

Examining News Media Use and Trust in Public Institutions in Kenya: The Moderating Role of Perceived Corruption and Political Freedom

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Much empirical research has examined the nexus between trust in public institutions and media use, but most of which is Western-centric. We steer off this lane using Afrobarometer survey data ($N = 2,400$) to examine this phenomenon in Kenya. Hierarchical regression analysis shows that the perceived corruption in Kenyan institutions statistically stifled the theoretical perception of a positive relationship between trust in institutions and media usage. Specifically, radio surfaced as a vital player in cultivating trust in public institutions, especially when perceived corruption is low. Moreover, perceived political freedom interacts with radio use in shaping trust, indicating a dynamic relationship between institutional inquiry, media consumption for news, and democratic procedures in Kenya. We discuss the implications of these findings and offer areas for further research.

Keywords: trust in public institutions, news media use, radio news, perceived corruption, political freedom

In developing democracies like Kenya where trust in public institutions remains low (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022), the media's role in shaping political attitudes presents a paradox: While news consumption can foster political learning, engagement, and trust (Kipkoech, 2023; Norris, 2000), it may

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equally fuel cynicism and polarization (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). This tension between the “virtuous circle” and “media malaise” theories (Norris, 2000; Robinson, 1976) remains unresolved in Kenya’s understudied media landscape (Kipkoech, 2023), where institutional trust dynamics differ markedly from Western contexts (Camaj, 2014; Verboord, Janssen, Kristensen, & Marquart, 2023). This theoretical and contextual gap necessitates empirical investigation to determine whether Kenya’s media ecosystem aligns more closely with trust-building or trust-eroding paradigms, and under what specific conditions these effects manifest.

Trust in public institutions is fundamental to a healthy democracy, as it legitimizes government decisions and fosters citizen engagement in political issues (Avery, 2009). In Kenya, trust in institutions is shaped by news media use and perceptions of political corruption and freedom. As a hybrid democracy, Kenya faces significant challenges in democratic consolidation, with institutional corruption emerging as the most critical concern among citizens, ultimately eroding public trust (Hope, 2014). Additionally, political freedom plays a crucial role in shaping institutional trust. Research suggests that in countries with greater political freedom, individuals experience a stronger sense of agency and political efficacy, enhancing their trust in institutions (Jiang & Zhang, 2021).

Kenya’s media system, vibrant yet intricate (Tully & Ekdale, 2014), offers a captivating microcosm to explore this vital relationship (news media use and trust in public institutions), presenting a unique and intriguing research opportunity. For instance, rapid technological advancements, including social media, have transformed Kenya into the *Silicon Savannah*, characterized by extensive Internet connections and mobile phone access, allowing audiences to engage with various types of media from the comfort of their own homes. Yet, social media platforms have become playgrounds for political and social banter (Tully & Ekdale, 2014), the spread of false information (Madrid-Morales, Tully, Mudavadi, Matanji, & Diop, 2025), and conspiracy theories, contributing to low trust in public institutions and even dissatisfaction with democracy (Ochieng, Grabe, Ireri, & Mudavadi, 2025). In addition, Mogambi (2016) observed that most Kenyans prefer radio as a source of information due to its ease of accessibility. They access the radio through mobile phones, public vehicles, private cars, at home, and in their neighborhoods. As such, we expect news consumption through different media types in Kenya to influence trust in public institutions differently.

Public trust in institutions in Kenya is further undermined by high reports of corruption (Schiffrin & Fannin, 2016), with Kenya often ranking poorly on the world corruption indices (Transparency International, 2024). In explaining the deeply entrenched corruption in Kenya, Onyango (2024) observes “a mafia-like white-collar corruption syndicate (cartels) and isolated corrupt practices emerge at all levels and sectors to enforce corruption and swindle citizens through unscrupulous bureaucratic processes... [including] bribery, kickbacks, threats, and murder” (p. 689). These and many other factors shape institutional trust in Kenya. In addition, political freedom in Kenya remains in flux, with recent government unrest resulting in the deaths of young protesters (Hill & Ford, 2025), further undermining trust in the government and its affiliated institutions. While Kenya holds regular elections with a 5-year term and encourages open civic spaces, instances of interference with media freedom, repression of dissent, and democratic backsliding have been documented (Freedom House, 2024), particularly during or near electoral periods. As such, these conditions create a platform where trust in public institutions and media consumption are shaped by forces beyond

media consumption, including institutional and political dynamics. Therefore, relying on survey data collected by Afrobarometer, we examine how different news media use predicts trust in public institutions in Kenya, as well as their interaction with perceptions of institutional corruption and political freedom. The following sections present the theoretical perspectives, the study's literature, methods, findings, and discussion in consecutive order.

Media Use & Trust in Institutions

Trust in public institutions refers to individuals' belief that entities such as government branches, anti-corruption agencies, and religious organizations will consistently behave in ways that align with citizens' normative expectations of fairness, integrity, and competence (Avery, 2009; Kipkoech, 2023). This form of trust is a crucial barometer of how the public perceives the functioning and governance of institutional systems. It is foundational to sustaining democratic legitimacy and ensuring political stability (Newton & Norris, 2000). High levels of institutional trust foster civic engagement and compliance with laws and regulations, whereas diminished trust can lead to political disengagement, skepticism, and unrest (Grande & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2025). Importantly, the degree of public trust in institutions significantly shapes how people evaluate the legitimacy, accountability, and transparency of governing bodies. Therefore, understanding the factors that enhance or erode trust in public institutions is essential for promoting democratic resilience and effective governance.

