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## What explains citizen trust in public institutions? Quality of government, performance, social capital, or demography

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### ABSTRACT

Trust is an essential indicator in the governance mechanism involving citizens' confidence in public institutions. The present study focuses on citizens' trust level in local administrative institutions, such as *Upazila* (sub-district) administrative offices in Bangladesh. It seeks to identify the factors that can explain the variations in citizens' trust level in public institutions. Based on the survey data of 1440 respondents from 16 *Upazila* administrative offices, it is found that, first, citizens' trust in these offices is high. Second, demographic variables involving citizens' occupation, such as political activism and NGO work, have the strongest overall effect on the variations in citizens' trust in the *Upazila* administrative offices. Citizens' civic engagement or associations to secure service also affect trust in *Upazila* administrative offices more than performance variables do.

### KEYWORDS

Institutional trust; *Upazila* administrative offices; social capital; performance; quality of government; Bangladesh

## Introduction

Trust in government is a multifaceted and challenging concept, which presumably promotes the effective implementation of public services (Christensen et al., 2020). The study of trust focuses on evaluating citizens' confidence level towards public institutions in meeting their expectations (Wang, 2016). According to Newton (2001, p. 202), trust is the "actor's belief that, at worst, others will not knowingly or unwillingly do you harm, and at best, will act in his interest." A positive experience in dealing with another person enhances trust and reduces vulnerability (Jamil & Askvik, 2015).

Local public institutions such as *Upazila* (sub-district) administrative offices (UZAOs) constitute the major and focal public institution in Bangladesh. The nation is divided into eight administrative divisions (each with its own administrative office); they are further divided into several districts (each district has a district administrative office) and each district is, then, divided into several *Upazilas* with their respective administrative offices. More than 25% (43 million) of the total population resides in *Upazilas* in Bangladesh. Having the trust of this population, based on how public services are delivered, is essential to strengthen the legitimacy and improve the performance of public institutions such as the UZAOs. The trust level in the government is a reflection of citizens' satisfaction with the performance of public services such as police, schools, and local administrative bodies (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). Better-quality performance should lead to satisfied

citizens, which subsequently results in even more trust or a similarly positive attitude towards the government. Similarly, the bad performance of government agencies can create a negative attitude towards the government and diminish citizens' trust in it.

"In developing countries like Bangladesh, the issue of trust in the governance mechanism is often considered as one of the most important and debated administrative issues to be dealt with" (Islam & Mahmud, 2015, p. 128); however, it remains understudied in Bangladesh (Jamil & Askvik, 2015). There are, however, exceptions like studies by Jamil and Askvik (2013, 2015), Anisuzzaman (2012), and Baniamin (2019), which have examined citizens' trust in public officials and institutions in Bangladesh. Studies feature a common trend where a high level of trust has been evident in public institutions. Studies by Basher (2017) and Jamil and Askvik (2015) have found a high level of citizen trust in local public institutions in Bangladesh. Baniamin (2019) finds strong hierarchical and authoritarian orientation at local levels in Bangladesh where citizens have little choice but to show unquestioning loyalty to get favours from authorities that could lead to high citizen trust in the country.

Why is the issue of trust in local public institutions important? Is it really necessary to ensure that citizens place their trust in local public institutions? Citizens always feel that local politics is effective in meeting their expectations; they also have a rational understanding of their local political issues (Almond & Verba, 1965; Dahl & Tufte, 1973; John, 2001, as cited in Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016). Citizens trust the public institutional officials who are nearby than those who are far away because they suspect that the latter may be incompetent, lazy, and probably dishonest (Christensen & Lægheid, 2005). To ensure that citizens have a positive view of the UZAOs, citizens' expectation must be met, which focus on performance; moreover, meeting the citizens' needs would lead to improved performance. Citizens tend to trust public institutions that ensure the quality of government involving the impartial exercise of public power. The elitist nature of public institutions in countries like Bangladesh, which involves favouritism and discrimination, allows citizens to be deprived of essential public services (Jamil & Askvik, 2015). A situation such as this is likely to generate distrust in public institutions (Jamil & Askvik, 2015). It may seem that performance best explains the trust level in public institutions such as UZAOs. However, does performance alone affect trust levels? Despite the importance of the public institutions' performance in meeting the citizens' needs to determine their trust level, it is unclear whether citizens necessarily care only about the performance aspect (Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016). While citizens are generally quite efficient at evaluating the performance of public services they use, their knowledge of the duties of specific public agencies or even the government, in general, is not always reliable (Van de Walle et al., 2008). Many problems emerge when studying the relation between performance and trust due to the difficulties in measuring the performance of a public institution as a whole (Van de Walle et al., 2008).

