Politics and Governance
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 11702
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.11702

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Open Access Journal

How Adolescents Evaluate Political Institutions and Develop Political Trust: A Cross-National Study

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Submitted: 31 October 2025 **Accepted:** 3 March 2026 **Published:** 6 May 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Contemporary Research in Political Culture: A Multidisciplinary Approach" edited by Stylianos Ioannis Tzagkarakis (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens) and Martin Neumann (Alpen-Adria University of Klagenfurt), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i486

Abstract

Political accountability depends on citizens' ability to critically evaluate institutional performance and bestow trust accordingly. Such evaluative judgments require both cognitive skills to process political information and normative standards against which institutional behavior is assessed. While adults' trust is known to respond to institutional performance, it remains unclear whether similar evaluative mechanisms operate among adolescents, who are still maturing cognitively and politically. Drawing on developmental psychology literature and evaluative theories of political trust, this study examines how adolescents' political trust is shaped by macro-level institutional quality and individual-level cognitive and normative resources. Using multi-level moderated mediation models and data from the 2022 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, covering 14-year-olds across 24 countries (N = 82,321), the study provides the first cross-national test of the evaluative nature of political trust in early adolescence. The results show that institutional quality influences political trust entirely indirectly through performance evaluations, with stronger responsiveness among adolescents with higher civic knowledge and stronger democratic norms. These findings demonstrate that political trust among emerging citizens reflects not only traditional socialization but also adolescents' own appraisal of political institutions. The study advances theories of micro- and macro-level political socialization and highlights the importance of cognitive and normative resources in the early development of political trust.

Keywords

adolescence; civic knowledge; democratic norms; institutional quality; political socialization; political trust

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1. Introduction

Political trust is a cornerstone of representative democracies, reflecting citizens' expectations that political institutions act in the public interest, even under conditions of uncertainty (Hardin, 2002; Norris, 2022). While trust can stabilize democratic systems by fostering compliance, political participation, and cooperation, its withdrawal may signal institutional failure and stimulate reform (Devine, 2024; Ouattara & van der Meer, 2023; van der Meer & Janssen, 2025). Adolescents are not peripheral to these dynamics. As emerging citizens they form orientations toward political institutions during a period of rapid cognitive, social, and political development (Ziemes, 2025). Their trust matters: Adolescents with higher political trust report greater political and community engagement (Šerek et al., 2017; Torney-Purta et al., 2004), whereas lower trust relates to political alienation and protest voting (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2013; Stals et al., 2025). Understanding how adolescents form political trust is therefore essential for understanding the roots and future trajectories of democratic systems.

Two broad traditions dominate explanations about the origins of political trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Cultural theories emphasize early socio-cultural socialization and interpersonal experiences, viewing trust as relatively stable and unresponsive to the political context (Flanagan, 2013; Schoon & Cheng, 2011; Uslaner, 2017). Institutional theories conceptualize trust as an evaluative judgment grounded in perceptions of institutional performance, such as corruption, procedural fairness, and effectiveness (Hardin, 2002; Norris, 1999). Recent work suggests that particularly this evaluative dimension stimulates incumbent accountability through voting behavior (van Alebeek et al., 2025). While both perspectives find support among adults (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024; van der Meer, 2017), research on adolescents has largely focused on micro-level socialization, showing that trust emerges from relationships with parents, teachers, and peers through feelings of fairness, warmth, and belonging (Marien, 2017; Šerek & Macek, 2014; Smets et al., 2013; Stals & Ziemes, 2024).

This emphasis portrays adolescents' political trust as exogenous and derivative—shaped by non-political interactions and second-hand cues from significant others (Jennings et al., 2009). As Flanagan (2013, p. 17) notes: "[Adolescents'] political theories, their concepts of how their society works, and their ideals about how it should work are ideas constructed and internalized from their actions with others." Yet adolescents increasingly encounter political information through news, peers, parents, and schools, providing opportunities to form their own evaluations of political institutions (Schulz et al., 2023). Developmentally, advances in cognitive and moral reasoning enable them to differentiate incumbents from institutions and form more autonomous and critical evaluations of political institutions (Easton & Dennis, 1969; Merelman, 1972; Sherrod et al., 2010). Panel studies show that political trust fluctuates most strongly before age 16, suggesting that early adolescence is a particularly impressionable period (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024; la Roi et al., 2025). Cross-national evidence further shows that adolescents' political trust tracks macro-level institutional performance, being lower in countries with more corruption and a lower standard of living (Lauglo, 2013; Stals & Ziemes, 2024; Torney-Purta et al., 2004). These patterns mirror adult findings and indicate that adolescents do not develop political trust detached from the broader political environment (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008).

Despite these insights, a crucial gap remains. Little is known about *how* macro-level institutional performance is translated into adolescents' political trust. Evaluative models argue that institutional conditions must first be perceived and evaluated before they can influence political trust (Norris, 2022; van der Meer, 2017). Among

adults, institutional quality affects trust primarily through subjective performance evaluations, conditional on political knowledge and democratic commitment (Mauk, 2021; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011). Whether such evaluative mechanisms already operate during early adolescence remains largely unknown.