Extensive research has examined the influence of news media on public trust in institutions (Avery, 2009; Camaj, 2014). However, most of this research has been conducted within stable democracies, such as the United States and Western Europe, leaving empirical gaps in comprehending how these dynamics function in contexts characterized by greater political stability. Kenya serves as fertile ground for expanding this area of research. Its media landscape is vibrant and contested, marked by a robust tradition of "independent" journalism (Kipkoech, 2023) *vis-à-vis* political interference, commercial interests, and periodic threats to press freedom (Ireru, 2015; Mudavadi, 2025). Concurrently, Kenya's political environment exhibits fluctuating democratic liberties, entrenched ethnic divisions, occasional balkanization, and pervasive perceptions of corruption—all of which can significantly influence how citizens interpret news and form trust in public institutions. As such, examining this context provides valuable insights into how audiences in contexts with structural factors, such as hybrid media systems and constant political and ethnic challenges, perceive trust in public institutions, potentially diverging from Western models. More so, this study enhances theoretical understanding by illustrating how local political and media environments compare to global communication patterns. In doing so, it goes beyond universal assumptions to accurately reflect the intricate realities of media and institutional trust in understudied Global South contexts.

Overall, media use for obtaining news has been identified as a critical factor influencing individuals' trust in political and public institutions (Avery, 2009). Through its democratic role of informing the public about institutional performance and governance, the media significantly shapes public attitudes toward political institutions (Adegbola, Gearhart, & Zhang, 2022; Camaj, 2014). However, the impact of media use for news on institutional trust has produced two competing streams of findings. One body of research supports the media malaise or videomalaise hypothesis, suggesting that increased exposure to cynical or

negative news about government actions fosters public distrust, political cynicism, and disengagement from the political process (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Robinson, 1976). According to this view, the media, particularly when emphasizing scandals, conflicts, or failures, can erode confidence in political institutions and contribute to political alienation.

Conversely, an alternative line of research posits a virtuous circle perspective, in which media use enhances political trust and engagement (Avery, 2009; Norris, 2000). From this standpoint, regular political news consumption enhances individuals' knowledge and understanding of institutional processes, which in turn fosters greater trust and political efficacy. The virtuous circle theory argues that attention to news and institutional trust are mutually reinforcing, as politically interested individuals seek out news, become more informed, and develop more positive attitudes toward democratic governance (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). Supporting this view, Newton (1999) found that news media use is positively associated with trust in political institutions and higher levels of political knowledge and interest.

However, not all forms of media exert the same influence on institutional trust; the relationship between news media use and political trust often varies across media. In particular, television news consumption has frequently been found to be negatively associated with political trust (Moy & Scheufele, 2000; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Robinson, 1976). Robinson (1976) argued that reliance on television as a primary source of political information fosters political distrust and feelings of inefficacy. This effect is primarily attributed to television's tendency to highlight the shortcomings of political campaigns and institutions, often portraying them in a critical or sensational manner. Additionally, television news frequently emphasizes social problems, scandals, and conflict, which can contribute to viewers' dissatisfaction with the political system and reinforce cynical attitudes. Mutz and Reeves (2005) further demonstrated that incivility in televised political discourse, such as hostile exchanges in political debates or talk shows, can undermine trust in government by reinforcing negative affect and perceptions of dysfunction. Aligning with the videomalaise hypothesis, we propose the following:

H1a: News consumption through television will be negatively related to trust in public institutions.

In contrast to television, news consumption through newspapers has generally been associated with higher levels of institutional trust. Newspapers tend to provide more in-depth, analytical, and fact-based reporting, often focusing on substantive coverage of political and social issues rather than emotional or sensational content (Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, & Shehata, 2016). This emphasis on rational discourse and comprehensive information is believed to foster a more informed citizenry, thereby enhancing trust in political institutions. Empirical studies have supported this relationship; for instance, Moy and Scheufele (2000) found that newspaper consumption positively correlates with trust in government. Similarly, Newton (1999) observed that readers of broadsheet newspapers in Britain, compared to those of tabloid newspapers or television news audiences, reported higher levels of political trust. In Kenya, the media landscape includes a more substantial presence of mainstream newspapers relative to tabloids (Ireru, 2015). This suggests that Kenyan newspaper readers are more likely to be exposed to substantive political coverage that aligns with the mechanisms proposed by the virtuous circle hypothesis, wherein news exposure fosters political learning, trust, and engagement. Hence, we expect that newspaper consumers in Kenya will be more inclined toward higher institutional trust:

H1b: News consumption through newspapers will positively affect trust in public institutions.

Like newspapers, radio, as a traditional media outlet, often provides hard news content that is issue-focused, informative, and generally less emotional or sensational. This format can be particularly effective in facilitating political learning and fostering trust among individuals who are interested in current affairs and actively follow the news (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). Public service radio, in particular, has been shown to contribute positively to citizens' trust in political institutions. For example, Holmberg (1999) found that exposure to public radio is associated with increased confidence in the political process. Similarly, Camaj (2014) reported a positive relationship between radio news use and political trust, suggesting that radio can be a reliable platform for promoting civic engagement and institutional legitimacy. While it is true that sensational or dramatized content on the radio can foster political cynicism (Strömbäck et al., 2016), such effects may be limited in contexts where public service broadcasting dominates the media landscape. In Kenya, radio remains a primary news source for many citizens, with much of this content delivered through public or mainstream radio outlets rather than commercial stations that prioritize sensationalism (GeoPoll, 2021). Radio is a uniquely positioned medium in contexts marked by limited literacy and infrastructural disparities. In Kenya, radio remains a highly accessible and trusted source of information, often serving as a bridge between state messaging and public discourse. However, this accessibility also means that radio can be instrumentalized by political actors, making its role in democratic and political transitions both influential and complex. Accordingly, radio news consumption in Kenya is likely to reinforce trust in public institutions by informing and engaging the public in a constructive manner:

H1c: News consumption through radio will be positively related to trust in public institutions.