Citizens' trust or distrust of public institutions has not only been associated with public service delivery but also with broader social relations (Van de Walle et al., 2008). Social relations foster trust (Eckstein, 1966; Eckstein et al., 1998, as cited in Mishler & Rose, 2001). Social capital issues, such as interpersonal relationships involving patron-client relationships, result in trust or distrust in institutions. Citizens cooperation with local civic associations influence the trust level (Mishler & Rose, 2001), making it evident that social capital is an important determinant in affecting citizens' trust level. This study tries to

investigate what factors affect citizens' trust level in UZAOs in Bangladesh. The present study also aims at providing a statistical trend on citizens' trust level in government institutions, such as UZAOs.

## Theoretical models

Public institutional trust has been explained using four explanatory approaches: quality of government, public service performance, social capital, and demographics (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2005; Jamil & Askvik, 2015; Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). The quality-of-government approach is articulated by Rothstein and Teorell (2008, as cited in Jamil & Askvik, 2015) where they argue that public institutions must exercise their authorised power impartially in providing services to citizens. People trust public institutions when citizens themselves assess institutions' actions positively, especially when institutions perform according to rules and standard operating procedure (Sztompka, 1999, as cited in Jamil & Askvik, 2015). The quality of government in service provision may determine the nature of public support and thus, citizen trust may be extended to the government (Jamil & Askvik, 2015). Public service performance concerning citizen trust may be understood as the evaluations of whether public institutions are performing according to public expectation (Campbell, 2004; Miller & Listhaug, 1990). The performance approach argues that institutions that perform well generate trust and those institutions that do not generate scepticism and distrust (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Individuals whose experiences with public services institutions are largely good tend to trust them (Kumlin, 2002; Rothstein & Steinmo, 2002, as cited in Christensen & Læg Reid, 2005).

Public service performance and trust in government, however, are not always positively correlated (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). This relationship is not automatic because the improved performance of public institutions does not necessarily result in a higher level of citizen trust (Baniamin, 2019). The performance of public institutions and satisfaction of citizens are not necessarily related because of subtle interplay of reality, perception, and expectation (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). A study by Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003), for instance, shows that well-functioning public services do not necessarily lead to trust in the government. Various factors such as social networks and societal norms regarding conflict management and cooperation in service delivery may create a context of trust (Rousseau et al., 1998); thus, the social capital determinant cannot be ignored. Robert Putnam's social capital approach indicates that social interaction fosters social capital, mainly understood as a generalised trust in society (Rousseau et al., 1998). This approach sees citizen trust as an extension of interpersonal trust and hypothesises that institutional trust is rooted in cultural norms and is communicated through socialisation. There are empirical supports for social capital perspective stating that institutional trust evolves from cultural orientations. The social capital theory assumes that institutional trust emerges from social relations (Mishler & Rose, 2001). It focuses on the "relational" aspect that emerges through experience, which leads citizens to trust or distrust depending upon interactions.

Christensen and Læg Reid (2005) find that demographic factors, such as age, education, and political affiliation, play an important role in shaping public institutional trust. Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2001b) mention the relation between education and trust in government in which the higher a person's education level is, the more they will trust the government.

The rationale for this is the cognitive factor, meaning that educated people have a significant amount of knowledge about the political-administrative system, can distinguish between its various components, and understand how public services are organised and function, which supposedly further trust (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2005). Counterarguments argue that knowledge produces a more critical attitude and thinking towards government or that normative attitude is more important than the cognitive aspect produced by a higher education level (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2005). Demographic variables, such as education, occupation, and gender, mould our social environment and the traits derived from such environment allow citizens to relate to the public institutional authorities.

Based on the quality of government, public service performance, social capital, and the demographic approach to citizen trust discussed above, this study developed certain explanatory variables.

### ***Demographic variables***

Demographic variables such as age, gender, and education have been found to influence trust (Kuenzi, 2008). Social relations, as well as the socially ascribed roles and outcomes such as variations in educations, income, and occupations, cause people to have positive or negative attitudes towards public institutions. For this study, the following four types of demographic indicators have been chosen to find out the relation with institutional trust: gender, age, education, and occupation. The relationship between various demographic indicators of this study with institutional trust is described below.

#### ***Gender***

Scholars such as Chang and Chu (2006) state that gender is one of the key determinants of political trust. Studies have shown that women support the public sector more than men (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2005). This study adopts a hypothesis, assuming that female respondents would trust the UZAOs more than male respondents. Over the last eight to ten years, the government has undertaken various significant initiatives regarding women empowerment at local government tiers. One-third of the seats of local government institutions are reserved for women in Bangladesh. Although women are still under-represented in local government institutions, they have become more independent along with increased literacy rate and are motivated towards government jobs, including at local public institutions. Underrepresentation may bypass financial incentives that women receive from local public institutions. Growth in the public sector has resulted in a higher tax burden for men than women as the tax ceiling is lower for women and local public institutions are usually reluctant in taking taxes from women, which may induce men's negative attitude towards the institutions. Thus, it can be presupposed that women will trust the government more than men will.