This study addresses this gap by examining whether adolescents engage in evaluative trust judgments. It investigates whether macro-level institutional quality influences adolescents' political trust indirectly through subjective institutional performance evaluations (RQ1), and whether this indirect relationship depends on adolescents' cognitive and normative resources. (RQ2). The study integrates evaluative theories of political trust with research on political socialization and cognitive development. The analyses draw on cross-national data from the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2022, covering 14-year-olds in 24 countries (Schulz et al., 2023), and apply multilevel structural equation modelling (MSEM) to estimate moderated mediation effects.

The article contributes to the literature in two ways. First, by adopting an evaluative perspective on political trust formation during adolescence, it shifts attention from traditional top-down micro-socialization to adolescents' active appraisal of institutional performance. By testing the mediating role of subjective performance evaluations and the moderating role of democratic norms and knowledge, it brings adolescents into a framework applied almost exclusively to adults. Second, by focusing on early adolescence—a formative period when political attitudes prove most malleable—the study advances understanding of when evaluative models of political trust emerge. Such evaluative capacities are fundamental for future democratic accountability and legitimacy (Norris, 2022).

2. Literature

2.1. Defining Evaluative Political Trust

Political trust refers to citizens' beliefs that state institutions act in the public interest, even when not directly monitored (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). At its core, trust is a relational judgment in which subject A trusts object B to do X (Hardin, 2002). It varies across institutional objects (e.g., parliament, political parties, and the judiciary), which cluster into distinct subdomains, separating impartial order institutions from partisan representative ones (Breustedt, 2018; Stals et al., 2024). This study focuses on trust in the core representative institutions: parliament, government, and political parties.

Political trust is not unconditional. It depends on citizens' own ability to make "reasonably accurate and informed predictions about future actions by agents based on their past performance" (Norris, 2022, p. 5). This evaluative view implies that trust responds to how well institutions perform, and that individuals can access and judge that performance against normative standards. Among adults, political trust systematically reflects macro-level institutional characteristics, including democratic quality (Mauk, 2021), proportional representation (Marien, 2011; van der Meer, 2010), political scandals (Bowler & Karp, 2004), executive impartiality (van der Meer, 2017), or corruption (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Far less is known about how adolescents develop and evaluate their relationship with the political system. This gap is notable given that political trust fluctuates most strongly during adolescence and stabilizes thereafter (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024; la Roi et al., 2025). Understanding how adolescents evaluate political institutions and develop political trust is therefore essential for knowing the roots of political cultures.

2.2. General Theoretical Foundations

Political socialization refers to the processes through which individuals develop political orientations and construct their relationship to the political world (Sapiro, 2004). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory offers a useful framework for understanding this process. It views human development—and political development in particular—as the product of ongoing interactions across nested environments: Micro-level contexts, such as family, peers, and schools, provide adolescents with their most immediate experiences of authority; meso-level linkages, such as communication between family and school, shape how political information is interpreted; and macro-level conditions—institutions, political events, cultural values—form the broader environment in which political orientations develop (Schulz et al., 2023).

Despite this ecological view, most research focuses on micro-level socialization, examining how political trust develops through non-political interactions with parents, peers, and teachers. These studies often assume that such experiences produce interpersonal (dis)trust that spills over into political (dis)trust (Flanagan, 2013). Parents are traditionally viewed as the primary socializing agent, with empirical work showing that adolescents from families with higher socio-economic status, with warm and trusting parents, and frequent political discussions, tend to report higher political trust (Marien, 2017; Šerek & Macek, 2014; Ziemes, 2025). Likewise, school environments matter: Fair treatment by teachers, open classroom climates, and positive peer relations consistently relate to higher political trust (Marien, 2017; Stals & Ziemes, 2024), whereas formal civics courses show mixed effects (Claes & Hooghe, 2017; Langton & Jennins, 1968).

While valuable, this work largely overlooks how adolescents themselves construct their relationship to the political system. As Owen (2008, p. 6) notes, most studies are "individual level explorations devoid of context or comparison," neglecting the intersection of macro- and micro-level socialization. Evaluative political trust is often assumed to emerge only through formal education and in adulthood. Mayne and Hakhverdian (2017, p. 9), for example, argue that the cognitive and normative resources needed for political trust are primarily acquired through "pre- or early adult socialization in formal education, and [evaluative] political trust is generated later…bridging adolescence and adulthood." Other scholars view adolescents' limited opportunities for political participation as restraining them from incorporating experiences with the system into their trust; as Niemi and Sobieszek (1977, p. 211) state, "many political lessons do not take hold until actual participation is possible and expected." Hence, political trust ought to only become evaluative once individuals have accumulated sufficient knowledge, democratic commitment, and relevant political experience.