Internet use for news consumption has increasingly been linked to higher levels of political trust. Ceron (2015) found that individuals who turn to the Internet specifically for news tend to have greater trust in public institutions, likely because online platforms offer greater access to diverse sources of information that can enhance political awareness and understanding. While broader Internet use has shown mixed effects on political engagement—with some studies finding it facilitates participation and others suggesting it fosters disengagement (Boulianne, 2009)—more targeted research suggests that using the Internet to consume news can positively influence citizens' satisfaction with political systems and democratic functioning (Bailard, 2012). In Kenya, the Internet has rapidly become a key channel for news consumption, and digital access is expanding. News outlets are increasingly migrating online, and more Kenyan citizens are turning to the Internet to stay informed about governance and public affairs (Nyabola, 2018). This growing reliance on online news sources may contribute to a more politically informed citizenry and, in turn, foster greater trust in institutions:

H1d: News consumption through the Internet will positively affect trust in public institutions.

In contrast to the generally positive association between targeted Internet news consumption and institutional trust, reliance on social media for news has been linked to lower levels of trust in public institutions (Ceron, 2015). Unlike traditional online news consumption, which often involves deliberate information seeking from established news outlets, social media platforms expose users to a flood of emotionally charged, opinion-based, and often unverified content. Research shows that negative and

sensational content spreads more rapidly on social media, shaping users' perceptions in a disproportionately critical or cynical direction (Cheng, 2020). Furthermore, the algorithmic nature of social media fosters the formation of echo chambers, where individuals are repeatedly exposed to ideologically consistent and potentially biased content through their own selective exposure or the platform's recommendation systems (Klein & Robison, 2020). This can amplify distrust by reinforcing negative attitudes toward institutions and minimizing exposure to diverse or balanced viewpoints. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1e: News consumption through social media will negatively affect trust in public institutions.

Perceived Corruption and Political Freedom & Trust in Institutions

Public trust in institutions is shaped by media consumption patterns, individuals' perceptions of government performance, and the broader political environment (Kipkoech, 2023). When citizens believe that government institutions function effectively and in the public interest, they are more likely to develop and maintain trust in these institutions. For instance, Camaj (2014) found a positive correlation between perceived government performance and trust in political institutions, suggesting that institutional trust is deeply rooted in the legitimacy of performance. However, widespread perceptions of corruption can severely undermine this trust. Extensive research has shown that public awareness of corruption, particularly when reinforced through media coverage, negatively impacts trust in government. Chang and Chu (2006) found that exposure to reports of systemic corruption within political and administrative institutions eroded public trust. Similarly, Akinola, Omar, and Mustapha (2022) demonstrated a negative relationship between perceived government corruption and political trust in Nigeria. Beesley and Hawkins (2022) also observed that even brief exposure to information about corruption significantly reduced institutional trust. Using data from the Asian Barometer, Wang (2015) demonstrated that perceptions of corruption in East Asian countries consistently and detrimentally affected citizens' trust in public institutions.

In the Kenyan context, corruption remains a deeply entrenched issue (Onyango, 2024). Harrington and Manji (2013) described corruption as a pervasive "feature of life in Kenya at all levels," highlighting how day-to-day interactions with police officers and civil servants are often tainted by bribery and extortion (p. 4). According to Schiffrin and Fannin (2016), the average Kenyan resident is estimated to pay as many as 16 bribes per month, illustrating the normalization and widespread nature of petty corruption. On a larger scale, in 2011, the Kenyan National Treasury reported that approximately 20–30% of the national budget was lost annually to corruption through fraudulent procurement practices, rigged bidding processes, and other forms of financial mismanagement. These losses represent a significant opportunity cost to national development and severely damage the legitimacy and credibility of public institutions. Given this context, examining how perceptions of corruption influence institutional trust in Kenya is critical. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Perceived corruption will be negatively associated with trust in public institutions.

Research shows that in modern society, governments that provide their citizens with modern conditions of life, including social and political frameworks and institutions that promote political and human rights and freedom, are more likely to create and sustain trust in institutions (Newton, 1999). Political

freedom refers to the ability of individuals to participate freely in political processes, express their opinions without fear of repression, and access fair and open electoral systems (Neumann, 1953). Prior research has shown that individuals in countries with greater political freedom tend to trust government and institutions more, as they perceive these systems to be more transparent and accountable (Jiang & Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, political freedom influences how individuals engage with and interpret news media, shaping their perceptions of governance and policy decisions. Political freedom also gives people a greater sense of autonomy and control over their lives, which has been linked to higher overall happiness and well-being (Bavetta, Patti, Miller, & Navarra, 2017).

Kenya's political governance and degree of political freedom have been shaped by a complex and evolving history. After gaining independence in 1963, Kenya operated as a multi-party democracy, but this system was short-lived. In 1982, the country transitioned into a one-party state under the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU), curtailing political competition and civic freedoms (Kagwanja & Southall, 2009; Widner, 1993). The reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1991 marked a critical turning point in Kenya's democratization process. However, restoring political pluralism did not immediately translate into a stable or entirely free political environment. Instead, periods of democratic progress were often interrupted by political violence, repression, and institutional weaknesses. One of the most defining moments in Kenya's recent democratic history was the 2007–2008 post-election crisis. The violence that erupted following a disputed presidential election led to significant human rights violations, including widespread loss of life, internal displacement, and the breakdown of law and order (Okia, 2011). During this period, political freedoms were severely curtailed: freedom of movement was restricted, and access to independent media, freedom of assembly, and expression were notably suppressed (Okia, 2011). This period of instability exposed the fragility of democratic institutions and raised serious concerns about the government's willingness and capacity to uphold fundamental civil liberties. Given this historical and political backdrop, we propose that perceived political freedom will influence trust in public institutions among Kenyans:

H3: Perceived political freedom will be positively associated with trust in public institutions.

