2018), these improvements can facilitate more effective policy implementation, greater citizen compliance with laws and regulations, and more productive state-society relations, ultimately contributing to greater political

stability and more inclusive governance. Through this differentiated approach to institutional strengthening that recognizes the distinct roles and challenges of different parts of the democratic system (Proszowska et al., 2023), my findings support the development of a more resilient democratic governance that better serves Malawian citizens' needs and aspirations for sustainable development.

Summary

In this chapter, I examined the critical issue of declining political trust across Malawi's three branches of government—executive, legislature, and judiciary—and established the framework for investigating this phenomenon. The background section illustrated Malawi's democratic transition and the concerning trends in political trust revealed by Afrobarometer data and highlighted the judiciary's traditionally higher trust levels compared to the other branches, despite overall systemic erosion. The problem statement identified the need to understand the relationships between governance factors and differentiated institutional trust, and acknowledged limitations in current literature that often overlook Malawi-specific dynamics and trust differentiation across government branches. This quantitative study examined how perceptions of government responsiveness, performance evaluations, corruption, affective polarization, and demographic factors influence trust across the three branches of government. The significance of this research lay in its potential to advance theoretical understanding of trust differentiation in emerging democracies while providing practical insights to strengthen Malawi's institutions and support progress toward the MW2063 vision.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review on political trust, examines theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence regarding its determinants and consequences. The literature review explores research on affective polarization, institutional performance, and corruption in democratic contexts, with particular attention to the unique dynamics of emerging democracies in sub-Saharan Africa. The chapter synthesizes findings from global and regional studies while highlighting the knowledge gap concerning trust differentiation across government branches in Malawi's specific sociopolitical context.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Political trust is an essential source of legitimacy, a precondition for democratic governance, and societal compliance with laws. The problem is that it is not known whether there is a relationship between citizens' perceived government responsiveness in managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs, the performance of the president, the performance of parliament, , corruption, partisan alignment, coethnic trust premium, employment, education, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in the president, trust in parliament, and trust in the judiciary in Malawi. While political trust is typical in research, previous studies relied heavily on qualitative methods and failed to consider trust differentiation across the tiers of government: the executive, legislature, and judiciary. There is also a dearth of research on the topic of whether partisan alignment, coethnic trust premium, corruption, perceptions of government responsiveness, and performance are the basis for evaluating political trust at different governmental levels (Proszowska et al., 2022, 2023; Schafheitle et al., 2020; Torcal & Carty, 2022). This quantitative study's examined the relationship between the between citizens' perceived government responsiveness in managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs, the performance of the president, the performance of parliament, corruption, partisan alignment, coethnic trust premium, employment, education, and satisfaction with democracy (independent variables), and trust in the president, trust in parliament, and trust in the judiciary (dependent variables) in Malawi.

This chapter provides the literature search strategy designed to allow future researchers to gauge how I completed the literature search for the study and discuss the literature's scope. This chapter also provides a literature review of the research concepts and critical variables. A theoretical foundation is provided, where the major theoretical propositions and their application to the theory are discussed. Next, I discuss the critical variables related to the literature review and the rationale for choosing it and relating it to the present study. Lastly, a summary of the chapter is provided.

Literature Search Strategy

I used several databases to search for relevant articles. The databases included *Public Administration Review*, *Public Administration*, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *OECD*, *Emerald Insight*, *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, *National Bureau of Economic Research*, *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, *SAGE Journals*, *British Journal of Management*, *Google Scholar* and *Journal of Institutional Economics*. While my initial time bounded research was set at 5-years, it was necessary to include research outside the 10-year window for seminal studies and the historical and theoretical material essential for understanding governance in the Malawi context.

I used various combinations of search terms until no new articles appeared. Evidence-based research articles were sourced using the following keywords: *political trust*, *government*, *confidence*, *corruption and trust*, *economic management and trust*, *determinants of public trust*, *citizens participation*, *economic development*, *economic and social progress*, *institutions*, *trust in president*, *Afrobarometer surveys*, *political trust*,

policy performance, *perceived responsiveness*, *political legitimacy*, *institutional quality*, *evaluation*, *multilevel governance*, *polarization*, *unemployment*, *democracy*, *cross-national research*, *political attitudes*, *cross-sectional design*, *panel study*, *social capital*, *coethnic trust premium*, *governance*, *political participation*, *cultural theory*, and *trust-as-an evaluation theory*. The other completed search was selected solely based on the theoretical framework of the EPST, leading to coverage of some dated work and its conceptualization into a nested model more recently in 2017.

Theoretical Foundation and Framework

Easton formulated the conventional theoretical framework of political systems. Easton (Easton, 1975; Norris, 2017) distinguished between specialized and broad forms of political support. Specific support includes public approval for individuals in authority, such as presidents, prime ministers, cabinets, civil servants, judges, military officials, and law enforcement agencies. Specific support, gauged by opinion polls, relates to assessments of the elected and appointed officials accountable for formulating and implementing political decisions. Proszowska et al. (2023) observed that evaluations of governmental acts and procedures influence support. Easton contended that specific support is unstable and relies on short- and medium-term factors, including context, performance, and partisan demography. Specific support relies on a logical assessment of the costs and benefits derived from performance evaluations, resulting in variability based on perceived benefits (Easton, 1975; Norris, 2017). Therefore, specific support is contingent on the perceived benefits and satisfaction of the authorities' performance.

Diffuse or generalized support denotes an abstract sentiment toward the state and its agencies (Easton, 1965; Norris, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2023). The overarching attitudes of national pride, patriotism, and commitment to core values and principles form a basis for diffuse support. Ideological, sociological, and cultural attachments influence diffuse support, which appears as more abstract sentiments toward the nation-state and its institutions (Easton, 1975; Norris, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2023). Diffuse support maintains the legitimacy of the state, agencies, and officeholders, even amid public criticism regarding policy outcomes or processes (Proszowska et al., 2023). Generalized support for the state sustains the resilience and legitimacy of the political system, especially for fragile states and transitional regimes (Norris, 2017).

Easton identified three tiers of political support objects: (a) the authorities, (b) the regime, and (c) the community (Easton, 1975; Norris, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2023). Political authorities refer to the incumbents of political office or, more broadly, the cohort of political elites acting as government leaders. Support for political authorities focuses on specific individuals or groups. Conversely, regime support pertains to public attitudes toward the institutions, processes, and principles of government. Finally, support for the political community entails aligning with the nation and political systems that transcend current government institutions (Easton, 1975; Norris, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2023). Easton's framework delineates the diverse dimensions of political support, emphasizing the significance of individuals, institutions, and the broader political community.

Norris (2017, pp. 19-32) updated the Eastonian framework by developing a nested model for analyzing elements of political support as a multidimensional phenomenon operating along a continuum from the most diffuse to the most specific levels:

1. The foundational attitudes of citizens regarding their affiliation with the nation-state, marked by national pride and identity, serve as the starting point.
2. A broad consensus emerges concerning the foundational concepts, ideals, and values that underpin the regime.
3. Citizens assess the regime's overall performance, reflecting contentment with governance and processes.
4. Citizens assess their confidence in regime institutions, emphasizing trust in the legislative, executive, judiciary, and municipalities.
5. The endorsement of incumbent officeholders by citizens reflects their attitudes toward leaders and political parties.

Easton asserts that the components are interrelated, shaping the comprehensive structure of political support (Easton, 1975; Norris, 2017). The revised framework posits that political trust constitutes a foundational confidence in the efficacy of political institutions, as well as a belief in the intentions and abilities of government officials. Political trust cannot be studied in isolation. Theoretically and empirically evaluating the significance of political trust requires understanding the dynamic interdependencies between political trust and broader levels of support (Norris, p. 30).

The EPST theory had two critical implications for my study of declining political trust in Malawi. First, it raised the question of whether political attitudes are a stable

feature of individuals or a rational response to changing circumstances. Second, is political trust a nondifferentiated orientation toward the political system as a whole or a specific assessment of the performance of different layers of government?

Stability and Change in Political Trust

The decline in political trust may indicate a deterioration of specific trust, subsequently affecting general trust. EPST posits that diffuse and specific support mutually influence each other through the generalization of experiences and the internalization of ideals. Researchers argue that favorable interactions with government performance may enhance diffuse support, whereas a robust agreement on regime values can reinforce specific support. Conversely, repeated negative experiences with political officeholders can lead to detrimental perceptions of the political system (Bertsou, 2019; Easton, 1965; Norris, 2017). Long-term attitudes can similarly affect immediate assessments of government performance. Inadequate citizen trust, irrespective of leadership changes, may lead to increased dissatisfaction and broader support forms. Regardless of leadership changes, persistent skepticism about established political authority will likely result in disillusionment with politics, leading to a decrease in levels of political trust.

Diffuse support is a reservoir of goodwill that maintains the system's stability, even when satisfaction with incumbents or outcomes is lacking (Bertsou, 2019; Norris, 2017). General support sustains the system even when incumbents or outcomes are unsatisfactory. Specific support hinges on governmental entities or political elites' actions and performance. In contrast, diffuse support pertains to affective orientations that signify

a commitment to a particular set of values. Dissatisfaction with democratic governance and procedures may lead to the downfall of current authorities; nonetheless, citizens' generalized attachments to the state demonstrate greater resilience since their conviction in the legitimacy of constitutional arrangements endures (Bertsou, 2019; Norris, 2017). The public believes that while a continuous lack of specific support impacts governance, it does not undermine the legitimacy of the country or the core power of its institutions. However, prolonged discontent damages trust.

A sustained trust deficit is likely to erode structural support for democratic institutions (Easton, 1975; Norris, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2023), making it essential to understand the dynamics of diminishing trust. Some scholars argue that declining trust poses a significant threat to democratic governance (Dalton, 2004; Hetherington, 2005; Norris, 1995) and is indicative of the continual disappointments citizens experience concerning the performance of officeholders, resulting in an expanding performance-expectations gap (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Hetherington & Husser, 2012). Dalton (2004) and van Beek (2019) offered that when successive governments fail to deliver the quality of democratic governance expected by their citizens, such recurrent disappointments might engender political cynicism and erode diffuse support for democratic institutions.

Conversely, some scholars equate declining trust with the emergence of critical citizenship (Klingemann, 1999; Norris, 1999; Welzel, 2013). From this perspective, a decline in political trust is not inherently harmful but signals citizens' demands for new forms of democratic engagement. The critical perspective may prompt authorities to respond effectively. However, a structural decline in trust may ensue if authorities

disregard the signals. Cynical citizens may increasingly support nondemocratic principles and gravitate toward antiestablishment and populist political parties. Over time, if governments consistently fail to meet public expectations for effective democratic governance, citizens are likely to withdraw support. The withdrawal may have significant implications, as specific government support could undermine diffuse support over time.

The debates raise the question about the determinants of political trust of how stable or volatile political attitudes are—is political trust primarily a stable trait reflecting culturally entrenched orientation toward the legitimacy of the political system, or is it a more volatile attitude influenced by short term factors, including the fluctuations of political life? Understanding the extent of stability or volatility in political attitudes is essential to clarifying their nature, formation, and evolution (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024; Norris, 2017). Such an understanding informs about the determinants and normative consequences of political trust.

Determinants of Political Trust

Building on Easton's framework, this section explores how individual and contextual factors interact to shape political trust. Devine and Valgarðsson (2024) assert that theories of political trust, based on Easton's continuum of trust building from specific to general, depend on assumptions about the stability of trust. Scholars categorize theories based on their assumptions regarding the stability of trust, ranging from the most stable to the least stable. The following sections examine dispositional, socialization, institutional, and political event theories to demonstrate that theories of trust development inherently assume its stability.

Dispositional Theories. At the most stable end, the individual disposition theory of political trust asserts that a person's intrinsic traits substantially affect their trust in political institutions and figures. Scholars believe trust is a personal trait rooted in early-stage socialization and neuropsychological wiring (Glanville & Paxton, 2007; Mondak et al., 2017; Proszowska et al., 2022). Gerber et al. (2010) found that the big five personality traits—extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience—influence social, economic, and political attitudes across races. Trust is independent of experience, and everyone has a basic trust level that affects their propensity to depend on other people's words and actions (Gerber et al., 2010; Ouattara et al., 2023). Intawan and Nicholson (2018) examined the complex relationship between public trust and government by distinguishing implicit and explicit trust. The two minds hypothesis suggests individuals oscillate between an unconscious mind (representing implicit trust) and a conscious mind (reflecting explicit distrust), influenced by early political socialization. The researchers observed that implicit trust underpins political system support despite vocal skepticism. Trust acts as a cognitive filter on others' conduct. Cognitive biases like confirmation bias can affect political trust, causing people to prefer to reinforce preexisting ideas about political entities (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). The theories underscore the centrality of accounting for personality and cognition as essential to stable political trust.

Critics have noted that while psychological traits tend to remain stable throughout an individual's life, political trust exhibits variability at the individual level (Ervasti et al., 2019; Hansen, 2013; Reeskens et al., 2021). Critics assert that dispositional theories

overemphasize individual traits, including personality and political socialization, while overlooking the broader social, economic, and political contexts that shape trust (Proszowska et al., 2023). The theories generally conceptualize trust as a stable trait, neglecting its dynamic nature, which can fluctuate in response to political events, scandals, or changes in government performance (Ervasti et al., 2019; Hansen, 2013; Reeskens et al., 2021). Scholars analyze dispositional theories, highlighting their tendency to oversimplify the complex dynamics of trust.

Socialization Theories. The theories assert that childhood socialization modifies foundational attitudes through a protracted process reliant on generational replacement (Mishler & Rose, 2007; Proszowska et al., 2023; Reeskens et al., 2021). Individuals not only overtly indoctrinate youths to recognize regimes' legitimacy but inadvertently and unconsciously impart teachings about subordinate positions of citizens in society. The political attitudes are firmly entrenched and evolve gradually over prolonged periods, sustaining throughout generations. Every culture formalizes interpersonal trust exchanges, creating a trust path dependency in which subsequent generations transmit their positive or negative inclinations toward institutions and democratic governance (Proszowska et al., 2023). The culture of trust influences the extent of trust. Further, political trust influences social trust, as equitable and efficient institutions convey norms and incentives that affect social behaviors (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Freitag & Bühlmann, 2009; Nannestad et al., 2014). Other scholars have argued that the relationship between social and political trust is reciprocal, suggesting that social trust can both arise from and strengthen democratic contexts (Hetherington, 1998). The social-

cultural perspective underscores the top-down influence of societal and cultural factors on trust, arguing that deeply rooted cultural norms and early socialization processes shape political trust.

Critics have argued that sociocultural theories emphasize cultural factors excessively, neglecting other significant external influences, including economic conditions, political events, and institutional frameworks that also contribute to forming political attitudes (Mishler & Rose, 2007). Some scholars argue that cultural theories could be overly deterministic, implying that cultural backgrounds significantly shape individuals without sufficiently acknowledging their potential for change and the ability to modify or adapt political beliefs (Reeskens et al., 2021). Cultural theories frequently assume homogeneity within cultures, neglecting the diversity and complexity of beliefs present within cultural groups (Choi & Woo, 2023; Mishler & Rose, 2007). Cultural and psychological frameworks conceptualize political trust as influenced by nonpolitical elements, such as social trust, interactions with unfamiliar individuals, lifelong socialization, and cultural context. Political trust is exogenous and neither directly associated with the political domain nor responsive to changing political circumstances (Proszowska et al., 2023).

Institutional Theories. Institutions that promote transparency, accountability, and citizen participation foster higher trust among citizens. Mishler and Rose (2013) argued that political trust is endogenous to institutional performance and conditioned by government capabilities. Institutional theories emphasize the importance of political experiences and adults' ability to adapt to changing circumstances, irrespective of

socialization background (Choi & Woo, 2023; Mishler & Rose, 2007). People reasonably assess modern institutions' present value (Mishler & Rose, 2007). While acknowledging the importance of childhood socialization, institutional theories hold that attitudes and actions are flexible and adaptive. Later life events either confirm, revise, or replace the political lessons learned as children. The implication is that experiences in later life have a more significant influence on the formation of attitudes. Generational disparities should diminish over time, overridden by contemporary experiences. Institutions' design, performance, legitimacy, and historical context play a critical role in determining how much trust individuals place in their government. Institutional theories do not guarantee trust stability, as radical changes could lead to a shift.

