

Public Servants or Interest Agents? The Effects of Political-Business Collusion and Public Representation on Political Trust and Voting Intention

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Abstract

This study examines how citizens' perceptions of elected representatives influence voting intention through the mediating role of political trust. An integrated framework is developed to incorporate both negative and positive evaluations of representatives, namely perceived political-business collusion and perceived public representation. Data were collected from 423 valid respondents in Tainan, Taiwan, and analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM). The results indicate that perceived political-business collusion has a significant negative effect on political trust, whereas perceived public representation exerts a significant positive effect. Moreover, political trust significantly enhances voting intention. Mediation analysis further confirms that political trust serves as a key mechanism linking citizens' evaluations of elected representatives to their behavioral intentions.

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the dual effects of contrasting perceptions on political trust formation and highlighting the central role of political trust in shaping voting intention. The findings also provide important policy implications, suggesting that enhancing transparency, strengthening accountability, and improving representative responsiveness are essential for fostering political trust and promoting democratic participation.

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Keywords: Voting Intention; Political-Business Collusion; Public Representation; Elected Representative.

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1. Introduction

In democratic political systems, elected representatives are widely regarded as a critical linkage between government institutions and citizens. Their primary responsibilities include articulating public preferences, formulating public policies, and overseeing the exercise of executive authority (McGarvey and Stewart, 2018; Klok and Denters, 2013). Central to this role is the expectation that elected representatives act in the public interest by ensuring effective public representation and responding to the needs of the broader population (Getimis and Hlepas, 2013). In this regard, they are expected to function as voices of the people, translating citizens' demands into policy outcomes. However, in practice, the behavior of elected representatives may be shaped by electoral competition, resource constraints, and interactions with interest groups. These dynamics can foster close relationships between political actors and business sectors or specific stakeholders, thereby giving rise to concerns about political-business collusion (Bandeira et al., 2024). As a result, elected representatives may be perceived not only as agents of public representation but also as intermediaries serving particular interests. This inherent tension between public representation and interest representation leads citizens to form both positive and negative evaluations of elected representatives, which in turn influence their overall political trust and political support.

With the advancement of information technology and the strengthening of media oversight, the transparency of political processes has increased substantially, enabling citizens to access information about political behavior and policy-making more easily (Hou and Li, 2023). Under these conditions, perceptions of whether elected representatives engage in political-business exchanges have become an increasingly important factor shaping political attitudes (Crepaz and Arikan, 2024). When citizens perceive that elected representatives prioritize the interests of specific groups over the public good, their political trust may be undermined, potentially reducing their willingness to engage in political participation (Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer, 2020). Conversely, when elected representatives are perceived as faithfully representing public interests and actively responding to citizens' needs, such evaluations are likely to enhance citizens' assessments of the political system. Positive perceptions of public representation can strengthen political trust, which in turn promotes political support and increases voting intention (Hug et al., 2025).

According to the political system theory proposed by David Easton, political trust can be conceptualized as a form of "diffuse support," reflecting citizens' generalized confidence in the political system (Kriek, 1995). A decline in political trust may undermine the stability of democratic institutions and, in severe cases, lead to political distrust and institutional crises (Rainer and Siedler, 2009). Moreover, political trust not only shapes citizens' evaluations of government performance but also influences their support for public policies and political behavior. In contexts characterized by high levels of uncertainty, political trust becomes an essential heuristic guiding citizens' political judgments (Levi and

Stoker, 2000). Existing literature has primarily examined the determinants of political trust from a macro-level perspective, focusing on factors such as government performance (Van Ryzin and Lavena, 2013), institutional design (Khayouti et al., 2023), transparency (Alessandro et al., 2021), and perceived corruption (Ares and Hernández, 2017). However, relatively limited attention has been paid to how citizens' perceptions of elected representatives influence political trust. Given that elected representatives are among the most visible and directly accessible political actors, their image and behavior often serve as key reference points through which citizens evaluate the broader political system. Therefore, examining political trust from the perspective of citizens' evaluations of elected representatives offers important theoretical insights.

