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Unveiling the Roots and Consequences of Electoral Distrust in Bangladesh: A Field Study on Rajshahi City Corporation Area

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Abstract: Election is crucial and indispensable for establishing a democratic government. Without elections, modern democracy loses its essence, spirit, and substance. Electoral distrust has emerged as a critical issue in Bangladesh, undermining the legitimacy of democratic institutions and processes. This study explores the origins and effects of electoral distrust within the Rajshahi City Corporation Area. The research investigates the factors contributing to the decline of public trust in elections, emphasising voter perceptions, past electoral experiences, and the impact of political, social, and media narratives. Data have been collected through structured questionnaires from a diverse group of Rajshahi city residents, enabling an in-depth understanding of their attitudes toward the electoral process. Using the purposive sampling method, the researcher has chosen 150 respondents from 2 election areas and the University of Rajshahi in the Rajshahi City Corporation area. The findings reveal that allegations of vote-rigging, political interference and a lack of transparency in election procedures are among the significant causes of distrust. Additionally, the study highlights this mistrust's social and political consequences, including voter apathy, disengagement, and diminished faith in democratic governance. Based on these insights, the research provides recommendations to restore public confidence, including reforms to enhance transparency, accountability, and voter education. This study contributes to the broader discourse on electoral integrity in Bangladesh, offering policy suggestions for strengthening democratic processes at the local level.

Keywords: Election, Distrust, Bangladesh, Democracy, Voter Perception, Election Commission.

Introduction

Elections serve as the primary avenue for citizens to engage in political processes, providing a platform for voters to select and endorse candidates they believe are best suited for public office. The foundation of a democratic government is built on the active involvement of the people through free and fair elections, which stand as a cornerstone of democratic principles. Elections are the “Lifeline of democracy” in the truest sense. The process by which people select their leaders, who govern, make critical decisions, and shape or redefine the government, is guided and upheld by established laws and fundamental principles. The citizens participate in formal elections and voice their political opinions in any democracy. Every government in this system is founded on widespread desire. The scope of the people’s expression is expanded with each election. In Bangladesh, mistrust of elections is a pervasive issue that undermines the most essential facets of democracy and nearly all political institutions. After gaining independence in 1971, the nation transitioned to a multiparty democracy. However, the nation’s voting procedures have grown extremely questionable, inviting prejudice and low levels of broad involvement. People’s discontent has grown due to political division, claims of voter disenfranchisement, results manipulation, and problems with the Election Commission’s impartiality (Quddus, 2014). In Bangladesh, opposition and ruling parties frequently accuse each other of electoral misconduct, perpetuating a cycle of mistrust. This deepening distrust

fuels political instability, erodes limited public confidence in democracy, and impacts social order and the economy (Akond et al., 2019). Political unrest, election-related violence, boycotts, and protests further contribute to the instability. Additionally, voter apathy grows as the hope for meaningful change through elections diminishes. Restoring public trust in Bangladesh's democratic system is crucial and requires addressing structural challenges through comprehensive institutional reforms. These reforms should include creating independent oversight mechanisms for the Election Commission (Khan, 2023), adopting improved electoral procedures, and introducing modern electoral systems to enhance transparency, fairness, and accountability. Although there has been much research on the electoral system and voting-related issues in Bangladesh, there has been very little research based on the experiences and opinions of voters at the field level. In that regard, it is hoped that this study will be a practical academic work highlighting the problems of Bangladesh's electoral system and the voters' dissatisfaction regarding it. Based on the questions "What are the causes of electoral distrust in Bangladesh?" and "How this distrust affecting the voters in the national and local elections?" this study explores the origins and effects of electoral distrust within the Rajshahi City Corporation Area and investigates the factors contributing to the decline of public trust in elections.