Moderating Effect of Perceived Corruption and Political Freedom

Citizens are not homogeneous in their engagement with or influence by news media, and the relationship between media use and institutional trust may vary significantly based on individual-level characteristics (Avery, 2009; Kipkoech, 2023). A growing body of research suggests that the effects of news consumption on trust in public institutions are not uniform but are shaped by preexisting beliefs, attitudes, and evaluations of the political system. For instance, Avery (2009) demonstrated that the impact of news media exposure on political trust is moderated by the type of media source (e.g., newspapers or television) and the individual's pre-existing political trust. This finding underscores the importance of considering personal predispositions when evaluating media effects.

Furthermore, other studies have shown that individuals' evaluations of government performance, such as perceptions of economic conditions, political efficacy, and levels of corruption, can also shape how news consumption influences institutional trust. For example, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that negative evaluations of the political system can amplify the detrimental effects of cynical or critical news

coverage, further eroding trust. More recently, Kipkoech (2023) emphasized that in contexts where government performance is perceived as poor, exposure to media highlighting governance failures may intensify skepticism and distrust toward public institutions.

Building on this line of research, the present study examines how the relationship between news consumption and institutional trust is influenced by individual perceptions of the political environment, specifically perceptions of corruption and political freedom. Rather than treating media effects uniformly, we explore how these contextual perceptions interact with media exposure to either amplify or attenuate trust in public institutions. In the Kenyan context, Kipkoech (2023) provided evidence for this interactional dynamic, showing that individuals' perceptions of corruption significantly condition the negative association between television news consumption and institutional trust. Specifically, individuals who perceive high levels of government corruption tend to exhibit even lower trust in institutions when frequently exposed to television news. This suggests that media exposure may reinforce cynicism and disillusionment in contexts where corruption is perceived as endemic. Conversely, in environments where corruption is perceived as low or manageable, the same media content might increase accountability and reinforce trust. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Perceived corruption will moderate the relationship between news media use and institutional trust in Kenya.

Perceptions of political freedom may also be a crucial moderating factor in the relationship between news media use and institutional trust. Individuals who feel that they have the right and freedom to express their opinions, participate in political processes, and hold leaders accountable are more likely to interpret news media content constructively and engage more positively with political institutions (Bavetta et al., 2017; Neumann, 1953). In such cases, media exposure may enhance democratic engagement and reinforce trust in institutions by aligning with citizens' sense of agency and voice.

Conversely, individuals who perceive limited political freedom due to restrictions on free speech, press, or political participation may view news content with greater skepticism or interpret it as further evidence of institutional dysfunction or repression. In these contexts, exposure to news may reinforce alienation and distrust, particularly if media coverage highlights political shortcomings or corruption without offering avenues for redress or participation (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Bavetta et al. (2017) further demonstrate that perceived political freedom shapes how individuals understand their role in the political process. Greater autonomy allows people to critically assess government performance through direct media consumption or independent political inquiry. This enhanced sense of political agency can influence how citizens evaluate the credibility of institutions and their willingness to extend trust to public bodies. Moreover, comparative studies suggest that societies with higher levels of political freedom tend to foster greater trust in government and institutions (Jiang & Zhang, 2021). Individuals in these environments also tend to engage with media more actively and critically, using news as a tool for informed citizenship rather than as a source of frustration or disillusionment. These findings suggest that perceived political freedom may shape how citizens consume news and how that consumption translates into trust or distrust in public institutions. Accordingly, we propose that perceived political freedom moderates the

relationship between different types of news media use and institutional trust. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5: Perceived political freedom will moderate the relationship between news media use and institutional trust in Kenya.

Method

This study leverages data collected from the ninth round of surveys by Afrobarometer, a reputable pan-African organization (see Afrobarometer.org). This non-partisan research group won the 2004 Data Set Award in the Comparative Politics section of the American Political Science Association and conducted nationally representative surveys using face-to-face interviews across the African continent (Afrobarometer, 2022). The respondents were selected between 2021 and 2022 through stratified multistage probability sampling to obtain representative samples. First, households across Kenya were chosen randomly. Research assistants then randomly selected adult participants in these households and interviewed them in the language they found most comfortable. This exercise yielded a 65% response rate, featuring a nationally representative sample of 2,400 respondents and a margin of error of $\pm 2-3\%$ at a 95% confidence level.

Measures

Dependent Variable

Trust in public institutions is the dependent variable, measuring how much trust individuals place in public institutions in Kenya. Respondents were asked, "How much do you trust each of the following?" with responses ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (a lot). Respondents were provided with 12 items: The president, the parliament, the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), your county assembly, your county governor, the ruling party, the opposition political parties, the police, the Kenya Defense Forces (KDF), the courts of law, traditional leaders, and religious leaders. These items were combined as an index, and reliability was rechecked ($\alpha = .87$; $M = 1.45$; $SD = .64$).

Independent Variable

The independent variable in our analysis is the various types of news media use. News media use was measured by asking participants "how often do you get news from the following sources?" using a scale of 0 (never) to 4 (every day): Radio ($M = 3.34$; $SD = 1.23$), television ($M = 2.60$; $SD = 1.73$), print newspapers ($M = .81$; $SD = 1.29$), Internet ($M = 1.86$; $SD = 1.86$), and social media sites ($M = 1.89$; $SD = 1.87$).