Institutional theorists argue that the primary driver of trust is the political institutional context. Scholars observed that increasing material affluence, education, and technological advancement in developed nations leads individuals to question hierarchical structures and trust in political elites (Inglehart, 1997). The expansion of education may have resulted in a broader and more varied set of demands on the government, complicating their fulfillment and potentially undermining political trust (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). Along these lines, institutional theorists underscore the role of systemic corruption, historical regime change, international integration, and electoral systems in influencing political trust (Mair, 2013; Mishler & Rose, 2001; van der Meer, 2010; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2016). Murtin et al. (2018) found that perceptions of institutional performance, government integrity, neighborhood connectedness and attitudes towards immigration, perceived satisfaction with public services, social

preferences and expectations, determine trust in government. Rothstein and Stolle (2008) focused on presenting institutional theory on how social capital, defined as generalized trust, is generated. The researchers found that social capital is embedded in and linked to formal political and legal institutions and that not all political institutions matter equally, and trust thrives most in societies with effective, impartial, and fair street-level bureaucracies.

Scholars have argued that institutional theories simplify the intricate nature of political trust to a single assessment of institutional efficacy. Citizens may cultivate trust through personal encounters and experiences not associated with institutional attributes (Mishler & Rose, 2007). Political trust is relational and domain-specific, varying considerably depending on personal experiences with institutions rather than a generalized evaluation of institutional performance (Choi & Woo, 2023; Mishler & Rose, 2007; Proszowska et al., 2023). Individuals are inclined to revise their trust assessments based on performance, which is frequently erratic. Theories of institutional trust may need to consider the heterogeneity of trust across many cultural, political, and economic circumstances. Trust is frequently contingent upon context, and elements that cultivate it in one environment may not be relevant in another (Putnam, 2000). Institutional theories often claim that elevated political trust is intrinsically advantageous for democratic administration. Empirical data indicates that elevated trust can exist alongside authoritarian or corrupt governments, demonstrating that trust does not invariably associate with favorable democratic results (Fairbrother et al., 2022; Reeskens et al., 2021). The dichotomy prompts inquiries regarding the normative consequences of

placing trust in institutions without evaluating their conduct and integrity. The overarching construct from other researchers is that political trust is a strategic decision, context and object-specific, involving vulnerability and risk among and by political actors.

Political Event Theories. The extent to which citizens are aware of political authorities and preferences and evaluate the performance of incumbents considering the preferences remains crucial (Anderson & LoTempio, 2002; Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Bovens & Wille, 2008; Christensen et al., 2020; Denters, 2002; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Harteveld et al., 2013; Marien & Werner, 2019; Muñoz, 2017; Torcal, 2014; van der Meer, 2010; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016). At the most volatile end, political event models build on subjective rationality judgments of trustworthiness emanating from rational choice theory (RCT) constructs. Grounded in neo-classical economics, RCT theorists assume that rational individuals or agents make decisions based on cognitive calculations (evaluations) of the costs, benefits, and probabilities of obtaining relevant goals using available information. In this view, an agent chooses the action that provides the maximum net benefit under the circumstances. Agents have complete information about the alternative actions available, and RCT assumes preferences are transitive such that if A>B>C, then A>C. Rational agents will never exchange a higher-value good for one that is lower. If a decision satisfies maximal utility and transitivity, then the agent's choice is rational (Cook & Santana, 2017). RCT assumes that trust is cognitive, with cognition preceding trusting behavior.

Coleman (1990) depicted trust as a form of rational action in which cognitive calculations of another's trustworthiness and assessments of the benefits of placing trust in another were central to the trust decision. Coleman asserted that the trustor calculates or predicts the trustee's level of trustworthiness, and a rational actor will only trust if the expected gain from trusting or the probability of gain minus the probability of loss is positive. Such a calculation requires knowledge of potential gain, loss, and probability that the trustee is trustworthy. Following this connection, the cognitive-rational approach has become dominant in political trust research.

Hardin (2002) invoked RCT to develop the trust-as-evaluation approach (TEA), which Cook et al. (2015) further developed. TEA considers trust as a strategic decision, context and object-specific, involving vulnerability and risk (Proszowska et al., 2023). Hardin offered the encapsulated interest perspective, which argues that models trust in a dyadic form as "actor A trusts actor B concerning X." The model assumes A's assessment of the reasons B might act trustworthy toward A on a specific issue or matter. A's assessment of the extent to which his/her encapsulated interests align with the interests of B determines the assessment. Hardin posited that incentives of trustworthiness can be structured so that the trustee's interests encapsulate those of the trustor. Hardin considered trust to be rational on the condition that the trustee gets the incentive to be trustworthy and that the trustor is aware of the trustee's incentives. Trust based on encapsulated interest permits a trustor to predict the trustee's trustworthiness better, given that the trustee's encapsulated interests are within the interests of the trustor. The trust assessment

is based on a rational calculation of negatives and positives and, as such, can only be done with some knowledge about the trust object.

Subsequently, scholars assert that political trust is an evaluative attitude (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Miller, 2006). Citizens' judgments of the trustworthiness of the political trust object regarding specific actions or environments underpin trust evaluations. Political trust reflects evaluations of whether political authorities and institutions are performing according to the normative expectations held by the public. An expression of trust in government is a summary judgment that the government has been responsive and will do what is right in the absence of constant scrutiny. To the extent that citizens grant their trust conditionally and voice their discontent (by voting incumbents out of office) when trustees betray trust, there is a check on incumbents' power and incentives for the trustees to reciprocate citizens' trust. Political trust is contingent upon citizens' evaluation of the performance of governments. The implication is that changes and variations in the political performance of different tiers of government will manifest in changes and variations in the trustworthiness of political incumbents.

Several studies demonstrated that political institutions are increasingly unresponsive to citizens' demands (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Norris, 2017). Some have argued that a decline in trust could be a symptom of perceived deficits in the functioning of the political process or lack of institutional fairness as measured by subjective perceptions (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Marien & Werner, 2019; Torcal & Carty, 2022). While not extensively explored, some studies suggest that ideological or party preferences could drive performance evaluations.

Other scholars argue that political trust may exhibit partisanship, suggesting that citizens' loyalty precedes subjective performance assessments. Holmberg (1999) revealed that Swedish voters supporting the incumbent party exhibited a higher propensity to trust the government. Some research studies found that political trust is more pronounced among ruling party supporters. Keele (2005) showed that trust varies with partisan dominance in Congress and the presidency, demonstrating that political alignment is significant for political trust assessments. Wilkes (2015) demonstrated that supporters of the ruling parties reported high trust levels, an indicator of satisfaction with the current administration, while constituents of the ousted parties were skeptical or hostile. The partisan divide indicates that shared familiarity and interests affect political trust, potentially fluctuating on party affiliation lines. However, a paucity of research considers party affiliation to be a determinant of political trust (Holmberg, 1999; Keele, 2005; Wilkes, 2015). The effect of affective politics and the interpartisan group conflict it generates on the decline in political trust needs further exploration (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2017; Torcal & Carty, 2022).

Differentiation in Political Trust

EPST sheds light on how citizens distinguish attitudinal objects in a multilevel government. A citizen in a democratic government ordinarily deals with several layers of government simultaneously. Most governments have three tiers: (a) the executive, (b) parliament, and (c) the local government. Nevertheless, the literature on political trust often ignores the multilayered configuration of the democratic political system (Muñoz, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2023). The focus on trust in different political institutions has

received relatively little attention, leading to a dearth of systemized and theoretical research on trust differentiation (Proszowska et al., 2023; Wu & Wilkes, 2018). To what extent do citizens differentiate or not in their political trust between executives, local, or legislature? Analyzing sole institutions in isolation omits a critical theoretical and empirical question in multilevel governments because not all institutions are equal.

Political decisions result from interactions in a complex network of actors operating at different tiers of government (Proszowska et al., 2022, 2023; Torfing & Sørensen, 2014; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). Differentiation in political attitudes occurs to the extent that citizens distinguish between different attitudinal objects, making distinguishing institutions and their role in decision-making challenging. The Malawi Constitution (1994) confers separate status, functions, and duties for its three branches of government. The executive branch is responsible for the initiation of policies and legislation and for the implementation of all laws. The legislature enacts the laws, while the judiciary interprets, protects, and enforces the constitution and all laws (Malawi Constitution, 1994). Do citizens trust executive, legislative, and judiciary institutions differently? Do citizens trust lower-level (higher-level) institutions more (less)? Can citizens form independent institutional perspectives? Political attitude differentiation occurs when citizens distinguish numerous attitudinal objects. Analyzing support patterns across political institutions is crucial because complex networks make players' political decisions at multiple government levels.

If citizens distinguish attitudinal objects in multilevel government, the question arises: Which level of government receives the highest level of trust? Some scholars have

argued that trust grows as it becomes closer on a spatial scale; thus, the more local, the higher the trust. Cole and Kincaid (2001) and Hansen and Kjaer (2020) argued that the distance between the citizens and the politicians can create mistrust. From this premise, trust is relatively higher at the local government level than at the regional and national levels of government (Cole & Kincaid, 2001; Hansen & Kjaer, 2020). Muñoz (2017) found a positive effect of proximity on trust, implying that local institutions tend to enjoy higher trust levels than national ones. However, perceptions of performance and responsiveness of specific institutions matter for the assigned trust level, creating a complex landscape for trust dynamics.

Citizens need help attributing responsibility for outcomes across different governmental levels. Some scholars maintain that citizens evaluate each political object independently of the rest of the multilevel structures (Harteveld et al., 2013). However, the presumption of the rational approach requires citizens to be highly informed about areas of competence and performance for each institution (Munoz, 2017). Local governments and the legislature may receive less media attention. Multilevel government systems blur the clarity of responsibility, making it hard for citizens to know which institution to hold accountable, especially for intermediate levels of decentralization where powers are intertwined (Leon, 2011; Muñoz, 2017). The implication is that political sophistication remains vital for attributing blame or support (Gomez & Wilson, 2008; Muñoz, 2017).

No easy fixes for trust exist in multilevel governments (Proszowska et al., 2022). Citizens have difficulty navigating complex realities, often applying shortcuts in

evaluating governments (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014; Hobolt, 2007; Proszowska et al., 2022). How do citizens face the challenge of forming political attitudes in a complex multilevel governance structure where power spreads between different tiers? Research has linked microlevel cognitive mechanisms to macrolevel trust patterns, explaining how people evaluate political organizations. Prosozwska et al. (2023) argued that citizens use distinct cognitive mechanisms to make sense of political complexities. Different heuristics, essentially unobservable, act as causal mechanisms that control the process of attitudinal formation.

Prosozwska et al. (2023) distinguished four ideal-typical patterns of nondifferentiation by observing differences in means and correlations between trust measurements. The difference between the means indicates the differences in trust levels with the question being, Do citizens in the population consider some political institutions as more trustworthy than others? If differentiation occurs, means are unequal; if not, means are equal. The correlation coefficient says to what extent the measures covary or are statistically dependent: do individuals who assign high scores to one trust measure also score high on another? Correlation helps to understand how differentiation occurs. A combination of these two parameters distinguishes patterns leading to competing hypotheses regarding (a) cognitive minimalism, (b) institutional saliency, (c) cognitive proximity, and (d) subjective rationality.

Cognitive Minimalism. The heuristic illustrates that individuals perceive the political system as a unified whole or monolith, often overlooking the distinctions between its various parts or subsystems, leading to generalized trust and simplified

assessments of complex political information (Zaller, 1992). Most people must be more open on political matters and form informed views. The limited cognitive engagement results in similar levels of trust or distrust across different political entities, often overlooking their unique characteristics. Citizens assess the trustworthiness of different governments based on the executive level's high visibility. To the extent that trust attitudes follow the mechanism, we should find a pattern of nondifferentiation characterized by equal means and weak correlations as respondents randomly assign scores (Proszowska et al., 2023).

Institutional Saliency. Citizens assess trust based on the national level, and it is likely to be a benchmark for trust. The approach posits that citizens prioritize political institutions based on their perceived importance and relevance to their lives, leading to context-dependent trust that varies among different institutions. Media coverage and institutional performance significantly influence public perceptions, shaping trust levels according to how healthy institutions address societal needs. The attitudes developed for the national level serve as cues for information shortcuts for forming views about other levels of government (Muñoz, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2023; Torcal & Christmann, 2019). To the extent that cognitive mechanisms influence trust attitudes, we expect to find a pattern characterized by equal means and high correlations.

Cognitive proximity. The approach posits that individuals are more likely to trust political institutions they are familiar with, as personal experiences and the influence of social networks significantly shape their perceptions of trust (Denters & Klok, 2013; Hansen, 2013; Prosozwska et al., 2023). Since local governments operate near the people

and are well-understood, citizens will trust them more than the executive and the judiciary. Citizens often rely on cognitive shortcuts based on their proximity to political entities, leading to higher trust levels for local governments than others. To the extent that cognitive proximity influences trust attitude formation, we expect to find a pattern characterized by unequal means and high correlations.

Subjective Rationality. The heuristic illustrates that citizens form trust attitudes toward each level of government separately. Individuals assess trust in political institutions based on their unique perceptions, beliefs, and values, leading to varied trust levels among different people (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Harteveid et al., 2013; Hetherington, 1998; Munoz, 2017; van der Meer, 2010; Proszowska et al., 2023). Perceived competence, emotional factors, and individual risk assessments influence the evaluation, where feelings and personal experiences significantly shape trust perceptions. Trust in political entities is a profoundly individualized process, emphasizing the importance of personal beliefs and emotions in shaping political trust. To the extent that subjective rationality informs trust formation, we expect to find a differentiation pattern characterized by unequal means and low correlations.

A preliminary inspection of the Malawian context confirms alignment with subjective rationality, with differences in means establishing a definitive institutional trust hierarchy (courts > parliament > president). Friedman test revealed statistically significant differences in trust across the three political institutions, χ^2 (2) = 1483.069, $p < .001$, indicating a clear hierarchical pattern of differentiated trust. The large effect size indicates substantial differences between institutional trust levels. The judiciary enjoys

the highest trust (M = 2.26, SD = 0.72) while the presidency receives lowest trust scores (M = 1.80, SD = 0.76). Parliament occupies a middle position indicating moderate confidence (M = 1.97, SD = 0.75). Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = 0.017$) revealed significant differences across multilevel governments. Trust in the judiciary significantly exceeded trust in president ($Z = -34.451$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.445$), representing the largest effect and approaching practical significance threshold for large effects. Trust in judiciary also significantly exceeded trust in parliament ($Z = -25.020$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.323$), indicating a medium-large effect. Trust in parliament significantly exceeded trust in president ($Z = -15.882$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.205$), representing a medium effect. The preliminary diagnostics fundamentally challenge the monolithic conceptualization of political trust proposed by Zaller (1992), instead affirming theories of attitudinal differentiation that posit citizens engage in sophisticated, performance-based evaluations of distinct governmental branches.

Weak correlations in trust variables further confirm the bias for subjective rationality and the need to independently analyze the different polities of Malawi government. Spearman rank correlation analysis demonstrated statistically significant positive correlations among all three measures of institutional trust, though these correlations were weak to moderate in strength. Trust in the president exhibited the most significant correlation with trust in parliament ($\rho = .411$, $p < .001$). In contrast, a moderate correlation was observed between trust in parliament and trust in the courts ($\rho = .368$, $p < .001$). A notable, albeit weak, correlation exists between trust in the president and trust in the courts ($\rho = .254$, $p < .001$). The preliminary diagnostics suggest that

institutional trust measures are positively correlated yet represent distinct construct, without strong correlations that vary from small to moderate. Additionally, judicial trust exhibits a greater degree of independence from presidential trust.

Subjective rationality is the most effective framework for investigating the determinants of political trust, as it encompasses the intricate interplay of individual beliefs, values, and emotional responses that shape citizens' evaluations of political institutions. Unlike cognitive minimalism, which tends to oversimplify trust into a generalized attitude (Mishler & Rose, 2001), or institutional saliency, which prioritizes the relevance of specific institutions (Nye et al., 1997), subjective rationality recognizes that trust is fundamentally personal and can vary significantly among individuals (Edelman, 1998). By emphasizing the centrality of personal experiences and perceptions, the approach allows researchers to uncover the nuanced factors driving trust differentiation across various political entities (Giddens, 1991). Subjective rationality captures the idiosyncratic nature of trust, facilitating a deeper exploration of how emotional responses and cognitive evaluations interact to inform political trust (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002), yielding more comprehensive insights into the determinants of political trust. In this framework, political trust relies on reasoned assessments of the evidence to evaluate governments based on performance, reputation, and context.

The reviewed literature on political trust has offered three microlevel models: (a) socioeconomic status, (b) democratic process evaluations, and (c) political performance evaluations. The next section provides a literature review of the related key variables.