Electoral Distrust

A democracy cannot thrive without free and fair elections, fundamental to maintaining a genuinely democratic republic. The legitimacy of any election rests on accurate ballot counting, but it is equally important that elections are conducted fairly and perceived as fair by the public. The authority of a democratically elected government ultimately hinges on public confidence in the integrity of its electoral process. Discussions about voter mistrust frequently arise among scholars, political analysts, and the media. This mistrust is often rooted in perceptions of voter suppression and electoral fraud during the election cycle. People who fear suppression believe there are too few valid votes, while those who fear fraud think there are too many illegitimate votes. Several factors contribute to election mistrust, including political leaders' exaggerated concerns about election results, voter traits, and institutional architecture (Shino et al., 2023). Election mistrust is often caused by alleged fraud, inadequate election management, and a lack of transparency. In such circumstances, institutional design is crucial in promoting impartial voting laws and independent electoral management organisations (Norris, 2014). The tendency of democratic backsliding is exacerbated by electoral mistrust. People may reject democracy entirely when they witness elections being rigged or manipulated (Maïtrot & Jackman, 2023, p. 425). Misinformation and disinformation play a significant role in eroding public confidence. Populist leaders can use this electoral disenchantment to undermine the foundational elements of democracy (Riaz, 2023). Decreased political accountability and threats to the rule of law often result in mistrust of the democratic process. The actual election winners often become an example of this type of misuse. When elections are most important, this abuse is often dismissed as irrelevant (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019).

Electoral Distrust in Bangladesh

Since independence, Bangladesh has experienced political turbulence, with 15 years of military rule until democracy was restored in 1991. Since then, politics has been dominated and polarised by the two largest political parties—long-time rivals, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) (Knox, 2009). In Bangladesh's elections, the winning party congratulates voters, while the losing party refuses to accept the results, alleging irregularities and fraud. This is the root cause of electoral distrust. The first parliamentary election was held under the political government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The second, third, and fourth parliamentary elections were held under military rule, either directly or indirectly. The fifth, seventh, and eighth parliamentary elections were held under a caretaker government. The sixth, tenth, and eleventh parliamentary elections were held under a democratically elected government. The ninth parliamentary election was held under a military-backed caretaker government (Mahmud, 2022b, p. 388).

The twelfth parliamentary election was also held under a democratically elected government. Various activities have been observed throughout these elections, such as voter intimidation by political parties, attempts to influence elections through force, fraudulent voting (i.e., giving one's vote to another), rigging and dishonest means of vote counting, and violence at polling stations. Regarding the first national parliamentary election, Sharmin Ahmed writes in her book *Tajuddin Ahmed: Neta O Pita*, "Although the Awami League won the election, there were reports in the newspapers that some party leaders had rigged the election. I also heard this news from discussions among elders. The news of rigging in some seats in Sylhet and Khandaker Mushtaq's victory by theft in Comilla was not unknown in political circles at the time" (Ahmad, 2014). This election raised distrust of the opposition parties towards the ruling party. Due to the few seats the opposition obtained, they could not play an effective role in parliament (Zafarullah & Akhter, 2001). On the other hand, the government had a "brute majority," allowing it to amend the constitution as it wished. The opposition parties raised allegations of unprecedented rigging in the second national parliamentary election. The Awami League (Malek) alleged that the results of this "blueprint" election were predetermined based on surveys conducted by various intelligence agencies. Mohiuddin Ahmed, in his book *BNP: Somoy Osomoy*, quotes Advocate Abdul Malek, writing, "The blueprint prepared in Bangabhaban regarding the results before the election has been implemented; everything was predetermined based on the surveys conducted by various organisations before the election" (Ahmad, 2016).

The 3rd National Parliament Election failed to create enthusiasm or excitement among the people. The voter turnout was much lower than usual, as evident in the election results. Widespread fraud and terrorism occurred during the third national parliamentary election. Voters in numerous places were either dissuaded from casting their ballots or denied access to the polling place to cast their ballots for the candidate of their choice. Rejecting the election results, Awami League President Sheikh Hasina stated that her party could not win due to widespread rigging in the election (Hasan, 2023). Most of the parliamentary elections held since Bangladesh's independence have been

controversial, with most of the elections being one-sided and reflecting the preferences of the ruling party (Akhter, 2017).

Bangladesh's 4th National Parliament election saw minimal voter turnout due to a lack of electoral competition. Foreign media and international observers reported only 10 to 15 percent voter participation. Similarly, the 11th National Parliament election faced widespread allegations of irregularities, including claims that many citizens were denied the opportunity to vote and that ballot boxes were pre-filled with votes marked for the "boat symbol" the night before the election. The Awami League secured a decisive victory in that election, winning 258 seats (Hossain, 2024).

Voting took place the night before the 11th National Election. No need for a court or anyone else to investigate the allegations in this election. If the issue of night voting had been investigated, the responsibility would have fallen on the authorities, so no investigation was conducted (Talukdar, 2022).

