

Everyday Legitimacy in Reformist Governance: Trust Cultures and the Relational Politics of Authority in Pasig City

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This article examines how political legitimacy is constructed and negotiated in everyday governance by advancing a relational and interpretive framework grounded in trust cultures. Moving beyond institutional and cultural accounts that treat legitimacy as an outcome of performance or predisposition, the study reconceptualizes legitimacy as an ongoing accomplishment shaped through citizens' encounters with authority under conditions of uncertainty. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 16 residents of Barangay Pinagbuhatan in Pasig City under the reformist mayoralty of Vico Sotto, this analysis identifies three interrelated dynamics – *relational presence*, *conditionality*, and *hybridity* – through which legitimacy is enacted in practice. These dynamics demonstrate how governance becomes perceptible, normatively evaluated, and practically navigated across embodied, mediated, and infrastructural forms. The findings show that legitimacy does not follow automatically from reforms but depends on how institutional practices are interpreted in relation to historically embedded expectations about fairness, responsiveness, and accessibility. By introducing trust cultures as a mediating mechanism, the article offers a meso-level account of how legitimacy is continuously produced, differentiated across institutional levels, and recalibrated through everyday interpretive work.

Keywords: Everyday Legitimacy; Trust Cultures; Relational Governance; Reformist Politics; Philippines



INTRODUCTION

Questions of political legitimacy have re-emerged with renewed urgency in contexts marked by democratic strain, institutional fragility, and the rise of both reformist and populist leaderships. Across Southeast Asia and beyond, scholars have documented how governments continue to command public support even amid governance failures, policy inconsistencies, and democratic backsliding (Curato, 2016; Thompson, 2016; Webb, 2017, 2018). In the Philippines, this paradox is particularly pronounced. Despite longstanding critiques of elite capture, bureaucratic weakness, and uneven service delivery (Hutchcroft, 1998; McCoy, 2009; Purdey et al., 2016), public trust in political institutions has at times remained resilient – and even

elevated – under conditions that might otherwise be expected to erode it (Pernia, 2022a). These tensions are especially visible in the contemporary moment, where both strongman populism and reformist governance projects can generate substantial public support, albeit through different pathways. Such variation raises a broader question: how is legitimacy actually constructed and sustained in practice under conditions of democratic fragility and uneven governance?

Existing scholarship offers important but partial answers. Institutional and performance-based accounts suggest that legitimacy derives from the effective delivery of public goods and services, with citizens responding to state performance (Easton, 1965, 1975; Mishler & Rose, 2001). Cultural and normative approaches, by contrast, emphasize historically embedded orientations toward authority, including preferences for order, hierarchy, and strong leadership (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 2020; Ma & Yang, 2014), while more recent work shows how support for decisive leadership can reinforce institutional trust even under illiberal conditions (Pernia, 2023). Yet while these perspectives help explain why legitimacy may be extended, they often treat it as a relatively stable outcome – whether of institutional effectiveness, cultural predisposition, or political performance. What remains underexplored is how legitimacy is interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in everyday interactions between citizens and the state, particularly in contexts where governance is encountered through localized and relational practices shaped by patronage, moral obligation, and negotiated authority (Kerkvliet, 2002; Kusaka, 2017; Sidel, 1999).

This article addresses that gap by advancing the notion of *everyday legitimacy*: the ongoing, situated process through which citizens evaluate, interpret, and respond to governance in the course of daily life. Rather than viewing legitimacy as a fixed property of institutions or regimes, we treat it as a relational accomplishment shaped through repeated encounters, accumulated expectations, and practical judgments. Drawing on relational approaches to trust (Frederiksen, 2014; Möllering, 2006; Six, 2014), the article argues that legitimacy, like trust, is inherently contingent, interpretive, and continuously renegotiated under conditions of uncertainty. The key question, then, is not simply whether governments perform or whether citizens are culturally predisposed to trust them, but how governance is rendered meaningful, credible, and acceptable through everyday experience.

To capture this process, the article introduces *trust cultures* as a meso-level analytical lens (Mendoza, 2025a, 2025b). Trust cultures refer to patterned, socially embedded expectations about how authority should be enacted and evaluated within particular contexts. They mediate between institutional practices and citizens' interpretations of governance, shaping what counts as responsiveness, fairness, accessibility, and credible authority. In this view, legitimacy emerges not simply from what governments do, but from how their actions are interpreted within culturally and relationally structured expectations. Trust cultures therefore provide a way of linking macro-level reforms and institutional practices to the situated judgments through which legitimacy is sustained, qualified, or withdrawn in everyday life.

Empirically, the article examines everyday legitimacy in the context of reformist local governance in Pasig City. It argues that the legitimacy of reform initiatives cannot be assumed to follow automatically from institutional design, policy outputs, or public visibility. Rather, legitimacy depends on how such efforts are interpreted through citizens' existing trust cultures and everyday expectations of authority. The analysis identifies three interrelated dynamics through which everyday legitimacy is enacted: *relational presence*, *conditionality*, and *hybridity*. Taken together, these dynamics illuminate how governance becomes legible, evaluated, and navigated

in everyday life – through the alignment of how authority is experienced, how it is judged, and how it is accessed across multiple modes of engagement.

The empirical case centers on Pasig City under the mayoralty of Vico Sotto, a setting widely associated with reformist governance, particularly in relation to transparency, anti-corruption, and digital responsiveness (Ranada, 2020). Since assuming office in 2019, Sotto's administration has sought to institutionalize bureaucratic discipline, reduce discretionary practices linked to patronage, and expand direct communication with citizens through digital platforms, positioning Pasig as a contemporary model of "good governance" within Philippine local politics (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011; Capuno, 2005). This makes Pasig an analytically strategic rather than representative case, in line with qualitative traditions that prioritize theoretically relevant cases for illuminating social and political mechanisms (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2018). Examining a setting where governance is widely perceived as improved provides a productive contrast to dominant accounts that explain legitimacy primarily through patronage or coercion (Hutchcroft, 1998; Sidel, 1999). It allows the article to ask not why legitimacy persists under obviously weak governance, but how it is actively assembled even under reformist conditions that might otherwise appear more straightforwardly legitimate.