More specifically, citizens' evaluations of elected representatives can be conceptualized along two primary dimensions. The first is perceived political-business collusion, which represents a negative evaluation reflecting citizens' perceptions of inappropriate relationships between elected representatives and business sectors or interest groups (Navot and Beerli, 2018). Such perceptions are commonly associated with corruption, favoritism, and unequal policy outcomes, thereby undermining institutional fairness and legitimacy. The second dimension is perceived public representation, which reflects a positive evaluation indicating the extent to which elected representatives are perceived as faithfully representing citizens' interests, actively advocating for public welfare, and fulfilling their democratic responsibilities (Denters, 2017). Although these two dimensions are conceptually distinct, they may coexist in real-world political contexts and jointly shape citizens' overall perceptions of the political system. Building upon these evaluations, political trust is considered a key psychological mechanism that links citizens' perceptions of elected representatives to their subsequent political behavior (Hooghe and Stiers, 2016). In other words, citizens' positive and negative evaluations are not directly translated into voting behavior; rather, they influence voting intention through the mediating role of political trust. Higher levels of political trust are associated with stronger institutional support and greater political participation, whereas lower levels of trust may lead to political disengagement, reduced voting intention, and a sense of alienation from the political process (Grönlund and Setälä, 2007).

Based on the above discussion, this study adopts a citizen-centered perspective to examine how perceptions of elected representatives influence political trust and voting intention. Structural equation modeling (SEM) is employed to analyze the causal relationships among multiple variables and to test the mediating role of political trust.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Perceived Political-Business Collusion and Political Trust

Political trust has long been recognized as a fundamental foundation for the functioning of democratic systems. It reflects not only citizens' evaluations of government performance but also their broader perceptions of the legitimacy of the political system. According to the political system theory proposed by Easton (1953), political support can be categorized into short-term "specific support" and long-term "diffuse support," with political trust representing the latter as a stable form of confidence in the political system. Among the various determinants of political trust, corruption and the relationship between political actors and business interests have consistently been identified as critical factors. Political-business collusion, as a form of institutionalized corruption, refers to the exchange of benefits between political actors and business sectors or specific interest groups through informal or non-transparent arrangements, thereby influencing policy-making and resource allocation (Bandeira et al., 2024). Such practices not only distort market competition but also undermine the fairness of public policies. When the political system is perceived as being dominated by particular interests, its legitimacy is challenged, which in turn reduces citizens' political trust.

Importantly, citizens' perceptions of such relationships can shape political attitudes even in the absence of direct evidence. Navot and Beerli (2018) argue that when citizens believe that political actors may be involved in inappropriate relationships or benefit exchanges, negative evaluations are likely to emerge. Similarly, Ares and Hernández (2017) suggest that perceptions of unfairness or lack of transparency within the political system significantly decrease trust in government and institutions. Crepaz and Arikian (2024) further indicate that when information disclosure is insufficient or decision-making processes lack transparency, citizens are more likely to develop suspicions of collusion, thereby reinforcing perceptions of political-business exchanges.

Therefore, perceived political-business collusion reflects not only citizens' evaluations of the integrity and fairness of elected representatives but also their broader assessment of institutional legitimacy. As such negative perceptions intensify, political trust is likely to be increasingly eroded. Based on the above arguments, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Perceived political-business collusion is negatively associated with political trust.

2.2 Perceived Public Representation and Political Trust

In democratic governance, the role of elected representatives extends beyond participation in policy-making to serving as a critical linkage mechanism between citizens and government. Through this function, elected representatives are expected to articulate public preferences, integrate diverse interests, and respond to societal needs (McGarvey and Stewart, 2018). In contrast to the negative perceptions associated with political-business collusion, citizens' evaluations of how effectively elected representatives fulfill their representative responsibilities constitute another important source of political trust. Such positive evaluations are commonly conceptualized as perceived public representation (Gabriel and Masch, 2018), referring to citizens' subjective assessments of whether political actors act in the public interest and faithfully reflect voters' preferences.