***Hypothesis 1a:*** Women are likely to trust UZAO more than men.

#### ***Age***

According to Christensen and Laegreid, one would expect trust in government to increase with age; older people tend to be more collective, whereas today's younger generation has experienced a public sector that is either shrinking or shifting towards the private

sector (Christensen & Lægheid, 2005). Due to various financial and structural rigidities, local public institutions may find it difficult to respond to the expectations, which may frustrate the youth, and hence, appear less trustworthy (Pande, 2010). However, older people may be satisfied with service provisions they used to get from local public institutions such as UZAOs and may be satisfied with the current service provisions. Thus, the hypothesis for the study regarding age is as follows:

**Hypothesis 1b:** Young people will have less trust in the UZAO than older people.

### **Education**

It is expected that the higher the people's education level, the more they will trust the government (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2001a, as cited in Christensen & Lægheid, 2005). However, there may be a counter-argument in that as citizens become more educated, they become more critical, aware, informed, and have a greater capacity to assess the quality of service provision (Mbatudde, 2013). Citizens with more education at the Upazila level will have a better understanding of local public policies and activities with complex thought models, especially in a country like Bangladesh where the presence of responsive governance is always under scrutiny. In contrast, citizens with no education or low education may not be aware of the actual functions, duties, and services to be provided by the local public institutions. Thus, the following hypothesis for the study is formed:

**Hypothesis 1c:** Educated people tend to be more critical about service delivery provision of the UZAO and hence, may distrust the public institution.

### **Occupation**

Trust in government may also be influenced by citizens' occupation (Christensen et al., 2019; Nye et al., 1997). This study classified the variable "occupation" into six categories. These are a) specialised professionals (doctors, engineers, teachers, and lawyers), b) political volunteers/activists, c) manual workers (both skilled and unskilled), d) business-owners/self-employed, e) socially important citizens, and f) people with NGO affiliation. UZAOs provide various healthcare services through local NGOs; citizens with NGO affiliation also need to access various citizenry services involving utility services. Based on the mutual benefit involving the service provision given by NGOs and UZAOs, the study hypothesises that the NGO-affiliated members expect to portray high trust in UZAOs. Socially important citizens with high social status may enjoy certain undue benefits and may portray high confidence in public institutions such as UZAOs in getting their work done.

Political volunteers or activists have an integral role in the UZAO because Upazila is the focal point of political parties. It is expected that citizens who are ruling party members would have greater trust in the institution as they expect privilege from it. Nepotism, favouritism, and political interference in public administration are rampant in Bangladesh (Zafarullah & Huque, 2001). Thus, the study hypothesises that volunteers or activists of the ruling party may show higher trust in the public institution than those affiliated with the opposition political parties. Professionals such as doctors, engineers, teachers, and lawyers who have a high living standard based on their economic prosperity may portray higher trust in UZAOs. However, a counter-argument based on education is that all these professionals are expected to be highly educated and be more critical of the ways public

services are provided. The mismatch between high expectations and the service quality may generate distrust among professionals towards UZAOs. Manual workers (day labourers and vehicle and mechanical operators) are likely to be more dissatisfied with life, economy, security, and access to basic services such as health, education, sanitation, and housing. Therefore, dissatisfaction among this group may generate distrust in public institutions. Through patron-client relationships involving networks such as kinship, regional affinity, and familial ties, business-owners may get undue favours, which may allow them to place higher trust in UZAOs.

### **Public service performance**

The performance approach focuses on the quality of public service. Notably, in the relationship between trust and performance (Rosanas & Velilla, 2003; Shabbir et al., 2010), there is a positive influence on the degree and level of trust through public service performance. The more positively the public service performance is perceived, the higher the trust is in public institutions. The more the local public institutions, such as UZAOs involved in various goods and services provisions, maximise citizens' satisfaction level, the greater the trust in institutions. Based on the performance-based theory, the following hypothesis is formed:

**Hypothesis 2:** The better the performance with the public services delivered by UZAOs, the higher the trust level.

### **Quality of government**

To ensure the quality of government, Rothstein emphasised procedural fairness, especially, impartiality (Rothstein, 2011). Impartiality is defined as the "condition where the officials do not take into consideration anything about the citizen ... not stipulated beforehand in the policy of the law" (Rothstein, 2011, p. 13). As UZAOs play an important role in addressing the basic issues locally and can exercise public power, the "exercise of power" in the decision-making process has to be impartial in the service delivery. Trust tends to be high when institutions act according to institutional norms and not according to preferences of particular interest groups (Jamil & Askvik, 2015). Based on the extent to which the UZAO personnel act impartially in the service provisions concerning institutional trust, the following hypothesis is formed:

**Hypothesis 3:** The more respondents perceive that UZAOs maintain fairness and impartiality in service provision, the greater the trust.