The 2024 election was one-sided and rigged. "The Awami League has gained absolute control over all state machinery and absolute power by winning the 2024 elections (Hossain, 2023). Despite the way the people of the country and the international community have rejected this election, the Awami League has been politically defeated despite winning the election. The people of the country are extremely angry with the Awami League today. In this situation, the people also wanted a new election under a neutral caretaker government (Riaz & Rana, 2024). If the opposition political parties, including the BNP, do not give up and start a movement for new elections, the political situation will turn around" (Umar, 2024).

A Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) study on the 11th National Parliament election stated irregularities in 47 out of 50 seats (TIB, 2024).

Figure 1

Election Day Irregularities in 50 Constituencies

Type of irregularity	% of seats
Inaction by administration and law enforcement to prevent violations of electoral rules, laws, order, and irregularities	85.7
Not providing equal protection to leaders, workers and candidates from all parties	85.7
Communication and information flow impediments	77.6
Not allowing the polling agent of the opposition to enter the vote center	75.5
Allegation of biased proceedings against Returning Officer or Assistant Returning Officer	65.3
Barring election observers and journalists from covering the election	61.2
Forcing voters to vote for particular electoral Party	55.1
Grabbing booths, publicly sealing ballots, ballot-staffing, casting fake votes	51.0
Neglecting investigating at opposing candidates' claims of irregularities in the election	51.0
Threatening opposition voters and not allowing them to enter polling stations	49.0
Fraud in vote counting	42.9
Purchase of votes (Cash payment, transportation spend and supply of food)	38.8
Others	24.5

Source: TIB (2024)

Various questions were raised about the results of this election, the voter turnout rate in various centers, and the vote gap between the competing candidates. Former Election Commissioner

Mahbub Talukder explained that the voting situation and results in the 11th National Parliament election were not expected. According to him, this election has become known to the people as the "night election" (Prothomalo, 2022). The 2024 election was one-sided and rigged; it was neither free nor inclusive. The overall experience, including the achievements and failures of the elections, is a bad sign for the future of democracy and democratic elections in Bangladesh (TIB, 2024).

Research Aim and Questions

The study's main aim is to examine the causes of electoral mistrust in Bangladesh, the consequences of this distrust, and strategies for restoring confidence/trust. The research questions of the study are as follows:

- a. What is the nature of election-related mistrust in Bangladesh?
- b. What is the impact of election-related mistrust?
- c. How can Bangladesh restore trust in elections by shaping the future electoral process?

Literature Review

While various books, articles, and journals have been published separately on topics like elections, democracy, politics, participation, representation, and the role of the Election Commission (Faruque, 2023), there has been a lack of substantial investigative research on electoral distrust in Bangladesh. Specifically, there is a gap in research on the causes, consequences, and pathways to restoring electoral trust. A brief description of some related works is provided below.

Miaji and Islam (2025) Examined how Bangladesh's shift from a two-party or multiparty democracy to a one-party dominant state with authoritarian traits has been influenced by clientelism, broker dominance, and the patron-client system. They also emphasise how this change has undermined the democratic process's integrity, making free and fair elections increasingly improbable.

Rahman (2023) In his historical exploration, he critically examines mechanisms for peaceful elections and resolving election-related conflicts. He explores the electoral system, the Election Commission's processes and administration, restoration, and institutional framework. Rahman also emphasises the role of the media, civil society engagement, women's participation, and youth involvement in politics, all crucial elements in restoring public trust in the electoral process.

Ajmeri (2024) Discusses AL's dominance, the erosion of democratic institutions, and the role of students in political activism. He focuses on the rigged 2024 election, media control, and opposition suppression, all contributing to the erosion of electoral integrity and trust. His work highlights the need for political reform and for restoring stability through community engagement, international support, and civil society involvement.

Ruhullah and Ushama (2024) Emphasise the importance of fair and transparent elections as the foundation of a robust democracy. Their work highlights how transparent electoral processes are crucial for representing citizens' voices and fostering trust in the electoral process.

Through a case study of the 2018 Bangladeshi parliamentary election, which took place on December 30, the work by Raiz and Parvez (2021) fills in the knowledge gaps about election tampering. The ruling Awami League (BAL) won the election by a landslide, raising questions about the procedure's fairness. This study looks at the ways the ruling party allegedly rigged the election by using strategies such as inciting fear, denying or imprisoning opposition candidates, limiting access to foreign observers, managing the media, and stuffing ballots. It also examines how the judiciary, law enforcement, civilian administration, and election commission support these initiatives.

