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Public Trust Reconstruction Strategy: The Case of the North Gorontalo Regency Government After the Re-Vote

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Informasi Artikel	Abstrack
Article history: Accepted 07-11-2025 Fixed 10-11-2025 Approved 16-11-2026 Keywords: <i>Strategy; Public Trust; Transparency; Re-Voting; Public Communication.</i>	Abstract: The election of the Regent and Deputy Regent of North Gorontalo in 2024 is experiencing legal tension that has given rise to a Re-Vote (PSU). The uncertainty caused by this legal dispute has led to a decline in public trust in the democratic process and local government. This research aims to identify the strategies implemented by the North Gorontalo Regency Government in rebuilding public trust after PSU. The method used is a qualitative approach with case studies, where data is collected through in-depth interviews, direct observations, and documentation studies. The analysis was carried out thematically to outline the condition of public trust and evaluate government strategies. The results of the study show that local governments implement strategies of transparency, open communication, community involvement, and improving the quality of public services. Despite the challenges related to information disclosure and local political dynamics, these efforts have succeeded in restoring some of the public's trust. The research also provides recommendations for future policies, emphasizing the importance of effective communication and active community participation in strengthening public trust.

Introduction

Public trust is one of the main pillars in maintaining the sustainability of democratic government. This is even more important at the regional level, where public trust in the government has a direct effect on the legitimacy of policies and the effectiveness of development programs implemented. North Gorontalo Regency, as one of the autonomous regions with complex political dynamics, faces major challenges after the re-election, which has the potential to cause uncertainty and suspicion among the public. This condition requires swift action from local governments to rebuild and strengthen public trust, thereby maintaining social and political stability, and ensuring that community participation in development is not compromised. Trust in the government, especially after the re-election, is highly dependent on transparency, good communication, and concrete action from the government. A study by Ventura & Takahashi (2024) shows that trust in public institutions is very closely related to the quality of Election management and transparency applied in every stage of the election. Further, Karp et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of public trust in the electoral process in strengthening the legitimacy of the government. Other studies have also shown that to build trust, the strategy must take into account the local social and cultural

context, which affects the perception community against the policies implemented (Hanasi, 2024). However, although various previous studies have discussed the importance of government strategies in building public trust, a more in-depth study of these dynamics in areas with specific socio-political characteristics, such as North Gorontalo Regency, is still limited. Therefore, this study aims to examine in depth how the strategies implemented by local governments in building public trust after the re-election in North Gorontalo, as well as identify the factors that affect the success or failure of the strategy. The novelty of this research lies in its more detailed focus on the local context of North Gorontalo and the socio-political dynamics that affect the process of reconstructing public trust in the area.

The formulation of the problem in this study is: (1) What is the condition of public trust in the North Gorontalo Regency government after the implementation of the re-voting? (2) What strategies are implemented by the North Gorontalo Regency government in rebuilding public trust? (3) What are the factors that affect the success or failure of the government's strategy in building public trust? The purpose of this study is to provide a clear picture of the public trust situation in North Gorontalo after the re-election, as well as to evaluate the strategies implemented by the local government to improve and strengthen public trust in the government.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, focusing on local governments' efforts to restore public trust following a re-vote (PSU). Data collection techniques include: *In-depth interviews* with the Regent and Deputy Regent, Chairman of the KPU, members of the DPRD, and community representatives. *Direct observation* of socialization activities, inter-agency coordination, and public services after the re-election (PSU). *Documentation study* of official archives, local news, and local government policy documents. *Data Analysis* uses thematic analysis, including the stages of transcription, coding, categorization, and thematic interpretation. Validity is strengthened through triangulation of sources and techniques, as well as member checking with key informants

Results and discussion

This study presents the results of an analysis related to the efforts made by the North Gorontalo Regency Government in rebuilding public trust after the implementation of the 2025 Re-Voting (PSU). Public trust after the PSU is a big challenge, considering the uncertainty caused by the election controversy and legal disputes involving one of the regent candidates. The findings of the study show that the strategies implemented by the government in an effort to improve public trust include four main pillars: transparency of public policies and information, open and consistent public communication, public involvement in decision-making, and real action in public services.