Political Trust in the Malawian Context

Malawi's political system and governance framework pose distinct problems and opportunities for research on political trust and its differentiation across government branches. Since the transition to multiparty democracy in 1994, Malawi has experienced mixed progress in consolidating its democratic institutions. Malawi functions under a presidential system of governance including three separate branches: the executive, led by the President; the legislature, which includes the National Assembly; and the judiciary, presided over by the Supreme Court. Following independence, a pronounced centralization of authority distinctly marked Malawi's political narrative under Kamuzu Banda leadership, which entrenched a specific orientation of political sentiments towards the presidency. Nevertheless, the period following 1994 presents a valuable opportunity to analyze political trust differentiation. The division of powers creates an optimal environment for studying how citizens distinguish their trust among various branches.

A particularly salient feature that makes Malawi unique for the study is the unprecedented assertiveness demonstrated by the judiciary within the study framework (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021). The Constitutional Court's landmark 2019 decision to annul the presidential election results due to irregularities, subsequently upheld by the Supreme Court of Appeal, garnered global attention. This event reflected a shock to the political system and demonstrated judicial independence and adherence to international principles, potentially contrasting the judiciary with other branches and exerting a differential impact on trust (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2021). Although the judiciary has shown notable independence, the parliament is under public

scrutiny concerning its efficacy (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). Many individuals criticize parliament for what they perceive as its apparent subservience to executive influence, which varies with the ruling party's majority and its involvement in resource allocation, frequently tainted by regional or patronage factors. This context renders Malawi an apt case for scrutinizing the factors influencing political trust, encompassing perceptions of performance, corruption, or patronage, and the efficacy of oversight functions in ensuring responsiveness However, there is a dearth of research on the determinants of political trust across different tiers of government in the Malawian context.

Gyimah-Boadi (2021) focused on an exploration of state legitimacy and trust in presidents in Africa and found that commitment to conserve and deepen domestic political capital, strengthen the social contract with citizens, and govern accountably is essential for African governments to effectively overcome the COVID-19 crisis and enhance prospects for postpandemic reconstruction. Gyimah-Boadi (2021) observed that Malawi ranked lowest in perceived institutional legitimacy at only 53% and the president only enjoyed 36% of trust in June 2020. The study puts a premium on an empirical understanding of factors that foster state legitimacy to bridge the public trust divide found in Afrobarometer surveys and support the postpandemic reconstruction. However, the study was exploratory sidestepping potential cause and effect of the declining levels of political trust.

Chunga and Kayuni (2022) focused on factors that affect citizen trust in Malawi and implications for state legitimacy and prospects for democracy. Chunga and Kayuni acknowledged that Malawi has experienced several political gains and losses which

ultimately have affected democratic consolidation or governance. The post-1994 Constitution stipulates explicitly that the authority of all state institutions is based on the sustained trust of Malawians. Using Afrobarometer data, the researchers highlighted perceptions about handling food challenges, economic management, and corruption as possible explanatory factors. The study is foundational in tackling the role of citizens' trust in good governance in Malawi and contributes to the postdemocratic era research by qualitatively analyzing developments during 1999–2022. The study can contribute to providing context and subsequent identification of variables for a potential quantitative analysis while tapping into new data postpandemic.

While the issue of political trust in Malawi has garnered research attention, it still needs to be more adequately explored, particularly in terms of trust differentiation across the three tiers of government: the executive, legislative, and judiciary. Previous studies have predominantly employed qualitative methodologies, overlooking the need for a nuanced analysis that considers how perceptions of government responsiveness and performance influence political trust at varying governmental levels (Proszowska et al., 2022, 2023; Schafheitle et al., 2020). Furthermore, other scholars argue that political trust may exhibit partisanship, suggesting that citizens' loyalty often precedes subjective assessments of government performance. For instance, Holmberg (1999) found that Swedish voters supporting the incumbent party demonstrated a higher propensity to trust the government. Research indicates that political trust is typically more pronounced among ruling party supporters. Keele (2005) illustrated that trust varies with partisan dominance in Congress and the presidency, highlighting the significance of political

alignment in trust evaluations. Similarly, Wilkes (2015) noted that supporters of ruling parties reported elevated trust levels, reflecting satisfaction with the current administration, while constituents from ousted parties exhibited skepticism or hostility. This partisan divide suggests that shared familiarity and interests significantly influence political trust, potentially fluctuating along party affiliation lines.

Despite these insights, more research must explicitly consider party affiliation as a determinant of political trust (Holmberg, 1999; Keele, 2005; Wilkes, 2015). Additionally, the effects of affective politics and the interpartisan group conflict it generates on the decline of political trust require further exploration (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2017; Torcal & Carty, 2022). I addressed these critical gaps by employing GLM regression analyses to connect microcognitive mechanisms with macrolevel patterns of citizens' trust in individual governmental polities, utilizing Afrobarometer survey data to assess how political factors—specifically government responsiveness, performance evaluations, and partisan affiliation—impact citizens' trust in the president, parliament, and judiciary. This research provided empirical insights into the often-overlooked phenomenon of trust differentiation within a multilevel governance context, contributed to a more nuanced understanding of political trust in an underdeveloped setting, and addressed the implications of political polarization.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Macroeconomic Performance

Trust as an evaluative orientation implies that good performance and substantive policy outcomes should induce higher political trust. Rising unmet expectations by the

government may be the root cause of declining political trust. Citizens first evaluate performance-relevant criteria and base trust in political institutions' economic successes or failures. The trust-as-an-evaluation approach moves past the socialization and genetic disposition of subjects. If many citizens experience economic hardship or a large discrepancy between their economic resources, citizens opine that the system needs to be more responsive to their needs (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Miller, 1974; Silke, 2020). Citizens hold governments firmly accountable for the state of the economy. When citizens are dissatisfied with economic performance, distrust of government ensues, whereas when economic prosperity abounds, political trust increases.

Several studies have found evidence for a strong relationship between subjective evaluations of the economy and political trust. Zmerli and Castillo (2015) found that distributive fairness perceptions and macrolevel inequality are negatively associated with political trust and that higher levels of macrolevel inequality attenuate the strength of the negative association for 18 Latin American countries. Rose and Mishler (2011) found that political and economic performance are the most critical influences on trust and that how performance is perceived is more important, analyzing 67 New Europe Barometer surveys from 14 post-Communist countries between 1993 and 2004. Park (2017) found that national economic performance remains the most potent source of political trust across many parts of East Asia. Economic development was critical for trust attitudes in sub-Saharan Africa (Hutchison & Johnson, 2017). Brezzi et al. (2022) focused on the determinants of people’s trust in public institutions and found that competencies, values,

socioeconomic and political factors, and perceptions about tackling long term challenges determine trust in government.

Some researchers have found that macroeconomic performance influences political trust (Brezzi et al., 2021; Hutchison & Johnson, 2017; Park, 2017; Rose & Mishler, 2011; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; Zmerli & Castillo, 2015). Nevertheless, other studies have not found a relationship between macroeconomic performance and political trust. Dalton (2004) found evidence debunking the claim that macroeconomic performance impacts political trust, citing changes in public opinion due to successful social modernization. van der Meer and Hakhverdian (2017) found that macroeconomic outcomes do not relate to political trust once one controls for corruption. Subsequently, researchers have questioned if the strong correlation between economic performance and political trust provides compelling evidence for a causal effect (van Der Meer, 2017).

The relationship between macroeconomic outcomes and political trust produces mixed outcomes. The choice of the dependent variable (e.g., trust in government, institutional trust) and the independent variable (economic development, economic growth, unemployment rates) seemed inconsequential. The sophistication of the statistical model design also does not appear essential for varied findings. Some studies conflated individual-level determinants with their contextual counterparts, making it unfeasible to disentangle the micro- and macrolevel effects, leading to evidence for the micro–macro linkage. Conversely, certain studies undervalued the impact of objective

macroeconomic performance measures by factoring in subjective economic assessments, revealing minimal or no evidence for the micro–macro link (van Der Meer, 2017).

Other scholars have argued that the link between perceptions of responsiveness to political trust differs across equal and unequal societies. Stiglitz (2012) demonstrated that income and wealth inequalities are associated with lower citizen support levels. Meanwhile, Silke (2020) found that the link between individual assessments of political responsiveness to one's preferences and political trust weakens in societies characterized by high levels of inequality or exclusion. In societies with more economic inequality, political trust depends less on assessments of political responsiveness to individual opinions, emphasizing the extent to which economic inequality and poverty within a society affect the traditional linkage between macroeconomic performance and political trust. If poverty or inequality is low, there is a clear and strong link between the assessment of outcomes and the level of support (Silke, 2020). The implication is that citizens' attitudes about political life depend on the context, which, if not factored in, could lead to mixed results.

Distinguishing cross-sections from longitudinal tests could explain differential outcomes. Many cross-sectional analyses reached inconsistent outcomes, yet the inclusion or exclusion of corruption as a control variable made a difference. In cross-sectional studies, corruption is generally the most vital determinant of political trust, crowding out other factors. Various studies have employed longitudinal designs, arguing that macroeconomic performance perceptions accrue over time. The implication is that

macroeconomic performance affects political trust, but mainly when citizens compare their state of the economy longitudinally rather than cross-sectionally.

Corruption

Corruption is the abuse of public office for private gain and untrustworthy behavior (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; della Porta, 2000; Uslaner, 2017; You, 2017). People trust a competent government that delivers essential services, keeps the country prosperous, and makes fair decisions (Uslaner, 2017; You, 2017). Fairness is linked to political trust. By engaging in corruption, a public officer betrays the public trust in his/her integrity. Corruption acts as a tax on low-income people and robs the state of resources for providing essential services, leading to an inequality trap. Citizens of countries ranking high for widespread corruption have less faith in government, e.g., corruption is associated with less trust in government in Europe (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; della Porta, 2000; Uslaner, 2017; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017; You, 2017).

The link between political trust and corruption depends on conceptions and norms about corruption. Most research perceives corruption as an agency problem (Klitgaard, 1988; Rose-Ackerman, 2013), where agents can exploit their informational advantage over the principal to pursue their own interests (You, 2017). Subsequently, anticorruption strategies stress the need to reduce discretionary public official power through deregulation, privatization, and liberalization while monitoring and sanctioning corrupt officials (Klitgaard, 1988; Rose-Ackerman, 2013; You, 2017). The exclusive focus on corruption as an opportunistic behavior of public officials weakens the link between trust

and corruption. Even if most officials are corrupt, hence untrustworthy, they are a small population and may not have much influence on generalized interpersonal trust.

Alternatively, scholars perceive corruption as a collective action problem (Mungiu, 2006; Persson et al., 2013; You, 2017). An impartial civil service and corrupt free citizens could represent a public good of the second order. However, in societies where most people practice petty corruption for services, it generates a collective problem. However, the majority may condemn practices as a collective, and all stand to lose from ongoing corruption and eventually fail to resist the temptation (Karklins, 2016; You, 2017). Scholars argue that social trust helps overcome collective action problems (Putnam, 1993; Rothstein, 2013; You, 2017). In a society where few people engage in corruption, it is much easier for individuals to resist corruption (You, 2017). Identifying corruption as a collective active problem informs why social trust is necessary to control corruption and why endemic corruption erodes social trust.

Evidence of the link between corruption and political trust abounds in the literature. Corruption leads to less political trust in transitional countries as people feel they need connections to resolve daily problems, including employment and dispute resolution (Mishler & Rose, 2007; Uslaner, 2017). Uslaner (2017) found that perceptions of corruption shape political trust in Africa using Afrobarometer surveys. Although managing the economy remains essential for trust, concerns about fairness and honesty dominate attitude formation; however, whether the government is handling corruption well matters for Latin America, while for Asia, management of the economy matters more than corruption (Uslaner, 2017; You, 2017), implying context specificity.

Measurement of corruption remains a challenge. Objective measures such as conviction rates may reflect the rigor and effectiveness of the judicial system or freedom of the press rather than the actual level of corruption (You, 2015). Hence, measures of perceived corruption may be more reliable than objective measures. Most researchers use Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank's corruption ratings. While there is substantial improvement in the availability and reliability of measures, significant measurement error remains a hurdle (You, 2017). It remains unclear if substantial variations in corruption reflect fundamental changes. Finding valid instrumental variables for social trust and corruption for microlevel evidence is difficult.

Corruption poses unique challenges in its conceptualization and measurement. While extensive research links corruption to adverse social and economic effects, its impact on democratic accountability and legitimacy remains less explored. Empirical studies yield mixed results, indicating a correlation between corruption and decreased political trust. However, the findings are often context-dependent and not universally applicable across different political cultures meriting further investigation into how corruption affects explicitly political attitudes.

Determining the influence of corruption on political trust requires an understanding that individual inclinations shape one's perspective of reality. Anderson and Tverdova (2003) examined sixteen established and emerging democracies to ascertain how corruption affects public perceptions of government. The study observed that citizens who support the current political leadership tend to overlook corruption's

adverse effects on forming political attitudes. Corruption uniformly impacts political trust, but its effects on institutions vary depending on the electorate. Alignment with authority attenuates corruption's negative impacts on political attitudes as ruling party supporters uphold favorable assessments compared to opponents. The reported impact of corruption on political trust depends on how much people care about the political system and whether one is a beneficiary (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003). Hence, understanding political trust requires factoring in the tendency to hold strong favorable feelings towards one's political party or group or negative feelings towards competitor parties or groups.

Affective Polarization

Affective polarization is influencing democracies worldwide. Citizens evaluate political trust according to their perception of leaders' alignment with their interests and ideals. Numerous aspects of the research clarify how partisanship might affect political trust. Longitudinal research has shown that individuals generally exhibit reluctance to trust those they detest while perceiving members of their social groups as more reliable. Hetherington and Rudolph (2017), Rudolph (2006), and Lodge (2013) contended that partisans increasingly partake in motivated reasoning, interpreting information or evidence in a biased manner to arrive at a favored judgment or conclusion. Motivated reasoning may affect political trust assessments, as partisans tend to appraise government performance more positively when their party governs and more negatively under opposing parties, distorting performance evaluations (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2017; Lodge, 2013; Rudolph, 2006). Partisans may selectively emphasize information that supports political allies, resulting in skewed criteria for trust assessments. The

polarization of political trust may have significant implications, particularly for the quality of democracy. Nevertheless, only a limited number of studies have examined the impact of polarization on political trust (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2017; Torcal & Carty, 2022).

Recent researchers have focused on the significance of affective polarization — the inclination of individuals to cultivate strong positive sentiments toward their political in-group and negative feelings toward out-groups — in the formation of political attitudes (Harteveld et al., 2021; Knudsen, 2021; Reiljan, 2020; Torcal & Carty, 2022; Wagner, 2020). Iyengar et al. (2019) identified an expanding divide between Democratic and Republican supporters, marked by mutual distrust, reluctance to engage, overt discrimination, and even endorsement of political violence. Americans categorize the two groups as an 'in-group' and 'out-group.' Hetherington and Rudolph (2017) demonstrated that individual partisanship influences political trust and shapes the evaluation of political performance. They also suggested that rising affective polarization between the two primary parties may account for the overall decline in trust observed in the United States.

Torcal and Carty (2022) found that in-group polarization generally enhances political trust, whereas out-group polarization exerts a more pronounced negative impact, leading to a net decrease in trust. The differentiation between in-group and out-group polarization is essential, as these two dimensions exert opposing influences on political trust. In two-party systems like the United States, in-group and out-group polarization frequently operate as opposing concepts, complicating and disentangling their effects. In multiparty systems, self-identification with a single party is generally less pronounced,

enabling researchers to more effectively distinguish between the effects of in-group affinity and out-group hostility.

Affective polarization may undermine trust through various mechanisms (Habyarimana et al., 2009; Harteveld et al., 2021; Knudsen, 2021; Reiljan, 2020; Robinson, 2020; Torcal & Carty, 2022; Wagner, 2020). Radical actors frequently undermine representative institutions, influencing the attitudes of their supporters toward these entities. Mainstream parties may employ polarizing tactics and rhetoric as a reaction to extremist challengers, leading to a decline in the quality of political discourse. Affective polarization may heighten zero-sum perceptions of the public sphere, diminishing the willingness to cooperate and compromise, ultimately resulting in political gridlock or unilateral policy imposition. With rising polarization, voters may disregard substantive information and cultivate greater confidence in opinions lacking a solid foundation, favoring partisan considerations over democratic principles (Habyarimana et al., 2009; Harteveld et al., 2021; Knudsen, 2021; Reiljan, 2020; Robinson, 2020; Torcal & Carty, 2022; Wagner, 2020).