Within Pasig, the study focuses on Barangay Pinagbuhatan, one of the city's largest and most socioeconomically diverse communities (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2020). As the lowest unit of local government in the Philippines, the barangay functions as a primary interface between citizens and the state, where governance is encountered through routine interactions such as service delivery, communication with officials, and participation in community programs (Brillantes & Moscare, 2002; Capuno, 2012). Barangays thus mediate state-society relations and translate policy into everyday practice (Kerkvliet, 2002; Sidel, 1999), making them especially suitable sites for examining legitimacy as a lived, situated, and relational process. Focusing on Pinagbuhatan enables the study to locate legitimacy not at the abstract level of regime support, but in the ordinary spaces where citizens actually encounter, assess, and navigate local authority.

The article makes three main contributions. First, it reframes legitimacy as a relational and processual phenomenon, thereby addressing limitations in institutional and cultural accounts that treat it primarily as an outcome or attitudinal disposition. Second, it introduces trust cultures as a mediating mechanism linking governance practices to citizens' interpretive evaluations, offering a meso-level framework for understanding how legitimacy is socially organized in practice. Third, it provides an empirically grounded account of how legitimacy is constructed in a Southeast Asian setting, contributing to debates on democratic ambivalence, populism, and governance in the region (Curato, 2016; Pernia, 2023; Webb, 2018). In doing so, the article shows that even in contexts of reform, legitimacy is not automatically secured but must be continuously accomplished through relational engagement, evaluative judgment, and everyday negotiation.

The remainder of the article develops a relational framework of legitimacy grounded in trust and interpretation, followed by a discussion of the research design and case. It then presents the three dynamics through which everyday legitimacy is enacted in Pasig City before concluding with reflections on the broader implications of theorizing legitimacy in Southeast Asia and beyond.

RETHINKING EVERYDAY LEGITIMACY: LIMITS AND RELATIONAL FOUNDATIONS

Contemporary debates on political legitimacy offer multiple explanations for why citizens extend – or withdraw – support from governments and institutions. Across political sociology,

comparative politics, and communication studies, legitimacy has been attributed to institutional performance, cultural orientations, moral expectations, and affective attachments. While these perspectives have generated important insights, they remain analytically fragmented and often treat legitimacy as a relatively stable condition or outcome. This section synthesizes different approaches and finds a common gap: they neglect legitimacy interpretation and enactment in actual governance. Based on this critique, the section proposes a relational lens that reframes legitimacy as a provisional achievement impacted by interaction, interpretation, and culturally embedded expectations.

Dominant Explanations and Their Shared Limits

A wide range of scholarship has sought to explain how political legitimacy is established and sustained, particularly in contexts characterized by institutional unevenness, personalized authority, and democratic ambiguity. In the Philippines and across Southeast Asia, these explanations cluster around approaches emphasizing structural relations, institutional performance, political leadership, cultural orientations, and moral expectations. While each offers important insights, they also tend to treat legitimacy as a relatively stable condition or outcome. Table 1 synthesizes these approaches and highlights both their analytical strengths and their shared limitations.

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Key Scholars</i>	<i>Primary Source of Legitimacy</i>	<i>Analytical Strength</i>	<i>Analytical Limitation</i>
Clientelism, Patronage, and Bossism	Hutchcroft (1998); Kerkvliet (2002, 2013); Landé (1965); Sidel (1999); Scott (1972, 1977)	Reciprocity, material exchange, embedded social ties, coercive and economic control	Explains durability of political support under inequality; foregrounds relational embeddedness of power	Treats legitimacy as structurally reproduced; under-specifies how citizens interpret and evaluate authority beyond material or coercive relations
Institutional Performance and Governance Delivery	Easton (1965, 1975); Fukuyama (2013); Mishler & Rose (2001)	Effective delivery of public goods, bureaucratic capacity, policy outcomes	Provides measurable account of legitimacy linked to institutional capacity	Assumes direct link between performance and legitimacy; struggles to explain trust persistence under weak or uneven performance
Populism, Leadership, and Political Performance	Curato (2016); Pernia (2023); Thompson (2016)	Authenticity, proximity to “the people,” decisiveness, perceived responsiveness	Captures affective and performative dimensions of legitimacy	Risks treating legitimacy as inherent to leaders; under-specifies how performances are interpreted across contexts

Political Culture and Normative Orientations	Almond & Verba (1963); Dalton & Ong (2005); Inglehart (2020); Pietsch (2015); Webb (2017, 2018)	Values, norms, and orientations toward authority (e.g., hierarchy, order)	Explains enduring patterns of political attitudes and hybrid orientations	Treats legitimacy as attitudinal; limited attention to how norms are enacted and negotiated in practice
Moral Economy and Everyday Norms	Cannell (1999); Kerkvliet (2013); Kusaka (2017); Scott (1977)	Norms of fairness, reciprocity, obligation, and moral expectations	Foregrounds citizens' moral reasoning and everyday evaluative frameworks	Identifies normative bases but under-specifies how these are operationalized in concrete interactions
Democratic Ambivalence and Hybrid Attitudes	Pernia (2022a, 2022b, 2023); Webb (2017, 2018, 2025)	Coexistence of democratic support and authoritarian preferences; conditional trust	Captures complexity and contradiction in public orientations	Describes ambivalence as outcome; limited explanation of how it is produced and navigated in everyday governance
Relational and Interpretive Approaches to Trust	Bevir & Rhodes (2010); Frederiksen (2014); Hamm et al. (2024); Harrer (2025); Möllering (2006); Six (2014)	Trust as relational, contingent, and interpretive process shaped by interaction and uncertainty	Reframes legitimacy as dynamic and processual; foregrounds interpretation and vulnerability	Strong conceptually but under-applied empirically in everyday governance, particularly in Southeast Asia

Table 1. Dominant approaches to political legitimacy and their analytical limits

At the structural level, legitimacy has often been explained through patronage, clientelism, and localized power relations. Classic studies emphasize how authority is embedded in networks of reciprocity and obligation (Kerkvliet, 2002, 2013; Landé, 1965; Scott, 1972, 1977), while later work highlights the consolidation of local power through economic and coercive control (“bossism”) (Hutchcroft, 1998; Sidel, 1999). These accounts remain indispensable for understanding how political support persists under conditions of inequality. However, they tend to treat legitimacy as structurally reproduced, offering limited insight into how citizens interpret authority beyond material exchange or coercive relations.

