

Legal Certainty and Public Trust in the Legal System: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between legal certainty and public trust in the legal system through a qualitative analytical approach grounded in Legal Studies and Sociolegal Studies. Legal certainty, understood as the clarity, consistency, and predictability of legal norms and their enforcement, is widely regarded as a fundamental principle of the rule of law. However, in many contexts, inconsistencies in legal interpretation, selective enforcement, and procedural inefficiencies have contributed to declining levels of public trust. This study aims to explore how perceptions of legal certainty influence public confidence in legal institutions and to identify key factors shaping this relationship. The research employs a qualitative design using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis involving community members, legal practitioners, and institutional stakeholders. Data were analyzed thematically to capture patterns related to perceptions of fairness, transparency, and accountability within the legal system. The findings reveal that higher levels of perceived legal certainty are strongly associated with increased public trust, particularly when legal processes are transparent, consistent, and accessible. Conversely, ambiguity in regulations, unequal application of the law, and lack of institutional accountability significantly undermine trust. Furthermore, the study highlights that public trust is not solely determined by formal legal frameworks but also by the lived experiences of individuals interacting with legal institutions. The research concludes that strengthening public trust requires a comprehensive approach that enhances legal clarity, institutional integrity, and participatory engagement. This study contributes to ongoing discussions on building a credible and inclusive legal system capable of ensuring justice and social stability.

Keywords: Legal Certainty, Public Trust, Legal System, Qualitative Analysis, Rule Of Law

Introduction

Legal certainty is a fundamental pillar in legal studies, ensuring that regulations are predictable, transparent, and consistent (Trisna et al., 2025). Theoretically, this principle requires that legal norms be formulated clearly and without multiple interpretations, so that every legal subject can accurately understand their rights and obligations. Without certainty, the law loses its regulatory function because individuals lack a stable guideline for determining legally valid actions, which in turn can lead to arbitrary enforcement by authorities. Within the rule of law, legal certainty serves as a primary prerequisite for realizing procedural justice and social order. Certain laws prevent regulatory vacuums and overlapping norms, which often become sources of horizontal and vertical conflict.

Consistency in law enforcement protects society against retrospective actions or sudden changes in regulations (Kurniadi et al., 2025), thus maintaining the stability of the legal system. This creates a conducive environment for social and economic interaction because it guarantees that disputes will be resolved according to pre-established rules. Furthermore, legal certainty is directly correlated with public trust in judicial institutions and the effectiveness of the national legal system. Axiologically, legal certainty is not merely a procedural formality, but rather an instrument to limit the discretion of the authorities and ensure it remains within constitutional boundaries. When a legal system is able to provide certainty, justice is no longer viewed as an abstract, subjective concept, but rather as the result of the application of objective and measurable norms. Thus, legal certainty serves as an anchor that maintains the balance between state power and the protection of citizens' fundamental rights (Suparidho et al., 2025).

The phenomenon of declining public trust in the legal system has become a global issue that has received serious attention in legal studies and sociolegal studies. In various countries, the public is increasingly skeptical of legal institutions due to the perception that the law is not always enforced fairly and consistently (Toyi et al., 2025). This decline in trust has a direct impact on weakening legal legitimacy and decreasing public compliance with legal norms. In the context of a rule of law state, public trust is a key element determining the effectiveness of the legal system in maintaining social order and justice (Tyler, 2006). One of the main factors triggering low public trust is inconsistency in law enforcement. Different treatment of similar cases, especially those involving actors from different social or economic backgrounds, gives rise to perceptions of discrimination and injustice. Furthermore, multiple interpretations of legal regulations often open up room for abuse of authority by law enforcement officials. Unclear legal norms not only create uncertainty but also weaken public trust in the integrity of the legal system itself (Fuller, 1969).