Classic cognitive and moral developmental theories challenge this assumption. Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1969) show that abstract reasoning, perspective-taking, and norm-based judgment develop rapidly between ages 11 and 14, even suggesting completion in early adolescence (Sherrod et al., 2010). Also Hess and Torney (1967) identify cognitive development as a key mechanism of political learning during childhood and adolescence. This developmental shift enables adolescents to move from concrete, personalized understandings of authority to more institutional and complex conceptions, implying that political trust changes qualitatively over time. Easton and Dennis's (1969) classic work on the development of political authority orientations illustrates this trajectory. Children first recognize political authority beyond family and school (politicization), understand it through concrete figures such as "the president" (personalization), idealize these figures as benevolent (idealization), and eventually differentiate incumbents (i.e., the

president) from their role or institutions (i.e., the presidency; institutionalization). By early adolescence, young people begin to form more autonomous and critical evaluations of political institutions, although they remain relatively more trusting than adults (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Torney-Purta et al., 2004; van Deth et al., 2011). Moreover, adolescents' knowledge about political institutions becomes more sophisticated and abstract, enabling them to cognitively ground their trust (Verhaegen & Boonen, 2018). Together, these traditions view early adolescence as a critical period of increasing (political) sophistication and abstraction in political thought, enabling political trust to become more responsive and critical to the broader political system. This makes it a crucial stage for understanding the evaluative nature of political trust.

2.3. Adolescents as Evaluative Citizens

Building on these theoretical insights, this study argues that adolescents—like adults—are capable of constructing evaluative political trust by linking macro-level performance to their trust judgments. Theoretically, both mediation and moderation processes are central, as van der Meer (2017, p. 603) argues: "Macro-level outcomes need to be perceived by citizens, their subjective salience should depend on expectations and values, and their effect on trust in political institutions hinges on the extent to which citizens hold political institutions responsible for these outcomes." The next section describes this evaluative process in more detail. Macro-level indicators shape political trust only "when citizens are concerned about it" (van der Meer, 2010, p. 531). Among adults, the empirical patterns support a purely indirect effect. Research by van der Meer and colleagues shows that institutional quality (i.e., public sector corruption, executive impartiality, and communist legacy) affects political trust through subjective performance evaluations (i.e., satisfaction with public services) and through perceived care, commitment, and reliability of politicians (van der Meer, 2017; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011). Similarly, economic performance affects trust in parliament only when individuals feel personally affected (van der Meer, 2010; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011). Mauk (2021) likewise finds that electoral and liberal democratic quality influences trust solely via democratic performance evaluations.

Among adolescents, political trust also tracks macro-level institutional performance (Torney-Purta et al., 2004), yet the mechanisms underlying this association remain unexplored. Adolescents may first learn about institutional performance through the evaluations transmitted by parents, peers, teachers, and other socialization agents. Yet, as they increasingly encounter political information directly (Schulz et al., 2023), and as their cognitive and political sophistication grows, they also become capable of forming their own assessments of how institutions perform. Institutional quality may therefore shape adolescents' trust both through the evaluations they internalize from proximate others and through their own emerging judgments. The consistent adult pattern of full mediation suggests that institutional quality should matter for adolescents' political trust primarily insofar as it shapes their subjective evaluations. This leads to the first hypothesis:

> H1: The relationship between institutional quality and political trust is mediated by adolescents' evaluations of institutional performance.

The trust-as-evaluation framework holds that the effect of institutional performance on political trust is conditional on citizens' expectations, values, and cognition (van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017, p. 85). Two individuals exposed to the same institutional context may reach very different trust judgments because

they differ in the information they receive, how they process it, and the standards they apply. Zaller's (1992) receive–accept–sample (RAS) model of attitude formation provides a useful foundation for understanding these differences. The model implies that individuals vary in (a) their likelihood of receiving political information and (b) their propensity to accept or reject the message. While the first stage hinges on individuals' political awareness, the second stage depends on their predispositions. This framework helps explain why both cognitive and normative resources condition evaluative trust formation.

Cognitive resources—political and democratic knowledge—shape the first stage: whether adolescents receive and accurately interpret institutional performance information (Norris, 2022). Higher educated and more knowledgeable adolescents follow political news more closely, possess stronger media-literacy skills, and are better able to distinguish credible from misleading information (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2017; Nygren & Efimova, 2025; Schulz et al., 2023). As a result, more sophisticated adolescents are more likely to detect institutional shortcomings, whereas less sophisticated adolescents may simply remain unaware of institutional flaws and their broader implications. Adult studies consistently show that education and political knowledge heighten sensitivity to corruption and other norm violations (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Mauk (2021) demonstrates that the indirect effect of democratic quality is strongest among politically interested and higher educated citizens. Among adolescents, civic knowledge and education level similarly strengthen responsiveness to corruption (Lauglo, 2013; Stals & Ziemes, 2024; Torney-Purta et al., 2004).