a. *Transparansi Kebijakan dan Informasi Publik*

The results of the research in North Gorontalo Regency show that the public information transparency strategy is the main foundation in reconstructing public trust after the Re-Vote (PSU). The local government opens access to information through various media, such as official publications and press releases, activity progress reports, as well as the use of social media of local government work units (SKPD) and the Regency Government's digital channels. In addition, public deliberation and socialization forums were also held at the sub-

district and village levels. These measures have been proven to create a perception of *fairness* and strengthen government accountability in the eyes of the public. Citizens interviewed in the study stated that when the reasons behind the implementation of the Re-Vote (PSU), the Constitutional Court's decision-making mechanism, and the stages of the transition of government were explained openly, the level of public acceptance of political results increased. One of the community leaders assessed that, "*we came to know why PSU needs to be done, and it is not for the benefit of the candidates, but to maintain mutual justice.*" Thus, transparency catalyzes government legitimacy.

This phenomenon is in line with the theory of Good Governance, which places transparency as one of the main pillars of good governance, along with accountability, participation, and the rule of law. According to UNDP (2021) "Transparency is often mentioned as a key foundation of trust in public institutions." Transparency is not only data disclosure but also *reason-giving* and processes that allow the public to understand and assess the fairness of decisions. Meanwhile, in other ways Grimmelikhuisen & Meijer (2014) emphasized that the perception of transparency has a positive correlation with the level of trust in public institutions, especially when information is conveyed clearly and relevant to the needs of citizens. In the context of North Gorontalo Regency, the official publication of the Regency Government and active communication of election organizers, in this case the General Election Commission (KPU), are indicators of concrete and measurable transparency implementation.

The importance of transparency in every policy taken by the government is the main highlight. The public wants an open explanation of the reasons and objectives behind the re-voting (PSU) and the policies that will be implemented after the re-vote (PSU), because the effect of transparency is not always linear or automatically positive. This is as stated by Licht et al. (2014) Excessive openness without context can cause confusion, information fatigue, and even increase distrust if the public considers the government's decision to be unfair, even though all data is open. These findings reinforce the results of research in North Gorontalo Regency, where the effectiveness of transparency is highly dependent on the manner and context of its delivery. Based on the facts on the ground, the North Gorontalo Regency government is not just "opening data", but packaging information with local narratives that are easy for the public to understand. Through the cultural approach of "huyula" (mutual cooperation and deliberation), the government makes transparency not just a formal communication, but part of social dialogue. This local values-based approach strengthens the effect of transparency because people feel respected and involved rather than just given one-sided information.

These findings are in line with the view Armstrong (2005) view that transparency must be accompanied by accountability so that the legitimacy of the government increases in a sustainable manner. In the context of North Gorontalo Regency, this practice can be seen through the periodic reporting mechanism of PSU activities, policy evaluation publications, and public question and answer forums that provide direct accountability channels. Further, Cucciniello et al. (2017) emphasized that effective transparency is not only about opening information, but also about building clarity and trust in public communication. The effect on trust increases when the government presents *relevant, understandable, and actionable information*, meaning that it can be followed up on or used by citizens to assess policies. A different statement was put forward by Bauhr & Grimes (2014). In his research, he reminded that in some cultural and political contexts, transparency can produce "muted" or even

negative effects when the public has expectations that are too high or when openness is perceived as a signal of institutional weakness.