Furthermore, unjust practices occurring in the legal process, such as corruption, abuse of power, and lack of transparency, further exacerbate this situation. Negative experiences of the public interacting with the legal system have shaped the collective perception that the law does not promote substantive justice. This demonstrates that public trust is influenced not only by the existence of legal norms but also by the quality of their implementation in practice. Therefore, efforts to increase public trust must include comprehensive reforms to the substance, structure, and culture of the law to create a more just, transparent, and accountable system (World Justice Project, 2020).

The relationship between legal certainty and public trust is a central issue from the perspective of sociolegal studies, which views law not only as a set of formal norms but also as a social phenomenon influenced by the interaction between institutions, culture, and societal behavior (Agung et al., 2025). Within this framework, legal certainty is understood as the extent to which legal rules are predictable, consistent, and fairly applied. When the law provides certainty, the public tends to have a positive perception of the legitimacy of the legal system, which ultimately strengthens public trust in legal institutions (Friedman, 1975).

Furthermore, the sociolegal approach emphasizes that public trust is not solely determined by the normative quality of the law, but also by people's empirical experiences

interacting with the legal system (Suparidho et al., 2025). When individuals perceive consistency in law enforcement and equal treatment before the law, trust in the legal system increases. Conversely, legal uncertainty characterized by multiple interpretations of regulations and inconsistent decisions can lead to dissatisfaction and distrust. In this regard, legal certainty serves as a mechanism connecting legal norms with public perceptions of justice (Tyler, 2006).

In a broader context, the integration of legal certainty and public trust is a crucial indicator in assessing the quality of a country's rule of law. Institutions such as the World Justice Project emphasize that a credible legal system is one that guarantees legal certainty while simultaneously gaining public trust through transparency and accountability. Therefore, from a socio-legal perspective, efforts to strengthen public trust must be undertaken through improving regulatory quality, consistent law enforcement, and developing a legal culture oriented toward substantive justice. This demonstrates that legal certainty and public trust have a mutually reinforcing relationship in realizing an effective and sustainable legal system (World Justice Project, 2020).

Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach within the Sociolegal Studies framework to analyze the relationship between legal certainty and public trust in the legal system. The research design used is a case study, focusing on the public's experiences interacting with legal institutions. Informants were selected through purposive sampling, involving the general public, legal practitioners, and law enforcement officers with direct experience in legal processes. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and documentation studies of relevant regulations and legal decisions (Abdullah et al., 2024; Elfira & Santosa, 2023; Santosa, 2025).

Data analysis was conducted thematically using an interactive approach that included iterative data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was maintained through triangulation of sources and methods, as well as member checking to ensure the accuracy of interpretation of research results. From a Legal Studies perspective, this method allows researchers to identify patterns of public perception regarding legal certainty, factors influencing public trust, and the contextual dynamics of the relationship between the two. Therefore, this qualitative approach is expected to produce comprehensive and relevant findings for the development of a more transparent, consistent, and accountable legal system.

Result and Discussion

The research findings indicate that public perceptions of legal certainty remain at varying levels, with a dominant trend toward uncertainty. Many respondents expressed that legal norms are often difficult to understand due to the complexity of regulations and the use of technical legal language. Furthermore, inconsistencies in the interpretation and application of the law by law enforcement officials further reinforce the perception that the legal system does not fully provide certainty. From a sociolegal studies perspective, this situation indicates a gap between law as a formal norm and law in social practice.

Furthermore, this study found that the level of public trust in the legal system is strongly influenced by the public's direct experiences interacting with legal institutions. Respondents who have experienced transparent, fair, and non-discriminatory legal processes tend to have higher levels of trust. Conversely, negative experiences such as unequal treatment, complicated processes, and a lack of transparency contribute to declining public trust. Within the legal studies framework, these findings confirm that public trust is shaped not only by legal norms but also by the quality of legal implementation on the ground.

This study also identified inconsistencies in law enforcement as a major factor weakening public trust. Differences in decisions in similar cases and the perception of preferential treatment of certain groups give rise to the perception that the law is not being enforced fairly. Furthermore, multiple interpretations of regulations open up room for subjectivity in decision-making by officials, ultimately worsening public perceptions of the integrity of the legal system. This situation demonstrates that legal certainty is a crucial prerequisite for building public trust.