Moderators

Based on prior literature (Akinola et al., 2022; Jiang & Zhang, 2021), political freedom and perceived corruption moderate the relationship between news media use and trust in political institutions. Therefore, political freedom and perceived corruption serve as moderators in the analysis.

Political freedom was measured by asking respondents to choose how free (0 = *not free at all* to 4 = *completely free*) they were to "say what you think," "to join any political organization," and "choose who to vote for without feeling pressured." The three items were combined into an index, and reliability was rechecked ($\alpha = .82$; $M = 3.43$; $SD = .63$).

Perceived corruption of institutions was measured by asking respondents, "How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption?": The president and officials of his office, members of parliament, civil servants, members of the county assembly (MCA), the governor and officials of his or her office, police, judges and magistrates, tax officials, traditional leaders, religious leaders, business executives, and non-governmental organizations. The 12 items reliably hung together and were combined into an index ($\alpha = .90$; $M = 1.45$; $SD = .53$).

Control Variables

We control variables contributing to trust in political institutions, including the country's present and individual economic conditions, the perceived increase in corruption, the freeness and fairness of the previous election, media freedom, perceived government performance, and demographics.

The country's present and individual economic conditions were measured by asking, "In general, how do you describe (1) the present economic conditions of the country ($M = 1.62$; $SD = 1.01$) and (2) your own present living conditions?" ($M = 2.39$; $SD = 1.18$). The responses ranged from 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good).

The perceived increase in the level of corruption was measured by asking the respondents, "Over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?" Response alternatives ranged from 1 (increased a lot) to 5 (decreased a lot) ($M = .30$; $SD = .46$).

The risk of reporting corruption was measured by asking respondents, "Can ordinary people report incidents of corruption without fear, or do they risk retaliation or other negative consequences if they speak?" (0 = *can report without fear* to 1 = *risk retaliation or other negative consequences*) ($M = .84$; $SD = .37$).

The freeness and fairness of the previous election were measured by asking respondents, "How would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2022?" Responses ranged from 1 (not free and fair) to 4 (completely free and fair) ($M = .66$; $SD = .47$).

Perceived media freedom was measured by asking respondents, "How free is the news media to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government?" Responses ranged from 0 (not at all free) to 3 (completely free) ($M = 1.94$; $SD = .96$).

Perceived government performance was measured by asking respondents to rate Kenya's government handling (1 = *very badly* to 4 = *very well*) of the following 17 items: managing the economy, improving the living standards of the poor, creating jobs, keeping prices stable, narrowing gaps between

rich and poor, reducing crime, improving essential health services, addressing educational needs, providing water and sanitation services, fighting corruption in government, maintaining roads and bridges, providing a reliable supply of electricity, preventing or resolving violent conflict, promoting equal rights and opportunities for women, protecting and promoting the well-being of vulnerable children, addressing the problem of climate change, and reducing pollution and protecting the environment. After checking the reliability, these items were combined into an index ($\alpha = .88$; $M = 2.16$; $SD = .48$).

Demographics

Our sample ($N = 2,400$) consisted of adult Kenyans over 18 years old, with an average age of 36.91 ($SD = 15.00$). 50% of the samples were males, 47.8% reported having at least completed high school, 40.4% were employed, 36.9% lived in rural areas, and 52.5% identified as having access to the Internet (see Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' Demographics.

	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Age	2400		36.91	15.00
Gender	2400			
Male	1200	50%		
Female	1200	50%		
Education	2396		4.21	1.78
No formal schooling	93	3.9%		
Informal schooling only (including Koranic schooling)	9	0.4%		
Some primary schooling	289	12%		
Primary school completed	500	20.8%		
Intermediate school or some secondary/ high school	360	15%		
Secondary/high school completed	617	25.7%		
Post-secondary qualifications, other than university, e.g., a diploma or degree from a polytechnic or college	349	14.5%		
Some university	66	2.8%		
University completed	106	4.4%		
Post-graduate	7	0.3%		
Employment Status	2400			
Unemployed	1430	59.6%		
Employed	970	40.4%		
Residential Location	2400			
Rural area	885	36.9%		
Urban area	1515	63.1%		
Internet Access	2208			
Do NOT have Internet access	949	39.5%		
Have Internet Access	1259	52.5%		

Results

The variables were entered into five sequential blocks based on theoretical considerations: (1) demographics, (2) economic evaluation, (3) perceived corruption, (4) perceived freedom, and (5) news media use (see Model 1 in Table 2). Demographic characteristics and individuals' evaluations of Kenya's overall economic condition and personal economic situation were first included as control variables, consistent with existing literature suggesting that perceptions of economic well-being can influence trust in public institutions (Li, Xiao, & Gong, 2015). The next blocks included perceived corruption, such as the perceived risk of reporting corruption and the perceived corruption of institutions, as well as perceived freedom, encompassing perceptions of media freedom, the fairness of past elections, and government performance. These variables have been identified in prior research as important predictors of trust in public institutions (Camaj, 2014). Finally, various forms of news media use were added in the last block of the regression model. In the sixth block (see Model 2 in Table 2), interaction terms were included to examine potential moderation effects. Multicollinearity checks indicated that no correlation coefficients between trust in public institutions and other variables of interest exceeded .80, and the variance inflation factor (VIF) values of all the independent variables were all below 2. This indicates that there are no existing multicollinearity issues.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Trust in Public Institutions in Kenya.