### **Social capital**

Putnam et al. (1993) work on trust and social capital in the creation and maintenance of democratic governance is noteworthy. He defines social capital as "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve efficiency by facilitating coordinated action" (Putnam et al., 1994, p. 167). He also referred to social capital as "connections among individuals- social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). The social capital theory emphasises two principal components: a) social networks established by associational

engagement such as voluntary organisations and b) reciprocal norms and trust between citizens involving generalised or particularised trust (Kim, 2005). Voluntary organisation aspect, denoting the civic association, is an important element in the societal approach to institutional trust.

The social capital approach to citizen trust suggests that positive interactions and attachments between citizens help to develop a sense of reliability and dependability, forming a social network. Bangladesh scores high on collectivism in Hofstede's study and collectivist societies' loyalty towards political parties help to get closer to the decision-makers. The kinship and relational based societal and administrative networks create positive reciprocal norms, leading to trust in the UZAOs. As a local public institution, UZAOs are involved with civic engagement with political parties and NGOs. Both the stakeholders are involved in welfare and advocacy for human development in the Upazilas. Thus, based on the components of social capital involving the social network and associational engagement, the following hypothesis for the variable is formed:

**Hypothesis 4:** Respondents engaged in social networks and associations are likely to have higher trust in UZAOs.

## Methodology

### *Selection of cases and research design*

An ideal sample for the study area could have included all 492 UZAOs to examine the relationships among the quality of government, performance, social capital, and demographic approach in explaining institutional trust. Unfortunately, the study area is restricted to 16 UZAOs. As explained above, Bangladesh is administratively divided into Divisions (8), Districts (64), and Upazilas (492) with each having an administrative office to carry out various public services. This study is based on a countrywide face-to-face questionnaire survey from the UZAOs. One district was randomly chosen from each division, and sixteen Upazilas, two from each of eight districts, were again randomly chosen. The sample selection may limit the generalisability of the findings across all UZAOs; however, it at least provides an opportunity to understand the factors citizens perceive in evaluating the UZAOs' trustworthiness. The main research objective of the study was to measure the level of institutional trust in the selected UZAOs. To achieve the objective, a quantitative approach was adopted based upon the opinions of different respondents who directly received services from the UZAOs. The quantitative approach of the study allowed to perceive the confidence level through the numeric description of the respondents' opinions. This study involves getting a statistical generalisation of the respondents' attitudes and opinions on the service delivery at UZAOs. The study was conducted on four important departments (Revenue, Health, Town Planning/Engineering, and Waste management) of the UZAOs.

There were 1440 respondents whose demographic profiles were based on gender, age, education, and occupation (shown in descriptive statistics). Despite efforts to obtain a representative sample, the sample may be biased towards men with higher education and occupations. Due to the patriarchal culture of Bangladesh, compared with females, male participants tend to take charge of outside issues more and thus, have greater access to local public institutions. Majority of the respondents range

from those who have completed their secondary school to higher-level education (university level). This shows a quite high literacy rate among service seekers as the overall literacy rate (70%) is quite high in Bangladesh. The study stratified respondents into different categories. Stratification makes way for improving the representativeness of the study samples. When the distribution of certain characteristics is done through stratification, the research tries to ensure that the statistical logical procedures incorporate the views of various stakeholders (Van Thiel, 2014). The present study categorised the population into six categories or strata. These are NGO service recipients, socially important citizens (landlords and leaseholders of markets and land), political volunteers/activists, business-owners (mainly traders and construction contractors), specialised occupational groups (such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers), and manual workers (both skilled and unskilled) such as day labourers, as well as vehicle and mechanical operators.

The rationale for selecting these strata is directly related to the study objective. As the study aims to map citizens' trust level in the UZAOs, these respondents directly help in giving their first-hand experience on how public offices are providing their services. The respondents were grouped as various stakeholders are involved in getting services from the UZAOs. Stakeholders need to be categorised for improving the representativeness that allowed the study to sample respondents directly from UZAOs. This study applied proportional stratified purposive sampling (proportion of the population in the strata is the same, which is then purposively selected from each group) as the study has an equal number of respondents for each of the six strata. An equal proportion of respondents from the six groups or strata were taken, where fifteen respondents from each stratum were randomly selected from sixteen UZAOs; thus, a total of 1440 respondents (6 categories x 15 respondents x 16 UZAOs = 1440) were randomly selected. Table 1 shows the sampling details and the reasons for the selection of respondents.

Primary data from the survey were collected through close-ended questionnaires on 4-point Likert- scale, for example, from *Not at all satisfied* to *Highly satisfied*. The survey was a cross-sectional study, that is, data were collected at one point in time. The IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 24.0 software was applied to refine the original data. The study involved descriptive analysis for all independent and dependent variables such as frequencies, multivariate frequency distribution (tabulation of two or more variables), that is, percentile distribution, the mean and SD of the data. The study also applied "multiple regression analyses" which have allowed an understanding of the magnitude or the extent of the explanatory variables' impact over the dependent

