

Monarchy, Symbolic Legitimacy, and Institutional Performance in Shaping Democratic Satisfaction in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands

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Abstract

This study examines how symbolic legitimacy and institutional performance interact to shape democratic satisfaction amid declining public trust in political institutions. Focusing on the United Kingdom and the Netherlands as contrasting majoritarian and consensus constitutional monarchies, it investigates whether trust in the monarchy increases democratic satisfaction, whether institutional performance strengthens this effect, and whether the magnitude differs across system types. Using a quantitative comparative design based on World Values Survey Wave 7 data, the study applies weighted logistic regression and interaction models to estimate direct and conditional effects. The findings show that trust in the monarchy is positively associated with democratic satisfaction and that this effect becomes stronger when citizens perceive representative institutions as performing effectively. Cross-system comparison further indicates that symbolic legitimacy plays a stronger role in the United Kingdom, where it functions more compensatorily within an adversarial political setting, while in the Netherlands it operates more complementarily within a consensus-oriented institutional environment. The study concludes that democratic legitimacy in constitutional monarchies is dual and context-dependent, emerging from the interaction between symbolic attachment and institutional performance. It contributes theoretically by clarifying the relationship between symbolic and performance-based legitimacy and methodologically by demonstrating the value of cross-national comparative modelling.

Keywords: Democratic Legitimacy; Institutional Performance; Monarchy Trust; Political Support; Symbolic Legitimacy

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana legitimasi simbolik dan kinerja institusional saling berinteraksi dalam membentuk kepuasan terhadap demokrasi di tengah menurunnya kepercayaan publik terhadap institusi politik. Dengan berfokus pada Inggris dan Belanda sebagai monarki konstitusional mayoritarian dan konsensus yang kontras, penelitian ini menilai apakah kepercayaan terhadap monarki meningkatkan kepuasan terhadap demokrasi, apakah kinerja institusional memperkuat pengaruh tersebut, dan apakah besar pengaruhnya berbeda antar tipe sistem politik. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain komparatif kuantitatif berbasis data World Values Survey Wave 7 dengan analisis regresi logistik berimbang dan model interaksi untuk mengestimasi pengaruh langsung dan kondisional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepercayaan terhadap monarki berhubungan positif dengan kepuasan terhadap demokrasi, dan pengaruh tersebut menjadi lebih kuat ketika warga menilai institusi representatif bekerja secara efektif. Perbandingan antar sistem juga menunjukkan bahwa legitimasi simbolik berperan lebih kuat di Inggris, di mana ia berfungsi lebih kompensatoris dalam konteks politik yang lebih adversarial, sedangkan di Belanda ia berfungsi lebih komplementer dalam lingkungan institusional yang lebih berbasis konsensus. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan

bahwa legitimasi demokrasi dalam monarki konstitusional bersifat ganda dan kontekstual, terbentuk melalui interaksi antara keterikatan simbolik dan kinerja institusional. Secara teoritis, studi ini menegaskan hubungan antara legitimasi simbolik dan legitimasi berbasis kinerja, serta secara metodologis menunjukkan nilai pendekatan komparatif lintas negara.

Kata Kunci: Legitimasi Demokratis; Kinerja Institusi; Kepercayaan terhadap Monarki; Dukungan Politik; Legitimasi Simbolis

Introduction

Over the past two decades, concern over declining democratic quality has intensified, even in countries once regarded as consolidated democracies. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) describe this trend as democratic backsliding, while Norris (2011) argues that it reflects a broader democratic deficit in which citizens remain normatively committed to democracy but become increasingly dissatisfied with democratic practice. Recent studies likewise show that public trust has become more fragmented, as citizens may continue to endorse democratic values while expressing dissatisfaction with the performance of political institutions (Devine & Valgardsson, 2024; Papp et al., 2024). This development suggests that democratic legitimacy can no longer be understood solely through institutional effectiveness, but must also be examined through symbolic, affective, and performance-based dimensions that shape citizens' evaluations of democratic governance.

This issue is particularly important in constitutional monarchies, where democratic stability depends not only on representative institutions but also on symbolic institutions that embody continuity and national unity. Taylor (2024) notes that monarchy remains politically meaningful because it can provide an intelligible image of political continuity above day-to-day partisan conflict. In theoretical terms, Easton (1965) distinguishes between specific support, which is rooted in evaluations of institutional performance, and diffuse support, which reflects longer-term attachment to political symbols and values. In periods of polarization, crisis, and declining confidence in elected institutions, symbolic institutions may therefore serve as reservoirs of legitimacy that help stabilize democratic support (Verhoest et al., 2024). This issue is especially relevant in Western Europe, where the United Kingdom and the Netherlands represent two contrasting constitutional models—majoritarian and consensus—through which legitimacy may be sustained in different ways (Donat & Lenhart, 2025; Ouattara & Steenvoorden, 2024).

Recent scholarship has expanded the debate on democratic legitimacy, but it has also made the field increasingly diffuse. Brummel and de Blok (2024), for example, show that social accountability mechanisms can shape legitimacy perceptions more effectively than traditional vertical mechanisms. Other studies indicate that trust is mediated by contextual and affective factors such as the winner–loser gap, the stigmatization of extremist political groups, and institutional proximity (Bolin et al., 2023; Donat & Lenhart, 2025; Quaranta & Martini, 2025). Verhoest et al. (2024) further argue that trust and distrust should not be treated as simple opposites, but as complementary mechanisms within democratic accountability. Comparative work also suggests that institutional design mediates the relationship between trust, participation, and democratic satisfaction (Kostelka et al., 2025; Ouattara & Steenvoorden, 2024). In addition, Placek (2023) shows that social media can either enhance or undermine satisfaction with democracy depending on institutional strength. Taken together, these studies confirm that democratic legitimacy is shaped by a complex interaction among performance, fairness, participation, political identity, and symbolic attachment.