Variable	Trust in public institutions	
	Model 1	Model 2
Demographics		
Age	.06	.05
Gender (1 = male)	-.10***	-.10***
Residence (1= rural)	-.03	-.03
Education	.08*	-.09*
Employment status	-.04	-.04
Access to the Internet	-.05	-.05
ΔR^2	.03***	.03***
Economic evaluation		
Country's present economic condition	.00	.00
Individual's present economic condition	.06	.06
Country's direction	.05	.08
ΔR^2	.05***	.05***
Corruption		
Perceived corruption of institutions	-.22***	-.03
Increase in the level of corruption	-.01	-.01
Risk of reporting corruption	-.04	-.04
ΔR^2	.09***	.09***
Perceived freedom		
Free and fairness of previous elections	.15***	.16***
Media freedom	.08*	.07*
Political freedom	.09**	.48***
Government performance	.22***	.26***
ΔR^2	.09***	.10***
News media use variables		
Radio		
Television	-.00	.07
Newspaper	.04	-.36
Internet	.16*	.46
Social media	-.12	.08
ΔR^2	.01	.01
Interaction		
Radio X Perceived corruption of institutions		-.27*
Television X Perceived corruption of institutions		.06
Newspaper X Perceived corruption of institutions		.16
Internet X Perceived corruption of institutions		-.33
Social media X Perceived corruption of institutions		.14
Radio X Political freedom		-.61**
Television X Political freedom		-.12
Newspaper X Political freedom		.26

Internet X Political freedom		-0.03
Social media V Political freedom		-0.32
ΔR^2		.01
Total R ²	.26	.27**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. The weights are standardized regression coefficients.

H1 proposed that different types of news media use would be associated with trust in public institutions in Kenya. As shown in Model 2 in Table 2, results showed that radio use for news was positively associated with trust in public institutions ($\beta = .71, p < .001$). However, television ($\beta = .07, p > .05$), newspaper ($\beta = -.36, p > .05$), Internet ($\beta = .46, p > .05$), and social media use ($\beta = .08, p > .05$) for news were not associated with trust in public institutions in Kenya. Therefore, H1 was partially supported.

H2 proposed that perceived corruption in public institutions would be negatively associated with trust in public institutions. Results showed that perceived corruption in public institutions was not significantly related to trust in public institutions ($\beta = -.03, p > .05$) (see Table 2, Model 2). Therefore, H1 was not supported.

H3 proposed that perceived political freedom would be positively related to trust in public institutions in Kenya. Results showed that political freedom was positively associated with trust in public institutions in Kenya ($\beta = .26, p < .001$) (see Table 2, Model 2). Therefore, H2 was supported.

H4 proposed that perceived corruption of institutions would moderate the relationship between news media use and trust in public institutions in Kenya. PROCESS Model 1 was used to test the interaction effects and revealed two significant effects. Specifically, perceived corruption in institutions in Kenya moderated the relationship between radio usage for news and trust in public institutions. When individuals perceived public institutions as less corrupt, the usage of radio for news did not impact trust in institutions; however, when individuals perceived public institutions as highly corrupt, individuals' trust in public institutions increased as their usage of radio for news increased ($\beta = -.27, p < .05$) (see Table 2 & Figure 1).

H5 proposed that political freedom would moderate the relationship between news media use and trust in public institutions in Kenya. Moderation analysis results showed that political freedom moderated the relationship between radio news use and trust in public institutions. More specifically, when individuals perceived themselves to be in a low political freedom environment, greater use of radio for news was associated with higher trust in public institutions; however, in high political freedom environments, increased radio news consumption corresponded with decreased trust in public institutions ($\beta = -.61, p < .01$) (see Table 2 & Figure 2).

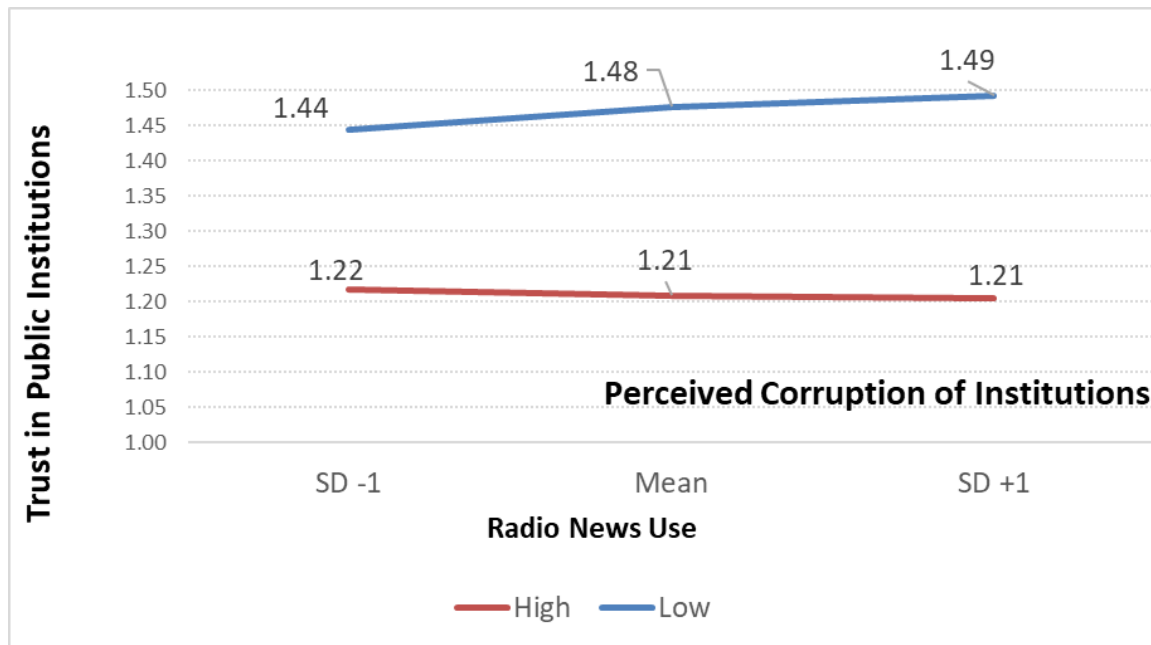


Figure 1. Interaction effects of perceived corruption of institutions and radio news use on trust in public institutions.