Normative resources—commitment to democratic norms and values—provide the standards against which institutional performance is judged (Norris, 2022; van der Meer, 2017), shaping the acceptance stage of opinion formation (Zaller, 1992). Adolescents evaluate institutional performance information in light of their existing democratic predispositions. Support for liberal democratic values such as equality and tolerance generally increases with years of schooling (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012). Adolescents with stronger democratic norms hold clearer expectations about what institutions should do and are therefore more likely to view information about institutional shortcomings as credible and relevant. Those with weaker democratic commitments may discount or reinterpret such information because it conflicts with their predispositions. This logic aligns with Norris's critical-citizens thesis (Norris, 2022), which argues that individuals with stronger democratic norms are more likely to detect and react to institutional failures, whereas those with weaker commitments may overlook undemocratic practices or view them as unproblematic. Empirical work shows that democratic commitment has risen globally, helping explain declining trust in representative institutions across well-established democracies, particularly among younger cohorts (Dawson & Krakoff, 2024; Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Empirical evidence, though limited, supports the moderating role of democratic norms. Specifically, support for democratic procedures strengthens the link between regime type and trust (Huhe & Tang, 2017), and citizens with more procedural or liberal conceptions of democracy react more strongly to variation in institutional quality (Hooghe et al., 2017). When modelling the indirect relationship between institutional quality and political trust, van der Meer (2017) finds that executive impartiality only increases trust in parliament among citizens who view impartiality as important for democracy, while Mauk (2021) reveals a conditional effect of procedural and liberal democratic conceptions.

Although cognitive and normative resources are conceptually distinct, they are not fully independent. More knowledgeable adolescents are also more likely to hold stronger democratic commitments, and both capacities

develop in parallel (Neundorf & Smets, 2017; Schulz et al., 2023). Still, they serve different causal functions in evaluative trust formation. While cognitive resources shape the reception and interpretation of performance information, normative resources shape its acceptance.

Together, these insights suggest that adolescents with stronger cognitive and normative resources are more likely to form trust judgments that accurately reflect contemporary institutional quality. This translates into the following hypothesis:

> H2: The positive relationship between institutional quality and institutional performance evaluations is stronger among adolescents with higher cognitive resources (a) and higher normative resources (b).

3. Data

To test the hypotheses, the study draws on data from the 2022 ICCS, organized by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). This study surveyed the civic competences of roughly 80,000 eighth-grade students (14 years old, on average) across 24 countries across the globe. Data were gathered using a stratified two-stage probability sample design. First, schools were sampled with a probability proportional to their size. Second, one class of the target grade was randomly selected and all students in that class participated in the study. The final sample comprises 82,321 students clustered in 24 countries. Sample characteristics are shown in Table A1 in the Supplementary File.

4. Measures

4.1. Dependent Variable

Political trust is operationalized by asking respondents to indicate how much trust they have in three core representative institutions—the national parliament, the national government, and political parties. Items are rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *completely* (4). Descriptive statistics of all three items are presented in Table A1 in the Supplementary File. Factor scores are estimated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Multi-group confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA) points to the achievement of scalar invariance (RMSEA = 0.087; CFI = 0.989; TLI = 0.995; Brown, 2014). Hence, differences in latent scores can be interpreted as substantive differences in political trust rather than measurement artefacts. This implies that students in different countries interpret the items sufficiently similarly to justify cross-national comparisons. The structural analyses rely on these latent factor scores.

4.2. Independent Variables

4.2.1. Country-Level

4.2.1.1. Institutional Quality

Institutional quality is measured using two country-level indicators. First, the 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) from Transparency International captures perceived public sector corruption (0 to 100, higher scores indicating less corruption; Transparency International, 2023). Second, the 2022 Liberal Democracy

Index from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project (Coppedge et al., 2024) measures liberal (separation of powers, rule of law, civil liberties) and electoral (universal suffrage, electoral contestation, political participation) dimensions of democracy. Both country-level indicators are strongly correlated (r = 0.817). To avoid multicollinearity and obtain a single measure of institutional quality, both variables were standardized and combined into a composite index, which is used in the multilevel analyses.

4.2.2. Individual-Level

Three individual-level independent variables are included. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table A1 in the Supplementary File.

4.2.2.1. Evaluations of Institutional Performance

Evaluations of institutional performance (hereafter referred to as: evaluations) are measured using the ICCS scale "satisfaction with the political system," which asks respondents about their level of agreement with four items: "The political system of [country of test] works well"; "Members of [parliament/congress] are good at representing the interests of young people"; "Members of [parliament/congress] generally represent the interests of people in their country well"; and "Members of [parliament/congress] treat all people in society fairly." All items tap into different traits of trustworthiness (Ouattara et al., 2023). The first item measures perceptions of institutional *competence* or *ability* (van der Meer & Dekker, 2011). The second and third items capture politicians' perceived willingness to act in the interest of young people and citizens in general, which are labelled as perceptions of *care* (van der Meer & Dekker, 2011) and *benevolence* (Mayer et al., 1995). The final item reflects *procedural fairness* perceptions (Tyler & Jackson, 2014). While these items do not exhaust the full range of trustworthiness traits—others are: transparency, reliability, empathy, or charisma—they represent the core and most relevant benchmarks that are consistently cited across psychological, legal, and political science literatures (for a review, see Ouattara et al., 2023). Responses were rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4). The scale reliability estimates for each country are satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.67 to 0.83; Schulz et al., 2023, p. 199), and MGCFA results point to the achievement of scalar invariance (RMSEA = 0.083; CFI = 0.959; TLI = 0.979), resembling findings in the ICCS 2022 technical report (Schulz et al., 2023). The scale values are part of the ICCS 2022 dataset and precalculated using item response theory (IRT) scaling methodology, with an international average of 50 and a standard deviation of 10.