Affective polarization increasingly defines political landscapes in many democracies, making knowledge of these dynamics essential for preserving democratic legitimacy. Recent studies indicate that affective polarization is prevalent in various countries, often at levels exceeding those observed in the United States (Reiljan, 2020; Wagner, 2021). There are generally lower levels of party identification in many countries despite the potential for perverse affective polarization (Wagner, 2021). As a result, most research has concentrated on the U.S. context, leveraging the distinct polar positions

between Republicans and Democrats, which restricts its applicability in multiparty settings. In underdeveloped contexts, tribalism influences political trust. Citizens generally exhibit increased trust toward individuals from their ethnic group, resulting in a coethnic trust premium. The notion pertains to the gradual confidence that individuals exhibit towards political representatives of the same ethnicity in contrast to equally competent nonethnic alternatives (Habyarimana et al., 2009; Robinson, 2016, 2020). Leaders' advantage within their ethnic constituencies may compromise governance, as trust can remain intact despite indications of declining objective performance and responsiveness metrics.

In Malawi, ethnic groups exhibit significant spatial segregation that aligns with regional demarcations. Malawi is home to ten prominent ethnic groups, each historically linked to distinct regions within the nation: the Chewa, Nyanja, Lomwe, Yao, Tumbuka, Sena, Tonga, Ngoni, Ngonde, and the Lambya/Nyiha (Khomba & Trew, 2022). All these groups utilize Bantu languages. The Chewa are the largest ethnic group in Malawi, comprising 38.4% of the total population and primarily located in the central region. The central region is primarily inhabited by the Chewa, constituting around 90% of the local populace, but it also includes several groups such as the Ngoni and Nyanja. Chichewa is the primary language in this region. The Tumbuka people primarily populate the Northern region, making up 91% of the local demographic. The Tonga community in Nkhata Bay District represents 6% of the northern demographic, alongside smaller groups such as the Ngonde, Lambya, and Sukwa, with Chitumbuka as the primary language in the area. The Yao and Lomwe peoples predominantly populate the Southern

region, both Bantu groups that migrated from Mozambique due to conflict. The distribution of ethnic groups is closely linked to the historical contexts of colonial and postcolonial political dynamics. During the colonial period, distinct clans and speakers of related dialects were systematically organized under appointed chiefs, leading to their formal classification as 'tribes' in alignment with British colonial policy. The establishment of Northern, Central, and Southern administrative regions has accentuated these distinctions with greater clarity.

Since significant regional and ethnic cleavages characterize Malawi's political landscape, their impact on voting patterns, alignment, and attitudinal formation is relevant for academic inquiry. Analyzing political trust reveals the interaction between entrenched identity factors and levels of political trust. The geographical concentration of ethnic groups enables the use of regional proxies for ethnicity and facilitates the examination of how affective polarization varies among different government members. Consequently, researchers need to examine the prevalence of affective polarization within multiparty contexts marked by weak party identification, shared ethnicity, and increased volatility in party offerings (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2017; Torcal & Carty, 2022; Wagner, 2021).

Democracy

All constitutional democracies organize and support trust in some domains while channeling distrust and mistrust into others (Neyazi et al., 2022; Warren, 2017; Watson et al., 2023). The relationship between trust and democracy appears paradoxical. Citizens should be distrustful of state powers and the political elites who wield the power.

Democracies emerged from distrust, particularly of elite powerholders. By design, democratic systems can and should protect and build trust relationships while limiting relationships of distrust (Warren, 2017). A political system built on distrust is nonetheless one within which trust relationships are both essential and pervasive. Democracies protect trust in society, separate political domains of government from service and regulatory agencies or ministries, channel distrust and mistrust into political domains, and empower monitoring by citizens and oversight bodies.

Democracies safeguard and maintain generalized trust. Democracies thrive when individuals can unite for shared objectives. A primary forerunner of these associative abilities is trusting relationships, especially those that extend from family, clan, or congregation to broader connections among fellow citizens (Putnam, 2000; Warren, 2001). Democracies safeguard these relationships by enforceable rights, particularly those that uphold association, speech, conscience, and petition, together with due process protections against arbitrary or discriminatory actions by the state or other public bodies. Rights do not inherently generate trust connections among individuals; such ties necessitate personal agency. However, they safeguard social environments for interaction and reinforce trust connections within society. Where such rights are present, horizontal trust relationships can develop (Warren, 2017).

Democracy channels mistrust while dividing the political branches of government (Norris 2011, 2017; Van de Walle et al., 2008; Marien, 2011; Warren, 2017). Agencies and ministries tasked with providing generally accepted public goods differ from the "political" components of government that handle conflicts, such as legislatures, elected

executives, and the portions of the judiciary involved in judicial review, in constitutional democracies. Each branch of government is distinct from the others in terms of its role, level of professionalism, and immunity to patronage and political objectives. The ideal situation is for various branches of government to work together for the common good, fostering trust and ensuring that citizens' interests align with the government's through regulating markets and ensuring public safety. However, due to their inherent bias and political affiliation, the political branches of government, including legislatures, elected executives, and portions of judiciaries, seldom meet the basic standards for trust. These branches of government are inherently isolated from individuals who hold public trust in democracies. Findings that trust in government differs by institution lend credence to this overarching concept. People are likelier to believe in the less politically charged police, public education, and judiciary than legislatures and politicians (Norris 2011, 2017; Van de Walle et al., 2008; Marien, 2011).

Democracy facilitates citizen monitoring and oversight by relevant bodies. Politics operates at the boundaries of consensus. Democracies necessitate vigilant citizens who monitor areas of divergent interests (Cavender, 2012; Pettit, 2012). Democracies enable partisans to advance their interests and values via debate, advocacy, and voting while prohibiting nondemocratic mechanisms such as coercion or economic blackmail. Competitive elections facilitate the empowerment of distrust by providing a mechanism for removing and replacing political elites. Democracies utilize oversight mechanisms extensively, mainly through independent auditors or agencies. Democracies typically

disclose most information regarding decision-making processes, enabling citizens to access the information required for effective monitoring.

Several studies have found that democracies tend to be associated with more trust both within society and toward government relative to nondemocratic systems. People recognize distrust and channel it into public politics (Jamal and Nooruddin 2010; Nannestad 2008). Neyazi et al. (2022) demonstrated that citizens satisfied with the functioning of democracy in Malaysia reported higher approval even if they faced economic hardship. Watson et al. (2023) found that people who showed low levels of trust in government tended to have low satisfaction levels with Venezuelan democracy. Christensen and Lægreid (2005) showed that a general satisfaction with democracy had higher trust in public institutions, including parliament, cabinet, civil service, and political parties.

Summary and Conclusions

Despite the crucial implications for democratic governance, understanding the decline in political trust has received little attention in the literature. The literature review has demonstrated that the EPST is central to this discussion. The theoretical framework suggests that political trust may vary according to citizens' perceptions of government efficacy and accountability. Macroeconomic performance, corruption management, democratic satisfaction, and partisan alignment are critical factors in evaluating governmental institutions. Empirical research suggests trust is more prominent at the local government level due to a heightened familiarity. Conversely, perceptions of inefficiency and corruption may erode trust at the national level.

Previous research demonstrated a gap in distinguishing political trust across different tiers of government, especially in Malawi. Most studies employed qualitative approaches in Malawi and did not use quantitative analyses to address causality among governmental responsiveness, performance assessments, partisan alignment, and political trust. Moreover, the consequences of political polarization—an ever more prominent element influencing trust dynamics across partisan divides—remain inadequately explored. This research addressed the gaps by using a quantitative approach and differentiating political trust across the different tiers of government, leveraging more waves of Afrobarometer data to analyze longitudinal trends. An outline of the research methods is described in Chapter 3, which provides details of the research design rationale, methods, variables, constructs, and validity.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In this cross-sectional quantitative study, I examined the predictive relationships between citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluation (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium) and trust in the president, parliament, and the judiciary in Malawi, while examining the mediating influence of employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy and controlling for demographic factors (age and gender). In Chapter 3, I present the variables of interest and their operationalization and discuss the research design and rationale for the study. This chapter also discusses the methodology, including data collection, population, and sampling strategy, and details the data analysis plan. Finally, I addressed the ethical concerns and procedures and concluded with a chapter summary and a preview of Chapter 4.

Research Design and Rationale

I employed a quantitative design using repeated cross-sectional survey data analyzed through GLM, focusing on ordinal logistic regression. The GLM approach was selected based on several methodological considerations: First, the DV—trust in the president, trust in the, and trust in the judiciary—are measured on an ordinal scale (ranging from "not at all" to "a lot"), violating the assumptions of normal distribution required for ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (Warner, 2013). The GLM framework appropriately addresses the ordered categorical nature of these DV without

requiring normally distributed outcomes (Williams, 2016). Second, although Afrobarometer surveys are not true panel data (as they survey different respondents in each wave), the GLM approach allows for the inclusion of wave-fixed effects, enabling direct interpretation of how institutional trust has changed across survey periods and different political regimes in Malawi (Wooldridge, 2010).

Third, the GLM framework effectively accommodates the diverse study's predictor types, including ordinal, continuous, and dichotomous variables, properly parameterizing each according to its measurement level. Fourth, while generalized linear mixed models (GLMM) might be warranted for cross-national Afrobarometer analyses due to country-level clustering, the exclusive focus on Malawi eliminates the imperative for the highest level of clustering. The remaining temporal clustering can be adequately addressed by including wave-fixed effects without requiring the additional complexity of mixed models (Gelman & Hill, 2006).

Fifth, the GLM approach allows for direct interpretation of the substantive effects of key theoretical predictors while maintaining statistical power through a more parsimonious specification (Hosmer et al., 2013). This aligns with the study's primary objective of understanding how Malawians' governance performance and responsiveness' evaluations affect their trust in political institutions over time rather than modeling random variability in these relationships. Finally, GLM provides methodological robustness by capturing potential nonlinear relationships between predictors and trust outcomes that might be missed in simpler models, offering a more nuanced analysis of political trust dynamics in Malawi.

Methodology

Population

I targeted a population of voting-age citizens in Malawi that were part of the Afrobarometer surveys. Afrobarometer surveys typically include 1,200 respondents that are nationally representatives and aged 18 years and older, allowing for a margin sampling error of no more than +/-2.8 percentage points with a confidence level of 95%. The target population excluded people living in institutionalized settings, such as dormitories, patients in hospitals, and persons in prisons or nursing homes.

Sampling and Sampling Procedures

I used archival data from Afrobarometer surveys, and hence, the sampling procedures defer to the Afrobarometer network. Afrobarometer employs a clustered, stratified, multistage, and area probability design. Afrobarometer surveys stratify the sample by social demographics, including main subnational units of government (state, region), and by urban or rural location, reducing the likelihood of a concentration of distinctive ethnic and language groups. Samples are drawn in stages, including primary sampling units (PSU) selected with probability proportionate to population size and secondary sampling units selected as households within each PSU. Using a randomization method for sampling starting points, the researchers randomly choose individual respondents. The data are weighted to correct for over- or undersampling or household size. The study utilized five waves of Afrobarometer data conducted in 2016, 2019, 2022, 2023, and 2025, with each wave covering 1,200 respondents and coded as Waves 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

I conducted a power analysis to determine the sample size for the study using G*Power 3.1.9.6 for Mac OS X (Faul et al., 2009). Without a specific module for ordinal regression, I deferred to G*Power's linear multiple regression option. The *a priori* sample size calculations relied on *F*-tests, with a medium effect size of .15 in line with Cohen's conventions, a conventional alpha error probability of .05, and a power of .95 to allow for a 95% probability of detecting a true effect. The number of predictors entered within the parameters was thirteen, including eight IV, two MV, and two CV. The minimum required sample size was 189 (Faul et al., 2009). Since ordinal regression generally requires larger sample sizes than linear regression, I applied a correction factor, increasing the sample size by 40%. The minimum sample size incorporating the adjustment was 265 respondents. Because Afrobarometer surveys have 1,200 respondents in each wave (n = 6,000), the sample size far exceeds the minimum required sample size.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I utilized archival secondary data gathered by a pan-African, nonpartisan research network and a nonprofit organization called Afrobarometer, operating out of Accra, Ghana. The motivation for using Afrobarometer data lies in its public availability, reputation as a reliable source of public opinion on policy, and the survey questions' alignment with the focus and scope of the research, including the longitudinal structure of the data across multiple survey waves. Since 1999, the Afrobarometer network has conducted surveys on public attitudes toward democracy, governance, the economy, and society. The survey platform consists of face-to-face interviews lasting 45 to 90 minutes, conducted in the respondents' preferred language. Participation is voluntary, and

Afrobarometer does not provide compensation to respondents. Trained local interviewers, supervised by field supervisors, collect the data, and control measures, such as spot-checks, back-checks, and daily team briefings are implemented.

Data Access

The data are available for download after registration and agreement to the terms of use, including proper citation of the data source. No special permissions are required to access the publicly available data sets. However, adherence to the Afrobarometer data use policy, which confines use solely to statistical analysis and research purposes, is mandatory. Afrobarometer expects users to acknowledge the data source in all publications.

Instrumentation and Operationalization of Variables

Variables

I derived the study variables from the Afrobarometer instrumentation as the primary source of the secondary data (see Table 1). The study's dependent variables (DV) were trust in the president, trust in the parliament, and trust in the judiciary. The study's independent variables (IVs) were multiple ordinal variables capturing the performance and responsiveness of the government. The variables included citizens' perceived government responsiveness in managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs, performance of the president, performance of the parliament, and corruption. Other IVs, including partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium, were measured dichotomously. The study also incorporated mediating variables (MV),

including the level of education, employment status, and satisfaction with democracy. The study also included two demographic control variables (CV): age and gender.

Table 1

Variable Descriptions, Types, and Measurements

Name	Type	Measurement [a]	Scale
Trust in the president	DV	0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a lot*)	Ordinal
Trust in the parliament	DV	0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a lot*)	Ordinal
Trust in the judiciary	DV	0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a lot*)	Ordinal
Perceived government responsiveness in managing the economy	IV	1 (*very badly*) to 4 (*very well*)	Ordinal
Perceived government responsiveness in addressing poverty	IV	1 (*very badly*) to 4 (*very well*)	Ordinal
Perceived government responsiveness in creating jobs	IV	1 (*very badly*) to 4 (*very well*)	Ordinal
Performance president	IV	1 (*strongly disapprove*) to 4 (*strongly approve*)	Ordinal
Performance Parliament	IV	1 (*strongly disapprove*) to 4 (*strongly approve*)	Ordinal
Corruption	IV	1 (*decreased*) to 3 (*increased*)	Ordinal
Partisan alignment	IV	0 = opposition party, 1 = ruling party	Dichotomous
Coethnic trust premium	IV	0 = different ethnicity, 1 = similar ethnicity with president	Dichotomous
Employment	IV	0 = unemployed, 1 = employment	Dichotomous
Education	MV	0 (*no schooling*) to 3 (*tertiary education*)	Ordinal
Democracy	MV	0 (*not a democracy*) to 4 (*very satisfied*)	Ordinal
Age	CV	Measured in years	Continuous
Gender	CV	1 = male, 2 = female	Dichotomous

Note. DV = dependent variable; IV = independent variable; MV = mediating variable; CV = control variable.

[a] Nonsubstantive responses such as “don’t know,” “haven’t heard enough,” or refused were recoded as missing values in SPSS to ensure they did not influence the analysis.

Operationalization

The operationalization of the variables is vital for ensuring construct validity while facilitating systematic measurement within the research design. The study relied on the measurement scales of the Afrobarometer surveys, which use a combination of ordinal Likert-like scales, dichotomous measures, and continuous variables to capture the complex relationships between political trust and government performance. Table 1 presents a comprehensive overview of all study variables used, detailing their measurement scales and the specific coding schemes employed for data collection and analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

All data analyses were computed using the Statistical Package for Social Services (SPSS) version 29. The primary analytical approach was ordinal logistic regression using GLM. In terms of data preparation, I did the following: (a) imported the five waves of Afrobarometer data for Malawi (available in SPSS .sav format), (b) standardized variable names and coding schemes across the different waves, (c) recoded nonsubstantive responses (don't know, refused, missing) to SPSS system missing values, (d) created a wave identifier variable to distinguish survey rounds (i.e., Waves 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, (e) merged the five data sets into a single file in long format with wave indicators, and (f) verified data integrity through frequency distributions and descriptive statistics and check for outliers and influential cases using appropriate diagnostics.

I conducted a thorough preliminary analysis before running the GLM regression. I generated descriptive frequency distributions for dependent and independent variables to

analyze univariate attributes (see Agresti, 2018). I computed each variable's relevant central tendency and dispersion metrics to evaluate data quality. I analyzed bivariate relationships using cross-tabulations with chi-square tests for categorical variables and correlation matrices for ordinal predictors. Beck and Katz (2011) offered that these initial analytical procedures conform to established standards for cross-sectional data analysis in comparative politics, providing a rigorous model specification for subsequent multivariate analysis.