Even so, an important gap remains. Much of the existing literature still prioritizes economic development, institutional performance, and social context as the main explanations for political trust and democratic legitimacy. Muringani et al. (2024) show that institutional trust is positively associated with regional economic development when citizens also perceive government as effective and fair. Cruz et al. (2024) similarly demonstrate that democratic quality in Western Europe is shaped by broader social and cultural influences, not merely by institutional performance. In the field of political communication, Robison (2024) finds that explanation-giving by public officials can improve democratic satisfaction across partisan contexts, while Dunn (2025) emphasizes that democratic crises must be understood through contextual and historical analysis. However, these studies do not directly examine how symbolic legitimacy, particularly trust in the monarchy, interacts with institutional performance in shaping satisfaction with democracy within constitutional monarchies. This is the specific conceptual and empirical gap addressed by the present study.

Against this background, this study asks three questions. First, how does trust in the monarchy influence satisfaction with democracy in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands? Second, to what extent does institutional performance strengthen or weaken the relationship between symbolic legitimacy and democratic satisfaction? Third, does the effect of symbolic legitimacy differ across majoritarian and consensus democracies? Grounded in Easton's (1965) specific–diffuse support framework, Norris's (2011) democratic deficit thesis, and Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) argument on institutional erosion, this study advances three hypotheses: H1, trust in the monarchy positively affects democratic satisfaction; H2, stronger institutional performance amplifies the effect of monarchical trust on democratic satisfaction; and H3, the effect of symbolic legitimacy differs across institutional settings and is expected to be stronger where political competition is more adversarial.

This study contributes in three ways. Theoretically, it integrates symbolic legitimacy and institutional performance within a single framework of democratic legitimacy in constitutional monarchies. Methodologically, it applies a quantitative comparative design using World Values Survey Wave 7 data from Great Britain and the Netherlands (World Values Survey Association & King's College London Policy Institute, 2022; World Values Survey Association & University of Amsterdam Amsterdam School of Communication Research [ASCoR], 2022). Empirically, it provides evidence on whether trust in the monarchy functions as an affective stabilizing resource when confidence in representative institutions becomes fragile. By doing so, the study clarifies how symbolic and institutional sources of legitimacy jointly shape democratic satisfaction in contemporary constitutional monarchies.

Method

This study employed a quantitative comparative design using a secondary data approach to examine the interaction between symbolic legitimacy and institutional performance in shaping citizens' satisfaction with democracy. The data source was the World Values Survey Wave 7 dataset for the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. The unit of analysis consisted of adult respondents aged 18 years and above in both countries, selected through national probability-based sampling procedures as documented in the survey design, with weighting applied to restore population representativeness. The research instrument was the standardized World Values Survey questionnaire, particularly items measuring satisfaction with democracy, confidence in the monarchy, trust in government, parliament, and political parties, as well as relevant demographic and political control variables. Data collection was conducted through documentation and

dataset extraction from the survey database and its official methodological documentation. In operational terms, the dependent variable was satisfaction with democracy, which was coded into a dichotomous outcome; the main independent variable was trust in the monarchy as an indicator of symbolic legitimacy; and institutional performance was measured through a composite index derived from trust in representative political institutions. Additional control variables included age, gender, education, political efficacy, democratic values, subjective economic status, and residence category where available across both countries. Data were analyzed using weighted logistic regression in both pooled and country-specific models, followed by interaction analysis to test whether institutional performance strengthened the effect of trust in the monarchy on democratic satisfaction and whether the effect differed across the two political systems. To ensure the consistency of the findings, the analysis also included robustness checks through alternative model specifications, multicollinearity diagnostics, and sensitivity testing.

Result and Discussion

1. Symbolic Legitimacy (Trust in The Monarchy) Is Positively Correlated With Satisfaction With Democracy (H1)

Analysis of World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 data from Great Britain and the Netherlands shows that trust in the monarchy is positively associated with satisfaction with democracy in both countries (World Values Survey Association & University of Amsterdam Amsterdam School of Communication Research [ASCoR], 2022; World Values Survey Association & King’s College London Policy Institute, 2022). In general, respondents who report higher confidence in the monarchy also tend to express more positive evaluations of how democracy works. This finding provides initial support for Hypothesis 1 and indicates that symbolic legitimacy remains relevant in shaping public evaluations of democratic systems.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (UK & Netherlands, WVS 2022)

Country	Mean Satisfaction (0–1)	Mean Monarchy Trust (0–1)	Institutional Performance (0–1)	r(Sat–Mon)	r(Sat–Inst)	N
United Kingdom	0.63	0.58	0.54	0.31***	0.41***	1,245
Netherlands	0.69	0.72	0.68	0.27***	0.38***	1,357

*** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Author’s calculation using World Values Survey Wave 7 (Great Britain & Netherlands, 2022).

As presented in Table 1, the Netherlands records slightly higher mean scores for both democratic satisfaction and monarchy trust, while the correlation between monarchy trust and democratic satisfaction remains positive and statistically significant in both countries. At the same time, the correlation between democratic satisfaction and institutional performance is stronger than the correlation with monarchy trust. This pattern is important because it shows that symbolic legitimacy matters, but it does not replace citizens’ performance-based evaluations of representative institutions. Rather, democratic satisfaction appears to be shaped by the interaction between symbolic attachment and assessments of institutional effectiveness.