**Table 1.** Sampling details and the reasons for the selection of respondents.

Unit of Observation	Upazila Administrative Offices
Respondents/ Stratification	NGO service recipients; socially important people; businessmen; political activists; specialised occupational people; manual workers. Six (6) strata
Sampling Size	1440 (15 respondents x 6 strata x 16 UZAOs)
Sampling Design	Single-stage- Sampling directly carried out in the UZAOs
Sample Selection Process	Proportional Stratified Random Sampling (PSRS) <sup>a</sup>
Reason for sample selection	The proportion for every stratum is equal to that of the population and is random as the random selection allows for more accurate generalisation from a sample

<sup>a</sup>Each stratum having equal sampling fraction/respondents.

variable, that is, citizens' trust in the UZAOs. The study ran Harman's single-factor score test in SPSS to identify any common method bias issue. Podsakoff et al. (2003) find that when a single factor is responsible for 50% or more of the variance, common method bias may occur. However, the single-item construct of trust did not predict 50% or more of the variance in other variables; thus, common method bias is unlikely.

## Measures

### ***Dependent variable: citizens' trust in UZAOs***

The best measure available for trust in governing institutions is translated as "confidence" (Svedin, 2012). The study measures the level of citizen trust based on the mean or the average value of the citizens' responses to a single item construct in the survey. The mean value simply maps or presents the level of citizens' perception of the UZAOs based upon the single-item construct: "To what extent do you have the confidence on your Upazila administration office?" on a four-point scale; the responses are *Highly Confident* (coded as 4), *Moderately Confident* (coded as 3), *Lowly confident* (coded as 2) and *Not at all Confident* (coded as 1).

### ***Independent variables***

#### ***Demographic variable***

For this study, four types of demographic variables gender, age, education and occupation, have been chosen. The gender variable is self-explanatory. For measuring age, five ranges of categories were created between 18 to 30 years, 31 to 40 years, 41 to 50 years, 51 to 60 years, and 61 and above years. The respondents' education level ranges from 0 to 7: 0 involves (*illiterate*), 1 (*literate*), 2 (*primary school*), 3 (*high school*), 4 (*secondary school*), 5 (*higher secondary school*), 6 (*graduation*), and 7 involves (*higher education such as post-graduation/PhD*). The respondents' occupations range from 0 to 5: 0 (*specialised professionals such as doctors, engineers, teachers, and lawyers*), 1 (*political volunteers/activists*), 2 (*skilled and unskilled manual workers*), 3 (*business-owners/self-employed*), 4 (*socially important citizens*), and 5 (*NGO personnel*).

#### ***Public service performance variable***

While looking at the trust level involving public service performance, seven determinants have been taken into account: 1) timeliness in providing services, 2) cost-effectiveness, 3) record management of UZAOs, 4) infrastructural (roads, bridges, surface sewer, and excavation of roads) services, 5) waste management services, 6) revenue services (fixation of annual holding taxes, allotment of holding numbers and shops of the Upazila markets, issuing of trade licence), and 7) health services (monitoring of food and sanitation programme, vaccination program, drive against adulterated food). Citizens' satisfaction with the UZAOs performance has been measured by the degree to which respondents are satisfied with the performance of the above-mentioned services. The response category involves *not at all satisfied* (1), *lowly satisfied* (2), *moderately satisfied* (3), and *highly satisfied* (4). The higher the score, the more favourable the evaluation.

### Quality of government variable

The quality of government variable maps citizen perception on the procedural maintenance of the neutrality and impartiality on the following four service areas of the UZAOs: 1) tendering and bidding process in giving lease or contracts for the infrastructural provisions, 2) issuing trade and transportation licences, 3) allotment of shops under the jurisdiction of UZAO, and 4) design approval of various infrastructures such as building, shops, and markets. The study measures citizens' perception of the quality of government through the question: "To what extent the UZAO maintains procedural impartiality?" on a four-point scale from *No procedural maintenance* (1), *low procedural maintenance* (2), *moderate procedural maintenance* (3) and *high procedural maintenance* (4).

### Social capital variable

The social capital variable is measured based on the single item construct: "To what extent do you trust your social networks and associations?" on a four-point scale from *not at all* (1) to *a lot* (4).

## Findings of the study

### Dependent variable: institutional trust in UZAOs

Table 2 briefly shows that the trust value from all 16 UZAOs is 2.93. This mean value is on the higher scale, indicating the presence of moderate or high-level citizen trust in UZAOs.

Table 3 shows that 59% of the respondents have high trust, while 41% of the respondents portrays low trust (adding *not at all confident* and *lowly confident*) in the UZAOs.

### Descriptive statistics on independent variables

Descriptive statistics, that is, the mean or the average value of the responses involving the index of the independent or explanatory variables and their indicators, have been

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for trust in Upazila administrative offices.

		Mean (S. D.)
		<i>Upazila administrative offices</i>
Trust value	<i>Institutional Trust</i>	2.93 (0.552)
Valid N		1440

Minimum value (1) and Maximum value (4)

**Table 3.** Trust in the public institutions- Upazila administration offices (Percentile distribution).

Category	<i>Upazila administration offices</i>
Low Confidence	41%
High Confidence	59%
Total Percentage	100%

Low Trust = Low Confidence [Not at all confident (1) and Lowly confident (2)].