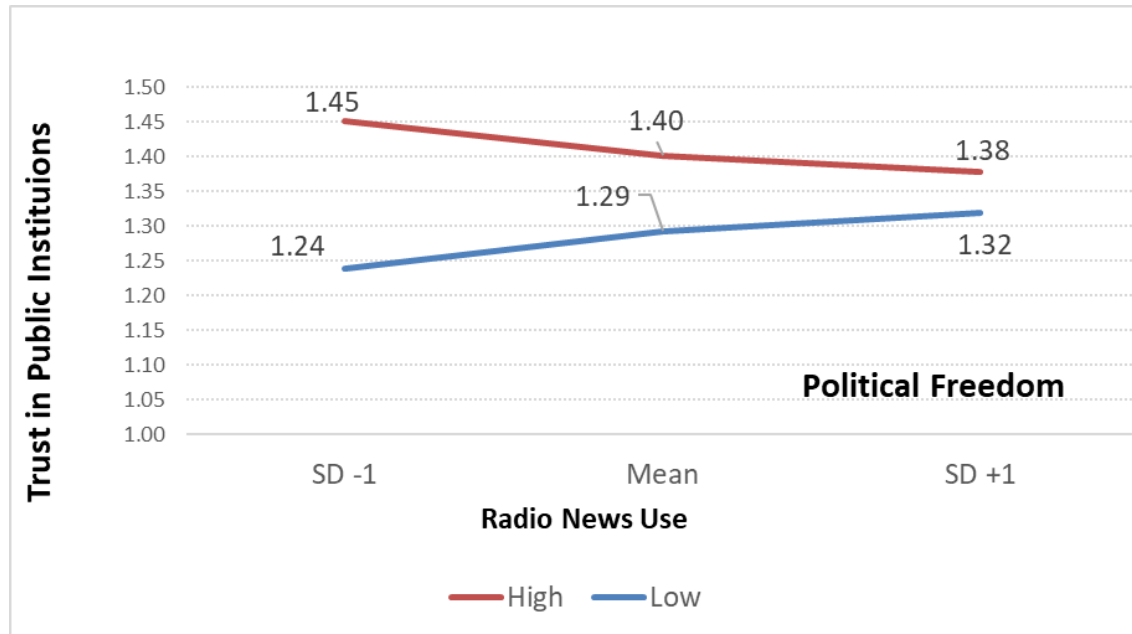


Figure 2. Interaction effects of political freedom and radio news use on trust in public institutions.

Discussion

The relationship between *news media use* and *trust in public institutions* has been thoroughly explored in Western democracies (Camaj, 2014; Verboord et al., 2023). However, it remains insufficiently examined in Global South settings, such as Kenya (Kipkoech, 2023). This research aimed to fill that void by examining how various media outlets affect trust in Kenyan public institutions, while also considering the influence of perceived corruption and political freedom, significant yet often overlooked concepts in the Global South. Our results illustrate a nuanced media landscape, highlighting radio's distinctive impact, which depends on citizens' views of their political context. As both well-established and emerging democracies face increasing democratic backsliding, such as political polarization, disinformation campaigns, and declining trust in media (Kwak, Tomescu-Dubrow, Slomczynski, & Dubrow, 2020; Palacios, 2025), our study of Kenya reflects a localized manifestation of these broader global trends, particularly in how citizens engage with news media like radio amidst ongoing concerns about institutional credibility and democratic stability. By examining these dynamics within the Kenyan context, our study contributes to understanding how global trends of democratic backsliding manifest at the local level through news media consumption and trust in public institutions.

Similar to previous studies (Kipkoech, 2023) conducted in Kenya, we found mixed results on significant predictors of news sources. First, radio significantly predicted trust in public institutions, highlighting its distinct role within Kenya's media landscape. This can be attributed to two key factors. First, radio is the most accessible and widely consumed medium in Kenya's urban and rural areas, primarily due to its low cost and reach to regions with limited infrastructure (GeoPoll, 2021). Additionally, many Kenyan radio stations broadcast in local languages, promoting inclusivity and enhancing their credibility among various linguistic and ethnic communities. Radio's linguistic accessibility and longstanding role in public communication—particularly in civic education and raising awareness of political and health issues, among other vital matters—have led to its reputation as a reliable information source. In circumstances where media trust is crucial for the legitimacy of institutions, the sustained prominence of radio indicates its essential role in shaping public perceptions of government and civic bodies.

Furthermore, radio programs in Kenya feature an interactive format that encourages direct citizen engagement through phone calls and text messages (Gagliardone, 2016), likely contributing significantly to the development of trust in these institutions. These findings align with earlier research highlighting the media's critical role in fostering trust between citizens and public institutions (Ceron, 2015; Ceron & Memoli, 2015; Norris, 2000). The apparent lack of significant predictors from other media sources, such as television, print, the internet, or social media, may be due to several factors. For instance, despite high internet adoption, digital divides and digital literacy remain pronounced across urban-rural divides and in areas outside major cities (Okello, 2024), which may limit the influence of online and social media. Second, the emphasis of television and print media in Kenya on entertainment or soft news over in-depth coverage or hard news, and their historical alignment with specific political factions (Ogola, 2011), may influence audience trust in public institutions. Therefore, while diverse media channels coexist, their influence on trust in public institutions varies, shaped by patterns of access, content focus, and public perceptions of independence. Third, Kipkoech (2023) attributed these insignificant relationships to the reliance on single-item measures, which are unable to capture "exposure" and "attention," two critical factors in examining

news use and trust (p. 2654). However, these differences in significance warrant further investigation in future studies. For instance, would the use of multiple items to examine news use produce alternative findings on news media use *vis-a-vis* trust in public institutions?