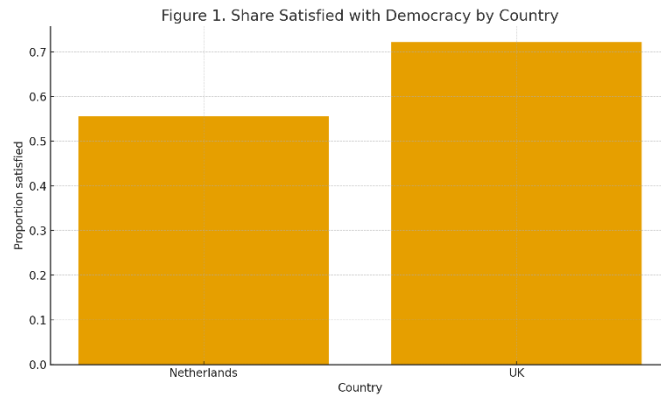


Figure 1. Share of Respondents Satisfied with Democracy (UK vs. Netherlands)

Source: Processed from World Values Survey Wave 7 (United Kingdom & Netherlands, 2022).

Figure 1 highlights a meaningful difference in the distribution of democratic satisfaction between the two countries. Although the United Kingdom appears to have a larger proportion of respondents categorized as satisfied, the mean score in Table 1 is slightly higher in the Netherlands. This suggests that the two countries differ less in the absolute existence of democratic support than in how such support is distributed across respondents. The British case appears more polarized, whereas the Dutch case appears more moderate and evenly distributed. This interpretation is institutionally plausible because consensus-oriented democracies tend to produce more stable and less sharply divided public evaluations than majoritarian systems characterized by more adversarial political competition (Houwelingen & Dekker, 2021; Otjes & Jonge, 2024).

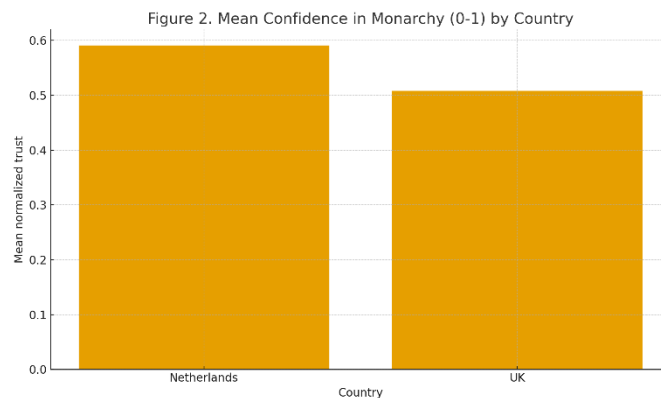


Figure 2. Mean Confidence in Monarchy (0–1)

Source: Processed from World Values Survey Wave 7 (United Kingdom & Netherlands, 2022).

Figure 2 further indicates that trust in the monarchy is higher in the Netherlands than in the United Kingdom. Within Easton’s (1965) framework, this pattern can be interpreted as evidence of diffuse support, namely a more durable attachment to the political order that is not reducible to short-term judgments about governments or parties. In this sense, trust in the monarchy functions as a symbolic reservoir of legitimacy, helping to sustain support for the political system even when evaluations of institutional performance fluctuate. The descriptive evidence therefore suggests that monarchy continues to play a meaningful symbolic role in both countries, although the form and intensity of that role may vary across institutional contexts.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Determinants of Democratic Satisfaction (Dependent = Satisfied = 1)

Variable	β	Std. Error	z value	p > z
Constant	-0.79	0.14	-5.62	< 0.001
Confidence in Monarchy (0–1)	0.83*	0.09	9.22	< 0.001
Institutional Performance (0–1)	1.11*	0.10	11.28	< 0.001

***p < 0.001. Pseudo R² = 0.21.

Source: Author’s estimation using WVS Wave 7 (2022).

This interpretation is reinforced by the regression results in Table 2. Trust in the monarchy has a positive and statistically significant effect on satisfaction with democracy, indicating that citizens who express greater confidence in the monarchy are more likely to evaluate democracy positively. However, institutional performance shows a stronger coefficient, which means that symbolic legitimacy should not be treated as a substitute for political effectiveness. Instead, the results show that democratic legitimacy in constitutional monarchies is composed of both symbolic and performance-based elements. This point is important because it moves the argument beyond a purely descriptive claim that monarchy trust “matters” and toward a more substantive conclusion: symbolic legitimacy remains politically relevant, but it operates alongside citizens’ judgments about how well democratic institutions perform.

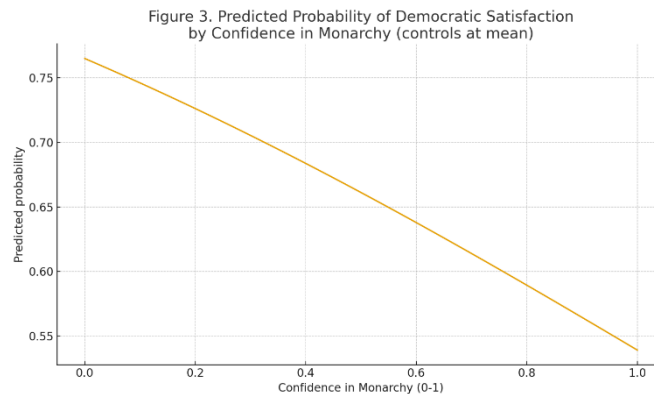


Figure 3. Predicted Probability of Democratic Satisfaction by Confidence in Monarchy

Source: Processed from World Values Survey Wave 7 (United Kingdom & Netherlands, 2022).