High Trust = High Confidence [Moderately confident (3) and highly confident (4)].

The percentages are rounded up.

presented in Table 4. The values presented, that is, the index involves the total number of answers for each value or measure as well as the combined average for all the independent variable indicators.

### ***Public service performance variables***

Descriptive statistics show that the overall index of public service performance variables for UZAOs has a score of 2.48; thus, the mean value is below average, which indicates that the majority of the respondents are lowly satisfied with the service performance. The highest satisfaction lies in the record management services provided by the UZAOs, with the satisfaction index at 2.96. Performance is least regarding the cost-effectiveness of the services provided by the UZAOs with the index at 2.23. This is quite surprising as a high level of citizen trust is reflected on the UZAOs; however, in terms of satisfaction level of various service provisions' performance, the response is not positive.

### ***Quality of government variables***

The overall quality of government index for UZAOs has an index of 1.91, which indicates that the majority of respondents consider the UZAOs to facilitate low procedural impartiality in various service provisions. The perception level of the quality of government shows that there is a substantial absence of impartiality in the implementation of rules and regulations in various services provided by UZAOs. However, this contradicts the hypothesis of the study involving the quality of government where it was expected that strong quality of government would generate higher institutional trust. Why is there high institutional trust in UZAOs despite the weak quality of government perceived by citizens? Is the performance theory of trust not valid for UZAOs? The relationship is evident from the discussion part.

### ***Social capital variables***

Based on the membership with any civil-society, voluntary, political, or community organisations, social capital seems to be high for UZAOs. The overall trust index is 2.81, which falls in the category of moderate associational trust. The trust index for respondents associated with a trade union is 2.98. This suggests that members of trade unions moderately trust (2.98 is close to 3, which represents "moderate trust"), encompassing the high trust category, their network, and association in getting things done. Associational trust index reports the index of 2.88 for voluntary organisations such as NGOs, indicating that the respondents with NGO affiliation have moderate associational trust in getting things done for them. Associational trust index for respondents on their politically affiliated organisation is on the higher side with a mean value of 2.85. This suggests that respondents tend to moderately trust their political association in getting things done from UZAOs.

## **Regression analysis**

Regression analysis answers the research questions and examines the relationships between explanatory variables and institutional trust, that is, trust in the UZAOs.

The combined model, including all explanatory variables, explains 34.2% (Adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.342) variations in citizens' institutional trust in the UZAOs. Table 5 shows the

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics for the indicators of the independent variables.

Independent Variable: Demographic variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean (S. D.)
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	1036	72	
Female	404	28	
<b>Age</b>			
18–30	188	13	
31–40	533	37	
41–50	490	34	
51–60	172	12	
61 and above	57	04	
<b>Education</b>			
Illiterate	14	01	
Literate	73	05	
Primary School (Class 1–5)	28	02	
High School (Class 1–8)	130	09	
Secondary School Certificate (Class 1–10)	260	18	
Higher Secondary Certificate (Class 1–12)	360	25	
University (Hons./Ms)	475	33	
Higher Education (post graduation/PhD)	100	07	
<b>Occupation</b>			
Professionals-lawyers, doctors, engineers	240	16.67	
Political Activists Volunteers	240	16.67	
Manual Worker (Skilled and Unskilled)	240	16.67	
Self-employed/Businessman	240	16.67	
Socially Important people: retired; landlord; leaseholder	240	16.67	
NGO personnel	240	16.67	
<b>Independent Variable: Public service performance</b>			
(a) Record Management			2.96 (0. 988)
(b) Health Services			2.75 (0. 580)
(c) Timeliness			2.60 (0. 877)
(d) Revenue Services			2.32 (0. 989)
(e) simple Infrastructural services			2.25 (0. 957)
(f) Waste management services			2.24 (0. 864)
(g) Cost-Effectiveness			2.23 (0. 869)
<b>Overall Satisfaction Index (Low-High)</b>			<b>2.48 (0. 496)</b>
<b>Independent Variable: Quality of Government</b>			
(a) Tender and bidding process in giving lease or contracts			2.12 (0. 941)
(b) Allotment of shops in the Upazila markets			1.94 (0. 921)
(c) Issuing of trade and transportation licences			1.89 (0. 910)
(d) Design approval of various infrastructures			1.67 (0. 937)
<b>Overall Quality of Government Index (Weak -Strong)</b>			<b>1.91 (0. 706)</b>
<b>Independent Variable: Social Capital</b>			Mean (S. D.)
<b>Citizens' Associational trust in:</b>			2.98 (0. 917)
(a) Trade union			
(b) Voluntary organisation (NGOs)			2.88 (0. 679)
(c) Affiliated organisation of political parties			2.85 (0. 988)
(d) Community organisation- theatre groups, sports club, cultural club			2.52 (0. 826)
<b>Overall Social Capital Index (Low – High)</b>			<b>2.81 (0. 958)</b>

Question for Customer Satisfaction Variable: To What extent the citizens are satisfied with the following services? [Answer Options: not at satisfied (1); lowly satisfied; moderately satisfied; high satisfied (4)].