Knox (2009), in his work *Building Trust Amidst Corruption in Bangladesh*, discusses the country's electoral trends and history, highlighting electoral corruption, violence, and the dominance of the two largest political parties (AL and BNP). He also examines foreign influence on parliamentary elections. This analysis provides insight into the broader political environment contributing to electoral distrust.

Akhter (2017) examines the importance of Bangladesh's elections and demonstrates how electoral malpractice has harmed the country's efforts to consolidate democracy. Both military and civilian governments have failed to achieve democratic legitimacy or legitimacy through free and fair elections, according to Muhammad Yeahia Akhter.

Akond et al. (2019) delve into the nature of parliamentary elections in Bangladesh, exploring the causes of political violence, the incidents of violence, and the targeting of individuals and property during elections. Their work sheds light on the violent and often manipulative tactics used during elections, contributing significantly to public mistrust in the electoral system.

Mahmud (2024) provides an in-depth discussion on political parties, the political system, parliament, political conflict, unrest, political leadership, and the national parliamentary election. This work also addresses issues of political party funding, which plays a critical role in electoral transparency and legitimacy.

Basu et al. (2018) examines the political evolution of British India (1757-1947), Pakistan's politics, and Bangladesh's emergence. He also discusses the formulation and features of various parts of the Constitution of Bangladesh, political processes, constitutional changes, and the political party system, including the 1st to 10th National Parliament Elections. His work provides a historical perspective on the evolution of the electoral system and the factors that have contributed to current electoral distrust.

From the above discussion, it is clear that no in-depth or comprehensive study has focused on electoral distrust in Bangladesh, particularly regarding its causes, consequences, and potential pathways for restoration. While several works discuss electoral matters, the role of the Election Commission, the political and electoral processes, and the history of Bangladesh's politics, most of

these studies are descriptive. The existing literature provides a general overview rather than a focused investigation into the issue of electoral distrust. Therefore, the present study aims to fill these gaps by offering a more in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the causes, consequences, and pathways to restoring trust in the electoral system in Bangladesh.

Research Methodology

A mixed-methods research approach was employed to investigate the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to electoral distrust in Bangladesh. This approach combined primary and secondary data sources to understand the issue comprehensively. Secondary data, such as document and media content analysis, were used to identify patterns and historical contexts of electoral distrust. This included reviewing existing reports, articles, and official documents related to elections in Bangladesh, as well as examining media coverage (news articles, editorials, and social media posts). Primary data were collected through surveys and structured questionnaires to capture statistical data on public perceptions of electoral processes and explore more profound insights into citizens' experiences and perspectives. The selection of 150 respondents was conducted using a purposive sampling method to ensure diversity in voter representation. The study aimed to include participants from different age groups, education levels, and professions to reflect a broader perspective. Specifically, 50 respondents were chosen from each of two election areas within the Rajshahi City Corporation, and an additional 50 respondents were selected from students at the University of Rajshahi. While this sampling strategy ensured a diverse urban sample, it may not fully represent the national population, particularly rural communities, which may experience different challenges in the electoral process. A structured questionnaire was designed to quantify levels of trust and identify specific concerns about the electoral process. The survey questions covered key themes, including Voter perceptions of election fairness, Trust in election technology, Political affiliation, Experiences with electoral fraud, Views on the independence of the election commission, the role of media influence, and Civic engagement in shaping electoral trust.

The questionnaire included both open-ended and closed-ended questions for quantitative and qualitative insights. The interview schedule was prepared to collect detailed responses, and the researcher personally conducted each interview to ensure unbiased and accurate data collection.

After data collection, the responses were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were employed to understand response trends, and data were coded for analysis using single-variable and multi-variable tables. Statistical tools such as averages, percentages, and cross-tabulations were used to analyse the data. Additionally, correlation analysis was conducted to explore relationships between variables, such as the link between political affiliation and perceptions of electoral fairness.