The study used SPSS's GLM function with a multinomial link appropriate for Likert scale data to construct a model for the nonnormally distributed data (Gelman & Hill, 2006). The link function was set to cumulative logit, which was appropriate for ordinal data (Wooldridge, 2010). Afrobarometer's respondent numbers were used as the subject identifier to identify each person across waves uniquely. The model was set at custom and not full factorial to allow only for examining how the effects of select variables of performance and responsiveness change across waves. The wave variable was set as the within-subject variable that accounts for repeated measurements and controls for time-dependent effects to capture temporal patterns. The model was run in SPSS, prioritizing parameter estimates, goodness of fit, and model effects.

Several core assumptions supported the validity of this approach (Gelman & Hill, 2006; Williams, 2016). First, the dependent variable followed a distribution from the exponential family (e.g., binomial, multinomial). Second, linearity in parameters was assumed by transforming the relationship between predictors and the expectation of trust (via the cumulative logit link function). The ordinal trust measures followed a

multinomial distribution with a cumulative logit link appropriate for ordinal data. Third, I tested for the independence of observations between subjects. However, within-subject observations were accounted for using the wave variable with an AR (1) correlation structure as the within-subject factor. Fourth, I assumed no extreme multicollinearity among predictors, particularly among economic responsiveness variables (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs). I also assumed the absence of influential outliers that could distort parameter estimates (Gelman & Hill, 2006; Williams, 2016).

I used several diagnostic techniques to validate the assumptions for employing GLM (Gelman & Hill, 2006; Williams, 2016). The residual plots were used to assess linearity and detect outliers. I used the variance inflation factor (VIF) analysis to test for multicollinearity. The study utilized dispersion statistics to evaluate model adequacy and used a link function test to confirm appropriate specifications. Additionally, I examined the AR (1) correlation structure's appropriateness for the within-subject repeated measures design. While homoscedasticity is less central for ordinal GLM than linear models, I evaluated variance patterns through scale-location plots to ensure robust parameter estimates.

Threats to Validity

External Validity

An essential aspect of external validity is its generalizability, which makes it reliable for future studies and references (Warner, 2008). External validity relates to how findings hold across various contexts (Stewart & Hitchcock, 2020). The focus on a single country, Malawi, may raise questions about generalizing to other African countries with

different political systems. I addressed such threats by triangulating the findings with electoral outcomes and assessing their consistency with relevant theoretical frameworks. Stewart and Hitchcock (2020) argued that comparing new findings with existing studies in the literature could strengthen external validity. Given the limited literature in the region, comparisons with other contexts while highlighting contextual differences could help mitigate these concerns.

Internal Validity

Internal validity indicates the absence of methodological errors, ensuring that the study results accurately reflect the examined population (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). Potential threats may arise from participant selection and measurement errors. A significant risk is traditional differential attrition, where participants differ systemically across multiple waves. This risk is mitigated by Afrobarometer's use of repeated cross-sectional surveys, selecting random sample respondents for each wave, which eliminates systematic differences between stayers and dropouts. Employing a consistent sampling methodology across waves, including stratified, multistage area probability sampling and random selection of households, ensures that the samples accurately represent the current population at each point in time. Stewart and Hitchcock (2020) noted that random selection could introduce selection bias, even when controlling for demographic variables. Generalized linear models address the challenge of tracking individual change by focusing on shifts in aggregate relationships over time to identify population-level changes, even without individual trajectories. I also considered education levels, age, region, and political affiliation to understand differential patterns across subgroups.

Construct Validity

Construct validity addresses whether survey measures accurately reflect the theoretical constructs they aim to measure. The study constructs illustrate how a researcher conceptualizes variables, which is essential for understanding theoretical representation. I will use Afrobarometer instruments that have been employed in the field since 1999 and have undergone methodological improvements. A potential threat to constructs could be political trust, which may hold different meanings for citizens or vary across cultures. Afrobarometer mitigates this risk by utilizing concrete, behavior-focused questions instead of abstract concepts, conducting thorough pretesting, and maintaining consistent wording across waves to ensure comparison validity. Data responses were used in situ from the data set and without alteration. Missing data were evaluated for their influence on test statistic outcomes and excluded from final data analyses.

Ethical Procedures

A potential barrier when using secondary data is that data access will likely include a partner-site agreement and an external research ethics review (IRB), which may take additional time. All Afrobarometer data are copyrighted and owned collectively by the Afrobarometer Network. Because Afrobarometer is funded from public resources, its data are a public good (Afrobarometer, n.d.-b; see Appendix). The study used ethical procedures outlined by Walden University, and data analysis commenced only after I obtained approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) on August 1, 2025.

Secondary Data Considerations

I adhered to Afrobarometer's data use, which restricts usage to statistical analysis and academic research purposes (see Appendix). All publications resulting from this research will properly acknowledge the Afrobarometer as the data source according to their citation requirements. Although the data is de-identified, I ensured secure storage of the downloaded data files throughout the analysis process. I reported results accurately and comprehensively, avoiding selective reporting that could misrepresent findings.

Original Data Ethics

The Afrobarometer network follows ethical procedures in its data collection. All participants give informed consent before taking part in the surveys. The Afrobarometer network informs respondents of their right to refuse participation or withdraw without consequences. The Afrobarometer ensures confidentiality and reports responses only in aggregated form. Interviewers obtain local ethical approvals before conducting surveys. The data sets are anonymous and contain no personally identifiable information.

To ensure that the study adheres to Walden University's ethical standards, I reported all data sources. I thoroughly assessed their adequacy, clearly and fully detailing the steps taken to preserve the integrity and validity of the results. The Afrobarometer data were securely stored in password-protected files on two separate storage drives and will be retained for 5 years, following Walden's data retention policy. After the required retention period, I will destroy each drive by encrypting the storage files and deleting. Further, retained paper notes will be shredded following the 5-year retention requirement. I gave special consideration to reporting politically sensitive findings by presenting

balanced perspectives while upholding scientific integrity. The evaluation by the Ethics Committee ensured adherence to institutional standards for political research using survey data.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological approach employed in the study to examine the relationship between citizens' evaluations of government performance and responsiveness and their trust in political institutions across the three tiers of government. The study utilized a quantitative design, analyzing repeated cross-sectional data from four waves of Afrobarometer surveys through ordinal logistic regression using Generalized Linear Models. This research design facilitated examining cross-sectional relationships between performance and responsiveness evaluations and trust while tracking changes over time. This chapter addresses potential threats to validity through statistical controls, sensitivity analyses, and acknowledgment of limitations. Ethical considerations are carefully assessed with particular attention to the responsible use of secondary data. Chapter 4 provides information on data collection, presents the study results, and analyzes the data from statistical modeling and outputs.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In Chapter 4, I present the study's findings. The chapter begins by revisiting the purpose of the research, accompanied by the research questions and hypotheses that guided the investigation. This chapter subsequently explains the process of secondary data collection, encompassing the timeframes, response rates, and any discrepancies as delineated in the methodology presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 outlines the demographic and descriptive attributes of the sample and subsequently discusses the study's findings. The chapter also delineates the statistical assumptions, accompanied by relevant figures. The subsequent section presents a synthesis of the research questions informed by the statistical outcomes derived from the analysis before progressing into Chapter 5.

This quantitative study examined the predictive relationships between citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluation (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium) and trust in the president, parliament, and the judiciary in Malawi, while examining the mediating influence of employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy and controlling for demographic factors (age and gender). The study was conducted to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations

(president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium) predict trust in the president, when mediated by employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy, and controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens?

RQ2: To what extent do citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium) predict trust in the parliament, when mediated by employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy, and controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens?

RQ3: To what extent do citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, creating jobs), performance evaluations (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium) predict trust in the judiciary, when mediated by employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy, and controlling for demographic factors (age and gender) among Malawian citizens?

Data Collection

I obtained publicly available secondary data from Afrobarometer, an organization operating as a pan-African, nonpartisan research network and a recognized nonprofit entity. Afrobarometer offers insights into the dynamics of political responsiveness and the levels of trust in various institutions. I collected data from five distinct waves of surveys carried out in 2016, 2019, 2022, 2023, and 2025. The five waves are recent,

fulfilling the objective for a mature methodology data source and the availability of variables. Earlier waves exhibited constraints in their demographic representation and variable measurements. Each survey wave comprised 1,200 respondents, culminating in a total of 6,000 responses across all relevant variables. Although there is multi-country-specific data available, I extracted Malawi information in part due to its methodological rigor and my desire to focus on Malawi specifically in my research.

I conducted a power analysis to determine the minimum sample size, with a result that at least 265 complete cases are necessary, computed on a confidence level of 95%. The sample was representative and aligned with the stratification of social demographics across regions, comprising South (43.4%), Central (36.0%), and North (20.7%), respectively. The data collection outlined in Chapter 3 was devoid of any discrepancies.

Baseline Descriptive and Demographic Characteristics

The study had a participant pool of 6,000 individuals, sourced from five waves of Afrobarometer surveys, each consisting of 1,200 respondents and a mean age of 36 years. The gender distribution in this cohort was almost balanced, with 3,019 participants (50.3%) identifying as female and 2,981 (49.7%) as male. Most individuals attained primary (64%, n = 3,839) and secondary education (24.1%, n = 1,444), with a significant minority (1.5%, n = 92) obtaining a university education. Those lacking formal education represented a minority response (10.4%, n = 625). Most participants were unemployed (85.9%, n = 5,153). The sample's demographic characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics

Demographic variable	*f*	%
Age		
Young adults (18–24)	1,617	26.9
Adults (25–64)	3,990	66.5
Older adults (65 or older)	393	6.6
Gender		
Male	2,981	49.7
Female	3,019	50.3
Education level		
No schooling	625	10.4
Primary	3,839	64.0
Secondary	1,444	24.1
Tertiary	92	1.5
Employment status		
Unemployed	5,153	85.9
Employed	847	14.1

Dependent Variables

The study focused on three levels of governance to study trust formation: the president, parliament, and judiciary. Afrobarometer surveys operationalize political trust through a direct question: "How much do you trust each of the following?" (Afrobarometer, n.d.-a). Afrobarometer categorizes responses on a 6-point scale ranging from "not at all "to "a lot." The original coding appeals for representing nonbinary outcomes as binary metrics (trust vs. distrust) permits only simplistic or blunt findings of differentiation (Proszowska et al., 2023). I merged the variables on a 3-point scale: 1 (*not at all*), 2 (*a little*), and 3 (*a lot*). The merger was in line with established methodologies, while substantially maintaining the original scales. Afrobarometer excluded individuals

who were missing, declined to participate, or had uncertain or insufficient knowledge responses. Table 3 shows the prevalence of the dependent variables in the data.

Table 3

Dependent Variables

Variable	*f*	%	Cumulative %
Trust in the president			
Not at all	2,441	40.7	40.7
A little	2,292	38.2	78.9
A lot	1,267	21.1	100.0
Trust in the parliament			
Not at all	1,758	29.3	29.3
A little	2,627	43.8	73.1
A lot	1,615	26.9	100.0
Trust in the judiciary			
Not at all	988	16.5	16.5
A little	2,460	41.0	57.5
A lot	2,552	42.5	100.0

Table 3 reveals a systematic decline in trust among governmental institutions, with the presidency facing the most pronounced shortfall. Approximately 78.9% (n = 4,733) of participants reported "Not at all or a little" in terms of trust, while 21.1% (n = 1,267) conveyed "A lot" of trust. The level of trust in parliament showed a similar pattern, with 73.1% (n = 4,385) indicating diminished or absent trust, while 26.9% (n = 1,615) conveyed a strong sense of trust. The observed systematic decline in institutional trust may imply a crisis of confidence in Malawi's democratic institutions. Nonetheless, there is a notably greater level of public trust in the judiciary compared to the other branches, potentially bolstered by the judicial system’s independence; however, a continued majority of responses (57.5%, n = 3,448) indicated "Not at all or a little" in

terms of trust in the judiciary. A minority (42.5%, n = 2,552) expressed a high level of trust in the judiciary.

Independent Variables

The primary independent variables at the individual level include affective polarization, perceived responsiveness, and evaluations of government performance.

Affective Polarization

To measure affective polarization, I used partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium to control for ethnic parties' dominance and regionalism, which is perverse for the Malawi context. Polarization is measured by whether the survey respondent belongs to the ruling party (coded "1") or the opposition party (coded "0"). Coethnic trust premium where respondents with the same ethnicity as the president were coded as "1," and those with a different ethnicity from the president were coded as "0."

Perceived Responsiveness

Evaluations of economic management, the living conditions of marginalized groups, and job creation seek to capture sociotropic evaluations that shape individuals' attitudes based on the societal impact of these outcomes. Afrobarometer inquired,: "How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters?" The surveys elicit responses on a 7-point scale. I retained the primary scale of only four levels: 1 (*very badly*), 2 (*fairly badly*), 3 (*fairly well*), and 4 (*very well*). I omitted respondents who either declined to participate or expressed uncertainty or a lack of sufficient knowledge, adhering to the standards of public opinion research. Nonsubstantive responses fail to yield meaningful insights into citizens' evaluative

judgments, which is essential for a valid sociotropic assessment (Zaller & Feldman, 1992; Stegmueller, 2013).

Performance Evaluations

The orientation of trust as an evaluative framework suggests that favorable performance regarding substantive policy outcomes should lead to elevated levels of political trust (van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). I used the performance of the president and the parliament to capture specific forms of trust, underscoring that citizens grant or retract trust in politics based on assessing its merits. Afrobarometer inquires: "Do you approve or disapprove of the way the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months?" Aligned with the other variables, I maintained the principal scale consisting of four levels: 1 (*strongly disapprove*), 2 (*disapprove*), 3 (*approve*), and 4 (*strongly approve*).

Secondary Independent Variables

Secondary IVs comprised the level of corruption and satisfaction with democracy. The formulation of the variable follows an inverse-coding methodology, utilizing a 3-point scale: 1 (*decreased*), 2 (*stayed the same*), and 3 (*increased*). The scale encapsulates the perceived trajectory of corruption over the preceding year as reported in the survey. Satisfaction with democracy taps into a more diffuse support and measured on a 4-point scale: 1 (*not at all satisfied*), 2 (*not very satisfied*), 3 (*fairly satisfied*), and 4 (*very satisfied*).

Group Differences

I conducted cross-tabulation analyses using chi-square tests to examine the associations between categorical predictor variables and trust across all three branches of government: the president, parliament, and judiciary. The analyses revealed systematic patterns of association that varied in strength and significance across institutional contexts. The cross-tabulation analyses also indicated unique patterns of institutional trust differentiation.

Table 4 illustrates that partisan alignment and coethnic premium differences in trust in the president were statistically significant (χ^2 (2, n = 6,000) = 23.78, $p < .001$; χ^2 (2, n = 6,000) = 13.99, $p < .001$), respectively. Of those expressing a lack of trust, 79.8% (n = 1,948) were opposition supporters compared to 20.2% (n = 493) ruling party supporters. Coethnic citizens were moderately more likely to express high trust, representing 39.0% (n = 494) of high-trust respondents compared to 61.0% (n = 773) from disparate ethnic groups. Employment status and gender showed no statistically significant association with presidential trust.

Partisan alignment, employment status, and gender differences in trust in the parliament were also statistically significant. Gender demonstrated a highly significant association with parliamentary trust (χ^2 (2, n = 6,000) = 23.681; $p < .001$). A greater proportion of female respondents indicated a lack of trust in parliament (54.1%, n = 951). Opposition party supporters exhibited a markedly higher tendency to express a lack of trust in parliament than ruling party supporters (χ^2 (2, n = 6,000) = 13.65; p = .001). Employment status is significantly associated with parliamentary trust (χ^2 (2, n = 6,000) =

9.501; $p = .009$). Coethnic premium was not significantly associated with trust in the parliament.

Table 4 illustrates that opposition party supporters (83%, ($n = 823$) were significantly more likely to express no trust in the judiciary compared to (16.7%, ($n = 165$) ruling party supporters (χ^2 (2, $n = 6,000$) = 29.63; $p < .001$). Gender demonstrated a statistically significant association with judicial trust (χ^2 (2, $n = 6,000$) = 7.110; $p = .03$). Women exhibited slightly higher trust in the judiciary (52.0%, $n = 1,327$) compared to men (48.0%, $n = 1,225$). Coethnic premium and employment status showed no statistically significant associations.