4.2.2.2. Civic Knowledge

Civic knowledge (hereafter referred to as: knowledge) is measured via a timed cognitive test. Students answered closed and open-ended questions about civic institutions, principles, participation, roles, and identities. One example item asked students: "What is the most likely reason a person in a democracy would join a political party?" with possible answers being: "to help the police with the enforcement of laws"; "to decide on sentences for people found guilty of crimes"; "to decide on the location of polling booths for national elections"; and "to participate in activities that influence government policy" (correct answer). Given the rotated-block assessment (i.e., each student received only one subset of questions), five plausible values with an international average of 500 and a standard deviation of around 100 were created for each student using IRT. All plausible values were used in the analysis.

4.2.2.3. Adherence to Democratic Norms

Adherence to democratic norms (hereafter referred to as: norms) is measured using the ICCS scale, "beliefs about threats to democracy," which asks respondents to rate how bad various situations would be for democracy on a four-point Likert scale ranging from *very bad* (1) to *not bad at all* (4). These items include: "Political leaders give government jobs to family members"; "The government breaks a law to fulfil a promise they made before they were elected"; "Opposition leaders are arrested because they openly criticized a new law"; "Only government supporters are appointed as judges"; "The government closes newspapers, radio and television stations that have been critical of its policies"; "The government blocks social media to prevent users from criticizing its policies"; and "The government controls all newspapers, radio and television stations." The scale reliability estimates for each country are satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.71 to 0.90; Schulz et al., 2023, p. 201), and MGCFA results point to the achievement of scalar invariance (RMSEA = 0.068; CFI = 0.955; TLI = 0.971). IRT scores were estimated with an average of 50 and a standard deviation of 10.

4.2.3. Control Variables

Control variables include gender (1 = girls), political interest (1 = interested), and socio-economic status. Socio-economic status combines parental education, parental occupation, and the amount of books at home. The indicator is calibrated to have a weighted mean of zero and standard deviation of one within each education system so that socio-economic status differences are interpretable relative to the national context, i.e., how relatively advantaged or disadvantaged a student is within their own education system.

5. Methods

Considering the latent nature of the constructs and the hierarchical structure of the data, MSEM was applied (Silva et al., 2020). Given an interclass correlation coefficient of 0.05 for schools and 0.13 for countries, a simpler two-level structure (students nested in countries) is estimated. All models were run using Mplus version 8.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). Sampling weights were applied in order to compensate for disproportional selection probabilities of a school or a student, adjust for non-response bias, and ensure population-representative estimates. Data compilation and recoding were conducted using the IEA International Database (IDB) analyzer (IEA, 2017) and IBM SPSS. To handle missing data, I used full information maximum likelihood (FIML) under the assumption of data being missing at random (MAR). Missing data for individual-level variables are presented in Table A2 in the Supplementary File.

A total of six models are estimated. First, to test whether the effect of institutional quality on political trust operates fully through adolescents' evaluations (H1), the analysis estimates: the direct effect of institutional quality (Model 1), the direct effect of evaluations (Model 2), both effects jointly (Model 3), and the indirect effect via evaluations (Model 4). All four models include random intercepts. Next, to test whether knowledge and norms condition the relationship between institutional quality and performance evaluations (H2a and H2b), cross-level interaction effects are estimated for knowledge (Model 5) and norms (Model 6). These models include random slopes for both moderators, as their effects are expected to vary across countries. All models control for gender, socio-economic status, and political interest. To facilitate interpretation of the intercepts as the expected outcome for an average student across all countries (i.e., the expected value of

political trust when all predictors are at their sample mean as opposed to zero), all continuous student-level predictors are grand-mean centered, subtracting the overall sample mean from each individual score. Unstandardized coefficients are reported in the main text to retain the original metric of the variables. Standardized estimates are provided in Table B1 in the Supplementary File. As Mplus does not compute standardized coefficients for indirect effects (Model 4) and random slopes (Models 5 and 6), these estimates are not reported.

6. Results

6.1. Mediation

I first turn to the models estimating the direct and indirect effects on political trust. The results are summarized in Table 1. First, the estimates show that both institutional quality (Model 1: $\beta = 0.187$, $p < 0.001$) and evaluations (Model 2: $\beta = 0.046$, $p < 0.001$) have a direct positive effect on political trust. When both predictors are included in Model 3, the effect of institutional quality decreases ($\beta = 0.096$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that part of its influence operates through adolescents' subjective evaluations. Model 4 formally tests this indirect pathway. Results are visualized in Figure 1. Because institutional quality varies only between countries, the indirect effect is modelled at the country-level (i.e., all variables are aggregated). Path a captures the effect of institutional quality on country-average evaluations, while path b captures the effect of country-average evaluations on country-average political trust. This specification allows us to test the indirect effect (a × b), that is, whether countries with higher institutional quality exhibit higher levels of political trust among adolescents because they, on average, evaluate institutions more positively. Individual-level associations between evaluations and trust are also estimated, but these slopes do not contribute to the country-level indirect effect, which is based solely on between-country variation. Although the results show a higher AIC in Model 4 compared to Model 3, this reflects the additional model complexity of estimating both the a and b paths. The mediation itself is substantial. Institutional quality exerts an entirely indirect effect on political trust via evaluations (Model 4: $\beta = 0.117$, $p < 0.001$), with its direct effect reduced to non-significance. In other words, what matters for adolescents' trust is not institutional quality *per se*, but how they perceive and interpret it, aligning with evaluative theories. The total effect of institutional quality ($\beta = 0.185$, $p < 0.001$), calculated as the sum of the indirect ($\beta = 0.117$, $p < 0.01$) and direct effect ($\beta = 0.061$, $p < 0.1$), is almost entirely accounted for by this evaluative mechanism. While evaluations account for 4.4% of the variance in political trust in Model 2, including all main predictors increases explained variance to more than 40% in Model 4. At the country-level, institutional quality explains roughly half of the variance in political trust (Model 1, $R^2 = 0.499$), but this increases considerably when the mediating role of evaluations is included (Model 4, $R^2 = 0.794$). This indicates that the effect of institutional performance is best understood through its impact on adolescents' evaluations, rather than directly affecting political trust.