Observing the description of the results and the concept of the views above in the context of North Gorontalo Regency, the factors of local wisdom and consistency of implementation are prerequisites for transparency to truly strengthen public trust. A government that is only transparent for a moment, for example, during a political crisis, risks giving rise to new skepticism. Thus, the transparency strategy implemented by the North Gorontalo Regency Government has been proven to contribute to the restoration of public trust, as long as it is carried out consistently, based on local values, and followed by a clear accountability mechanism. Contextual and participatory transparency not only creates a fair perception but also fosters a sense of belonging between citizens and the government, which is the key to the sustainability of local democratic legitimacy after the Re-Vote (PSU).

b. Open and Consistent Public Communication

The results of the study show that open and consistent public communication is one of the main pillars in reconstructing public trust in the North Gorontalo Regency government after the Re-Vote (PSU). The local government realizes that information disclosure alone is not enough without active and continuous two-way communication between the apparatus and the community. For this reason, the North Gorontalo Regency Government initiated various forms of public communication channels; face-to-face forums such as village public dialogue, meetings with traditional and religious leaders, as well as the use of digital media such as the official website of the local government, the General Election Commission (KPU) social media accounts, and community WhatsApp groups. This approach has been proven to suppress the potential for disinformation, channel official clarifications, and correct political rumors that were previously widely circulated in the community.

Based on data obtained from informants, research confirms that fast and clear communication from the government helps people no longer depend on mixed news. A member of the DPRD said that the government's quick response on social media and direct clarifications from officials made the public believe that the government was not silent on the growing issue. These findings show that effective public communication functions not only as a means of conveying information but also as an instrument of social legitimacy. The public considers that a government that is responsive, open, and does not delay clarification is a trustworthy government.

Viewed from the perspective of public communication theory in modern governance, open communication is not only a technical issue of information but a pillar of deliberative democracy that allows dialogue and citizen participation. According to Botan & Sommerfeldt (2023) the *two-way symmetrical communication* model encourages a relationship of mutual trust between public institutions and the community because communication is no longer instructive, but collaborative and listens to public feedback. In line with that Porumbescu (2017) In his research, it was stated that transparency without interactive public communication is not enough to build public trust, because citizens need confirmation, clarification, and narratives that explain the context of the policy. In other words, communication is a bridge between transparency and trust. Further, Kim & Lee (2012) mentioned that public trust increases significantly when communication is carried out with high speed and consistency, especially in situations of political crisis or uncertainty after

electoral conflicts. They emphasized that fast, consistent, and empathetic government communication can withstand the "erosion of trust" in society.

Regarding the North Gorontalo Re-Voting (PSU), the success of the local government's public communication strategy is also influenced by the skills of the apparatus in managing local messages and communication media. The government does not only rely on the mass media, but also uses an interpersonal approach based on *local champions* of the community and religious leaders who are trusted by the public to convey policy messages. This social network-based approach increases the effectiveness of government messaging because it resonates with local social norms and language (*local resonance effect*). This approach is in line with the results of research by Jenkins & Grimley (2021), which shows that public communication that adopts the local cultural context is more effective in increasing trust than bureaucratic formal communication, because people feel that the message received is sourced from their own community.

In addition, consistency of communication is also an important element. The results of the study show that the people of North Gorontalo feel more confident when the government provides information updates regularly, not just when there are big problems. Communication that is carried out periodically, rather than reactively, strengthens the impression of stability and professionalism of the government. This finding is in line with the Message Consistency Theory put forward by Hallahan (2015), that public messages that are conveyed consistently and not contradictory will strengthen the perception of institutional integrity. Conceptually, the practice of public communication in North Gorontalo Regency reflects the principles of responsiveness and accountability in the framework of the *good governance* version of UNESCAP (2020), which emphasizes that open communication allows the government to respond to the aspirations of the community in a timely, transparent, and empathetic manner. Thus, the results of the study show that open and consistent public communication is a strengthening variable for public trust in the government after the Re-Vote (PSU). Open communication that is carried out dialogically, repeatedly, and adjusted to the local context has succeeded in building a positive perception that the North Gorontalo Regency government is not only informative, but also responsive and trustworthy.

c. Community Involvement in Decision Making

The results of the study show that community involvement in post-Re-Voting (PSU) decision-making is one of the important strategies used by the North Gorontalo Regency Government to restore and strengthen public trust. Local governments realize that political legitimacy is not only built through legitimate election results, but also through participatory processes that show respect for the people's votes. In practice, the North Gorontalo Regency Government activates public participation mechanisms based on local wisdom, such as *community deliberation forums*, *hearing meetings* at the sub-district level, and cross-cultural and religious leaders meetings to discuss post-PSU policy priorities. The government also opens a dialogue space for youth and women's groups to participate in conveying their aspirations related to regional social and economic policies. Through this approach, the community feels directly involved in the policy formulation process, not just as a decision-maker.