Institutional and performance-based accounts, by contrast, locate legitimacy in the effective delivery of public goods and the capacity of the state to perform (Easton, 1965, 1975; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Fukuyama, 2013). While these perspectives provide clear evaluative criteria, they often assume a relatively direct relationship between performance and legitimacy. This makes it difficult to account for empirical cases where trust persists despite weak or uneven performance, or where similar reforms yield divergent evaluations across contexts.

A third body of work emphasizes leadership, political performance, and populist appeal. Here, legitimacy is mobilized through claims to authenticity, proximity to “the people”, and

decisiveness (Curato, 2016; Thompson, 2016). Recent scholarship further shows how strong leadership can reinforce institutional trust, particularly when leaders are perceived as effective, even in the presence of illiberal tendencies (Pernia, 2023). Yet these accounts risk attributing legitimacy to leaders themselves, rather than examining how such performances are interpreted, contested, or sustained in everyday settings.

Cultural and normative approaches foreground historically embedded orientations toward authority, including preferences for order, hierarchy, and stability (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 2020; Dalton & Ong, 2005; Pietsch, 2015; Webb, 2017, 2018). These perspectives have been especially influential in explaining the persistence of hybrid political attitudes in Southeast Asia. However, by treating legitimacy primarily as an attitudinal orientation, they offer limited insight into how such norms are enacted, negotiated, or transformed in practice.

Moral economy perspectives shift attention to citizens' normative expectations, emphasizing fairness, reciprocity, and moral obligation as bases for evaluating authority (Cannell, 1999, Kerkvliet, 2013; Kusaka, 2017; Scott, 1977). These accounts demonstrate that legitimacy is deeply embedded in moral reasoning. However, they often stop short of specifying how such expectations are operationalized in concrete interactions with governance.

Finally, scholarship on democratic ambivalence highlights the coexistence of democratic commitments and authoritarian preferences within the same publics (Pernia, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Webb, 2017, 2018, 2025). While this work captures the complexity of political orientations, it tends to describe ambivalence as an outcome rather than explaining how it is produced, sustained, or navigated in everyday life.

Taken together, these approaches converge in treating legitimacy as something that is possessed, granted, or measured. While they explain why legitimacy may be extended, they offer limited insight into how it is *recognized*, *interpreted*, and *enacted* in everyday governance. Addressing this gap requires a shift toward a relational and processual understanding of legitimacy.

Legitimacy as Relational and Contingent Practice

A relational perspective reconceptualizes legitimacy as an *ongoing accomplishment* shaped through interaction, interpretation, and uncertainty. Drawing from relational approaches to trust, this view emphasizes that trust is not a fixed attitude but a process involving continuous evaluation (Frederiksen, 2014; Möllering, 2006; Six, 2014). Trust entails a “leap” beyond available evidence, requiring actors to act despite uncertainty and incomplete knowledge (Möllering, 2006). As such, it is inherently interpretive: actors must make sense of others' intentions and actions under conditions where certainty is unavailable.

Trust is also fundamentally tied to vulnerability. To trust is to accept the possibility of disappointment, as expectations may not be fulfilled. Recent work underscores how trust operates under conditions of fragility, requiring ongoing recalibration as relationships evolve (Hamm et al., 2024; Harrer, 2025). Trust is thus neither binary nor stable, but continuously negotiated through interaction.

Extending this perspective to governance suggests that legitimacy, like trust, is relational and contingent. Citizens do not simply respond to institutional outputs; they interpret and evaluate governance as they encounter it in practice. These evaluations are shaped by expectations about fairness, responsiveness, and care, which are themselves socially and historically situated (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010). Legitimacy, in this sense, emerges through ongoing processes of interpretation rather than as a fixed attribute of institutions or regimes.

This perspective foregrounds contingency. Institutional reforms – such as transparency initiatives, digital governance platforms, or anti-corruption measures – do not automatically produce legitimacy. Their effects depend on how they are interpreted within specific contexts. The same practice may be read as sincere in one setting and as performative or insufficient in another. Legitimacy is therefore shaped not only by what governments do, but by how their actions are rendered meaningful within particular interpretive frameworks.

Trust Cultures as Conceptual Framework for Everyday Legitimacy

Building on this relational understanding, this article advances *trust cultures* as its conceptual framework (Mendoza, 2025a, 2025b). Trust cultures refer to patterned, socially embedded expectations about how authority should be enacted, recognized, and evaluated within specific contexts. They operate as a meso-level mechanism linking structural conditions and institutional reforms to everyday judgments of legitimacy.

Trust cultures shape what counts as credible, fair, and responsive governance. They draw on historically grounded norms, moral frameworks, and interpretive repertoires that guide how citizens make sense of authority. In contexts such as the Philippines, these expectations are shaped by legacies of patronage, negotiated authority, and moral obligation, which continue to inform how governance is experienced and evaluated (Kerkvliet, 2013; Kusaka, 2017).