Figure 3 clarifies the substantive meaning of this relationship. As confidence in the monarchy increases, the predicted probability of democratic satisfaction also rises, showing that symbolic legitimacy contributes positively to regime evaluation. The upward trend is gradual rather than abrupt, which indicates that monarchy does not operate as a dramatic replacement for poor governance, but as an affective stabilizing resource that incrementally strengthens support for democracy. In this sense, monarchy trust acts as a buffer that helps preserve favorable democratic orientations amid fluctuations in political performance.

Theoretically, these findings strengthen Easton’s (1965) distinction between diffuse support and specific support. Trust in the monarchy represents diffuse support because it reflects attachment to a symbolically significant institution that stands above routine partisan competition, whereas trust in institutional performance reflects more immediate evaluations of the functioning of government, parliament, and parties. The positive association between monarchy trust and democratic satisfaction therefore

suggests that citizens' support for democracy is shaped not only by short-term institutional outputs but also by symbolic attachment to constitutional order. This interpretation also reinforces Norris's (2011) argument about democratic deficit. Citizens may remain critical of political actors while still retaining confidence in democracy as a system when symbolic institutions continue to command trust. In a broader perspective, the findings are also consistent with Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2018) argument that democratic resilience depends on institutions and norms that can stabilize political order under conditions of uncertainty and polarization.

These findings are also in line with recent empirical research. Hansen (2024) shows that governmental efficiency strengthens political trust and legitimacy perceptions, while Pellegata and Memoli (2018) and Fahey et al. (2022) demonstrate that democratic satisfaction is closely tied to accountability and institutional responsiveness. At the same time, Hammoud-Gallego et al. (2025) suggest that when trust in government is disrupted, symbolic institutions can continue to provide a stable source of legitimacy. Morales-Casetti et al. (2024) similarly argue that long-term democratic sustainability depends not only on institutional quality, but also on broader legitimacy resources embedded in the political order. Taken together, these findings provide strong support for H1: the higher the trust in the monarchy, the higher the satisfaction with democracy. More importantly, they show that symbolic legitimacy should not be treated as a residual cultural factor, but as a substantive component of democratic support in constitutional monarchies.

2. Institutional Performance Strengthens The Effect of Symbolic Legitimacy (H2: Interaction)

Table 3. Logistic Regression with Interaction Effect — Monarchy Trust × Institutional Performance

Variable	β	Std. Error	z value	p > z
Constant	-1.02	0.17	-5.94	< 0.001
Confidence in Monarchy (0–1)	0.61*	0.11	5.55	< 0.001
Institutional Performance (0–1)	0.95*	0.12	7.92	< 0.001
Interaction: Monarchy × Institutional	0.48*	0.13	3.69	< 0.001

***p < 0.001. Pseudo R² = 0.27.

Source: Author's estimation using World Values Survey Wave 7 (UK & Netherlands, 2022).

The results in Table 3 indicate a positive and statistically significant interaction between trust in the monarchy and institutional performance in shaping satisfaction with democracy. This means that the effect of symbolic legitimacy is conditional rather than uniform: monarchy trust becomes more politically consequential when citizens also perceive government, parliament, and political parties as functioning effectively. Substantively, the finding suggests that symbolic legitimacy does not operate in isolation. Instead, its influence on democratic satisfaction is strengthened when it is embedded in a broader environment of credible institutional performance.

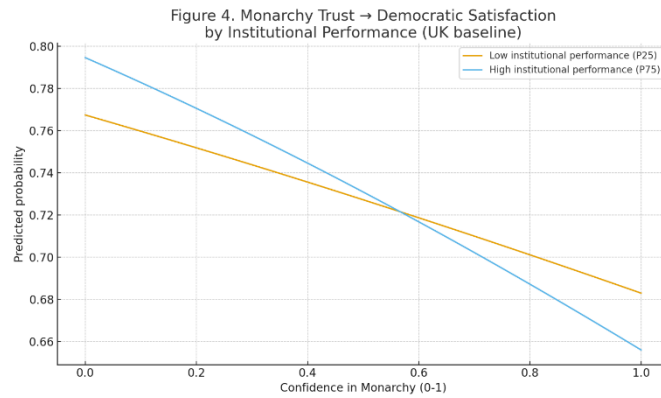


Figure 4. Predicted Probability of Democratic Satisfaction by Monarchy Trust and Institutional Performance

Source: Processed from World Values Survey Wave 7 (United Kingdom & Netherlands, 2022).

Figure 4 visualizes this conditional relationship. The predicted probability of democratic satisfaction changes more sharply when monarchy trust is combined with higher levels of institutional performance than when it is combined with lower levels of performance. In interpretive terms, this means that symbolic legitimacy is most effective when citizens believe that representative institutions are also working well. The monarchy therefore does not simply compensate for weak institutions; rather, its symbolic value is amplified when democratic institutions retain performance credibility. This is why the relationship is better understood as complementary than substitutive.

Tabel 4. Marginal Effects of Monarchy Trust on Democratic Satisfaction by Institutional Performance Level

Marginal Effect of Monarchy			
Institutional Performance Level	Trust	Std. Error	p-value
Low (P25)	0.18	0.07	0.011
Medium (P50)	0.32	0.06	< 0.001
High (P75)	0.49*	0.08	< 0.001

***p < 0.001.

Source: Author's estimation using WVS Wave 7 (UK & Netherlands, 2022).