Table 4

*Cross-Tabulations for Categorical Predictors (*N *= 6,000)*

Variable	Partisan alignment		Coethnic trust premium		Employment status		Respondent gender	
	χ^2	*p*	χ^2	*p*	χ^2	*p*	χ^2	*p*
Trust in the president	23.78	< .001**	13.99	< .001**	5.52	0.06	4.13	0.13
Trust in the parliament	13.65	0.001**	4.438	0.001**	9.50	0.009**	23.68	< .001**
Trust in the judiciary	29.63	< .001**	3.15	0.207	3.50	0.174	7.11	0.03*

*$p < 0.05$, two-tailed. **$p < 0.01$, two-tailed.

The cross-tabulation analyses revealed distinct patterns of institutional trust differentiation. Partisan alignment emerged as the most consistent and powerful predictor across all three institutions. Coethnic trust premium showed significant effects for presidential trust but diminished importance for parliament and no significant association with judicial trust, suggesting that ethnic considerations are most salient for executive

evaluation. Employment status demonstrated mixed patterns, with significant effects only for parliamentary trust. Most of the unemployed individuals trusted the parliament more (88.1%, *n* = 1,423) compared to the employed (11.9%, *n* = 192). In contrast, gender displayed the most significant effects on parliamentary trust, while exerting negligible influence on evaluations of the presidential and judicial branches.

Correlation Matrices

I conducted bivariate correlation analyses using Pearson product-moment correlations to explore the relationships between ordinal predictor variables and trust within the three branches of government. The correlations offer insights into the relative magnitude of relationships. The correlation matrix revealed systematic patterns of association that provide insights into the underlying structure of political trust evaluations in Malawi.

Table 5 illustrates that performance-based evaluations, government responsiveness, corruption perceptions, and educational attainment exhibit systematic relationships with institutional trust, manifesting differentiated patterns across the three branches of the Malawian government. The coefficients of bivariate correlations were minimal for all predictor variables. The correlations among all predictors remained within acceptable limits, thereby validating the inclusion of these variables concurrently in forthcoming multivariate analyses.

Table 5

*Bivariate Correlations for the Ordinal Variables (*N = *6,000)*

Variable	Statistic	TrustPre	TrustParl	TrustJud	Econ	Poverty	Jobs	PerfPre	PerfParl	Corrupt	Demo	Educ
TrustPre	*r*	1	.415**	**.**263**	**.**408**	.341**	.314**	.532**	.236**	-.274**	.205**	-.071**
	p		< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
TrustParl	*r*	.415**	1	.371**	.207**	.199**	.205**	.241**	.245**	-.137**	.163**	-.039**
	p	< .001		< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
TrustJud	*r*	**.**263**	.371**	1	.132**	.151**	.133**	.171**	.160**	-0.87**	.149**	-0.85**
	p	< .001	< .001		< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001
Econ	*r*	**.**408**	.207**	.132**	1	.560**	.522**	.472**	.244**	-.268**	.204**	.019
	p	< .001	< .001	< .001		< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	.142
Poverty	*r*	.341**	.199**	.151**	.560**	1	.591**	.393**	.202**	-.211**	.202**	.041**
	p	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001							
Jobs	*r*	.314**	.205**	.133*	.522**	.591**	1	.353**	.210**	-.213**	.177**	-.010
	p	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001		< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	.452
PerfPre	*r*	.532**	.241**	.171**	.472**	.393**	.353**	1	.343**	-.288**	.221**	-.021
	p	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001		< .001	< .001	< .001	.104
PerfParl	*r*	.236**	.245**	.160**	.244**	.202**	.210**	.343**	1	-.127**	.096**	-.078**
	p	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001		< .001	< .001	< .001
Corrupt	*r*	-.274**	-.137**	-0.87**	-.268**	-.211**	-.213**	-.288**	-.127**	1	-.154	.025
	p	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001		< .001	.041
Demo	*r*	.205**	.163**	.149**	.204**	.202**	.177*	.221*	.096**	-.154**	1	.041**
	p	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001	< .001		.002
Educ	*r*	-.071**	-.039**	-.085**	.019	.041**	-.010	-.021	-.078**	.025	.041**	1
	p	< .001	.003	< .001	.142	.001	.452	.104	< .001	.051	.002	

Note. TrustPre = trust in the president; TrustParl = trust in the parliament; TrustJud = trust in the judiciary; econ = government responsiveness in managing the economy; poverty = government responsiveness in addressing poverty; jobs = government responsiveness in creating jobs; PerPre = performance of the president; PerParl =performance of the parliament; corrupt = level of corruption; Semo = satisfaction with democracy; education =the level of education of the respondent.

**p* = .05, two-tailed. ***p* = .01, two-tailed.

The correlation analysis revealed a clear hierarchy in the strength of associations across institutional contexts. Presidential trust consistently demonstrated the strongest correlations with performance and responsiveness measures, followed by parliamentary trust, with judicial trust showing the weakest but still significant associations. The strongest interpredictor correlation was observed between handling the economy and improving living standards ($r = .56$, $n = 6000$, $p < .001$), which, while substantial, remains below conventional thresholds for multicollinearity concern ($r > .80$; see Belsley et al., 1980; Kim, 2019). Performance evaluation of the president demonstrated a strong positive correlation with presidential trust ($r = .53$, $n = 6000$, $p < .001$), representing a large effect size. Notably, education's consistent negative correlations with all trust measures, though small in magnitude ($r = -.04$ to $-.07$), provide empirical support for the critical citizenship hypothesis. Advanced education seems to cultivate more nuanced political assessments marked by a robust institutional skepticism instead of blind faith.Results

Results

Assumptions Testing

Test of Parallel Lines

The test of parallel lines assesses the proportional odds assumption essential to ordinal logistic regression, asserting that the relationships between predictors and outcomes remain constant across all threshold levels of ordinal dependent variables (Agresti, 2019). The assumption holds significant importance, as violations may result in skewed parameter estimates and misleading statistical inferences when models

mistakenly presume uniform effects of predictors across ordinal categories. Suppose the test reveals significant results ($p < 0.05$). In that case, it violates the proportional odds assumption, necessitating alternative analytical approaches such as multinomial logistic regression or partial proportional odds models that allow for differential effects of predictors across various levels of the ordinal outcome.

The test of parallel lines was significant for all three trust variables: (a) trust in president (χ^2 (13, n = 6,000) = 67.88; $p < .001$), (b) trust in parliament (χ^2 (13, n = 6,000) = 69.53; $p < .001$), and (c) trust in courts (χ^2 (13, n = 6,000) = 80.35; $p < .001$). The results indicate violations of the proportional odds assumption, suggesting that the relationship between predictors and trust outcomes varies across different levels of institutional trust. The results bode well with political attitudes studies as the context may entail nonlinear relationships, and other predictors may matter differently for the presidency, judiciary, or parliament. Consequently, multinomial logistic regression was employed instead of ordinal logistic regression to accommodate these differential effects across response categories.

Multicollinearity Test

I utilized the variance inflation factor (VIF) to test if the independent variables are highly correlated with each other. Multicollinearity impacts model validity by producing unstable parameter estimates with inflated standard errors, unreliable significance tests, and coefficients exhibit counterintuitive signs or magnitudes obscuring the individual contributions of predictor variables and undermine statistical inference (Field, 2018).

Table 6 shows multicollinearity diagnostics revealed no significant relationships among the predictor variables. All VIF ranged from 1.058 to 1.819, well below the conventional threshold of 5.0 for problematic multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2019), and all tolerance values ranged from 0.550 to 0.945 well above the threshold of 0.2. The highest VIF values were observed for the government responsiveness variables, with perceived government responsiveness in addressing poverty and perceived government responsiveness in managing the economy due to their conceptual interconnections yet remained within acceptable thresholds. The findings allow for the retention of all predictor variables in the final generalized linear model.

Table 6

Multicollinearity Results

Variable	Tolerance	VIF
Government responsiveness in managing the economy	0.563	1.776
Government responsiveness in addressing poverty	0.550	1.819
Government responsiveness in creating jobs	0.585	1.710
Performance president	0.664	1.506
Performance Parliament	0.860	1.162
Level of corruption	0.884	1.132
Partisan alignment	0.912	1.097
Coethnic trust premium	0.904	1.106
Employment	0.945	1.058
Education	0.856	1.168
Democracy	0.918	1.089
Age	0.900	1.112
Gender	0.936	1.106

Note. VIF = variance inflation factor.

Findings

Research Question 1

The first question examined whether perceptions of government's responsiveness and performance, corruption, affective polarization, and satisfaction with democracy

significantly predicted trust in the president. A GLM model with a multinomial distribution and a cumulative logit link function successfully converged, and individual model effects revealed statistically significant predictors, offering strong evidence to reject the null hypothesis in favor of the alternative.

Table 7 summarizes the GLM regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics, *p*-values, and reports the odds, and the estimated change in odds of trust in the president at a 95% confidence interval. Government performance perceptions were significantly associated with the outcome, with presidential performance demonstrating elevated odds (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 523.62; $p < .001$, OR = 2.01, 95% CI [1.90, 2.14]), of increasing trust in the president. Parliamentary performance revealed a weaker association with presidential trust (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 9.13, p = .003, OR = 1.08, 95% CI [1.02, 1.14]). Perceived government responsiveness in managing the economy, addressing poverty, and creating jobs were all significantly associated with trust in the president (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 72.49, $p < .001$, OR = 1.38, 95% CI [1.28, 1.49]); (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 25.93, $p < .001$, OR = 1.21, 95% CI [1.12, 1.30]); and (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 12.86, $p < .001$, OR = 1.15, 95% CI [1.06, 1.23]), respectively.

Table 7

Generalized Linear Model Regression for Trust in the President

Variable	*B*	*SE*	Wald	*df*	*p*	*OR*	95% CI
Government responsiveness in							
Managing the economy	0.32	0.04	72.49	1	<.001	1.38	1.28-1.45
Addressing poverty	0.19	0.04	25.93	1	<.001	1.21	1.12-1.30
Creating jobs	0.14	0.04	12.86	1	<.001	1.15	1.06-1.23
Corruption	-0.27	0.04	47.08	1	<.001	0.76	0.71-0.83
Performance president	0.70	0.03	523.62	1	<.001	2.01	1.90-2.14
Performance parliament	0.08	0.03	9.13	1	0.003	1.08	1.03-1.14

Satisfaction with democracy	0.17	0.03	42.88	1	<.001	1.19	1.13-1.25
Age	0.01	0.00	17.71	1	<.001	1.01	1.00-1.01
Gender	-0.03	0.06	0.32	1	0.573	0.97	0.87-1.08
Employment status	0.06	0.08	0.68	1	0.409	1.07	0.92-1.24
Partisan alignment	-0.73	0.15	22.42	1	<.001	0.48	0.36-0.65
Coethnic trust premium	-0.31	0.13	5.80	1	0.016	0.73	0.57-0.94
Education							
No schooling	0.47	0.21	5.29	1	0.022	1.61	1.07-2.41
Primary	0.37	0.19	3.94	1	0.047	1.45	1.01-2.09
Secondary	0.18	0.19	0.87	1	0.350	1.19	0.82-1.74
Tertiary	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Wave							
Wave 1	-1.16	0.21	30.73	1	<.001	0.31	0.21-0.47
Wave 2	0.30	0.19	2.44	1	0.118	1.35	0.93-1.98
Wave 3	-1.09	0.21	27.71	1	<.001	0.34	0.22-0.51
Wave 4	-0.04	0.19	0.05	1	0.825	0.96	0.66-1.40
Wave 5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note. CI = confidence interval.

Affective polarization and institutional governance factors were statistically significantly associated with trust in the president. Partisan alignment (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 22.42, $p < .001$, OR = 0.48, 95% CI [0.36, 0.65]), and coethnic trust (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 5.80, $p < .001$, OR = 0.73, 95% CI [0.57, 0.94]), demonstrated significant positive associations. For every unit increase in perceived corruption level, the odds of higher presidential trust decreased by 24% (χ^2 (1, n =6,000) = 47.08, $p < .001$, OR = 0.76, 95% CI [0.71,0.83]). Conversely, for every unit increase in satisfaction with democracy, the odds of higher trust in the president increased by 19% (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 42.88, $p <$ .001, OR = 1.19, 95% CI [1.13,1.25]).

Sociodemographic controls exhibited mixed associations with presidential trust. Gender and employment status were not significantly associated with the outcome, while age and education demonstrated significant positive relationships. Older citizens expressed higher levels of trust (χ^2 (1, n =6,000) = 17.71, $p < .001$, OR = 1.01, 95% CI

[1.00, 1.01]). Citizens with no formal schooling (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 5.29, p = .021, OR = 1.61, 95% CI [1.07, 2.41]), and primary education (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 3.94, p = .047, OR = 1.45, 95% CI [1.01, 2.09]), demonstrated higher trust compared to tertiary education holders.

Research Question 2

The second question examined whether perceptions of government's responsiveness and performance, corruption, affective polarization, and satisfaction with democracy significantly predicted trust in the parliament. A GLM model with a multinomial distribution and a cumulative logit link function successfully converged. The individual tests of model effects revealed that multiple predictor variables significantly contributed to the model, thus rejecting the null hypothesis in favor of the alternative.

Table 8 presents the GLM regression coefficients, standard errors, Wald statistics, p-values, odds ratios, and 95% confidence intervals for trust in parliament. Parliamentary performance perceptions emerged a central predictor of trust in parliament (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 148.02, p < .001, OR = 1.36, 95% CI [1.29, 1.42]). The president's performance was also statistically significantly associated with trust in parliament (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 34.47, p < .001, OR = 1.18, 95% CI [1.12, 1.24]). Institutional quality factors demonstrated statistically significant associations. For every unit increase in perceived satisfaction with democracy, the odds of expressing trust in the parliament increased by 23% (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 63.33, p < .001, OR = 1.23, 95% CI [1.17, 1.29]). For each unit increase in perceived corruption, the odds of expressing higher trust in parliament declined by 13.0% (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 15.79, p < .001, OR = 0.87, 95% CI [0.81, 0.93]).

Perceived government responsiveness to job creation and poverty reduction were statistically significant (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 14.23, p < .001, OR = 1.15, 95% CI [1.07, 1.23]), (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 3.26, p = 0.07, OR = 1.07, 95% CI [0.99,1.15]), respectively. Economic management was not significantly associated with parliamentary trust. Affective polarization showed mixed results. Coethnic trust premium was significantly associated with higher parliamentary trust, (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000 = 5.45, p = .020, OR = 1.34, 95% CI [1.05, 1.70]), while partisan alignment was not significant, (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 0.04, p = .851, OR = 0.97, 95% CI [0.73, 1.30]).

Table 8

Generalized Linear Model Regression for Trust in the Parliament

Variable	*B*	*SE*	Wald	*df*	*p*	*OR*	95% CI
Government responsiveness in							
Managing the economy	0.06	0.04	2.55	1	0.110	1.06	0.98-1.14
Addressing poverty	0.07	0.04	3.26	1	0.071	1.07	0.99-1.15
Creating jobs	0.14	0.04	14.23	1	<.001	1.15	1.07-1.23
Corruption	-0.14	0.04	15.79	1	<.001	0.87	0.81-0.93
Performance President	0.16	0.03	34.47	1	<.001	1.18	1.12-1.24
Performance Parliament	0.30	0.03	148.02	1	<.001	1.36	1.29-1.42
Satisfaction with democracy	0.20	0.03	63.33	1	<.001	1.23	1.17-1.29
Age	0.00	0.00	0.03	1	0.866	1.00	0.99-1.15
Gender	0.10	0.05	3.89	1	0.049	1.11	1.00-1.22
Employment status	0.19	0.07	7.08	1	0.008	1.22	1.05-1.40
Partisan alignment	-0.03	0.15	0.04	1	0.851	0.97	0.73-1.30
Coethnic trust premium	0.29	0.12	5.45	1	0.020	1.34	1.05-1.70
Education							
No schooling	0.21	0.19	1.18	1	0.278	1.24	0.84-1.81
Primary	0.21	0.18	1.31	1	0.253	1.23	0.86-1.76
Secondary	0.07	0.18	0.13	1	0.721	1.07	0.74-1.53
Tertiary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Wave							
Wave 1	0.30	0.19	2.35	1	0.125	1.35	0.92-1.97
Wave 2	0.15	0.18	0.72	1	0.395	1.16	0.82-1.64
Wave 3	0.38	0.18	4.33	1	0.038	1.46	1.02-2.07
Wave 4	-0.17	0.18	0.89	1	0.344	0.84	0.59-1.21
Wave 5	0	0	0	0	0	1	0

Note. CI = confidence interval.