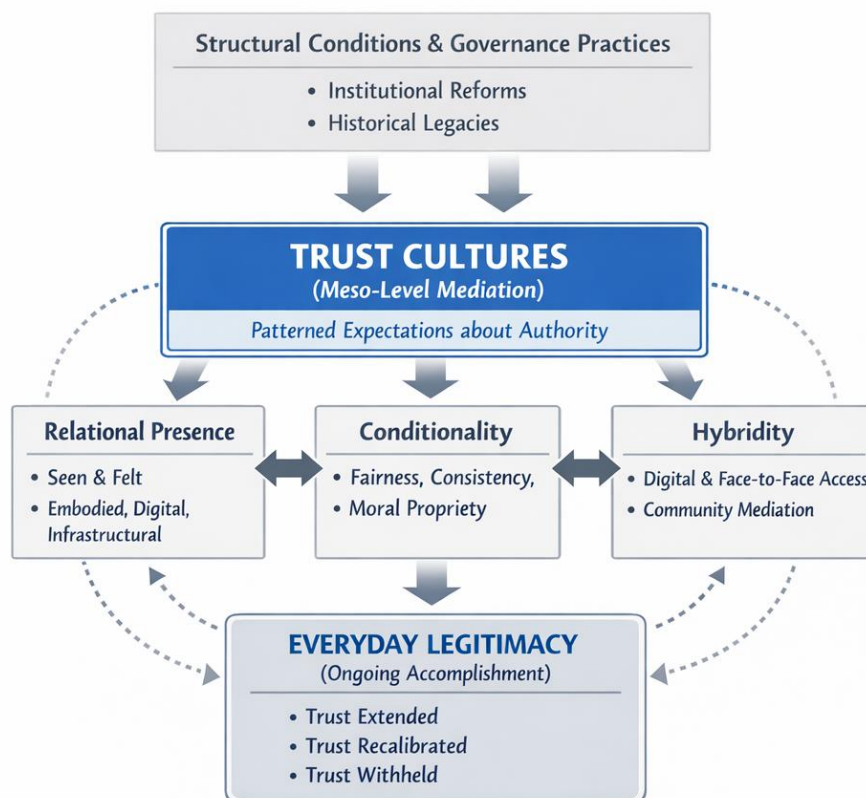


Figure 1. Trust cultures as a framework for everyday legitimacy (own illustration)

As illustrated in Figure 1, trust cultures mediate the relationship between governance and legitimacy by shaping how institutional actions are interpreted. Structural conditions and governance practices influence trust cultures, while trust cultures, in turn, shape how these practices are understood and evaluated. Legitimacy emerges from this interaction as an ongoing, situated accomplishment rather than a fixed outcome. At the same time, these evaluations feed back into trust cultures, reshaping expectations over time and reinforcing or destabilizing future interpretations of governance.

This framework clarifies why institutional reforms do not automatically generate legitimacy. Initiatives such as digital engagement, transparency measures, or bureaucratic reforms are not evaluated in isolation but in relation to existing expectations about how authority should be enacted. The same practice may be interpreted as sincere, insufficient, or even suspect depending on how it aligns with these expectations. Legitimacy, therefore, depends not only on institutional change but on its resonance with trust cultures.

Trust cultures do not operate merely as abstract orientations; they are enacted through recurring dimensions of everyday evaluation that structure how governance becomes meaningful in practice. In particular, they shape (1) how governance is rendered perceptible and experienced as relational presence, (2) how it is normatively assessed through conditionality in relation to expectations of fairness, consistency, and moral propriety, and (3) how it is accessed and navigated through hybridity across multiple modes of interaction. These dimensions capture the interpretive work through which citizens make sense of authority under conditions of uncertainty.

Focusing on trust cultures thus foregrounds the everyday character of legitimacy as a process of ongoing interpretation and recalibration. Legitimacy is produced through routine encounters in which citizens experience presence, evaluate conduct, and navigate available channels of engagement. These processes generate patterned dynamics through which legitimacy is sustained, qualified, or withdrawn, reflecting both reformist initiatives and enduring expectations shaped by prior experiences of governance.

By positioning trust cultures as a mediating mechanism, this framework captures legitimacy as a process that is continuously negotiated and often internally differentiated. The analysis that follows identifies three interrelated dynamics: relational presence, conditionality, and hybridity; through those dynamics dimensions are enacted in practice, demonstrating how reformist governance is rendered perceptible, evaluated, and navigated through existing trust cultures.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case-study design, drawing on semi-structured interviews with residents of Barangay Pinagbuhatan and analyzed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), to examine how legitimacy is interpreted and enacted in everyday governance. Situated within an interpretive approach to political research, the study treats legitimacy not as a measurable outcome but as a relational and meaning-laden process emerging through citizens' encounters with local government. This orientation enables close attention to the expectations, judgments, and evaluative practices through which legitimacy is constructed in context.

Data Collection and Sampling

The study draws on 16 semi-structured online interviews with residents of Barangay Pinagbuhatan, conducted between March and May 2025. Participants varied by gender, age,

occupation, and length of residence, enabling the study to capture a range of everyday encounters with local governance. While online interviewing may have limited participation among less digitally connected residents, it also enabled access to employed participants and residents with caregiving responsibilities who might otherwise have been difficult to recruit.

Sampling combined self-selection and purposive strategies. A recruitment call was posted on the Barangay's official Facebook page, generating an initial pool of participants, after which purposive selection and limited snowballing were used to ensure variation across age, gender, occupation, and length of residence. The final sample included 13 women and 3 men. Six participants were aged 18-29, nine were aged 30-59, and one was aged 60 or above. Occupationally, the sample included homemakers and full-time mothers, salaried and service-sector workers, a teacher, BPO workers, a legal secretary, a pastor and community mediator, a part-time rider and online seller, and a family driver recovering from stroke. For the purposes of participant profiling, "long-term residents" refers to participants who had lived in Pasig or Pinagbuhatan for ten years or more, while "more recent residents" refers to those who had lived there for fewer than ten years. Most participants fell into the former category, with a smaller number belonging to the latter. Taken together, the sample provided a diverse cross-section of everyday experiences with local governance.