Moreover, practices such as the “brown envelope” phenomenon—where journalists accept informal payments to influence news coverage due to low salaries paid to journalists—have been widely documented across African media systems and pose a serious challenge to media credibility (Ileri, 2015; Mudavadi, 2025). These unethical practices can erode public trust in mainstream outlets, such as newspapers and television news, leading audiences to view these sources with suspicion or disengage from them altogether. In contrast, radio occupies a distinct position as a hyper-local and community-embedded medium (Backhaus, 2025). Its widespread accessibility, frequent use of local languages, and focus on issues relevant to everyday life contribute to its perception as a more authentic and trustworthy source of information. This perceived proximity to the community helps radio maintain higher levels of public trust, particularly in contexts where institutional trust is low and national media are seen as compromised or politically influenced (Crittenden & Haywood, 2020).

Perceived political freedom was a significant positive predictor of trust in public institutions, reinforcing existing theories regarding the link between democratic liberties and government legitimacy (Bavetta et al., 2017; Newton, 1999). This suggests that citizens who feel free to express their political opinions and engage in governance tend to regard public institutions as more trustworthy. Interestingly, this aligns with media malaise theory, which argues that the overall political context affects the media’s role in fostering trust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). The finding related to perceived corruption, which showed no significant relationship, is more perplexing, as it contradicts a considerable amount of literature indicating that perceived corruption undermines trust in government (Akinola et al., 2022; Wang, 2015). This could imply that Kenyans have developed specific coping strategies or alternative approaches for assessing trust in public institutions that warrant further investigation. For instance, longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into trends in corruption, media consumption, and trust in public institutions.

Our analysis also revealed nuanced dynamics in the interaction effects. Precisely, radio’s capacity to build trust diminishes significantly when perceived corruption is high, suggesting that media effects cannot overcome profound skepticism born of systemic graft (Akinola et al., 2022; Wang, 2015). Conversely, in contexts where people perceive lower levels of corruption within institutions, radio consumption appears to reinforce trust, possibly through its dissemination of positive governance narratives. Similarly, among individuals who perceive low political freedom, greater radio news consumption is linked to higher institutional trust. In contrast, for those who perceive high political freedom, increased radio news consumption is not associated with higher institutional trust and may even be linked to a slight decline. These results suggest that radio news consumption plays a compensatory role for individuals who perceive a restrictive political environment, potentially enhancing their trust in institutions. Conversely, for those already confident in their level of political freedom, additional radio news exposure does not significantly boost institutional trust, possibly due to information saturation or increased scrutiny.

This paradoxical pattern may reflect radio’s dual role as a government mouthpiece in restricted environments (e.g., hybrid or authoritarian democracies) and a platform for critical discourse where

freedoms are protected (e.g., full democracies). However, we also need to acknowledge that radio news consumption can be shaped by the legal and regulatory frameworks that govern media operations in a given country. For instance, in environments with strict media controls or government oversight, the content and availability of radio news may be limited or biased, influencing how audiences engage with and interpret such news. Conversely, in more open regulatory contexts, radio news may offer more diverse viewpoints, potentially fostering greater public trust in institutions.

These findings significantly affect theory, media professionals, and governance reformers in Kenya. They highlight the importance of enhancing radio's capacity for accountability journalism while ensuring it remains widely accessible. This may include training programs for radio journalists in investigative techniques and ethical reporting, along with infrastructure investments to sustain radio's reach to rural and marginalized areas. For the development of democratic institutions, these findings indicate that perceptions of freedom and corruption shape the media's ability to build trust. Notably, the results stress that media effects should not be considered separately from their political context—a crucial lesson that extends beyond Kenya to other developing democracies, where media freedom is constrained and corruption rates are high. Furthermore, focusing on Kenya broadens the geographic range of media trust research beyond its usual Western emphasis. Most notably, it highlights how citizens' views of their political context significantly influence the media's ability to promote trust in public institutions. As such, this finding holds theoretical and practical importance for comprehending democratic progress in the Global South.

Of course, this study is not devoid of limitations. For instance, its design inhibits causal inferences regarding the impact of changes in media consumption on trust in public institutions over time. Therefore, future research could utilize panel data to monitor these relationships during Kenya's electoral cycles and anti-corruption response efforts. Alternatively, future analyses could capitalize on annual Afrobarometer data for panel survey analysis. Conducting comparative studies across African countries would provide fertile grounds for clarifying whether these patterns are specific to Kenya's media environment or indicative of broader regional trends, thus enhancing scholarly understanding of these concepts and creating room for further analysis.

In *conclusion*, this study highlights the significance of radio as the predominant news medium influencing trust in public institutions in Kenya, with its effects contingent upon the political context. While it enhances trust in low-freedom environments, its impact diminishes as political freedoms expand. The effects of perceived corruption and political freedom challenge overarching theories of media trust, emphasizing how perceptions of institutions shape communication effects in developing democracies such as Kenya. These findings are vital in several ways: (1) demonstrating radio's unique role in fragmented media environments, (2) theorizing the conditional nature of media trust based on governance conditions, and (3) positioning African cases at the forefront of global media effects research. The results indicate the necessity for context-sensitive media development strategies that enhance the accountability role of radio while reflecting Kenya's distinctive political communication environment. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative approaches to examine these dynamics across similar governance contexts.

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