Within institutional settings, elected representatives perform multiple roles, including policy-making, oversight, and interest mediation. A key responsibility of these actors is to reconcile competing interests among different social groups and translate citizens' demands into concrete policy actions (Klok and Denters, 2013; Getimis and Hlepas, 2013). When elected representatives effectively perform these representative functions, they enhance the responsiveness of democratic systems and strengthen citizens' positive evaluations of the political system. Such evaluations not only contribute to higher levels of political trust but also promote the quality and stability of democratic governance. Empirical evidence further supports this relationship. Hug et al. (2025) demonstrate that when political actors accurately understand and respond to voter preferences, their political support and electoral performance improve significantly. Similarly, Grönlund and Setälä (2007) find that when citizens perceive elected representatives as responsive to their needs and actively advocating for the public interest, their political trust increases. Conversely, when representatives are perceived as ineffective in representing citizens, institutional confidence may decline, which in turn reduces political participation.

Therefore, perceived public representation reflects not only citizens' evaluations of individual political actors but also their broader assessment of the responsiveness and legitimacy of the political system. Based on the above arguments, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Perceived public representation is positively associated with political trust.

2.3 Political Trust and Voting Intention

In democratic systems, voting represents the most fundamental and institutionalized form of political participation, and its underlying mechanisms have long been a central concern in political science and public governance research (Glasgow and Alvarez, 2005). In complex political environments characterized by incomplete information, citizens often find it difficult to fully evaluate candidates or policy proposals. As a result, they tend to rely on their overall level of political trust as a

heuristic for decision-making (Levi and Stoker, 2000).

When political trust is high, citizens are more likely to identify with the existing political system and express their support through voting (Grönlund and Setälä, 2007). In contrast, declining levels of political trust may lead to political disengagement, reduced voting intention, and feelings of alienation or dissatisfaction with the political system (Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer, 2020). These findings suggest that political trust influences not only whether individuals participate in voting but also their broader attitudes toward the political system. Furthermore, higher levels of political trust are associated with stronger support for existing political arrangements and institutional structures, thereby reinforcing the status quo (Zmerli et al., 2007). Conversely, when political trust declines, citizens may be more inclined to support anti-establishment alternatives or non-mainstream political actors. Such patterns highlight the central role of political trust in shaping voting behavior, particularly in influencing political support and citizens' orientation toward the political system (Wang, 2016).

Therefore, political trust serves as a crucial linkage between political attitudes and behavioral outcomes. Its influence extends beyond voting participation to encompass political support and institutional identification. Based on the above arguments, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Political trust is positively associated with voting intention.

2.4 The Mediating Role of Political Trust

Building on the preceding discussion, citizens' evaluations of elected representatives—whether negative (perceived political-business collusion) or positive (perceived public representation)—are likely to shape their overall perceptions of the political system. Prior research suggests that political trust functions as a “conversion mechanism” within democratic systems, through which evaluations of political actors are internalized into broader institutional trust and subsequently translated into political behavior (Hooghe and Stiers, 2016). In other words, citizens do not make voting decisions solely based on their perceptions of individual political actors; rather, they rely on their level of political trust to determine whether to support the political system and engage in related political actions.

Negative evaluations of elected representatives, such as perceived political-business collusion, are expected to reduce political trust, which in turn diminishes political support and voting intention. Conversely, positive evaluations, such as perceived public representation, are likely to enhance political trust, thereby strengthening citizens' support for the political system and increasing their willingness to participate in voting. When elected representatives are perceived as effectively representing public interests, citizens are more likely to develop confidence in the political system, which subsequently promotes political participation.