Participant code	Gender	Age group	Occupation / social role	Residence duration
P1	Female	18-29	Homemaker / caregiver	Long-term resident
P2	Female	18-29	Full-time mother / homemaker	Long-term resident
P3	Female	30-59	Legal secretary / legal assistant	Long-term resident
P4	Female	30-59	Homemaker	Long-term resident
P5	Female	30-59	Homemaker	Long-term resident
P6	Female	30-59	Homemaker	Long-term resident
P7	Female	30-59	Call-center worker	Long-term resident
P8	Female	30-59	Part-time rider / online seller	Long-term resident
P9	Female	30-59	Homemaker	More recent resident
P10	Female	18-29	High school teacher	Long-term resident

Participant code	Gender	Age group	Occupation / social role	Residence duration
P11	Male	18-29	BPO worker / senior process executive	Long-term resident
P12	Female	18-29	BPO customer service representative	Long-term resident
P13	Male	60+	Pastor / Lupon member / ALS teacher	Long-term resident
P14	Female	30-59	Homemaker	More recent resident
P15	Male	30-59	Family driver / PWD, recovering from stroke	Long-term resident
P16	Female	18-29	Homemaker / informal side work	Long-term resident

Table 2. Profile of interview participants

Interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and were conducted primarily in Filipino, with occasional code-switching into English. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and, where necessary, translated into English by the lead researcher with attention to preserving culturally embedded terms such as *tiwala* (trust), *hiya* (propriety), and *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude). Participants received modest compensation, and ethical clearance was secured prior to data collection.

The interview guide was designed to elicit situated evaluations of governance rather than abstract political attitudes. Questions centered on concrete encounters with local authority – such as accessing services, interacting with officials, and responding to policy initiatives – alongside broader reflections on *tiwala*, *pagsunod* (submission), and the culturally embedded values that shape engagement with authority. Data collection proceeded according to the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), with the resulting dataset providing sufficient depth, relevance, and variation for the interpretive analysis undertaken here.

Analytical Strategy

Analysis followed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), supported by MAXQDA 2024. Coding proceeded in two phases. First, subsets of interviews were independently coded to generate initial patterns grounded in participants' accounts. Second, these codes were reviewed collaboratively and iteratively refined into broader analytic categories.

While themes were developed inductively, analysis was theoretically sensitized by the relational framework of trust and legitimacy, enabling the identification of patterned dynamics through which governance is rendered perceptible, evaluable, and navigable in everyday life.

Through this process, three central dynamics – relational presence, conditionality, and hybridity – emerged as recurring patterns in how participants interpret and evaluate governance.

In line with interpretive Political Science (Bevir & Rhodes, 2015; Rhodes, 2017), interview accounts are treated not as fixed attitudes but as meaning-making practices. Excerpts are presented to illustrate broader patterns rather than isolated viewpoints, and alternative interpretations were considered throughout the analytic process.

Triangulation, Reflexivity, and Limitations

Analytic rigor was strengthened through multiple forms of triangulation. Patterns identified in interviews were compared across participants and situated within observable features of governance in Pasig City, including communication practices and service delivery. Findings were further cross-validated against ethnographic insights from a parallel study involving short-term participant observation across five Barangays in the same city during the 2025 election period, focusing on everyday interactions and citizen-state encounters in both offline and digitally mediated settings.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The lead researcher conducted all interviews in Barangay Pinagbuhatan, ensuring consistency in data collection and initial interpretation. One undergraduate research assistant from Pasig contributed contextual insights to situate participants' accounts, while the rest of the team engaged through transcripts and participated in collective reflexive discussions. These discussions enabled critical engagement with interpretations, accounting for positionality and refining analytic themes collaboratively.

Several limitations should be noted. The study focuses on a single barangay and a relatively small sample, limiting generalizability. Online interviews may have excluded less digitally connected populations. Nonetheless, the aim is analytical insight rather than statistical generalization. While triangulation strengthens the findings, both datasets remain situated within Pasig City. Despite these constraints, the study offers a robust lens for examining how reformist governance is interpreted and negotiated in everyday life.

FINDINGS

Drawing on interviews with residents of Barangay Pinagbuhatan, this section examines how legitimacy is interpreted and enacted in everyday governance. Rather than emerging automatically from institutional reforms or policy outputs, legitimacy appears as an ongoing evaluative process through which citizens assess authority in practice – deciding when to extend trust, when to comply, and when to withhold support. These evaluations are anchored in culturally embedded expectations about presence, fairness, and responsiveness, which structure how governance is encountered at the local level.

Three interrelated dynamics were identified and subsequently refined: relational presence, conditionality, and hybridity. These dynamics do not operate independently but overlap in practice, shaping how governance is encountered, judged, and navigated. Together, they show how legitimacy is continuously negotiated through trust cultures that mediate between reformist governance and citizens' lived experiences.

Relational Presence

Across the interviews, what initially appears as leadership “visibility” is more precisely experienced as relational presence – an interpretive sense that governance is active, accessible, and responsive across multiple modes of encounter. Participants do not simply ask whether leaders are visible, but whether they are *felt* as present in ways that signal care, responsiveness, and accountability. Presence, in this sense, is less an observable attribute than an evaluative effect emerging from patterned interactions.

At the most immediate level, presence is articulated through embodied encounters. Several participants emphasize that leaders must be “*nakikita*” (seen) and “*napupuntahan*” (reachable) (P-4, P-6). One recalls that trust shifted when a leader “*pumunta sa lugar namin na never nagawa ng previous administration*” (went to our area, something never done before) (P-4), while another describes officials who “*bumababa talaga sa komunidad*” (really go down to the community) as more trustworthy (P-7). A similar sentiment appears in another account noting that leaders who “*nakakausap mo nang direkta*” (you can speak with directly) generate stronger confidence (P-1). These narratives suggest that embodied presence carries symbolic weight: it signals not only accessibility but a reorientation of authority away from distance and toward relational engagement.

However, participants also complicate any straightforward equation between physical co-presence and trust. Mediated responsiveness – particularly through digital platforms – emerges as an equally significant dimension of presence. One participant recounts messaging a government page and receiving an almost immediate reply, noting that they did not have to wait “*kahit 10 minutes, 30 minutes*” (even 10 minutes, 30 minutes) (P-4). Others describe how updates are “*pino-post*” (posted) regularly (P-3, P-9), allowing them to monitor activities without direct interaction. Another adds that “*madali silang ma-contact online*” (they are easy to contact online) (P-10), while one participant frames responsiveness itself as a form of presence: “*kahit hindi mo sila makita, sumasagot naman*” (even if you don’t see them, they respond) (P-2). Here, presence is constituted through communicative accessibility rather than physical proximity.