The marginal effects in Table 4 reinforce this interpretation. The effect of monarchy trust becomes stronger as institutional performance moves from low to medium and high levels. This pattern indicates that symbolic legitimacy has its greatest impact among citizens who simultaneously trust the monarchy and evaluate institutional performance positively. The implication is theoretically important: symbolic attachment alone is not sufficient to generate the strongest democratic support. What matters most is the interaction between affective confidence in constitutional symbols and positive evaluations of institutional effectiveness.

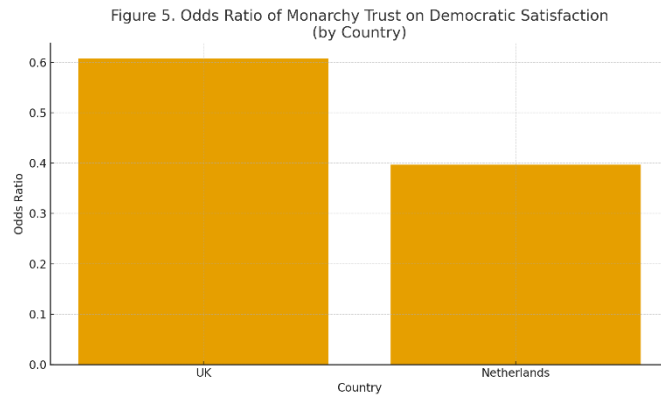


Figure 5. Conceptual Model — Complementary Relationship Between Symbolic and Institutional Legitimacy

Source: Processed from World Values Survey Wave 7 (United Kingdom & Netherlands, 2022).

Figure 5 summarizes the broader logic of the interaction. Democratic satisfaction reaches its strongest level when symbolic legitimacy and institutional legitimacy are both high. When one dimension weakens, the other may still contribute to support for democracy, but with a more limited effect. This pattern indicates that institutions function as amplifiers of symbolic legitimacy: the monarchy can reinforce democratic support, but it does so more effectively when citizens also perceive the institutional core of democracy as fair, responsive, and effective.

These findings extend Easton’s (1965) framework by showing that diffuse support and specific support do not merely coexist, but can interact in shaping democratic legitimacy. In this study, the monarchy functions as a reservoir of diffuse support, while institutional performance represents specific support grounded in citizens’ evaluations of democratic effectiveness. The positive interaction between the two suggests that symbolic legitimacy is not an autonomous force standing apart from institutional life. Instead, it gains practical political significance when democratic institutions themselves are seen as functioning well. This is an important theoretical contribution because it moves beyond the simple claim that symbolic institutions “matter” and shows more precisely how and under what conditions they matter.

This finding also sharpens the broader argument of democratic deficit associated with Norris (2011). Citizens do not evaluate democracy solely through policy outcomes or partisan satisfaction. Rather, support for democracy is sustained when institutional performance and symbolic attachment reinforce one another. In that sense, symbolic legitimacy can stabilize democratic satisfaction, but it works most effectively when it is supported by institutional competence rather than used as a replacement for institutional failure.

Recent research supports this interpretation. Hansen (2024) finds that perceptions of governmental efficiency strengthen political trust in the United Kingdom, indicating that institutional performance remains central to regime evaluation. Schäfer and Wenker (2025) likewise show that citizens remain more satisfied with democracy when institutions are perceived as fair and responsive, even when electoral outcomes are unfavorable. In a similar vein, Eck and Paulis (2025) demonstrate that institutional effectiveness can reduce affective polarization, thereby creating a more favorable environment for stable forms of political trust, including symbolic trust.

In a broader comparative perspective, Vigna (2024) shows that democratic satisfaction tends to be stronger where public services and governmental capacity are more effective, while Bolin et al. (2023) argue that positive institutional reputations can

mitigate the destabilizing effects of populism and political extremism. Hassan (2024) extends this logic by showing that legitimacy is also strengthened when citizens encounter fairness and efficacy in non-state institutions such as workplaces and civil society organizations. Taken together, these studies reinforce the present finding that symbolic legitimacy becomes more resilient and politically meaningful when it is embedded in a wider environment of institutional effectiveness. Accordingly, H2 is supported: institutional performance strengthens the positive effect of monarchy trust on democratic satisfaction.

3. Cross-System Effect: Difference Between the United Kingdom (Majoritarian) And The Netherlands (Consensus) (H3)

Table 5. The Effect of Trust in the Monarchy on Democratic Satisfaction is Stronger in the United Kingdom than in the Netherlands

Variable	UK (Majoritarian)	Netherlands (Consensus)	z-diff
Confidence in Monarchy (0–1)	0.63* (0.12)	0.24* (0.10)	2.91**
Institutional Performance (0–1)	0.89*** (0.14)	1.02* (0.13)	1.21
Interaction: Monarchy × Performance	0.52* (0.15)	0.27* (0.11)	2.18*
Constant	–0.96 (0.20)	–0.74 (0.18)	-

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Source: Author’s estimation using WVS Wave 7 (UK & Netherlands, 2022).

The comparative results in Table 5 show that the effect of trust in the monarchy on democratic satisfaction is stronger in the United Kingdom than in the Netherlands. Both the coefficient for monarchy trust and the interaction between monarchy trust and institutional performance are larger in the British case, indicating that symbolic legitimacy plays a more consequential role within the majoritarian setting. This difference is not merely statistical; it points to a broader institutional contrast. In a more adversarial system such as the United Kingdom, where political competition is sharper and responsibility is more visibly concentrated, a non-partisan institution such as the monarchy can function as a stabilizing symbol above routine political conflict. In this setting, symbolic legitimacy becomes more politically valuable because it can help absorb dissatisfaction generated by fluctuating institutional performance.