Question for Quality of Government Variable: To what extent do UZAOs carry out proper procedures in the following provisions? [Answer Options: no procedural maintenance (1); low procedural maintenance; moderate procedural maintenance; high procedural maintenance (4)].

Question for Social Capital Variable: To what extent do you trust your associational networks? [Answer Options: not at all (1); just a little; moderate; a lot (4)].

Mean/Index values are given in descending order.

regression analysis of all the independent variables affecting citizens' trust in Upazila administrative offices.

Concerning the demographic variables, the combined model shows that political activism has a strong significant negative effect, beta coefficient ( $\beta$ ) of  $-0.537$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), on institutional trust in the UZAOs. Respondents with NGO affiliation show a positive significant relationship, although a weak significance, on the trust level in UZAOs with  $\beta$  of  $0.234$  ( $p < 0.10$ ). Findings from the regression model indicate gender only has random effects, but no significant impact, on citizens' trust in the UZAOs. The model also finds age to have an insignificant impact on citizens' trust in UZAOs. The hypothesis involving older people to portray more trust than young people may not hold. In the combined regression model involving all the variables, education does not reveal any statistical significance in the trust level in UZAOs.

Regarding public service performance variables, only one of them, infrastructural development, has a positive but weak statistically significant relationship with trust  $\beta$  of  $0.254$  ( $p < 0.10$ ), while all other indicators are insignificant. Regarding the quality of government determinants, only "design approval of infrastructure" has a positive and

**Table 5.** Regression analysis of all the independent variables affecting citizens' trust in Upazila administrative offices.

	Institutional Trust (Standardised Coefficient)
	Combined Model
<b>Demographic Variables</b>	
(a) Age	0.013
(b) Gender (ref: male)	-0.013
(c) Education (ref: lower)	-0.027
Occupation	
(a) NGO officials	<b>0.234*</b>
(b) Political volunteers/activists	<b>-0.537***</b>
(c) Specialised Professionals	0.089
(d) Manual Workers	0.059
(e) Socially Important Persons	0.020
(f) Businessmen	-
<b>Public service performance on:</b>	
(a) Infrastructural	<b>0.254*</b>
(b) Timeliness	0.106
(c) Record management	0.081
(d) Waste management	0.055
(e) Cost-Effectiveness	0.048
(f) Revenue services	-0.013
(g) Health services	-
<b>Quality of Government</b>	
<i>Impartiality and Fairness in:</i>	
(a) Design approval of various infrastructures	<b>0.246*</b>
(b) Tender and bidding process	0.053
(c) Issuing of trade and transportation licences	0.044
(d) Allotment of shops in Upazila markets	0.013
<b>Social Capital</b>	
<i>Citizens Associational Trust with:</i>	
(a) Voluntary organisations (NGOs)	<b>0.189*</b>
(b) Trade Union	<b>0.120*</b>
(c) Community Organizations- theatre groups, sports club, cultural club	0.076
(d) Affiliated organisation of political parties	-
<b>N</b>	<b>1440</b>
<b>Constant</b>	<b>2.534</b>
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>0.342</b>

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.005$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Businessman professionals and affiliated organisations of political parties are excluded as they are used for reference categories.

weak statistically significant relationship with a  $\beta$  of 0.246 ( $p < 0.10$ ) affecting institutional trust. The civic engagement with trade unions has a  $\beta$  of 0.120 ( $p < 0.10$ ) and engagement with NGOs has a slightly higher  $\beta$  of 0.189 ( $p < 0.10$ ). Civic engagement involving trade unions and NGOs have a positive impact on the trust level in UZAOs.

## Discussion

The study expected significant effects of age, gender, and education in influencing institutional trust that was not found; only the respondents' occupations influence the trust level in the UZAOs. According to Newton and Norris (1999), the government's performance affects people randomly and trust in public institutions will be randomly distributed amongst the population regardless of educations, gender, age, living standards, and tribe. Askvik et al. (2011) show that age has no significant impact on trust in public institutions in Nepal, and with similar demographic attributes, identical results are expected in Bangladesh. It can, thus, be argued that citizen trust has been randomly distributed involving a differentiated way amongst the population in UZAOs regardless of age. Education is often a significant predictor of trust in established democracies (Mishler & Rose, 2001). However, Bangladesh has a hybrid regime of democracy with substantial irregularities in elections, problems of governance with underdeveloped political culture, and low levels of political participation (Democracy Index, 2016). Thus, when the citizens' participation in public life is not ensured, socialisation variables such as education may not be a significant predictor of trust. The study expected that specialised professionals would show a negative perception in the way they trust UZAOs due to their high education causing them to be critical of service provisions. The regression model analysis shows those specialised professional groups are insignificantly related to trust.