A third modality – what may be termed infrastructural presence – appears through the materialization of projects and services. Participants repeatedly describe encountering governance through outcomes that precede or exceed communication. One notes “*nagugulat kami na meron na*” (we are surprised that something is already there) (P-4), while another emphasizes that leadership is credible because “*hindi puro salita... ginagawa niya*” (not just words... it is done) (P-2). Others echo this, observing that “*makikita mo sa projects kung gumagalaw*” (you can see in the projects if [the government] is moving) (P-8) and that improvements become evident in everyday spaces such as roads, clinics, or services (P-12). In these accounts, governance becomes present through its material effects, suggesting that action itself functions as a communicative signal.

Importantly, participants do not treat these modalities as interchangeable. Instead, they evaluate their alignment. For some, constant visibility is unnecessary; one participant observes that leaders do not need to “*laging nagpapakita*” (always show themselves) if outcomes are evident (P-5). Another notes that even without frequent appearances, “*ramdam mo pa rin yung ginagawa nila*” (you can still feel what they are doing) (P-12), while another emphasizes that “*kahit hindi visible, basta consistent*” (even if not visible, as long as it is consistent) (P-6). Presence, therefore, is less about frequency than about coherence across embodied, mediated, and infrastructural forms.

At the same time, relational presence is unevenly distributed across governance levels. While city-level leadership is often described as responsive and accessible, barangay-level experiences are more mixed. One participant describes their local official as *“hindi mo malalapitan”* (not approachable) (P-5), while another notes that services appear concentrated in certain areas, raising questions about selective presence (P-13). Others point to delays in response or limited communication at the barangay level (P-14, P-15), and one remarks that *“minsan parang hindi mo alam kung sino lalapitan”* (sometimes you don’t know who to approach) (P-16). These accounts suggest that presence is fragmented, producing differentiated trust orientations within the same governance structure.

A possible counter-interpretation is that what participants describe as presence may reflect ‘strategic performance’ – visible acts designed to signal effectiveness rather than substantively engage citizens. Participants themselves are not unaware of this possibility. Some distinguish between leaders who appear only during events and those who remain engaged beyond them (P-6, P-7). Others emphasize that visibility without fairness or follow-through is insufficient (P-3, P-13). These reflections indicate that presence is actively scrutinized rather than passively accepted.

Ultimately, trust emerges when embodied, mediated, and infrastructural presence align in ways that appear coherent and sustained. When these forms reinforce one another, presence is interpreted as genuine; when they diverge, it produces ambivalence or skepticism. Relational presence thus operates as a key mediating mechanism through which governance becomes legible and evaluable in everyday life.

Conditionality

If relational presence shapes how governance is encountered, conditionality structures how it is judged. Across the interviews, trust is consistently articulated as contingent rather than automatic, grounded in expectations of fairness, consistency, and moral appropriateness. Participants evaluate not simply whether governance functions, but whether it functions properly according to normative expectations.

Fairness emerges as a central condition. Several participants describe shifts from exclusionary systems to more inclusive ones. One notes that previously *“maraming prosesos”* (there were many processes), whereas now *“lahat nakakakuha”* (everyone is able to receive) (P-9). Another emphasizes that programs are *“walang palakasan”* (without favoritism) (P-10), while a third describes services as *“pantay-pantay”* (equal) (P-6). Others reinforce this perception, noting that assistance is now *“hindi na kailangan ng backer”* (no longer requires a backer) (P-1) and that processes feel more transparent (P-3). These accounts suggest that trust is closely tied to the perception that governance operates on impersonal and inclusive criteria.

Yet this expectation is frequently tested. Participants recount persistent instances of exclusion, particularly at the barangay level. One observes that *“pag may kakilala... madaling makapasok”* (if you know someone, it is easy to get in) (P-9), while another describes processes as *“sila-sila lang”* (just among themselves) (P-13). Others point to uneven distribution of aid or opportunities (P-14, P-15), and one remarks that *“may nauuna pa rin kahit hindi naman dapat”* (some still get prioritized even when they shouldn’t) (P-2). These experiences demonstrate that conditionality is grounded in everyday encounters with gatekeeping and perceived favoritism.

Consistency also figures prominently. Participants expect rules to be applied uniformly. One emphasizes that governance should not vary arbitrarily (P-11), while another notes that enforcement gaps – such as in traffic or sanitation – undermine trust (P-16). Others describe

situations where policies are implemented differently across locations, with one stating “*depende sa lugar*” (it depends on the place) (P-7). Another participant highlights that inconsistency creates uncertainty: “*hindi mo alam kung ano susundin*” (you don’t know what to follow) (P-15). These concerns indicate that predictability is a key condition for legitimacy.

Conditionality is also shaped by broader moral expectations. Participants frequently reject the personalization of governance. One critiques practices that create obligation, emphasizing that services should not generate “*utang na loob*” (debt of gratitude) (P-8). Another echoes this, stating that assistance should be understood as “*karapatan*” (a right) rather than a favor (P-12). At the same time, participants acknowledge the persistence of such cultural logics. One describes utang na loob as “*mahirap iwasan*” (hard to avoid) (P-9), while another notes that gratitude can still influence perceptions even when resisted (P-6). These accounts suggest that conditionality is negotiated within, rather than outside of, existing cultural frameworks.

Trust is also linked to follow-through. Participants repeatedly emphasize that leaders must “*tumutupad sa sinasabi*” (fulfill what they say) (P-9). Another contrasts “*salita*” (words) and “*gawa*” (action) (P-10), while others highlight that credibility depends on observable outcomes (P-3, P-8). Yet expectations extend beyond promise-keeping. Some participants value proactive governance, noting that effective leaders “*hindi naghihintay ng reklamo*” (do not wait for complaints) (P-8) and deliver results even without prior commitments (P-10).