Taken together, these findings provide strong support for H1: Adolescents' political trust is shaped by institutional quality through subjective evaluations of the political system and its representatives.

Table 1. Institutional quality, evaluations, and political trust (direct, indirect, and moderation effects).

Independent variables	M1			M2			M3			M4			M5			M6		
	β	*SE*	*p*	*β*	*SE*	*p*	*β*	*SE*	*p*	*β*	*SE*	*p*	*β*	*SE*	*p*	*β*	*SE*	*p*
(Intercept)	−0.014	0.039	***				−0.013	0.024	***	−0.083	0.023	***	−0.080	0.024	***	−0.009	0.023	ns
Direct effects																		
Between (country)																		
Quality (c)	0.187	0.049	***				0.096	0.029	***	0.068	0.035	ns	0.070	0.038	ns	0.070	0.034	*
Within (student)																		
Evaluations				0.046	0.001	***	0.046	0.001	***	0.046	0.001	***	0.046	0.001	***	0.046	0.001	***
Knowledge							0.000	0.000	**	0.000	0.000	**	0.000	0.000	ns	0.000	0.000	ns
Norms							−0.003	0.001	***	−0.003	0.001	***	−0.003	0.001	**	−0.003	0.001	***
Indirect effects																		
Between (country)																		
Quality on evaluations (a)										1.938	0.537	***						
Evaluations (b)										0.061	0.009	***						
Quality via evaluations (a × b)										0.117	0.035	***						
Total effect (a × b + c)										0.185	0.048	***						
Interaction effects																		
Quality × knowledge													0.013	0.003	***			
Quality × norms																0.102	0.021	***
N students	78,376			76,545			75,505			76,357			76,357			74,683		
N countries	24			24			24			24			24			24		
ICC	0.129			0.049			0.047			0.140			0.140			0.140		
R^2 (student)	0.012			0.443			0.444			0.403			—			—		
R^2 (country)	0.499			—			0.377			0.794			—			—		
AIC	1,589,042			115,189			113,594			666,126			661,904			663,928		

Notes: Multilevel structural equation models estimated with maximum likelihood; the set of model specifications comprises random-intercept models (M1–M4) and random-slope models (M5–M6); unstandardized estimates; standard errors in parentheses; all models account for individual-level control variables: gender, socio-economic status, and political interest; indirect effects are estimated in M5 and M6 but not reported; significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Sources: CPI 2022 (Transparency International, 2023); ICCS 2022 (Schulz et al., 2023); V-Dem v14 (Coppedge et al., 2024).

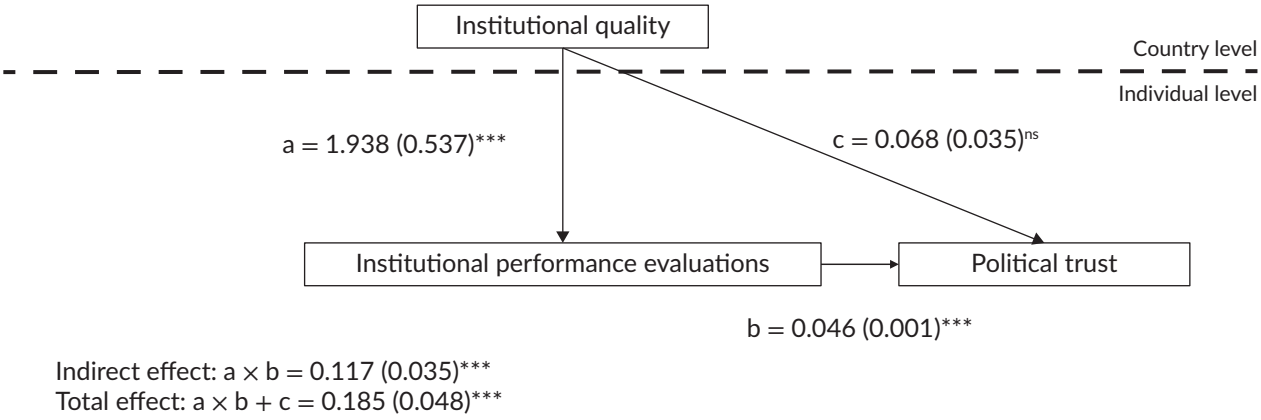

Figure 1. The indirect effect of institutional quality on political trust. Notes: Multilevel structural equation model estimated with maximum likelihood; unstandardized estimates; robust standard errors in parentheses; model specifications according to Model 4, Table 1; significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Sources: CPI 2022 (Transparency International, 2023); ICCS 2022 (Schulz et al., 2023); V-Dem v14 (Coppedge et al., 2024).