Based on data obtained from several informants, the research said that the involvement of community leaders and customary institutions made the post-PSU reconciliation process faster to be accepted by residents. One of the village chiefs stated that "*the government is more open now; The public can speak directly in the forum, and our voices*

are heard to determine the programs that are really needed." This statement shows that public participation has a strong psychological effect in rebuilding trust and a sense of ownership in government policies. This phenomenon is in line with the participatory governance theory put forward by Fung & Wright (2003) in his book *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* explains that substantive public involvement strengthens the legitimacy and effectiveness of government because the policies produced reflect the aspirations of citizens and broaden the basis of government accountability.

Conceptually Arnstein (2019) emphasizing that citizen participation must rise from mere *tokenism* (ceremonial) to *partnership* and *delegated power*, where citizens have a real position in the decision-making process. The practice found in North Gorontalo shows a shift towards a level of "partnership" participation because the forums that are formed give the community the opportunity to influence decisions, not just provide symbolic input. In addition, these findings are supported by research Nabatchi & Amsler (2014) which states that public participation strengthens institutional trust when citizens see evidence that their views are actually integrated in the final decision. In post-conflict situations or legitimacy crises, such as PSUs, this form of participation acts as a "social bridge" that restores cohesion between the government and citizens. From the perspective of social psychology, the social trust theory Putnam et al. (2021); Levi & Stoker (2000) Explains that public participation strengthens horizontal (between citizens) and vertical (between citizens and government) trust networks. When the government invites the public to dialogue regularly and transparently, it reinforces the norm of reciprocity and the perception that the government "trusts the citizens". This kind of trust is reciprocal, and residents become more trusting of the government because they feel appreciated and involved.

Field findings also show that local participatory processes based on cultural values such as "huyula" (cooperation) strengthen a sense of solidarity and accelerate the recovery of social relations after the Re-Vote (PSU). Local governments integrate these values into public policies by involving local communities as partners in the implementation of development programs. This approach emphasizes the importance of "cultural embeddedness" in the implementation of participation, as emphasized by Baiocchi (2005) In his study on community participation in Brazil, public participation rooted in local norms is more durable and more trusted by the community In addition, the results of the study show that the success of community involvement is also strongly influenced by the government's ability to manage public expectations. Some residents complained that their input was sometimes not responded to immediately due to budget or authority constraints, which led to the perception of being "heard but not implemented". These findings are relevant to the results of the research by Christensen & Lægreid (2020) in the Public Management Review, which said that participation without follow-up clarity can lower public trust, because citizens interpret their involvement as a mere formality.

Therefore, in the context of North Gorontalo, the local government began to implement a *follow-up report system* after a public forum, where the results of deliberations and government decisions are announced publicly. This step shows a tangible form of participatory accountability, ensuring that every aspiration that comes in is responded to, whether accepted or rejected, with a clear reason. Thus, it can be concluded that the strategy of community involvement in decision-making in North Gorontalo plays a dual role: first, as a means of socio-political reconciliation after the PSU; and second, as a mechanism for learning

local democracy that strengthens long-term public trust. When citizens feel meaningfully involved in decision-making and see the concrete results of their participation, public trust grows not because of propaganda or political promises, but because of first-hand experience in an inclusive and fair governance process.

d. Real Action in Public Service

The results of the study show that after the 2025 Re-Vote (PSU), the North Gorontalo Regency Government (GORUT) is working hard to restore public trust through concrete actions oriented towards improving the quality of public services. These measures are intended to affirm that the legitimacy of governance is not only built through communication and transparency, but also through *performance-based trust* that grows from real performance evidence. Local governments implement a series of priority programs in the basic infrastructure, health, and education sectors. Some of the concrete initiatives found on the ground include:

1. Maintenance and reconstruction of village roads damaged by project delays during the PSU period, which became a symbol of "government return to work".
2. Primary health service revitalization programs, including *mobile clinic services* to remote villages and the procurement of basic medical equipment.
3. Improving educational facilities, such as classroom rehabilitation, and providing scholarships for outstanding students after the disruption of the political process.