Despite these expectations, conditionality does not produce simple withdrawal when unmet. Instead, participants adopt layered evaluations. Many express strong trust in city leadership while identifying shortcomings at the barangay level (P-10, P-11, P-14). Others articulate ambivalence, acknowledging improvements alongside persistent issues (P-12, P-15, P-16). Trust, therefore, is recalibrated rather than revoked.

A counter-interpretation is that these criteria function as ‘post hoc rationalizations’. However, participants consistently ground their evaluations in concrete experiences – navigating access, observing favoritism, or encountering inconsistent enforcement. These patterns suggest that conditionality operates as an active evaluative framework rather than a retrospective justification.

Conditionality thus emerges as a central organizing logic of trust: legitimacy is continuously assessed in relation to fairness, consistency, and moral expectations. It produces not a binary of trust and distrust, but a spectrum of orientations shaped through ongoing interaction.

Hybridity

If relational presence captures how governance is encountered and conditionality explains how it is judged, hybridity reveals how it is navigated. Participants describe governance as a layered assemblage of digital platforms, face-to-face interactions, informal intermediaries, and infrastructural constraints.

Digital platforms play a central role. Participants refer to official pages where updates are “*pino-post*” (posted) (P-9) and shared – “*shine-share namin*” (we share it) (P-11). Others describe using these platforms to seek information or raise concerns (P-10, P-12, P-3). These systems enable both direct communication and peer-to-peer dissemination.

Responsiveness is crucial. One participant notes that messages receive immediate replies (P-10), while another emphasizes that “*nasasagot agad*” (answered immediately) (P-3). Others describe this responsiveness as evidence of accessibility (P-2, P-6). However, engagement is uneven. Some participants report limited use due to unfamiliarity or lack of need (P-9, P-13), while others note that “*hindi lahat marunong gumamit*” (not everyone knows how to use it) (P-14).

Access constraints are a recurring concern. One asks, “*paano pag wala kang internet?*” (what if you do not have internet?) (P-9), while another highlights disparities in devices and literacy (P-11). Others point to older residents or low-income households being excluded (P-14, P-15, P-16). These accounts show that digitalization produces differentiated access.

Participants respond through adaptive strategies. Some rely on intermediaries (P-11), while others depend on community networks for information (P-8, P-12). One notes that “*sa kapitbahay mo na lang malalaman*” (you just learn from neighbors) (P-1). These practices indicate that hybridity is co-produced through everyday adaptation.

Offline processes remain central. Many services still require physical presence, often involving long queues. One participant notes waiting for hours (P-11), while another states that “*pumipila pa rin kahit may online*” (you still queue even if there is online) (P-16). Others suggest appointment systems to improve coordination (P-11, P-13).

Hybridity also shapes interpretation. During the pandemic, participants followed protocols based on information circulating across channels (P-9, P-11, P-12). However, overlapping systems can create confusion. One describes processes as “*magulo*” (confusing) (P-9), while another notes inconsistencies between online and offline procedures (P-15).

Digital systems do not replace face-to-face interaction but reconfigure it. Participants often combine modes sequentially – using online platforms for information but relying on in-person encounters to complete transactions (P-10, P-16). This produces layered engagement.

A counter-interpretation is that hybridity reflects a ‘transitional phase’ toward full digitalization. However, participants emphasize the need for multiple modes due to structural inequalities. Offline systems remain essential for inclusion. Moreover, participants frame hybridity as something to be managed rather than eliminated.

Hybridity thus emerges as a key site where access, efficiency, and legitimacy intersect. It shapes who can engage and how effectively they can do so. Crucially, it interacts with relational presence and conditionality: digital responsiveness contributes to presence, while differential access conditions perceptions of fairness.

Ultimately, participants navigate governance through a heterogeneous system of interactions, adapting to constraints while evaluating coherence across modes. Trust depends not only on individual components but on how they are integrated into a system that is both accessible and responsive.

DISCUSSION

This article set out to examine how legitimacy is constructed and sustained in everyday governance by advancing a relational and interpretive framework grounded in trust cultures. The findings complicate dominant institutional and cultural accounts by demonstrating that legitimacy does not follow automatically from either improved performance or entrenched normative orientations. Instead, it emerges as a contingent and continuously negotiated accomplishment, produced through citizens’ interpretive engagements with governance in practice. The three dynamics – relational presence, conditionality, and hybridity – do not merely describe different aspects of governance but reveal a layered process through which authority is rendered meaningful, evaluated, and either stabilized or unsettled.

At a conceptual level, the findings challenge the outcome bias embedded in much of the legitimacy literature. Institutional accounts tend to equate legitimacy with performance (Easton, 1965, 1975; Mishler & Rose, 2001), while cultural approaches attribute it to enduring orientations toward authority (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 2020; Webb, 2018). Both assume a degree of causal stability. The present study unsettles this by showing that even in a

reformist context, legitimacy remains interpretively fragile and uneven. Performance does not speak for itself, nor do cultural predispositions operate as fixed determinants; both must be mediated through everyday sense-making.

Relational presence foregrounds this mediation by showing that visibility is not inherently legitimating. What matters is not simply that leaders are seen, but that their presence is experienced as coherent across embodied encounters, mediated responsiveness, and infrastructural outcomes. Citizens actively triangulate these forms, suggesting that legitimacy depends on the perceived alignment of signals over time. In this sense, relational presence functions as a verification mechanism through which authority is rendered credible – or not. This complicates accounts of performative governance by showing that visibility itself is subject to evaluation.

At the same time, relational presence reveals a tension within reformist governance. Efforts to enhance accessibility can generate trust but also raise expectations that must be continually met. Presence becomes a standard against which future interactions are judged, introducing a dynamic of escalation. Where alignment falters – through uneven responsiveness or fragmented implementation – presence can lose its legitimating force. It is therefore both generative and precarious.