Empirical evidence from cross-national studies further supports the importance of political trust as a mediating mechanism in shaping voting behavior (Wang, 2016). These findings suggest that political trust serves as a critical link connecting citizens' perceptions of elected representatives to their political behavior. Accordingly, this study conceptualizes political trust as a key mediator within the proposed research framework. Based on the above arguments, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: Political trust mediates the relationship between perceived political-business collusion and voting intention.

H4b: Political trust mediates the relationship between perceived public representation and voting intention.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Framework

This study aims to examine how citizens' perceptions of elected representatives influence their voting intention through the mediating role of political trust. Based on the preceding literature review and hypotheses development, an integrated research framework is constructed to explain the causal relationships among the key variables.

First, with regard to the independent variables, this study focuses on two core evaluative dimensions of elected representatives: perceived political-business collusion and perceived public representation. The former represents a negative perception, reflecting citizens' subjective judgments regarding whether elected representatives engage in inappropriate exchanges of benefits with business sectors or interest groups. The latter represents a positive evaluation, indicating the extent to which citizens perceive elected representatives as effectively representing public interests and responding to societal needs. Together, these two dimensions capture citizens' contrasting evaluations of political actors and serve as the primary explanatory variables in this study.

Second, political trust is incorporated as a mediating variable. Political trust is conceptualized as a key psychological mechanism that links citizens' evaluations of political actors to their subsequent political behavior. In other words, citizens' perceptions of elected representatives do not directly translate into voting intention; rather, they are transformed through the level of trust in the political system, which in turn influences political support and behavioral intentions. Therefore, political trust plays a central mediating role in the proposed research framework.

Third, voting intention is treated as the dependent variable, representing citizens' willingness to support the political system or specific candidates in an electoral context. Voting intention is widely regarded as an important antecedent of actual voting behavior and serves as an effective indicator of political participation.

In summary, the conceptual framework of this study can be described as follows: perceived political-business collusion and perceived public representation exert

negative and positive effects on political trust, respectively; political trust subsequently influences voting intention. In addition, political trust mediates the relationships between citizens' evaluations of elected representatives and their voting intention. The proposed research framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

To empirically test the proposed model, this study employs structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM is particularly suitable for analyzing complex relationships among latent variables, as it allows for the simultaneous estimation of both measurement and structural models, as well as the examination of mediating effects. This methodological approach provides a robust framework for validating the theoretical model developed in this study.