Furthermore, research findings reveal a strong and interconnected relationship between legal certainty and public trust. High levels of legal certainty, characterized by clarity of norms, consistent enforcement, and procedural transparency, contribute significantly to increased public trust. Conversely, legal uncertainty tends to foster distrust, which can lead to low compliance with the law. From a socio-legal perspective, this relationship is reciprocal, with public trust also strengthening the legitimacy and effectiveness of the legal system.

Finally, this research found that efforts to increase public trust cannot be undertaken in isolation but require a comprehensive approach. Regulatory reform to improve legal clarity, strengthen the integrity of law enforcement officials, and increase the transparency and accountability of legal institutions are strategic steps that must be undertaken simultaneously. Furthermore, public participation in the legal process also needs to be increased to build a more inclusive relationship between law and society. Thus, strengthening legal certainty and public trust are two inseparable aspects in realizing a just and sustainable legal system.

Discussion

This research discussion demonstrates that legal certainty plays a fundamental role in shaping public trust in the legal system. From a sociolegal studies perspective, legal certainty is understood not only as clarity of norms but also as consistency in the application and enforcement of the law (Manggala et al., 2025). Research findings indicate that unclear regulations and inconsistent court decisions contribute significantly to declining public trust. This aligns with the view that unpredictable laws lose their social legitimacy, leading the public to become skeptical of the effectiveness and fairness of the legal system (Friedman, 1975).

Furthermore, this discussion reinforces the theory that public trust in the law is strongly influenced by people's empirical experiences interacting with legal institutions. Within the legal studies framework, procedural justice is a key factor determining the level

of public trust. When individuals perceive fair, transparent, and non-discriminatory treatment, trust in the legal system increases significantly. Conversely, unjust practices, such as discrimination and abuse of authority, will undermine public perceptions of legal integrity (Tyler, 2006).

Furthermore, this study's findings confirm that inconsistent law enforcement and multiple interpretations of regulations are major obstacles to achieving legal certainty. When law enforcement officials have too much room for interpretation without clear standards, the potential for disparity in decisions increases. This situation not only creates uncertainty but also opens up opportunities for corruption and abuse of power (Hamdan, 2025). Therefore, in the context of legal development, regulatory reforms are needed to reduce normative ambiguity and strengthen oversight mechanisms for law enforcement officials (Fuller, 1969). Finally, this discussion emphasizes the importance of an integrative approach to strengthening the relationship between legal certainty and public trust. Institutions such as the World Justice Project emphasize that a credible legal system must be able to guarantee legal certainty while building public trust through transparency and accountability (Rizky et al., 2025). Therefore, efforts to increase public trust are not sufficient through normative reform alone; they must also be accompanied by improvements in law enforcement practices and increased public participation. This approach is expected to create a legal system that is not only formally legitimate but also enjoys strong social legitimacy (World Justice Project, 2020).

Conclusion

This study concludes that legal certainty is a key factor in establishing and maintaining public trust in the legal system. From a sociolegal studies perspective, legal certainty relates not only to the clarity of norms but also to the consistency of enforcement, transparency of procedures, and fairness in implementation. The research findings indicate that legal uncertainty, characterized by multiple interpretations of regulations and inconsistent decisions, significantly undermines public trust. Furthermore, the public's empirical experience interacting with legal institutions is a crucial factor influencing their perceptions of the legal system's credibility.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes that enhancing public trust requires a comprehensive and sustainable approach within the legal studies framework. Legal reform must include simplifying regulations, strengthening the integrity of law enforcement officials, and increasing the transparency and accountability of legal institutions. Furthermore, public participation needs to be strengthened to create a more inclusive relationship between the law and the public. Therefore, the integration of legal certainty and equitable law enforcement practices is a key prerequisite for realizing a credible, effective, and socially just legal system.

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