Conditionality deepens this argument by showing that legitimacy is normatively structured. Trust is extended not simply in response to outcomes, but through judgments about fairness, consistency, and moral propriety. This reframes performance-based legitimacy as insufficient: what matters is not only that governance delivers, but how it delivers. The emphasis on *walang palakasan* (no favoritism) and the rejection of *utang na loob* indicate an ongoing recalibration of normative expectations toward more impersonal forms of authority.

However, the findings resist a linear narrative of normative change. Rather than displacing existing cultural logics, conditionality reveals their continued role as evaluative resources. Concepts such as *utang na loob* are reflexively negotiated—sometimes resisted, sometimes reinterpreted. This suggests that legitimacy is constructed through *moral layering*, where new expectations coexist with older relational norms. In this respect, the findings extend work on moral politics (Kerkvliet, 2002; Kusaka, 2017) by showing that citizens actively rework inherited frameworks in response to changing governance conditions.

Conditionality also exposes the limits of reformist narratives. While city-level governance is often evaluated positively, persistent experiences of exclusion and inconsistency at the barangay level complicate these assessments. This produces a differentiated legitimacy field in which trust is unevenly distributed across institutional layers. Rather than a unified regime of legitimacy, what emerges is a fragmented configuration in which citizens simultaneously affirm and critique different parts of the governance system.

Hybridity introduces a further complication by situating these processes within a multi-modal governance environment. The coexistence of digital platforms, face-to-face interactions, and informal mediation challenges linear accounts of modernization. While digital systems extend reach and responsiveness, they also generate new forms of exclusion, particularly for those lacking access or capability. Digitalization does not resolve legitimacy problems but reconfigures them.

Crucially, hybridity shows that legitimacy is attached not to individual channels but to their integration. Digital responsiveness may enhance relational presence, but without accessible offline processes, it can reinforce inequality. Legitimacy thus depends on the coherence of the governance assemblage rather than the effectiveness of any single component. This shifts attention from discrete reforms to the alignment of multiple systems.

Hybridity also highlights differentiated access. Citizens do not encounter governance on equal terms; their experiences are mediated by resources and infrastructural conditions. While legitimacy is constructed through interpretation, the conditions of that interpretation are unevenly distributed. Trust cultures are therefore not only cultural but materially situated.

Viewed together, the three dynamics suggest that legitimacy operates as a *composite process*. Relational presence establishes perceptibility, conditionality provides evaluative criteria, and hybridity structures access. These dimensions are mutually constitutive: presence without fairness is insufficient, fairness without accessibility is ineffective, and accessibility without coherence generates confusion. Legitimacy emerges from their alignment – and is destabilized when that alignment breaks down.

This perspective also helps explain the persistence of public support under conditions of institutional fragility (Curato, 2016; Thompson, 2016; Pernia, 2022a, 2023). Such support is not simply a function of performance or culture, but of how governance is interpreted across different dimensions of experience. Citizens may tolerate shortcomings in one domain if others remain intact. Conversely, strong performance may fail to generate trust if it is perceived as unfair or inaccessible. Legitimacy is thus a shifting balance of evaluative considerations.

Finally, the study contributes to theorizing legitimacy from the Global South by foregrounding its situated and relational character. The concept of trust cultures links macro-level conditions with micro-level interpretations without reducing one to the other, offering a way to understand legitimacy as an emergent property of social interaction.

In sum, legitimacy in everyday governance is not a property that institutions possess, but a process that must be continuously enacted and recognized. It is produced through the alignment of relational presence, conditional expectations, and hybrid systems of engagement. Where these elements cohere, legitimacy is provisionally stabilized; where they diverge, it becomes contested and open to revision.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how legitimacy is constructed in everyday governance by advancing a relational and interpretive framework grounded in trust cultures. Moving beyond institutional and cultural accounts that treat legitimacy as an outcome of performance or predisposition, the study shows that legitimacy emerges through ongoing processes of evaluation, negotiation, and recalibration as citizens encounter governance in practice. Focusing on Pasig City under the mayoralty of Vico Sotto, the analysis demonstrates that even in a context widely associated with reform, legitimacy is neither automatic nor stable but must be continuously accomplished.

Empirically, the study identified three interrelated dynamics – relational presence, conditionality, and hybridity – through which legitimacy is enacted in everyday life. These dynamics reveal that legitimacy is not secured by reforms alone, but by how such reforms are interpreted within existing expectations and lived experiences. Governance becomes credible when it is experienced as present across multiple modalities, when it meets expectations of fairness and consistency, and when its channels of engagement are coherently aligned. Conversely, misalignments across these dimensions generate ambivalence, fragmentation, or skepticism, even in otherwise favorable contexts.

Conceptually, the article contributes to legitimacy theory by reframing legitimacy as a processual and multi-layered accomplishment rather than a fixed attribute. The notion of trust cultures provides a meso-level lens for understanding how macro-level reforms are mediated through localized, culturally embedded practices of interpretation. This perspective offers a

more nuanced account of how legitimacy persists, shifts, or erodes – not as a direct reflection of institutional performance, but as the outcome of ongoing relational work.

The findings also carry broader implications for the study of governance in Southeast Asia and beyond. First, they underscore the importance of disaggregating legitimacy across institutional levels. Second, they highlight the need to account for hybridity in governance systems, where digital, interpersonal, and infrastructural modes of interaction coexist and shape citizen experience unevenly. Third, they suggest that normative expectations are not static or fully transformed under reform, but are actively reworked through everyday encounters with authority.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a single case and a relatively small sample, focusing on one barangay within a broader urban setting. As such, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable, but to provide analytical insight into how legitimacy operates in context. Future research could extend this approach through comparative or longitudinal designs that track how trust cultures evolve across settings and over time.

Ultimately, legitimacy is best understood not as something that governments possess, but as something continuously made and remade in everyday life. It is through the alignment – or misalignment – of relational presence, conditional expectations, and hybrid systems of engagement that authority becomes credible, contested, or fragile.

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