6.2. Moderation

To test H2a and H2b, which expect the relationship between institutional quality and evaluations to vary by adolescents' knowledge and norms, I introduce cross-level interaction effects one at a time. Slopes for the second part of the indirect effect are fixed. The results are presented in Table 1 and show significantly positive cross-level interaction effects for both knowledge (Model 5: $\beta = 0.013$, $p < 0.001$) and norms (Model 6: $\beta = 0.103$, $p < 0.001$). Substantively, this means that adolescents with higher knowledge and stronger norms are more responsive to institutional quality when developing their evaluations, and subsequently their political trust. To account for empirical overlap between knowledge and norms ($r = 0.432$ in the pooled data), an additional test includes both moderators simultaneously. This does not substantively alter the results: Both moderation effects decrease in size though remain statistically significant.

Figure 2 visualizes the conditional effects, showing predicted political trust levels as a function of institutional quality across varying levels of knowledge and norms (based on Models 5 and 6, respectively). For clarity, both moderators are binned into terciles (low, medium, and high). The graphs show that the moderation effects are primarily driven by students in low institutional quality contexts. While political trust levels are relatively similar across cognitive and normative groups in high-quality contexts, trust drops more sharply among politically informed and normatively committed adolescents as institutional quality declines. This asymmetry suggests that the moderation effects stem less from differences in high-quality contexts and more from heightened critical evaluations among engaged students in low-quality contexts.

The moderated models show small improvements in AIC relative to the baseline model (Model 4). Although the interaction terms are statistically meaningful, they remain modest in magnitude. This is likely because knowledge and norms are not consistently correlated with trust across all countries, as shown by the country-specific estimates (Table C1 in the Supplementary File). The effect of knowledge is strongly negative in Brazil and Colombia, positive in 12 countries (e.g., Bulgaria, Denmark, and the Netherlands), and non-significant in 10 countries (e.g., France, Spain, Cyprus, and Serbia). Norms display a similar uneven pattern, with significantly negative associations in 15 countries (e.g., Slovakia, Latvia, Romania, and Cyprus),

no significant relationship in mostly high-quality contexts (e.g., Denmark, Germany, Sweden, but also Brazil), and one positive effect in Norway. Given that knowledge and norms do not shape trust consistently, this limits the extent to which moderation improves overall model fit. In short, the moderation refines rather than fundamentally alters the mediation process.

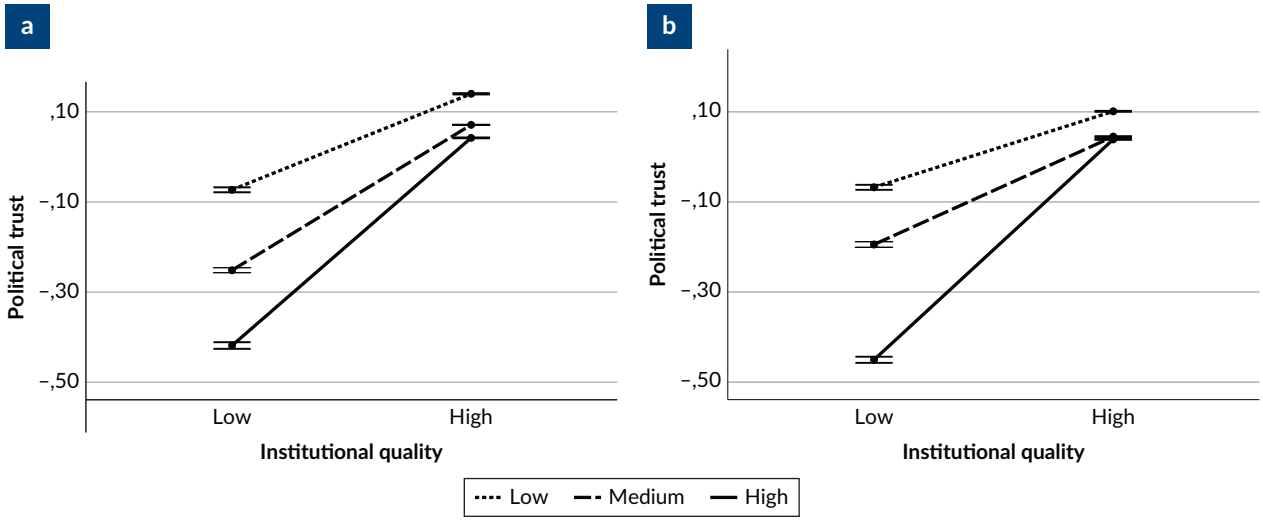

Figure 2. Indirect effect of democratic quality on political trust moderated by (a) knowledge (estimates based on Model 5, Table 1) and (b) norms (estimates based on Model 6, Table 1). Notes: Multilevel structural equation models estimated with maximum likelihood.; unstandardized estimates and 95% confidence intervals. Sources: CPI 2022 (Transparency International, 2023); ICCS 2022 (Schulz et al., 2023); V-Dem v14 (Coppedge et al., 2024).