The study has several potential limitations. First, self-selection bias may have influenced the results, as individuals with strong opinions about electoral distrust may have been more willing to participate. Second, the sample was drawn primarily from an urban setting (Rajshahi City Corporation area and university students), which may not fully capture the perspectives of rural

voters. Rural communities often face unique challenges in the electoral process, such as limited access to polling stations or different levels of media influence, which were not addressed in this study. These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted with caution and may not be generalisable to the entire population of Bangladesh.

Data Analysis

This part systematically presents the collected data through tables and figures. Various explanatory data analysis tools have been employed to ensure clarity and accuracy. These tools include frequency tables, bar diagrams, and pie charts for visual representation. Each tool is carefully chosen to highlight specific aspects of the collected data. The use of these visual aids enhances the comprehensibility of the information provided. By presenting data visually, respondents' opinions become more apparent and accessible. Such techniques enable the identification of patterns and trends in the gathered information. Ultimately, this approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the respondents' perspectives.

Table 1

Age of the respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	18-25	63	47.4
	26-35	42	31.6
	36-50	21	15.8
	50<	7	5.3
	Total	133	100.0

The table depicts the respondents' age distribution, revealing important insights into the demographic composition. A significant 47.37% of the respondents belong to the 18-25 age group, positioning it as the dominant category. This suggests a youthful demographic, which could reflect a higher level of participation from students or young professionals in the survey, potentially indicating trends or issues that resonate more with this age range. The second-largest group, 26-35 years, comprises 31.58% of the respondents, representing a mature yet still youthful segment that may offer different perspectives on the survey topic. In contrast, the 36-50 age group makes up 15.79% of the total respondents, suggesting that while this age range is less represented, their opinions may provide valuable insights into mid-career experiences and challenges. Notably, only 5.26% of respondents are above 50, highlighting a relatively low representation of older individuals in the survey. This skew toward younger age groups could reflect a gap in engagement or relevance for older respondents, potentially influencing the generalizability of the survey's findings across all age demographics. Such a distribution raises important questions about the survey's target

audience and whether the results reflect the experiences of a more specific age group rather than a broader cross-section of the population.

Table 2

Gender of respondents

		Percent	Frequency
Valid	M	57	42.9
	F	76	57.1
	Total	133	100.0

The table illustrates the gender distribution of the respondents, revealing that 57.14% are female (F), while 42.86% are male (M). This indicates that females form the majority of the respondents, suggesting a higher level of engagement or representation from women in this survey. Such a distribution could reflect the target population's demographic characteristics or the topic's nature, which might resonate more with female participants. The relatively smaller proportion of male respondents raises questions about potential barriers to participation or differing interest levels in the subject matter. This gender imbalance could influence the overall findings, as perspectives from the male demographic might be underrepresented. Additionally, the gender distribution provides an opportunity to examine whether there are notable differences in responses or attitudes based on gender, which could offer valuable insights into gender-specific trends or concerns relevant to the research.

Table 3

Educational qualification of respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Secondary or less	21	15.8
	Undergraduate	66	49.6
	Postgraduate or more	46	34.6
	Total	133	100.0

This table illustrates the educational qualifications of the respondents, providing insights into the academic profile of the survey population. The largest group, constituting 49.62%, holds undergraduate qualifications, indicating that nearly half of the respondents have completed tertiary education at the bachelor's level. This suggests a strong representation of individuals with foundational higher education, which may influence their perspectives and engagement with the survey topic. Respondents with postgraduate or higher qualifications account for 34.59%, reflecting a substantial proportion of advanced degree holders who may bring more specialised knowledge

or expertise to the survey. In contrast, only 15.79% of the respondents have a secondary education or less, indicating a relatively more minor representation of individuals with lower formal educational attainment. This distribution highlights a predominantly well-educated demographic, which may impact the generalizability of the findings to populations with varying educational backgrounds. Additionally, the significant presence of postgraduate respondents could imply a higher level of critical analysis or nuanced viewpoints within the responses. At the same time, the underrepresentation of those with secondary education or less suggests the need for strategies to engage this group more effectively in future studies.