Socioeconomic factors demonstrated statistically significant associations with trust in parliament, with employed citizens having 21.6% higher odds of expressing trust in parliament (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 7.08, p = .008, OR = 1.22, 95% CI [1.05, 1.40]). Similarly, respondent gender was significantly associated with trust in parliament (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 3.89, p = 0.049, OR = 1.12, 95% CI [1.00, 1.22]). Age and education level were not significantly associated with parliamentary trust.

Research Question 3

The third question examined whether perceptions of government's responsiveness and performance, corruption, affective polarization, and satisfaction with democracy significantly predicted trust in the judiciary. The analysis employed a GLM model with a multinomial distribution and a cumulative logit link function, appropriate for the ordinal nature of the trust in judiciary variable. Based on individual tests of model effects, the null hypothesis was rejected in favor of the alternative, as several variables demonstrated statistically significant predictive relationships with trust in the judiciary.

Table 9 shows that education level has a significant overall association with judicial trust. Citizens without formal schooling had 58% higher odds of expressing greater trust in the judiciary (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 5.92, p = 0.015, OR = 1.58, 95% CI [1.09, 2.28]) and 46.5% for individuals with primary education (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 5.18, p = 0.023, OR = 1.465, 95% CI [1.05, 2.04]). Satisfaction with democracy was significantly associated with trust in the judiciary (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 62.52, p < .001, OR = 1.23, 95% CI [1.17, 1.30]) while corruption levels marginally and negatively associated (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 3.13, p = 0.077, OR = 0.94, 95% CI [0.87, 1.01]).

Table 9

Generalized Linear Regression Model for Trust in the Judiciary

Variable	*B*	*SE*	Wald	*df*	*p*	*OR*	95% CI
Government responsiveness in							
Managing the economy	-0.03	0.04	0.49	1	0.485	0.97	0.91-1.05
Addressing poverty	0.14	0.04	14.34	1	<.001	1.15	1.07-1.23
Creating jobs	0.05	0.04	1.64	1	0.200	1.05	0.98-1.12
Corruption	-0.07	0.04	3.13	1	0.077	0.94	0.87-1.01
Performance president	0.12	0.03	19.28	1	<.001	1.13	1.07-1.19
Performance parliament	0.16	0.02	47.60	1	<.001	1.18	1.12-1.23
Satisfaction with democracy	0.21	0.03	62.52	1	<.001	1.23	1.17-1.30
Age	0.002	0.00	1.34	1	0.246	1.00	0.10-1.01
Gender	-0.06	0.05	1.34	1	0.246	0.94	0.85-1.04
Employment status	0.02	0.07	0.04	1	0.833	1.02	0.88-1.17
Partisan alignment	-0.13	0.15	0.83	1	0.362	0.88	0.66-1.17
Coethnic trust premium	-0.08	0.12	0.43	1	0.514	0.93	0.74-1.17
Education							
No schooling	0.46	0.19	5.92	1	0.015	1.58	1.09-2.28
Primary	0.38	0.17	5.18	1	0.023	1.47	1.05-2.04
Secondary	-0.01	0.17	0.01	1	0.937	0.99	0.71-1.38
Tertiary	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Wave							
Wave 1	0.55	0.19	8.69	1	0.003	1.73	1.20-2.48
Wave 2	-0.28	0.17	2.74	1	0.098	0.75	0.54-1.05
Wave 3	0.07	0.19	0.12	1	0.727	1.07	0.74-1.54
Wave 4	-0.01	0.18	0.00	1	0.955	0.99	0.69-1.42
Wave 5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note. CI = confidence interval.

Government performance evaluations were also significantly associated with trust in the judiciary. For each unit increase in parliamentary performance approval increases the odds of higher judicial trust by 17.7% (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 47.60, $p < .001$, OR = 1.18, 95% CI [1.12, 1.23]), while each incremental increase in presidential performance approval resulted in a 13% rise in trust in the judiciary (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 19.28, $p <$ .001, OR = 1.13, 95% CI [1.07, 1.19]). Perceived government responsiveness in reducing

poverty was significantly associated with trust in the judiciary (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 14.34, $p < .001$, OR = 1.15, 95%CI [1.07, 1.23]).

Affective polarization did not demonstrate significant associations with trust in the judiciary. Neither partisan alignment (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 0.83, p = .362, OR = 0.875, 95% CI [0.657, 1.166]), nor coethnic trust premium (χ^2 (1, n = 6,000) = 0.43, p = .514, OR = 0.926, 95% CI [0.735, 1.166]), achieved statistical significance. Similarly, perceived government responsiveness in managing the economy and creating jobs was not a statistically significant predictor of judicial trust.

Post Hoc Analysis

Supplementary analysis of coethnic trust premiums showed wave heterogeneity. Wave and coethnic trust premium were statistically significant coefficients across temporal intervals, especially for Wave 3 (β = 0.838, $p < .001$, OR = 2.311, 95% CI [1.599, 3.340]) during the annulment of the 2019 presidential election. The results suggest coethnic factors intensify during crises. Citizens with ethnic ties to the president show significantly higher trust. The temporal variability across waves suggests that the influence of ethnic identity on political attitudes becomes more pronounced in response to key political events.

The simultaneous analysis of wave-by-partisan alignment interactions revealed differing patterns for coethnic dynamics. Partisan alignment had significant main effects, while interaction terms varied in magnitude and statistical significance across waves. Wave 3 showed the most substantial political polarization during the constitutional crisis. Party identity has a more consistent baseline influence on presidential trust, amplifying

gradually in crises. The results show that identity-based trust systems react differently to political situations in the ethnically diverse emerging democracy of Malawi.

Summary

The findings show the differentiated nature of political trust in Malawi. Trust in the judiciary remains consistently higher than that in the president and parliament, reflecting its insulation from partisan and ethnic polarization. Performance evaluations, government responsiveness to economic and poverty concerns, and corruption perceptions predominantly shaped presidential trust with partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium as essential moderators. Post hoc analyses illustrated that the influence of partisan alignment and coethnic identity on presidential trust intensifies with political crises. Parliamentary trust reflects largely institutional performance and job creation efforts. Conversely, the judiciary's trust remains resilient to affective polarization, reinforcing its role as a stabilizing institution. Higher education is associated with lower trust in the president and judiciary. Affective polarization's impact on parliamentary and judicial trust, and partisan alignment's influence on parliamentary and judicial trust, were not statistically significant.

In Chapter 5, I will provide an in-depth analysis of the results referencing the connections to the peer-reviewed literature discussed in Chapter 2. The discussion will include the study's overall conclusions while acknowledging the strengths and limitations inherent in the research. Additionally, I will provide recommendations for future research and explore the broader implications of the research, particularly as they relate to potential avenues for social change that governance practitioners could pursue to tackle

obstacles in realizing the goal of transforming into a wealthy and inclusive middle-income country by 2030.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Chapter 5 includes the interpretation of research findings on the distinct nature of political trust across Malawi's three tiers of government. The purpose of the cross-sectional quantitative study was to examine the predictive relationships between citizens' perceived government responsiveness (managing the economy, addressing poverty, and creating jobs), performance evaluation (president and parliament), corruption perceptions, and affective polarization measures (partisan alignment and coethnic trust premium) and trust in the president, parliament, and judiciary in Malawi, while examining the mediating influence of employment status, education level, and satisfaction with democracy and controlling for age and gender. The research utilized generalized linear models with a multinomial distribution. The EPST theoretical framework fostered the understanding of how specific support for current officeholders and broader support for regime institutions influence political trust.

Malawians assess trust in the president, parliament, and judiciary using distinct criteria rather than uniform standards. Citizens expect the executive to manage the economy effectively, parliament to legislate employment matters, and the judiciary to ensure fairness in distribution, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of institutional responsibilities as defined by constitutional roles. The study revealed significant cross-institutional spillover effects that question the conventional independence models, despite the constitutional separation of powers. Presidential and parliamentary performance evaluations significantly impact judicial trust, suggesting that citizens view institutions as

part of interrelated trust networks. However, the connection coexists with meaningful institutional differentiation, as evidenced by the judiciary's substantially weaker correlations with other branches.

Satisfaction with democracy serves as a fundamental basis for institutional trust, validating diffuse support theory. In contrast, affective polarization creates systematic biases primarily in presidential trust evaluations, with partisan misalignment and coethnic expectations generating specific effects that intensify during periods of political crisis. Corruption perceptions create a clear vulnerability hierarchy: presidential trust experiences the most significant negative impact, followed by parliamentary trust, while judicial trust remains largely insulated. Educational attainment reveals varying patterns of trust that align with the critical citizenship hypothesis. Citizens with lower levels of education demonstrate higher trust in presidential and judicial institutions than those with tertiary education, while trust in parliamentary institutions remains unaffected by education level.

In Chapter 5, I interpret the findings, contextualize the current research within the existing literature, address the study limitations, and explore implications for social change and future research. The central aim of Chapter 5 is to synthesize the results obtained through the cross-sectional quantitative analysis of five waves of Afrobarometer surveys (2016–2025), encompassing 6,000 voting-age Malawian citizens. The findings affect democratic consolidation and Malawi's Vision 2063 development goals. The analysis could contribute to the theoretical understanding of political support systems in

nascent democracies and offer practical recommendations for strengthening institutional legitimacy.

Interpretation of the Findings

Institutional performance serves as the primary foundation for the formation of political trust across all branches of government in Malawi. Presidential performance emerged as the most significant predictor of presidential trust, while parliamentary performance demonstrated the strongest association with judicial trust. The performance-trust nexus operates consistently, exemplified by former President Mutharika's successful electoral strategy built around "Let the works of my hands speak for me," effectively leveraging strong performance records to secure popular support. The findings align with democratic governance literature on how institutional effectiveness directly influences citizen evaluations (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Rose & Mishler, 2011). The differentiated performance criteria suggest that citizens apply institution-specific standards when forming judgments, supporting Schnaudt and Popa (2023) and van der Meer and Hakhverdian's (2017) trust-as-evaluation framework, while extending the paradigm to the emerging democracy context. However, the performance-based evaluation system operates within a complex institutional ecosystem where traditional separation of powers models faces significant challenges from reputational interdependence.

Although a constitutional separation of powers exists, citizens' evaluations of political trust reveal a complex reputational interdependence that challenges traditional models. Contemporary governance literature establishes judicial independence as a cornerstone of democratic governance, with courts designed to operate free from political

influence, ensuring impartial interpretation of the law and protection of constitutional rights (Norris, 2017; Muñoz, 2017). However, the findings reveal significant evaluative spillovers, with presidential and parliamentary performance significantly predicting judicial trust, implying citizens cannot entirely compartmentalize assessments of different government branches.

The spillover effects demonstrate that institutions function within interconnected reputational ecosystems, with the effectiveness of one governmental branch potentially affecting trust in others, confounding simplistic models of complete evaluative independence. Citizens should be aware that government branches must work together to achieve effective governance. Shortcomings in a single governmental branch could undermine confidence in the overall governmental structure. However, the reputational linkage did not eliminate institutional differentiation, as evidenced by the substantially weaker trust correlation between the presidential and judicial branches ($r = .254$) compared to the presidential-parliamentary relationship ($r = .411$). Citizens uphold a sophisticated democratic evaluation, reflecting a dual-track system that allows for institutional interconnectedness and meaningful distinctions between government branches. Citizens remain aware that while courts may be formally independent, their effectiveness and legitimacy are shaped within broader contexts of governmental performance and democratic accountability.

The empirical findings suggest that satisfaction with democracy serves as a collective basis for political trust across all tiers of government, providing quantitative validation for theoretical predictions about diffuse support mechanisms. Statistical

analyses revealed significant, positive associations between satisfaction with democracy and political trust, consistently observed across all institutional measures. The results align with multiple streams of research that demonstrate the essential role of democratic satisfaction for political trust, providing empirical support for EPST and Norris's nested models (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005; Neyazi et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2023).

The universality of satisfaction with democracy's influence on political trust shows that diffuse support functions as expected, creating a reserve of goodwill that shapes specific evaluations of institutions, rather than citizens making entirely independent judgments of each government branch. The pattern observed suggests that broad support for democratic governance maintains institutional legitimacy, even amid critiques of policies or procedures, aligning with Easton's theoretical claims about the stabilizing effect of diffuse support. According to Norris's (2017) interpretation of Easton's framework, satisfaction with democracy reflects citizens' evaluation of regime performance—the third level in the hierarchical structure—which the findings indicate systematically affects trust in specific institutions at the fourth level. Examining the link between democratic satisfaction and political trust provides valuable insights into trust dynamics within Malawi's multiparty democracy and similar emerging democracies where institutional legitimacy is still evolving.

Citizens demonstrate sophisticated institutional attribution by applying differentiated responsiveness criteria that align with constitutional role allocations across the three branches of government. All three metrics of government responsiveness—economic management, poverty alleviation, and job creation—were significant predictors

of trust in the president. In contrast, perceived government responsiveness to job creation predicted parliamentary trust solely, while judicial trust responded exclusively to poverty reduction measures. The differentiated attribution pattern aligns precisely with Malawi's constitutional framework: citizens assign comprehensive economic stewardship to the executive branch, hold parliament accountable for employment legislation, and expect the judiciary to ensure distributive justice and protection of social welfare (Republic of Malawi, 2017). The findings challenge existing theoretical frameworks that conceptualize government responsiveness as a uniform construct (Brezzi et al., 2021; Hutchison & Johnson, 2017; Park, 2017), instead supporting Rose and Mishler's (2011) emphasis on subjective performance perceptions operating through institution-specific mechanisms.

The current findings on institutional differentiation could help explain persistent contradictions in the economic performance-political trust literature. Earlier studies have yielded significantly varied results concerning the association between economic performance and political trust. Studies by Park (2017) and Zmerli and Castillo (2015) found strong correlations for economic performance and political trust, while Dalton (2004) and van der Meer and Hakhverdian (2017) found negligible or absent effects. Van der Meer (2017) observed that the selection of dependent variables (trust in government versus institutional trust) and independent variables (economic development, growth rates, unemployment) seemed irrelevant to the mixed outcomes. Silke (2020) found that the responsiveness-trust linkage varies contextually, with a weakening observed in societies marked by high inequality or exclusion. Advanced statistical modeling did not clarify the contradictory findings.

The current findings indicate that conflicting results concerning economic performance and political trust may stem from the aggregation bias inherent in analyzing undifferentiated government trust. Researchers tend to obscure systematic variations that citizens use in trust assessments by neglecting the distinct constitutional roles. The results show that different institutions have unique patterns of responsiveness, implying that specific support mechanisms function through more sophisticated cognitive processes that consider their functional roles. Citizens do not apply the same performance standards to all institutions but evaluate them based on the relevant constitutional mandates and perceived areas of competence. Studies that treat political trust as a single, uniform construct may produce inconsistent results by overlooking the complex ways in which citizens assign responsibility and accountability across the three branches of government. These findings emphasize the importance of context-specific factors, such as clarity about constitutional roles, in shaping citizens' evaluations.

Affective polarization creates temporally variable biases in presidential trust evaluations, with the intensity and nature of these effects contingent upon specific political contexts. The empirical evidence demonstrates that coethnic expectations operate through crisis-activated mechanisms, intensifying dramatically during institutional legitimacy challenges (Wave 3: $OR = 2.311$) while remaining dormant during periods of political stability. Partisan alignment effects exhibit different temporal patterns, maintaining a more consistent influence across survey waves, yet remain subject to intensification during crisis periods. Devine and Valgarðsson (2024) found that trust judgments can evolve in response to political scandals or crises. Temporal heterogeneity

suggests that affective polarization may be a dynamic rather than static phenomenon, with different identity anchors becoming salient in response to specific categories of political challenges, rather than operating uniformly across all political contexts.

The dual pattern suggests that presidential systems consolidate partisan identification and ethnic expectations around a single executive figure, leading to what Torcal and Carty (2022) have recognized as heightened in-group versus out-group dynamics. The coethnic penalty for presidential trust suggests that citizens expect higher performance from coethnic presidents—a phenomenon Robinson (2020) termed the "coethnic trust premium," which operates in reverse when actual performance falls short of expectations. In contrast to presidential vulnerability, parliamentary institutions demonstrate remarkable resilience against these polarization dynamics while maintaining positive coethnic representation effects.

The current findings suggest that the judiciary shows resilience against affective polarization, demonstrating a significant insulation from partisan alignment and benefits related to coethnic trust. Malawi demonstrates broad support for legal institutions that operate independently of partisan political loyalties. However, the notable temporal interaction (Wave 2 × ethnicity: $\beta = 0.713$, $p < .001$) suggests that judicial independence may be context-dependent, with major political events potentially triggering ethnic considerations even within seemingly neutral institutions. For example, in a landmark case for judicial independence in Africa, Malawi's Constitutional Court nullified the results of the May 2019 presidential election. This action by the court aligns with the arguments of political event theorists, who suggest that significant societal events can

cause substantial shifts in public sentiment (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Christensen et al., 2020; Denters, 2002), highlighting the need for vigilant protection of judicial legitimacy during periods of political upheaval.