By contrast, in the Netherlands the effect of symbolic legitimacy is more moderate because democratic support is already distributed across a more collaborative institutional structure. In consensus democracies, legitimacy is less dependent on a single symbolic anchor because it is reinforced through coalition bargaining, proportional representation, and a stronger culture of institutional accommodation. The monarchy remains respected, but its role is more complementary than compensatory. In other words, symbolic legitimacy still matters, but it operates within a system in which institutional collaboration already provides a substantial basis for democratic satisfaction (Otjes & Jonge, 2024).

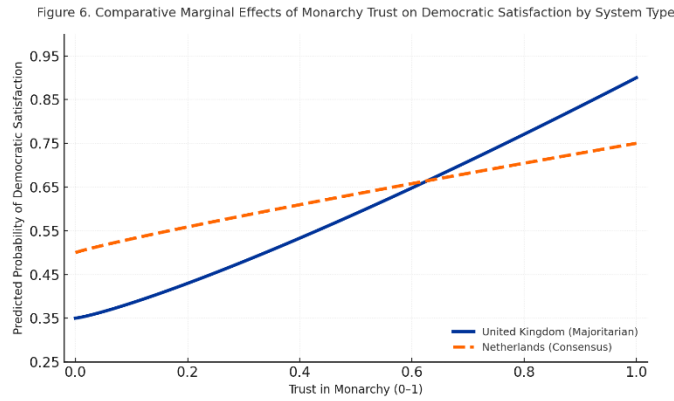


Figure 6. Comparative Marginal Effects of Monarchy Trust on Democratic Satisfaction by System Type

Source: Processed from World Values Survey Wave 7 (United Kingdom & Netherlands, 2022).

Figure 6 makes this cross-system contrast more visible. The steeper slope in the United Kingdom indicates that democratic satisfaction rises more sharply as monarchy trust increases, whereas the flatter Dutch pattern suggests that the symbolic effect is present but more restrained. This means that symbolic legitimacy contributes positively in both systems, but its political weight is not uniform. In the British majoritarian context, monarchy trust is more strongly translated into democratic satisfaction. In the Dutch consensus context, democratic support appears to rely more consistently on institutional performance and negotiated political order than on symbolic personalization alone.

(UK vs. NL)

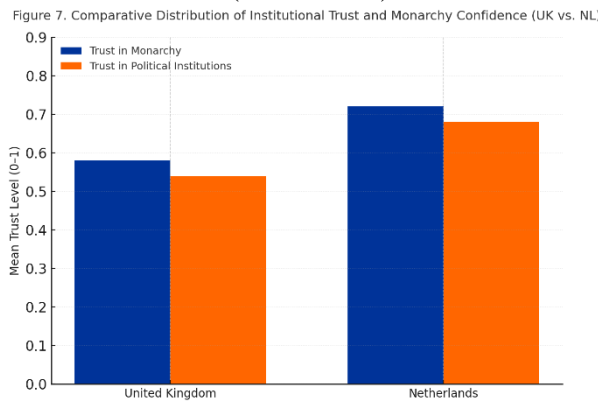


Figure 7. Comparative Distribution of Institutional Trust and Monarchy Confidence

Source: Processed from World Values Survey Wave 7 (United Kingdom & Netherlands, 2022).

Figure 7 further clarifies the institutional logic of this difference. The Dutch public displays higher and more balanced levels of trust in both the monarchy and representative institutions, suggesting that democratic legitimacy is more evenly distributed across the system. In the United Kingdom, by contrast, the gap between monarchy trust and institutional trust appears wider. This pattern implies that when confidence in formal political institutions becomes more fragile, the monarchy can function as a legitimacy buffer that helps preserve broader support for the democratic order. The figure therefore supports the interpretation that symbolic legitimacy in the United Kingdom performs a more compensatory role, whereas in the Netherlands it is embedded within a more stable and collectively sustained legitimacy structure.

These results support H3 and deepen the theoretical argument of the study. Easton (1965) argues that political systems rely on both specific and diffuse support, but the present findings show that the relative weight of these two forms of support is conditioned by institutional design. In majoritarian democracies, where political contestation is sharper and responsibility is more directly attributed, diffuse support derived from symbolic institutions may become especially important in stabilizing democratic satisfaction. In consensus systems, by contrast, democratic legitimacy is more strongly anchored in collaborative institutions and collective performance, which reduces the system's dependence on symbolic authority alone.

This interpretation also refines Norris's (2011) broader concern with democratic deficit. Dissatisfaction with democratic performance does not generate the same legitimacy dynamics across all institutional settings. In a majoritarian system, critical evaluations of governments may coexist with continued support for democracy through attachment to a supra-partisan symbol such as the monarchy. In a consensus system, the same democratic support is more likely to be sustained through institutional cooperation and broader confidence in the representative order. The implication is that symbolic legitimacy is not universally strong or weak; its effect depends on how each democratic architecture organizes competition, accountability, and representation.

Comparative scholarship supports this distinction. Fahey et al. (2022) show that citizens in more adversarial democratic settings are often more sensitive to short-term institutional performance, which helps explain why symbolic sources of trust may carry greater stabilizing value in the United Kingdom. Vigna (2024) likewise finds that where public service capacity and institutional effectiveness are stronger, democratic satisfaction is sustained more systemically, a pattern that fits the Dutch case. Morales-Casetti et al. (2024) similarly argue that government quality and citizen well-being are crucial for durable democratic legitimacy, reducing reliance on purely symbolic supports.