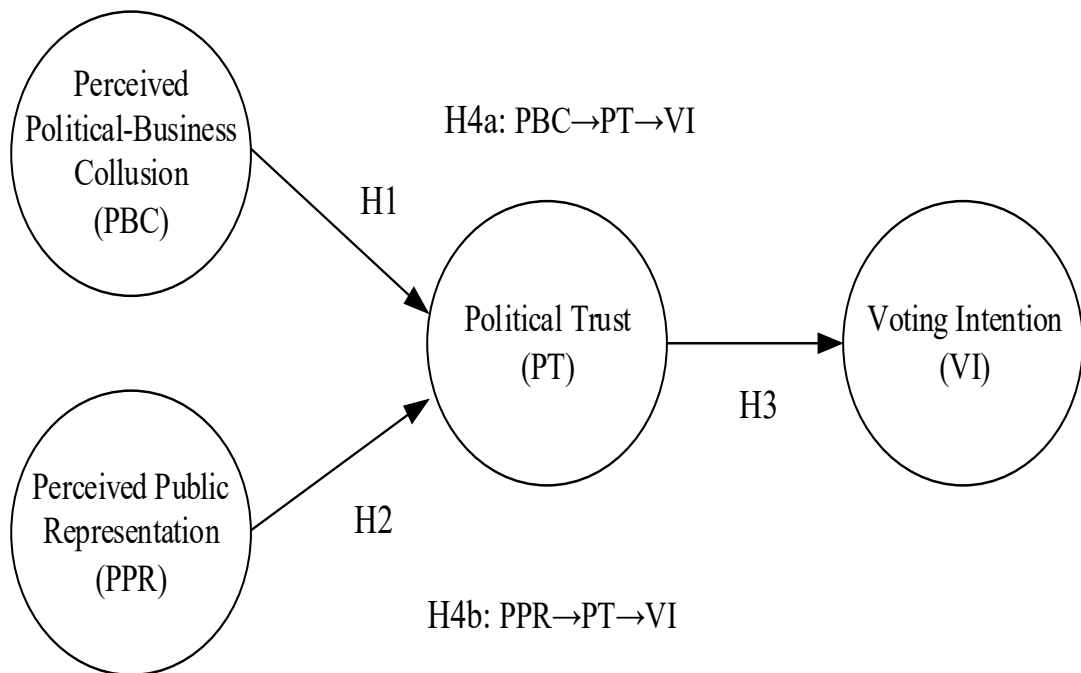


Figure 1: Research Framework

3.2 Questionnaire Design

This study employed a structured questionnaire to collect data, with the aim of quantitatively measuring citizens' perceptions of elected representatives, political trust, and voting intention. The measurement items were developed based on the preceding literature review to ensure content validity and theoretical consistency. All items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The detailed measurement items are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Questionnaire items

Construct	Measuring Items
Perceived Political-Business Collusion (PBC)	PBC1: I believe that some elected representatives have inappropriate relationships with business sectors. PBC2: I believe that elected representatives may favor specific interest groups when making decisions. PBC3: I believe that policy-making may be influenced by businesses rather than the public interest. PBC4: I believe that political-business relationships affect the fairness of public policies. PBC5: I believe that elected representatives are easily influenced by large corporations or financial groups.
Perceived Public Representation (PPR)	PPR1: I believe that elected representatives faithfully reflect the needs of the public. PPR2: I believe that elected representatives advocate for the public interest. PPR3: I believe that elected representatives respond to voters' opinions. PPR4: I believe that elected representatives prioritize public interests in decision-making. PPR5: I believe that elected representatives are capable of representing their constituencies effectively.
Political Trust (PT)	PT1: I trust the current political system. PT2: I believe that the government usually makes the right decisions. PT3: I believe that the political system as a whole is trustworthy. PT4: I believe that the government acts fairly in public affairs.
Voting Intention (VI)	VI1: I am willing to participate in voting in future elections. VI2: I am inclined to support candidates whom I identify with. VI3: I pay attention to election-related information when making voting decisions. VI4: I believe that voting is an important form of political participation.

Based on the proposed research framework, four latent constructs were included in the questionnaire. First, perceived political-business collusion was measured to capture citizens' negative evaluations of elected representatives. Drawing on prior studies on perceived corruption and political transparency (Navot and Beerli, 2018; Ares and Hernández, 2017; Crepaz and Arikan, 2024), this construct consists of five items assessing whether elected representatives are perceived to engage in inappropriate relationships with business sectors or interest groups. The items address issues such as preferential treatment toward specific groups, the influence of business interests on policy-making, the use of personal connections for private gain, and the impact of political-business relationships on policy fairness. This construct reflects citizens' evaluations of institutional integrity and fairness.

Second, perceived public representation was included to measure citizens' positive evaluations of elected representatives. Based on studies of democratic representation and local governance (Klok and Denters, 2013; Getimis and Hlepas, 2013; Denters, 2017), this construct comprises five items capturing whether elected representatives effectively reflect public preferences and serve the public interest. Specifically, the items assess responsiveness to citizens' needs, advocacy for public welfare, consideration of voters' opinions, prioritization of public interests, and the ability to represent constituencies. This construct emphasizes responsiveness and the quality of representation.

Third, political trust was measured using four items adapted from prior research (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Grönlund and Setälä, 2007). These items evaluate citizens' overall trust in the political system, including trust in government decision-making, confidence in institutional performance, and perceptions of fairness in public affairs. This construct reflects citizens' evaluations at the institutional level rather than attitudes toward individual political actors.