These measures are seen by the public as tangible proof that the government is not just "talking", but really working in the public interest. An informant from a community leader in Kwandang District stated that "we are starting to believe again because the government is now going down directly to repair the roads and monitor the schools. In the past, when we were PSU, we only heard promises." This statement affirms that public trust grows from the concretization of political promises in the form of public services that can be felt directly. These findings are in line with *the public service performance theory* by Van de Walle & Bouckaert (2003) which explains that public perception of the effectiveness and fairness of services has a direct effect on the level of trust in the government.

In connection with the facts in North Gorontalo Regency, the improvement of public services after the Re-Vote (PSU) shows a positive causal relationship between the quality of services and the legitimacy of local government. In addition, according to Christensen & Lægveid (2020) in the Public Management Review, public trust increases when the government shows responsiveness to the real needs of citizens through efficient and empathetic service policies, especially after political or social crises. The North Gorontalo government implements this approach by ensuring that public services continue to run during the political transition period and immediately improve their quality after the PSU is completed. Theoretically, the "Performance-Based Legitimacy" model (Gilley, 2006) asserts that society not only assesses the legitimacy of the government from the democratic process, but also from the government's ability to generate real benefits. In this case, concrete actions such as infrastructure development, improved health services, and education are indicators of government success that can strengthen long-term public trust.

The results of the study also show that improving public services not only has an impact on public satisfaction but also reduces the potential for political polarization after PSU. This is in accordance with the findings Bouckaert et al. (2005) which states that effective public services function as a "*neutral trust channel*" that restores citizens' trust in state institutions

without having to go through partisan political channels. Furthermore, field findings show that the most effective form of "public service action" in building trust in North Gorontalo is a *proximity-based service*, namely services that are geographically and emotionally close to residents. For example, mobile health services and direct visits by the Regent to schools. This approach is in line with the concept of "street-level bureaucracy" of Lipsky (2010) which confirms that direct interaction between public service providers and the community has a significant impact on the perception of justice and trust.

Regarding *governance*, the approach of the North Gorontalo District, the government of Kabupaten North Gorontalo reflects the application of the principles of responsiveness and effectiveness, as stated in the *Good Governance* framework of UNESCAP (2020), which states that an effective and responsive government is able to translate the aspirations of the people into real and sustainable public services. However, the results of the study also indicate several challenges in the implementation of this strategy. In some sub-districts, limited human resources and budgets cause public services to be uneven. As a result, some people still view the government's efforts as symbolic. This situation is reminiscent of the criticism of Pollitt & Bouckaert (2017) in *Public Management Reform*, that public service reform that is not accompanied by change management and periodic evaluation will result in a "trust gap" between citizens' expectations and the realization of government performance.

To overcome this, the North Gorontalo Government has developed a *performance feedback system* in the form of annual community satisfaction surveys and service results reports published online. This step strengthens the performance accountability dimension and demonstrates the government's commitment to transparency in work results, not just in the policy process. Thus, the results of the study confirm that real action through improving public services is the most effective instrument in rebuilding public trust after PSU. This strategy shows the transformation of public trust from perception-based to empirical experience-based: people believe not because they are promised, but because they directly feel the benefits of government policies. Conceptually, these findings confirm the view that Ryzin (2011) in the Public Administration Review that the performance of public services (service performance) is the main path for the formation of *trust in government*, especially in the context of post-crisis local government. Public trust will last a long time when public service continues to show consistency between promises, processes, and results.