Table 4

Occupation of respondents

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Student	66	49.6
	Job holder	51	38.3
	businessman	8	6.0
	farmer	8	6.0
	Total	133	100.0

The table presents the occupational distribution of the respondents, offering insights into their professional or academic backgrounds. The largest group, accounting for 49.62%, comprises students, indicating that nearly half of the survey participants are engaged in academic pursuits. This dominance suggests that the survey topic might be particularly relevant to younger, academically inclined individuals or that students were more accessible or willing to participate. Job holders comprise 38.53% of the respondents, representing a significant working population whose perspectives may reflect practical or professional experiences. Meanwhile, business people and farmers each account for 6.02% of the total, highlighting a limited representation from entrepreneurial and agricultural sectors. The predominance of students and job holders suggests a focus on urban or semi-urban demographics, potentially overlooking the unique viewpoints of less-represented occupational groups such as farmers. This imbalance underscores the importance of considering how occupation influences the findings and whether broader occupational diversity could enhance the survey's applicability across varied socio-economic contexts.

Results

This section presents and analyses the findings from the research on the causes of electoral distrust in Bangladesh. The results provide insights into key factors contributing to voters' growing skepticism and lack of confidence in the electoral process.

Table 5

Opinion of respondents about the fairness of the election system

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Fully fair	3	2.3
	Fair	3	2.3
	Partially fair	4	3.0
	Unfair	22	16.5
	Fully unfair	101	75.9
	Total	133	100.0

This table depicts respondents' perceptions regarding the fairness of the election system. The data indicates a significant divergence of opinions, with a disproportionately large segment of participants expressing dissatisfaction. Specifically, three respondents categorise the system as entirely fair, three as fair, four as partially fair, 22 as unfair, and 101 as wholly unfair. This distribution underscores a predominant sentiment of discontent, as 123 out of 133 respondents (approximately 92.48%) perceive the system as unfair or entirely unfair.

Table 6

Information about respondents voting in the last election: Did you vote in the last election?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	46	34.6
	No	87	65.4
	Total	133	100.0

The table details voter participation in the most recent election and the reasons behind non-participation. The data reveals that only 34.6% of respondents participated in the election, whereas a significant majority—65.4%—did not cast their votes. Among the non-voters, the predominant reason was a lack of trust in the election system, accounting for 84.21% of this group. In contrast, 15.79% attributed their non-participation to time constraints.

Table 7

Opinion about the independence of the election commission

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Fully independent	5	3.8
	Independent	2	1.5

	Partially independent	44	33.1
	Not independent	82	61.7
	Total	133	100.0

The table offers a comprehensive overview of respondents' perceptions regarding the independence of the election commission. The data indicates that a mere 1.50% of respondents believe the commission is fully independent, while an even smaller fraction, 0.77%, considers it independent. In contrast, 33.08% perceive the commission as partially independent, and a significant majority—61.65%—view it as not independent.

Table 8

Reason for public distrust of election: What is the main reason for the public's distrust of elections?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Electoral fraud	70	52.6
	Influence of political parties	25	18.8
	Administrative weakness	2	1.5
	Media bias	2	1.5
	All the reasons	27	20.3
	Electoral fraud, influence of political parties, and administrative weakness	7	5.3
	Total	133	100.0

The table highlights the primary reasons underlying public distrust (Mahmud, 2024) in elections, as identified by the respondents. The data reveals that 70 respondents attributed their distrust to electoral fraud, making it the most frequently cited cause. Additionally, 25 respondents pointed to the undue influence of political parties, while two each cited administrative weakness and media bias as contributing factors. Twenty-seven respondents attributed their distrust to these reasons; seven collectively identified the first three factors.

Table 9

Trust in technology used in the election: How confident are you in using technology in elections?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Have full trust	3	2.3
	Have partial trust	28	21.1

	Have no trust	102	76.7
	Total	133	100.0

The table illustrates respondents' levels of trust in the technology employed in elections, revealing a significant lack of confidence among the majority. The data shows that only three respondents expressed complete trust in the technology, while 28 indicated partial trust. Contrastingly, 102 respondents—representing the overwhelming majority—stated they distrusted the technology used during the electoral process.

Table 10

Impact of Public Distrust in Elections on Society

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Political instability	43	32.3
	Economic instability	6	4.5
	Social divide	7	5.3
	Unwillingness to vote	77	57.9
	Total	133	100.0

This table illustrates the societal impacts of public distrust in elections as respondents perceive them. The data reveals diverse consequences, with 43 respondents identifying political instability as a key outcome, 6 attributing it to economic instability, and 7 highlighting its role in deepening social divides. However, the most significant finding is that 77 respondents believe public distrust in elections primarily results in an unwillingness to vote.