Finally, voting intention was measured as the dependent variable to capture citizens' willingness to participate in future elections. Based on studies of political participation and electoral behavior (Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer, 2020; Grönlund and Setälä, 2007), this construct includes four items assessing citizens' intention to vote, support for preferred candidates, attention to election-related information, and the perceived importance of voting. This construct reflects behavioral intention rather than actual behavior.

In addition, to control for sample heterogeneity, this study collected demographic variables, including gender, age, education level, occupation, and monthly income. Furthermore, political experience variables were incorporated to capture respondents' level of political involvement, including prior voting experience, voting frequency, attention to political information, participation in political activities, and interactions with elected representatives. These variables provide additional insights into citizens' political engagement and are included for supplementary analysis.

3.3 Data Collection

This study targeted citizens in Tainan, Taiwan, and employed a questionnaire survey to collect empirical data. Tainan was selected as the research setting due to its characteristics as a city where urban and local political dynamics intersect, and where citizens frequently interact with elected representatives. These features make it a suitable context for examining citizens' perceptions and evaluations of political roles.

A convenience sampling approach was adopted for data collection. Questionnaires were distributed across major public locations in Tainan, including commercial districts, traditional markets, parks, and transportation hubs, in order to capture a diverse range of respondents. In addition, to broaden the sample base, an online survey was administered through digital platforms, with the questionnaire disseminated via social media and communication applications. This mixed-mode approach was intended to increase participation across different age groups and socio-demographic backgrounds.

During the data collection period, a total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, of which 450 were returned. After excluding incomplete and invalid responses, 423 valid questionnaires were retained for analysis, yielding an effective response rate of 84.6%. This sample size meets the recommended requirements for structural equation modeling (SEM) and provides sufficient statistical power for subsequent analyses.

To ensure data quality and measurement reliability, a pilot test was conducted prior to the main survey. Based on participants' feedback, the questionnaire items were revised to improve clarity and content validity. Furthermore, all responses were collected anonymously, and participants were informed that the data would be used solely for academic purposes. These procedures were implemented to reduce social desirability bias and enhance the accuracy of responses.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

This study collected a total of 423 valid questionnaires from citizens in Tainan, Taiwan. Regarding the demographic characteristics of the sample, 197 respondents (46.6%) were male and 226 respondents (53.4%) were female, indicating a slightly higher proportion of female participants. In terms of age distribution, the largest group was respondents aged 31–40 years ($n = 106$, 25.1%), followed by those aged 21–30 years ($n = 100$, 23.6%), 41–50 years ($n = 77$, 18.2%), 51–60 years ($n = 64$, 15.1%), 61 years and above ($n = 48$, 11.3%), and under 20 years ($n = 28$, 6.6%). Overall, the sample is primarily composed of respondents aged between 21 and 50 years, indicating a predominance of young and middle-aged participants.

In terms of educational attainment, respondents with a college or university degree constituted the largest group ($n = 210$, 49.6%), followed by those with a high school education or below ($n = 132$, 31.2%), and those with a graduate degree or above ($n = 81$, 19.1%).

Regarding monthly income, the largest proportion of respondents reported earning below NT\$30,000 ($n = 125$, 29.6%), followed by NT\$30,001–50,000 ($n = 122$, 28.8%), NT\$50,001–70,000 ($n = 100$, 23.6%), NT\$70,001–100,000 ($n = 49$, 11.6%), and above NT\$100,001 ($n = 27$, 6.4%). These results indicate that the sample exhibits a diverse distribution in terms of educational background and income levels, reflecting a range of socio-economic characteristics.

With regard to political participation experience, 236 respondents (55.8%) reported having prior voting experience, while 187 respondents (44.2%) had never voted. When considering voting frequency in the most recent five elections, 219 respondents (51.8%) reported not participating in any election, 39 respondents (9.2%) participated in one to two elections, 83 respondents (19.6%) participated in three to four elections, and 82 respondents (19.4%) reported participation in all five elections. These findings suggest that although more than half of the respondents indicated prior voting experience, a substantial proportion demonstrated relatively low levels of electoral participation when measured across recent elections, indicating notable variation in political engagement within the sample.