Conclusion

This study confirms that the reconstruction of public trust after the Re-Vote (PSU) in North Gorontalo Regency is a multidimensional process that requires a combination of communication, governance, and sustainable performance strategies. The results of the field findings show that local governments are not only trying to restore political legitimacy procedurally, but also focusing on the psychological and social recovery of the community through strategies that are integrated in four main dimensions, namely;

Transparency of public policies and information is the initial foundation for the restoration of public trust. By opening access to information about the reasons, stages, and results of PSU implementation, the North Gorontalo Regency Government has succeeded in creating a perception of fairness and strengthening institutional accountability. These findings confirm the view of UNDP (2021) and Grimmelihijsen & Meijer (2014) that transparency is

the main instrument for building public trust, not just data disclosure, but openness of rationality and policy processes that can be tested by the public. In the context of North Gorontalo, the effectiveness of this strategy is strengthened by the application of local wisdom principles such as *mosalanga* and *huyula*, which make information disclosure resonate with the culture of the community.

Furthermore, in terms of open and consistent public communication, it plays a role as a social medium that bridges transparency and trust. Local governments build two-way communication channels through face-to-face forums, social media, and community groups. The results of the study prove that fast, responsive, and empathetic communication suppresses the potential for disinformation while strengthening public perception of government professionalism. This is in line with the findings of Porumbescu (2017) and Kim & Lee (2012), who affirm that the consistency and quality of public communication contribute directly to *trust recovery* after political crises. Thus, open public communication is not only a tool of information but a mechanism of social legitimacy.

Next, community involvement in decision-making becomes an instrument of local democratization that strengthens reciprocal relations between the government and citizens. Through community deliberation forums, meetings with traditional leaders, and the involvement of youth and women, the North Gorontalo Regency government shows a commitment to substantive participation, not just a formality. Public participation designed on a cultural basis has been proven to accelerate post-PSU social reconciliation and strengthen the legitimacy of regional policies. These findings affirm the theory of *empowered participatory governance* by Fung & Wright (2003) and Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, which places citizen involvement as a means of redistributing power and establishing ownership of public policy.

Meanwhile, seen from real action through improving public services, it becomes a concrete form of the state's presence in people's lives. The local government has shown a commitment to performance by improving basic infrastructure, improving health services, and expanding access to education. This empirical evidence shows that *performance-based legitimacy* (Gilley, 2006) is the main underpinning of post-crisis public trust: people tend to trust governments that deliver real and sustainable benefits. The performance of public services that is directly felt by citizens not only fosters trust, but also restores the belief that the government functions as a public servant, not just a political actor.

Conceptually, the four strategies are intertwined in forming a public trust *cycle*. Transparency builds the foundation of integrity, public communication connects the government with the community through continuous dialogue, public participation strengthens policy legitimacy through inclusivity, and public service actions prove real government performance. This cycle indicates that restoring public trust cannot be achieved partially, but rather requires a systemic and sustainable approach.

The practical implications of this study confirm that the strategy of reconstructing public trust after PSU needs to be directed at the synergy between transparency, communication, participation, and public service performance. Local governments should avoid a pattern of ceremonial approaches that stop at publication or socialization, and instead emphasize consistency in action, responsiveness to citizens' aspirations, and concrete evidence on the ground. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on *trust in government* by showing that public trust at the local level is not simply the result of electoral

democracy, but is the product of a dynamic interaction between the symbolic (narrative and communication) and the empirical (performance and public service). In the context of a region such as North Gorontalo, which is rich in social and cultural values, the reconstruction of public trust requires an approach that is not only rational but also contextual and based on local values.

Thus, it can be concluded that the strategy of reconstructing public trust carried out by the North Gorontalo Regency Government after the PSU has proven to be effective and contributory to regional socio-political stability. The sustainability of this strategy is highly dependent on the government's commitment to maintaining consistency, expanding participation, and ensuring that each policy delivers tangible benefits to society. Public trust is not the result of rhetoric, but rather of the continuity between words, processes, and real actions.

Acknowledgments

Penulis mengucapkan terima kasih kepada Dekan Fakultas Ilmu Sosial atas support pendanaan dalam kegiatan Skim Riset Kolaboratif tahun anggaran 2025 dengan SK No. 487UN47.B2/KU/2025.

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