Discussion

The findings reveal a deep-seated distrust in the electoral process among respondents in the Rajshahi City Corporation area. This section interprets the results, connects them to theoretical frameworks, and proposes concrete solutions to address the issues identified.

The results align with theories of electoral integrity and institutional trust. According to Norris (2014), electoral integrity is crucial for maintaining public confidence in democratic institutions. The widespread perception of electoral fraud (Hossan et al., 2024, p. 10) and the lack of independence of the Election Commission (Chowdhury, 2023) Bangladesh reflects a breakdown in electoral integrity, leading to diminished trust in democratic processes. Additionally, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2019) argue that democratic backsliding often begins with the erosion of trust in electoral systems, which is evident in the high levels of voter apathy and skepticism observed in this study.

The study reveals significant insights into the roots and impacts of electoral distrust in Bangladesh, specifically within the context of the Rajshahi City Corporation. The age distribution of respondents highlights a youthful demographic, with 47.37% falling within the 18-25 age group. This indicates that younger individuals, likely students or young professionals, are more engaged in discussions about electoral matters. Conversely, older age groups, particularly those above 50, are minimally represented, indicating a potential disengagement or lack of accessibility for older citizens.

This skewed representation suggests that the findings may not fully capture the perspectives of older citizens, which could influence the overall interpretation of the study results.

Gender distribution analysis shows that 57.14% of respondents are female, compared to 42.86% male. This suggests a higher level of engagement among women in this survey, which could be influenced by the topic's relevance to their experiences or societal roles. However, the underrepresentation of men requires further investigation to determine if specific barriers prevent their participation in this survey. The educational qualifications of respondents reveal a predominantly well-educated sample, with nearly half holding undergraduate degrees and over one-third possessing postgraduate qualifications. This suggests that a respondent pool is likelier to engage critically with the survey topic. However, the limited representation of individuals with secondary education or less highlights a potential gap in the sample, which could limit the generalizability of the findings across all educational levels in Bangladesh. Occupational data reveals that nearly half of the respondents are students, while job holders comprise 38.53%. This indicates a strong representation from academic and professional groups. The low participation of businesspeople and farmers, each accounting for only 6.02% of respondents, underscores the need for future studies to include a more diverse occupational background, mainly to reflect rural and entrepreneurial perspectives.

A key finding is the overwhelming perception of electoral unfairness, with 92.48% of respondents viewing the system as unfair or entirely unfair (Singh, 2024). This indicates deep-seated dissatisfaction that must be addressed to restore public confidence (Miaji & Islam, 2025). The overwhelming perception of unfairness (Ahmed et al., 2024, p. 1326) points to a significant crisis in the electoral system's legitimacy, suggesting that electoral reforms are critical to restoring confidence in the process (Hasan, 2023, p. 11).

Voter participation data further corroborates this distrust, as 66% of respondents abstained from voting in the most recent election (Mahmud, 2024), with the majority citing a lack of trust in the system as the primary reason. This reinforces the idea that electoral distrust is a significant factor influencing voter turnout, which can lead to reduced democratic legitimacy.

The study also uncovers significant skepticism regarding the independence of the election commission (Majumdar, 2023), with 61.65% perceiving it as not independent. Such perceptions undermine trust in the electoral process and highlight the urgent need for structural reforms to enhance the commission's transparency and autonomy (Alim, 2024). Such skepticism regarding the

Election Commission's autonomy further compounds the problem of electoral distrust, as it suggests a perceived lack of impartiality in electoral oversight. This raises the need for reforms to increase the transparency and operational independence of the Election Commission.

Distrust in elections is primarily attributed to electoral fraud, undue political influence, administrative weaknesses, and media bias. Electoral fraud was the most frequently cited cause of distrust, underlining the importance of addressing electoral transparency and fairness issues. These findings align with previous research highlighting electoral fraud as a critical issue undermining public confidence in democratic processes.

To address this, electoral reforms should focus on strengthening election monitoring mechanisms through independent oversight bodies (Abid et al., 2025) increasing transparency in vote counting through digital verification processes, and ensuring fair representation of all political parties in the Election Commission. Implementing legal safeguards against voter suppression and electoral fraud, along with civic education campaigns, can further rebuild public trust. These issues collectively contribute to a lack of public confidence, with electoral fraud being the most frequently cited concern (Quddus, 2014). Trust in election technology is similarly low, with 76.69% of respondents expressing no trust. This suggests the need for rigorous technological improvements and increased public awareness to foster acceptance. Specifically, ensuring the security and transparency of digital voting mechanisms will be crucial in rebuilding trust in election technology.