Descriptive statistics for the main constructs are presented as follows. The mean value for perceived political-business collusion was 2.870 ($SD = 1.154$), for perceived public representation was 2.941 ($SD = 1.145$), for political trust was 2.994 ($SD = 1.272$), and for voting intention was 2.934 ($SD = 1.276$). Overall, the mean scores for all constructs are close to the midpoint of the scale (3), suggesting that respondents exhibit moderately neutral or cautious attitudes toward elected representatives, political trust, and voting intention. Among the constructs, political trust has the highest mean value, although it does not substantially exceed the midpoint, indicating a moderate level of trust in the political system. In contrast, perceived political-business collusion shows a slightly lower mean, yet remains close to the midpoint, suggesting that some respondents still hold concerns regarding relationships between elected representatives and specific interest groups. Furthermore, the standard deviations for all constructs exceed 1, indicating a considerable degree of variability in respondents' perceptions. This suggests that there are notable differences among individuals in their evaluations of elected representatives, political trust, and political support. These results not only reflect the diversity of political perceptions among citizens in Tainan but also indicate that the data possess sufficient variability for subsequent reliability and validity analyses, as well as structural model testing.

4.2 Reliability and Validity Analysis

This study employed factor analysis to assess the reliability and validity of the measurement model, including internal consistency reliability and convergent validity. The results are presented in Table 2.

First, internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR). The results indicate that Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs range from 0.852 to 0.874, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, thereby demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency. In addition, the CR values range from 0.894 to 0.914, which are also above the acceptable level of 0.70, further confirming the reliability of the measurement model. Second, convergent validity was assessed based on factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). The standardized factor loadings for all items range from 0.751 to 0.868, exceeding the recommended cutoff value of 0.70, indicating that the observed variables adequately represent their respective latent constructs. Furthermore, the AVE values range from 0.628 to 0.726, all above the threshold of 0.50, demonstrating adequate convergent validity.

Overall, the measurement model exhibits satisfactory reliability and convergent validity, indicating that the constructs used in this study possess acceptable measurement quality. These results support the suitability of the model for subsequent structural analysis.

Table 2: Results for factor loading, reliability, and validity.

Constructs	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Perceived Political-Business Collusion (PBC)	PBC1	0.814	0.864	0.902	0.648
	PBC2	0.837			
	PBC3	0.793			
	PBC4	0.773			
	PBC5	0.808			
Perceived Public Representation (PPR)	PPR1	0.795	0.852	0.894	0.628
	PPR2	0.815			
	PPR3	0.791			
	PPR4	0.751			
	PPR5	0.809			
Political Trust (PT)	PT1	0.827	0.864	0.907	0.710
	PT2	0.848			
	PT3	0.841			
	PT4	0.854			
Voting Intention (VI)	VT1	0.863	0.874	0.914	0.726
	VT2	0.831			
	VT3	0.845			
	VT4	0.868			

Note: CR: Composite reliability; AVE: Average variance extracted.

4.3 Structural Model Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test the proposed hypotheses and examine the causal relationships among the latent constructs. The results are summarized in Table 3.

First, regarding the direct effects, the results indicate that perceived political-business collusion has a significant negative effect on political trust ($\beta = -0.36$, $t = -7.35$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher levels of perceived collusion are associated with lower levels of trust in the political system. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. In contrast, perceived public representation shows a significant positive effect on political trust ($\beta = 0.49$, $t = 9.64$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that when citizens perceive elected representatives as effectively representing public interests, their trust in the political system increases. This finding supports Hypothesis 2 and highlights the importance of positive representative evaluations in shaping political trust. Regarding the effect of political trust on behavioral outcomes, the results show that political trust has a significant positive effect on voting intention ($\beta = 0.71$, $t = 13.86$, $p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that higher levels of political trust increase citizens' willingness to participate in voting and support the political system. Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