7. Discussion

Political trust has long been understood as a cornerstone of democratic stability, yet its origins remain contested. Cultural theories emphasize cultural and micro-level socialization, while institutional theories highlight citizens' critical appraisal of institutional performance. It is particularly these "critical citizens" (Norris, 1999, 2022) who hold institutions accountable and stimulate democratization (van Alebeek et al., 2025; van der Meer & Janssen, 2025). However, research on adolescents has often portrayed young people as insulated from macro-political conditions and lacking the cognitive and normative resources needed for critical, evaluative trust (Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017). Drawing on political socialization and cognitive development theory and ICCS 2022 data, this study challenges that view by examining to what extent early adolescents develop political trust through evaluative processes.

The findings reveal that adolescents are far from passive learners. Institutional quality influences adolescents' political trust entirely indirectly through subjective evaluations, mirroring adult patterns (Hooghe et al., 2017; Mauk, 2021; van der Meer, 2017; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011). Even at age 14, before adolescents can formally participate, macro-level conditions play a formative role when adolescents perceive and interpret them. Moreover, the strength of this evaluative pathway varies: Civic knowledge and democratic norms amplify the extent to which institutional quality shapes evaluations, and in turn, political trust. These effects are especially pronounced in low-quality institutional contexts, where politically informed and normatively committed adolescents express sharper declines in trust. The findings align with

theories of attitude formation (Zaller, 1992), which emphasize that individuals vary in their ability to receive, interpret, and accept political information based on their political awareness and predispositions. It also resonates with the notion of "critical citizens" (Norris, 1999): Those with stronger cognitive and normative foundations are more likely to detect institutional shortcomings and to treat such information as relevant for legitimacy attitudes. Cross-national heterogeneity further highlights that evaluative trust formation is context-dependent. In high-performing democracies, knowledgeable adolescents tend to express higher trust, whereas in lower-performing contexts, knowledgeable adolescents report markedly lower trust. Such critical engagement is especially activated under conditions of democratic deficit, consistent with the idea that sophistication sharpens recognition of institutional malperformance (Norris, 2022). However, in several countries, civic knowledge neither heightens trust nor fuels skepticism. This suggests that a threshold effect may operate: Once adolescents possess a minimal grasp of how institutions function, further increases in civic knowledge do not substantially alter how they interpret institutional performance. Democratic norms show a more stable negative association: Adolescents with stronger democratic commitments tend to trust representative institutions less, holding them to higher standards (Mauk, 2020). Still, in well-established democracies such as Norway—where institutions most closely match these ideal expectations—normatively committed adolescents express higher political trust. This raises questions about the evaluative benchmarks they apply. Future work could use person-centered approaches to identify distinct "democratic profiles" and examine which evaluative standards they apply (Hooghe et al., 2017). For example, to what extent adolescents benchmark their institutions not against an abstract democratic ideal but against other salient countries.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. While the cross-sectional nature of the data offers a valuable snapshot of evaluative political trust among adolescents, panel data would allow stronger tests of causal inference and could trace how adolescents' evaluations and trust evolve as they gain political experience, move through different educational environments, or encounter major political events. Such data would also clarify whether adolescents become more critical as they age or whether early evaluations persist. Furthermore, future research could benefit from additional indicators of trustworthiness criteria, responding to novel developments in the field (Ouattara et al., 2023). Finally, as the study focuses on new and established democracies, future research could explore evaluative trust in more restrictive, authoritarian contexts. Research shows that in autocracies, citizens' perceptions of democratic quality often diverge sharply from objective measures because people rely on different democratic standards or on regime propaganda (Dalton et al., 2007; Mauk, 2020). Studying adolescents in such environments would clarify whether evaluative trust can develop when institutional information is filtered or strategically framed, and whether young people can form independent assessments under such constraints.

The findings carry several implications for research on political trust and political socialization. Early adolescence—and potentially childhood—emerges as a critical period for the development of evaluative trust. This study shows that the interaction between institutional and developmental factors matters. Adolescents do not form political attitudes in isolation from the broader political environment; their perceptions are shaped by the quality of democratic institutions and interpreted through their own cognitive and normative frameworks. Civic education therefore plays a central role in fostering the cognitive skills and democratic commitments that enable adolescents to form critical yet more accurate evaluations of political institutions. Strengthening these resources—especially in low-quality contexts—provides a foundation for constructive democratic accountability and engagement. Ultimately, equipping young citizens to critically assess

institutional performance, rather than simply encouraging trust, is essential for sustaining democratic legitimacy in the long term.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the reviewers and editors for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts. I am also grateful to the thematic issue editors, Stylianos Ioannis Tzagkarakis and Martin Neumann, for their guidance and support.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between KU Leuven and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data used in this article are available in the IEA data repository, at https://www.iea.nl/data-tools/repository/iccs.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used OpenAI's GPT-5 to assist with language editing. All AI-assisted content was reviewed and edited by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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