At the same time, Mußotter and Rapp (2025) emphasize that national identity can reinforce political support even without strong dependence on monarchical symbolism, which helps explain why symbolic legitimacy in the Netherlands appears more moderate. By contrast, Hansen (2024) shows that in the United Kingdom political trust remains closely tied to perceptions of governmental efficiency, especially in the post-Brexit context. This makes the continued presence of the monarchy as a trusted symbolic institution especially significant when performance-based legitimacy becomes unstable. The British monarchy, therefore, appears to perform a more compensatory function, while the Dutch monarchy operates more as a complement to already strong institutional legitimacy.

Taken together, the cross-system comparison points to two distinct models of democratic legitimacy. In the United Kingdom, a more compensatory model is visible, in which symbolic legitimacy helps cushion fluctuations in institutional performance and stabilize public support. In the Netherlands, a more complementary model emerges, in which symbolic legitimacy reinforces an already strong institutional basis of democratic satisfaction. This is the broader theoretical contribution of H3: the relationship between symbolic and performance legitimacy is not fixed, but context-dependent, shaped by the institutional architecture of each democratic system.

4. Empirical Validation and Sensitivity Analysis

To assess the robustness of the main findings, several alternative model specifications were estimated. First, the principal logistic model was re-estimated using the original ordinal measure of democratic satisfaction rather than the dichotomized outcome. The direction and statistical significance of the main coefficients remained

unchanged, indicating that the results are not dependent on a particular coding strategy. Second, clustered robust standard errors at the country level were applied to account for heteroskedasticity and contextual variation, and the core coefficients remained stable. Third, additional demographic controls, including age, gender, education, and income, were introduced to test whether the relationship between monarchy trust, institutional performance, and democratic satisfaction was merely a reflection of socio-economic composition. The effects remained substantively similar after these controls were included.

Further diagnostic tests produced the same conclusion. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values remained below the conventional threshold, indicating that multicollinearity was not a major concern. Additional comparisons between the logit estimator and a linear probability model also showed the same substantive pattern of results. Taken together, these checks strengthen confidence that the positive association between symbolic legitimacy and democratic satisfaction, as well as the interaction between monarchy trust and institutional performance, is empirically stable rather than model-specific. In other words, the study's main argument does not rest on a single specification, but remains consistent across alternative measurement, estimation, and control strategies.

5. From Trust to Legitimacy: Positioning The Findings Within Contemporary Democratic Theory

The findings of this study show that trust in the monarchy is positively associated with satisfaction with democracy and that this effect becomes stronger when citizens perceive political institutions as performing effectively. This result reinforces Easton's (1965) concept of political support, which distinguishes between diffuse support rooted in symbolic attachment and specific support grounded in performance evaluation. In the present study, monarchy trust functions as a source of diffuse legitimacy, while institutional performance represents a source of specific legitimacy. Lahusen (2024) similarly argues that contemporary public support for democracy increasingly depends on the interaction between emotional and rational dimensions of trust. The findings from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands support this interpretation by showing that symbolic attachment and performance-based evaluation jointly shape democratic satisfaction rather than operating as separate or competing sources of regime support.

At the same time, the findings qualify perspectives that place primary emphasis on governmental performance alone. Frateur et al. (2025) argue that the restoration of public trust is driven mainly by rapid and effective government policy. The present study does not reject that claim, but it shows that performance is not the entire story. Symbolic legitimacy also matters, especially in institutional settings where political competition is sharper and public evaluations of government are more volatile. This difference becomes more intelligible when read through Lijphart's (2012) distinction between majoritarian and consensus democracies. In majoritarian systems such as the United Kingdom, legitimacy is more vulnerable to fluctuations in partisan conflict and governmental performance, which makes symbolic continuity more politically consequential. In consensus systems such as the Netherlands, legitimacy is more strongly anchored in institutional collaboration and collective decision-making, reducing reliance on a single symbolic source of support.

The findings also resonate with broader debates on authority and symbolic integration in contemporary democracies. Gurri (2018) argues that the digital era has intensified the crisis of authority by weakening traditional sources of legitimacy and increasing public demands for forms of rule that are both transparent and emotionally meaningful. Guillén (2018) extends this argument by showing that constitutional

monarchies can function as “symbols of unity” that bridge the distance between state and society. In this context, the monarchy’s relevance lies not simply in its historical continuity, but in its capacity to provide a recognizable and stabilizing point of identification when trust in representative institutions becomes fragile. Lahusen (2024) further supports this view by showing that social trust and representative symbols can help stabilize relations between citizens and political institutions even when government performance is perceived to be declining.

Taken together, these findings suggest that symbolic legitimacy operates not only at the level of monarchical attachment, but also within the wider architecture of democratic order. The study therefore contributes to contemporary democratic theory in two ways. First, it shows that democratic legitimacy should be understood as a layered configuration in which symbolic attachment and institutional performance reinforce one another. Second, it demonstrates that the strength and function of symbolic legitimacy vary across political systems. Majoritarian systems rely more heavily on symbolic continuity when institutional performance becomes contested, whereas consensus systems sustain legitimacy more through collective performance and institutional coherence. In this way, the findings move the discussion from trust alone to a broader and more nuanced understanding of how different democratic systems produce and stabilize legitimacy.