In addition, this study further examined the mediating role of political trust. Reliability and validity of the constructs were confirmed in the previous analysis, with all Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.70. To test the mediation effects, the composite scores of each construct were computed, and the PROCESS macro (Model 4) developed by Hayes (2017) was employed. The results reveal that perceived political-business collusion exerts a significant negative indirect effect on voting intention through political trust ($\beta = -0.168$, 95% CI = $[-0.226, -0.117]$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that higher perceptions of collusion reduce voting intention by lowering political trust. Similarly, perceived public representation has a significant positive indirect effect on voting intention via political trust ($\beta = 0.213$, 95% CI = $[0.152, 0.281]$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that positive evaluations of representation enhance voting intention by increasing political trust. As the confidence intervals for both indirect effects do not include zero, the mediation effects are statistically significant. Therefore, Hypotheses 4a and 4b are supported. Overall, the results indicate that citizens' perceptions of elected representatives—both negative (perceived political-business collusion) and positive (perceived public representation)—influence voting intention through the mediating role of political trust. Notably, perceived public representation exhibits a stronger effect on political trust compared to perceived political-business collusion, suggesting that positive evaluations of representation play a more influential role in shaping political trust.

Table 3: SEM analysis results and hypothesis verification.

Hypothesis	Hypothesized Path	Path coefficient	Results
H1	PBC→PT	-0.36***	Supported
H2	PPR→PT	0.49***	Supported
H3	PT→VI	0.71***	Supported
H4a	PBC→PT→VI	-0.168*** [CI = -0.226, -0.117]	Supported
H4b	PPR→PT→VI	0.213*** [CI = 0.152, 0.281]	Supported

Note: *** $p < 0.01$.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how citizens' perceptions of elected representatives influence voting intention through the mediating role of political trust, using survey data collected from Tainan, Taiwan. The findings provide several important insights into the relationships among perceived political-business collusion, perceived public representation, political trust, and voting intention.

First, the results indicate that perceived political-business collusion has a significant negative effect on political trust. This finding suggests that when citizens perceive political decision-making as being influenced by specific economic interests, their trust in the political system is undermined, which in turn weakens democratic legitimacy. From a policy perspective, this highlights the importance of enhancing institutional transparency and accountability. Governments should strengthen mechanisms such as conflict-of-interest disclosure, regulation of political donations, and transparent policy-making procedures to reduce public concerns regarding political-business collusion.

Second, the study confirms that perceived public representation has a significant positive effect on political trust, and its influence is stronger than that of perceived political-business collusion. This finding underscores the critical role of representative responsiveness and accountability in shaping political trust. Elected representatives should not only avoid negative perceptions but also actively demonstrate their commitment to public representation. In practice, this may involve strengthening communication with constituents through regular constituency services, public consultations, and digital engagement platforms. Such efforts can enhance citizens' perceptions of responsiveness and ultimately reinforce trust in the political system.

Third, the findings show that political trust has a significant positive effect on voting intention, indicating that higher levels of trust increase citizens' willingness to participate in elections and support the political system. This result has important implications for democratic governance, suggesting that strengthening political trust can contribute to higher voter turnout and greater civic engagement. Governments and electoral authorities should therefore prioritize fairness, transparency, and accessibility in electoral processes to foster public confidence.

Finally, this study demonstrates that political trust plays a significant mediating role between citizens' evaluations of elected representatives and their voting intention.

This finding implies that improvements in policy performance or political communication alone may not directly translate into political support unless they effectively enhance political trust. Therefore, policymakers should focus not only on short-term policy outcomes but also on the long-term development of institutional trust as a foundation for sustainable democratic governance.

In conclusion, this study highlights that the effectiveness of democratic governance depends not only on institutional design but also on citizens' perceptions of political actors and their level of trust in the political system. By reducing concerns about political-business collusion, enhancing the quality of public representation, and strengthening political trust, it is possible to promote political participation, improve institutional legitimacy, and ensure the long-term stability of democratic systems.

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