Corruption perceptions create a hierarchical vulnerability pattern across institutions. The findings suggest a clear hierarchy of corruption sensitivity, with presidential trust experiencing the most substantial negative impact (a 24% decrease), followed by parliamentary trust (a 13% decrease). In contrast, judicial trust remains insulated mainly from corruption perceptions. This hierarchical pattern reflects differentiated accountability expectations based on institutional roles and the historical centralization of authority in Malawi's presidential system. Citizens apply the highest integrity standards to the presidency as the primary steward of national governance, moderate expectations to parliament as a collective decision-making body, and maintain confidence in judicial independence following landmark decisions, such as the 2019 Constitutional Court election annulment. The result aligns with institutional salience theory, which posits that citizens prioritize political institutions based on their perceived importance and direct impact on governance outcomes (Muñoz, 2017; Proszowska et al., 2023).

Parliamentary trust demonstrates remarkable insulation from partisan polarization while preserving positive coethnic effects. Harteveld et al. (2021) and Wagner (2020) showed that institutional arrangements can either amplify or mitigate affective polarization depending on the structure of political competition. Malawi's parliamentary pattern suggests that distributed authority across multiple parties and coalitions prevents

the concentration of partisan emotions that characterizes presidential systems. Citizens view coethnic parliamentary representation as beneficial for advocacy and symbolic inclusion without the performance pressures that burden presidential coethnicity. The institutional differentiation supports theoretical arguments that multiparty systems enable more dispersed affective attachments than concentrated presidential systems. Wagner (2021) and Torcal and Carty (2022) demonstrated that self-identification with a single party is generally less pronounced in multiparty systems. The current study findings suggest that constitutional arrangements providing collaborative governance structures can serve as crucial democratic buffers during periods of political crisis.

Educational attainment creates differential trust patterns across institutions, with less educated citizens demonstrating significantly higher trust in presidential and judicial institutions while showing no preference for parliament. Citizens without formal education exhibit 61% higher odds of presidential trust and 58% higher odds of judicial trust, while parliamentary trust remains invariant to educational level. The findings support the critical citizenship hypothesis proposed by Dalton (2004) and Norris (2011), which suggests that higher education enhances analytical capabilities for institutional assessment while simultaneously establishing more demanding performance benchmarks. Education serves as a dual mechanism, cognitively empowering citizens to scrutinize institutional performance while fostering higher expectations for trust formation (Schnaudt & Popa, 2023; Welzel, 2013). Parliamentary immunity to educational effects suggests unique institutional characteristics that may obscure individual accountability

within collective decision-making frameworks, consistent with Hakhverdian and Mayne's (2012) micro–macro interactive framework.

The differentiated effects of gender and employment status across institutions suggest that effective democratic governance requires institution-specific approaches to citizen engagement. Gender was significantly associated with parliamentary trust (OR = 1.10, $p < .05$) but showed no effects on presidential or judicial trust, indicating that women may view parliament as more accessible because legislative institutions offer greater perceived opportunities for representation. Similarly, employed citizens had 22% higher odds of expressing parliamentary trust ($OR = 1.22$, $p < .01$), while showing no preference for other institutions. This demonstrates rational cost-benefit evaluations consistent with EPST, whereby citizens perceive the legislature as most directly relevant to their economic interests and job security. Since both demographic factors predicted only parliamentary trust, different institutions operate through distinct legitimacy mechanisms, suggesting that parliamentary institutions may benefit from targeted outreach to women and employment-focused constituencies. In contrast, presidential and judicial institutions require alternative engagement approaches addressing their specific institutional functions and citizen expectations.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides robust empirical insights into the relationship between government performance evaluations and institutional trust in Malawi, several methodological and contextual limitations must be acknowledged to interpret the findings and establish appropriate boundaries for generalization properly. The cross-sectional

design precludes definitive causal claims about performance-trust relationships, as the direction of causality between satisfaction with democracy and institutional trust remains theoretically ambiguous—citizens with higher institutional trust may evaluate democratic performance more favorably, rather than democratic satisfaction driving trust formation.

Statistical modeling constraints further limit interpretive scope, as the ordinal characteristics of the dependent variables impose specific limitations compared to continuous outcomes, including the potential failure of the proportional odds assumption in ordinal logistic regression across all predictors (Warner, 2013). This assumption requires that the relationship between each pair of outcome groups remains the same, which may not hold consistently across all performance evaluation predictors. Additionally, the possibility of differential nonresponse across survey waves might have introduced bias if certain demographic or political groups were consistently more likely to refuse participation. Although Afrobarometer employed weighting techniques to correct sampling discrepancies, residual bias might have persisted.

The temporal scope of the five-wave analysis (2016–2025) captures a specific historical period marked by constitutional crisis and regime change, which limits generalizability to other political contexts or historical periods. This is particularly true since the intensification of polarization effects during constitutional crisis periods suggests that the findings may not represent stable, long-term patterns. Measurement limitations arise from Afrobarometer survey instruments constraining variable conceptualization, as the ordinal trust measures, while validated, may not capture the full complexity of citizen-state relationships, and cultural translation of trust concepts across

Malawi's multilingual context introduces potential measurement errors not addressable through statistical modeling, compounded by possible social desirability bias in self-reported political attitudes.

The focus on Malawi aligns with Dowd and Driessen's (2008) call for country-specific analysis within broader comparative frameworks, as they demonstrate significant variation in ethnic voting patterns even among countries with similar levels of ethnolinguistic fractionalization. However, the generalizability of these findings is limited to Malawi's multiparty presidential system with strong traditional authority structures. Caution is needed when applying this to other African contexts, considering differences in institutions, economic development, and cultural factors, as the study cannot establish causality or predict trust patterns under different political systems.

Recommendations

My study examined the factors influencing political trust in Malawi's presidency, parliament, and judiciary. The results highlight significant opportunities to enhance scholarly understanding of how political trust varies in emerging democracies, while also identifying several methodological and theoretical limitations that require further research. Based on the study’s strengths and limitations, as well as gaps in the literature, several recommendations are proposed to continue this line of inquiry.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal panel studies that track individual citizens' trust trajectories over extended periods to complement the cross-sectional insights generated through this investigation. While the current study's repeated cross-sectional design provided valuable insights into aggregate trust patterns across different

political administrations, individual-level panel data would enable researchers to examine how specific events, policy outcomes, and leadership changes influence personal trust trajectories. Such longitudinal approaches would address the temporal causality limitations inherent in cross-sectional designs and provide more definitive evidence regarding the directionality of relationships between performance evaluations and institutional trust.

Comparative research extending beyond Malawi's borders represents a critical avenue for validating and refining the theoretical framework developed through this investigation. While necessary for deep contextual understanding, the study's focus on Malawi limits generalizability to other emerging democracies characterized by different institutional arrangements, ethnic compositions, and historical trajectories. Researchers should systematically examine trust differentiation patterns across multiple sub-Saharan African countries with varying constitutional frameworks, levels of democratic consolidation, and governance challenges. Such comparative analysis would enable scholars to identify universal versus context-specific mechanisms underlying institutional trust formation.

The role of media consumption patterns and information sources in shaping differentiated institutional trust deserves systematic empirical attention. My study deliberately excluded media variables to maintain analytical focus. Nevertheless, the growing influence of social media, traditional news sources, and informal communication networks on political attitudes suggests these factors may significantly moderate the relationships between performance evaluations and trust outcomes. Future investigations

should incorporate comprehensive measures of media exposure, source credibility, and information processing to understand how citizens' information environments influence their capacity to differentiate between institutional performances.

A mixed methods approach combining quantitative analysis with qualitative interviews would offer deeper insights into the cognitive processes underlying institutional differentiation. While the current study's quantitative framework effectively identified patterns of trust differentiation, qualitative methods could illuminate the reasoning mechanisms citizens employ when evaluating different branches of government. Focus groups and in-depth interviews could reveal how citizens understand institutional roles, attribute responsibility for outcomes, and form expectations regarding governmental performance across different domains.

The temporal interaction findings specifically indicate that future research should examine whether the crisis-activated pattern of coethnic polarization observed during Wave 3 represents a generalizable mechanism or a context-specific response to Malawi's particular constitutional crisis. Research designs should systematically vary crisis types (constitutional, economic, and security) to determine whether different challenges activate distinct identity mechanisms, as suggested by the differential temporal patterns observed for coethnic versus partisan effects.

Implications

The implications for positive social change stemming from my study are significant. Based on my findings, several recommendations for the president, parliament, judiciary, and governance practitioners to address governance challenges that threaten

Malawi's aspiration to become an inclusively wealthy and self-reliant upper-middle-income country by 2063 emerge. Malawi's Vision 2063 explicitly acknowledges that each of the three arms of government has an important role to play in facilitating good governance. The study results provide evidence-based solutions for strengthening each branch in accordance with its constitutional mandate and citizen expectations.

My research contributes to Malawi's democratic consolidation by providing empirical evidence supporting governance reforms aligned with citizen expectations across the three constitutional branches. The universal predictive power of democratic satisfaction across the president, parliament, and judiciary validates Norris's (2017) nested model of political support, suggesting that strengthening democratic processes creates positive feedback loops that enhance legitimacy across all three branches simultaneously. The finding supports Warren's (2017) argument that democracies protect trust relationships while channeling distrust into appropriate political domains. The policy implications involve prioritizing electoral integrity, participatory governance mechanisms, and transparency initiatives as essential components that support the objectives of Vision 2063 by enhancing institutional legitimacy and citizen confidence in the distinct yet interconnected constitutional system.

Based on the empirical findings, several practical recommendations emerge for strengthening democratic governance across Malawi's three constitutional branches, grounded in established governance literature. Presidential practitioners should prioritize transparent economic governance and robust anticorruption measures, as these factors most strongly predict presidential trust, while also creating positive spillover effects on

parliamentary and judicial trust. This aligns with Gyimah-Boadi's (2021) recommendations for enhancing state legitimacy in Africa. Communication strategies should emphasize economic performance outcomes and integrity initiatives to maintain public confidence while recognizing that presidential performance affects citizen evaluations of all three branches through reputational linkages, supporting Brezzi et al.'s (2021) framework on drivers of trust in public institutions. Based on the empirical finding that coethnic trust premium effects intensify specifically during constitutional crises while remaining nonsignificant during stable periods, presidential practitioners should develop crisis-contingent communication strategies rather than assuming uniform identity effects.

Parliamentary practitioners should focus on employment-focused policies and constituent engagement, particularly targeting women and employed citizens who demonstrate higher parliamentary trust, aligning with Hakhverdian and Mayne's (2012) earlier research on institutional trust and democratic responsiveness. Legislative reforms should emphasize representative functions and constituency service capabilities while maintaining resilience against the effects of partisan polarization. Parliament's unique position as the only branch where employment status and gender significantly predict trust suggests opportunities for targeted outreach emphasizing legislative responsiveness to economic and representational concerns, consistent with democratic theory on representative institutions and advancing Vision 2063 inclusivity goals (Warren, 2001). Parliament must prioritize legislation supporting Vision 2063's private sector dynamism and industrial development to build trust through employment creation.

Judicial practitioners should maintain independence and professional competence while acknowledging that their operations within broader governance contexts impact public confidence through spillover effects from presidential and parliamentary performance, thereby supporting theoretical work by Warren (2017) on institutional trust differentiation. The judiciary successfully maintained relative insulation from partisan and ethnic considerations while remaining responsive to performance evaluations, which provides a model for institutional independence, consistent with Norris's (2017) analysis of regime institutions and political support. The judiciary's higher levels of trust should be leveraged to mediate conflicts arising during Vision 2063's economic transformation.

Vision 2063's emphasis on instilling a mindset of "ndizotheka" (it's possible) among Malawians requires institutional credibility demonstrated through performance and responsiveness. Governance practitioners across the president, parliament, and judiciary should adopt integrated approaches that recognize institutional interdependence while preserving appropriate separation of powers. Newton et al. (2018) made a similar recommendation in their analysis of social and political trust dynamics. Coordinating anticorruption initiatives, transparency measures, and democratic process improvements across the three branches would help maximize positive spillover effects while addressing institution-specific trust deficits through targeted interventions that recognize the differentiated performance expectations citizens hold for each constitutional branch, supporting comprehensive governance reform approaches (Warren (2017). The government must communicate success stories from each of its branches to build collective confidence in transformation capacity.

The study's methodological approach yields several important implications for future research on political trust in emerging democracies. The successful application of generalized linear models with multinomial distribution to Afrobarometer data demonstrates the utility of sophisticated statistical modeling for analyzing ordinal trust outcomes while accommodating violations of proportional odds assumptions common in political attitudes research, supporting Proszowska et al.'s (2023) arguments for differentiated institutional analysis over monolithic trust constructs. The methodology's use of institution-specific trust measures for the president, parliament, and judiciary successfully captured hierarchical trust patterns and revealed spillover effects between institutions that validate Schneider's (2017) emphasis on measurement equivalence, while the inclusion of wave-fixed effects across multiple survey periods controlled for temporal variations affecting all institutions simultaneously, consistent with Beck and Katz's (2011) recommendations for rigorous time-series cross-sectional data analysis.

The findings significantly extend EPST by providing empirical evidence for differentiated specific support mechanisms operating through institution-specific performance expectations across the president, parliament, and judiciary, while validating Norris's (2017) nested model where diffuse support (satisfaction with democracy) operates universally across all three governmental branches and specific support varies according to distinct constitutional role allocations. The study extends trust-as-evaluation theoretical approaches by demonstrating that citizens apply differentiated responsiveness criteria aligned with constitutional mandates rather than uniform performance expectations—holding the president accountable for comprehensive economic

stewardship, expecting parliament to address employment and representation concerns, and viewing the judiciary as responsible for distributive justice while remaining insulated from direct economic accountability, thereby supporting Citrin and Stoker's (2018) evaluative framework and contributing to resolving contradictions in the economic performance-political trust literature by suggesting that aggregation bias may obscure systematic institutional variations, addressing concerns raised by van Der Meer (2017) about mixed empirical results in performance-trust research.

My study challenges the monolithic conceptualization of political trust by providing the first quantitative evidence of systematic institutional differentiation in an emerging African democracy. The research establishes a clear hierarchical trust pattern (judiciary > parliament > president) that contradicts assumptions about uniform institutional confidence, while revealing previously unexamined spillover effects. Specifically, presidential and parliamentary performance evaluations significantly predict judicial trust, indicating reputational interdependence that complicates traditional separation of powers models. The findings demonstrate differential institutional vulnerability to affective polarization, with presidential trust most susceptible to partisan and ethnic considerations while judicial trust maintains relative resilience, providing empirical benchmarks for comparative analysis across sub-Saharan African democratic contexts and extending political trust research beyond its traditional focus on established Western democracies to validate theoretical predictions in posttransition societies where institutional legitimacy remains contested.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the sophisticated nature of political trust differentiation across Malawi's three constitutional branches, revealing that citizens apply distinct performance criteria while significantly influenced by democratic satisfaction, institutional performance evaluations, and affective polarization dynamics. By employing a cross-sectional quantitative approach guided by Easton's Political Support Theory, the research identified how satisfaction with democracy operates as a universal foundation for trust across all branches, while performance evaluations create institution-specific effects and affective polarization intensifies during political crises, particularly affecting presidential trust through partisan alignment and coethnic expectations. The findings demonstrate that citizens hold the president accountable for economic stewardship, expect parliament to address employment concerns, and view the judiciary as responsible for distributive justice while maintaining resilience against polarization effects, challenging assumptions about undifferentiated political attitudes in emerging democracies, and resolving contradictions in the economic performance-political trust literature through empirical evidence of systematic institutional variations.

The research implications emphasize the critical need for evidence-based reforms that address performance expectations while mitigating polarization and strengthening democratic processes in pursuit of Vision 2063 objectives. Strategic interventions, including presidential economic transparency, parliamentary employment legislation, and judicial independence preservation, could significantly impact democratic consolidation by leveraging the universal influence of democratic satisfaction while addressing

institution-specific vulnerabilities. The study's methodological contributions underscore the importance of longitudinal panel designs and comparative approaches to examining how performance-trust relationships evolve across diverse contexts. Overall, the findings emphasize the necessity for differentiated institutional strengthening that recognizes citizens' evaluative sophistication and the complex interplay between democratic satisfaction, performance assessments, and identity-based polarization in creating resilient democratic systems for inclusive development in sub-Saharan Africa.

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Appendix: Afrobarometer Data Usage Policy