Finally, the societal impacts of electoral distrust are profound. Respondents identified significant consequences of political instability, social divisions, and economic challenges (Islam & Rahman, 2025, p. 297) and voter apathy. Notably, the most prevalent impact is a widespread unwillingness to vote, perpetuating a cycle of disengagement and diminishing the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

This highlights the feedback loop where distrust in the electoral process exacerbates voter apathy, further undermining the democratic system.

While the findings highlight significant flaws in Bangladesh's election system, some positive reforms have been introduced recently. For instance, electronic voting machines (EVMs) aimed to enhance transparency (Duenas-Cid, 2024; Sayem, 2025, p. 767), though skepticism remains. Additionally, past elections have seen improvements in voter education and turnout incentives. Recognising these efforts while addressing persistent challenges provides a more balanced perspective.

The findings align with theories of electoral integrity and institutional trust, which emphasise that trust in democracy depends on perceived fairness and transparency of electoral processes. According to Norris (2014), public confidence in elections is critical for political stability. The results also support Dahl's (2006) Theory that democratic legitimacy requires free and fair elections, and if electoral integrity is compromised, democratic participation declines.

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, the study highlights a widespread lack of trust in the electoral process among respondents. Key issues, including perceived unfairness, electoral fraud, and the lack of independence of the election commission, emerge as significant concerns. The findings show that a youthful and educated demographic dominates the survey, raising questions about the inclusivity of perspectives from older and less educated groups. Low voter turnout, driven by systemic distrust, underscores the urgent need for reforms to rebuild confidence in elections. Minimal trust in election technology further highlights the necessity of improving its transparency and reliability. Societal impacts such as political instability, social division, and voter apathy reveal the broader consequences of electoral distrust. Addressing these challenges requires targeted reforms to ensure fairness, inclusivity, and accountability in electoral governance. This study provides critical insights for policymakers and stakeholders to restore faith in Bangladesh's democratic institutions and strengthen the electoral process.

Comprehensive reforms are necessary to address the widespread electoral distrust in Bangladesh. Strengthening the independence of the election commission through legal and structural changes is critical to restoring public confidence. Electoral fraud and undue political influence must be minimised through stringent regulations and impartial oversight. An independent electoral body with a clear mandate and mechanisms for ensuring impartiality would play a pivotal role in increasing public trust. Public education initiatives should enhance understanding of election technology, reliability, and security measures, fostering greater trust. Engaging underrepresented groups, such as older populations and those from rural areas, is important to ensure broader participation and inclusivity. Efforts to involve rural populations in awareness campaigns (Mahmud, 2022a), using accessible platforms and local language, could facilitate more significant engagement. Removing barriers to voter participation is key, particularly in less-represented sectors like farmers and business people. A transparent approach to electoral processes, including the use of technology, will be vital for rebuilding trust. To foster greater transparency and engagement, the government should consider establishing a clear and transparent process for election-related technology, including public consultations and feedback. Political parties, civic organisations, and government bodies must collaborate to create a more credible electoral system. Addressing the societal impacts of distrust, such as political instability and social divides, will be essential for democratic stability. A holistic approach to these challenges will help restore faith in the electoral process and contribute to the long-term health of democracy in Bangladesh. Collaboration between civil society organisations and political bodies is essential for ensuring the inclusivity and credibility of the electoral process.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study on electoral distrust in Bangladesh, future research could focus on several key aspects to deepen the understanding of the issue. First, a comparative analysis between urban and rural areas in Bangladesh could provide insights into how electoral distrust

varies across different demographic and geographical contexts. Additionally, future studies could explore the role of media in shaping public perceptions of electoral fairness, focusing on how media bias or misinformation contributes to electoral distrust. Longitudinal studies could also be valuable to assess how electoral distrust evolves, particularly concerning political events or government changes. Furthermore, research examining the impact of electoral reforms in other regions or countries with similar challenges could offer practical lessons for improving trust in the Bangladeshi electoral process. Finally, incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews with political leaders and civil society organisations, could provide a more nuanced understanding of the root causes of electoral distrust.

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