Findings reveal that political activists acted as a negative predictor of trust in the UZAOs. Party loyalty is an important means of getting services in Bangladesh. Then, why a negative relationship is being portrayed? The rationale may have the same context, where partisan politics tends to favour only volunteers or activists concerned with the "ruling party". Sometimes the difference in political ideology becomes the sole indicator in depriving individuals of various services in Bangladesh. The regression model shows that respondents with NGO affiliation have a significant impact on the trust level. Patron-client relationship may be formed between the UZAOs and individuals associated with NGOs, creating a mutual dependency that allows respondents to portray a high level of trust.

With regards to the performance of various public services, findings demonstrate that only one service out of seven services, infrastructural development, has a significant level of positive impact in enhancing citizens' trust in UZAOs. Infrastructural development is concerned with the construction and maintenance of rural roads, bridges, and culverts, which have huge impacts on uplifting citizens' quality of life. Over the last three to four years there has been significant improvement in road maintenance, construction of bridges, flyovers, and underpasses (Asian Development Bank, 2014). There is no denying that infrastructural development is an important indicator for citizens to explore the predictive ability in explaining institutional trust in the UZAOs.

The study expected that higher procedural maintenance in service provisions would lead to higher trust; however, only one indicator, out of four, has some statistical

significance in explaining institutional trust in the UZAOs. It is interesting to observe that despite services being delivered with low procedural maintenance, the level of citizens' trust tends to be high in UZAOs. What may explain such a response? It may be argued that political performance involving the quality of government at the UZAOs such as impartiality and neutrality may not be an important predictor of trust. Finding an answer to this question is hard to achieve in relevance with other studies carried out involving institutional trust. However, the reason why citizens tend to have high trust in institutions with a weak quality of government may reflect on Bangladesh's high rank in Hofstede's power distance index for authoritarian means of decision making. Citizens may indicate their allegiances and dependence for nepotism, patronage, and affiliations that help in meeting their normative expectations and accept the existential inequality along with service delivery based on the elitism of hierarchy and status. The study of Van de Walle et al. (2002) shows that cultural explanations and societal issues are important measures of institutional trust.

Concerning the role of civic engagement in influencing citizens' trust in UZAOs, the study expected to find a positive relationship. The finding reveals that civic association has a positive impact on the trust level. Why is civic association positively related to institutional trust? There is considerable evidence for such results. Citizens in collectivist societies, such as in Bangladesh, tend to be included with various associations to achieve something together, which also has a positive spillover effect on individual achievement. Societies where people express more solidarity with others and are inclined to share resources, people are generally happier with life (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005, pp. 41–42, as cited in Jamil & Askvik, 2015). Studies such as Jamil and Askvik (2015) prove the relevance of the current study's case regarding the civic association. Scholars found a significant impact as membership in various associations generates trust in public institutions in Bangladesh. Thus, with higher institutional trust in UZAOs, the relation between high social capital and high institutional trust may seem valid.

## Conclusion

What fosters trust in institutions? The main objective of the study was to measure the level of citizens' trust in UZAOs and high trust has been found. The demographic factors best explain the finding of the study on trust levels based on the respondents' occupations. Regarding the respondents' occupations, political volunteers showed interesting results as it was expected to portray a positive impact, but showed a negative significant impact on trust with the highest  $\beta$  value. The finding is consistent with the study conducted by Christensen and Læg Reid (2005), where demographic variables have the strongest effect on citizens' trust. Citizens with NGO affiliation showed a positive impact on the trust level. Regarding the quality of government determinants, procedural fairness in design approval of various infrastructures influences the trust in UZAOs. The social capital approach demonstrates a significant effect on the trust level.

The study has not found performance to be a significant determinant of institutional trust in the UZAOs in Bangladesh unlike the studies by Mishler and Rose (2001) as well as Bouckaert and Van de Walle (2001b), which show performance has a strong positive effect on public institutional trust. This identifies a gap in the literature as performance in terms of service provisions might not be applied as a proxy in determining the trust level at

UZAOs in Bangladesh as shown by Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003). This study finds significant and interesting contribution as networks and associations through social capital, rather than institutional performance, have a significant impact in explaining trust level in UZAOs.

One of the limitations of the study was not considering the various services of the Upazila administrations in mapping the generalised citizen trust, which paves way for future research. The finding generalises from 16 out of 492 UZAOs, which is a limitation of this study; thus, the statistical generalisation could be considered as high for these 16 UZAOs, but might not be the same for the other UZAOs. However, it can also be argued that Bangladesh is quite uniform in terms of its socio-economic norms and value distribution involving strong uncertainty avoidance and high power distance, which characterise service provisions in general along with their means of socialisation; thus, the possibility to generalise the findings in Bangladesh, as well as compare with other public service deliveries, is high.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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