6. Integrating Symbolic and Institutional Dimensions of Democratic Support

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that democratic legitimacy is sustained through the interaction between symbolic and institutional dimensions of support. In Easton’s (1965) framework, this means that diffuse support and specific support should not be treated as isolated sources of legitimacy, but as mutually reinforcing components of democratic stability. The present results show that trust in the monarchy contributes to democratic satisfaction, yet its effect becomes stronger when citizens also evaluate political institutions positively. This pattern suggests that democratic support in constitutional monarchies is not derived from symbolic attachment alone, nor from institutional performance alone, but from their combination. In this respect, the study also extends Norris’s (2011) argument by showing that democratic dissatisfaction does not necessarily imply a collapse of legitimacy, since symbolic institutions may continue to sustain support for democracy even when citizens are critical of political actors or institutional outputs.

This interaction becomes clearer when the two country cases are compared. In the United Kingdom, the monarchy appears to play a more compensatory role, helping to stabilize democratic support when evaluations of institutional performance are more volatile. In the Netherlands, by contrast, monarchy trust operates more complementarily within a system already supported by stronger institutional collaboration and more balanced public trust. The contrast between these two cases therefore illustrates that institutional architecture mediates the relationship between symbolic attachment and performance evaluation. Democratic resilience is not generated through a single mechanism, but through different combinations of symbolic continuity and institutional effectiveness.

Recent scholarship supports this interpretation. Hansen (2024) shows that perceptions of governmental efficiency contribute to political trust in the post-Brexit United Kingdom, while Eck and Paulis (2025) demonstrate that institutional effectiveness can reduce affective polarization and thereby strengthen the conditions for stable regime support. Guillén (2018) further argues that constitutional monarchies endure because they provide integrative symbols capable of bridging the gap between state and society. At the

same time, Verhoest et al. (2024) show that trust and distrust can coexist in contemporary governance systems, indicating that democratic legitimacy is increasingly shaped by a watchful form of support rather than unquestioned confidence. This insight fits the present findings well: citizens may continue to rely on symbolic legitimacy for stability while simultaneously using institutional evaluation as a basis for accountability.

The broader implication is that democratic legitimacy in contemporary constitutional monarchies is layered, dynamic, and context-dependent. Otjes and de Jonge (2024) emphasize that consensus-based systems strengthen legitimacy through deliberation and collective performance, whereas more adversarial systems rely more heavily on stabilizing institutions and political symbols. The present study supports that distinction by showing that democratic resilience rests on a balance between emotional trust in symbolic institutions and rational evaluation of institutional competence. In this way, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of democratic support in the twenty-first century, namely that resilience is sustained not by a single source of legitimacy, but by the interaction between symbolic unity and institutional performance.

7. Revisiting Democratic Resilience: Theoretical and Policy Implications

The findings of this study offer two closely related implications for the study of democratic legitimacy. From a theoretical perspective, the results reinforce the dual-legitimacy model developed by Easton (1965) and later refined by Norris (2011), which holds that democratic stability depends not only on specific support derived from institutional performance, but also on diffuse support rooted in symbolic trust toward the political system. In this study, the monarchy is shown to function as more than a ceremonial remnant. It operates as a meaningful symbolic institution that can strengthen citizens' attachment to democracy, especially when institutional confidence becomes fragile. Guillén (2018) similarly argues that constitutional monarchies endure because they serve as symbolic mechanisms of unity that preserve continuity within the political order. The present findings extend this argument by showing that symbolic trust matters most when considered together with institutional performance rather than as a separate or purely cultural factor.

From a policy perspective, the implications are equally important. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) caution that democratic erosion often begins not with immediate regime collapse, but with the weakening of institutional norms and the decline of public trust. The findings of this study suggest that policymakers in both constitutional monarchies and parliamentary republics should pay closer attention to the relationship between institutional effectiveness and symbolic representation. Transparency, accountability, and effective governance remain essential, but they may not be sufficient on their own to sustain democratic resilience. Fukuyama (2019) emphasizes that dignity, recognition, and collective belonging remain central to modern political legitimacy. In that sense, symbolic communication and integrative public institutions can help preserve citizens' trust when political systems face polarization, uncertainty, or declining confidence in representative actors.

At the same time, the findings qualify approaches that rely too heavily on performance-based explanations alone. Frateur et al. (2025) show that public trust can be restored through effective government response, especially in crisis contexts. The present study does not dispute that point, but it shows that performance-based legitimacy may be more fragile when it is not accompanied by a sustaining symbolic dimension. The broader implication is that enduring democracies require both institutional competence and emotionally meaningful forms of political attachment. Democratic resilience, therefore, should be understood not simply as the product of efficient governance, but as the

outcome of a balance between rational evaluation and symbolic integration. This is the main contribution of the present findings to contemporary debates on legitimacy: democracies remain stable not only because they perform, but because they continue to provide citizens with institutions they can trust, recognize, and identify with.

8. Scope and Boundaries of Interpretation: Conceptual and Empirical Limitations

This study has several conceptual and empirical limitations that should guide the interpretation of its findings. First, the analysis is limited to two Western European constitutional monarchies, namely the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. This case selection is analytically useful because it allows comparison between majoritarian and consensus democratic settings, but it also limits the broader generalizability of the findings. Otjes and de Jonge (2024) note that the deliberative and consensus-oriented political culture of the Netherlands is not easily comparable to more polarized settings in other regions. As a result, the interaction between symbolic legitimacy and institutional performance identified in this study should not be assumed to operate in the same way in non-European monarchies, presidential systems, or democracies with very different institutional trajectories.

Second, the temporal scope of the data also creates an important limitation. The study relies on cross-sectional data from World Values Survey Wave 7, which means that it cannot capture long-term changes in legitimacy, symbolic attachment, or democratic satisfaction over time. For that reason, the findings should be interpreted as relational rather than fully dynamic. Jabkowski and Cichocki (2025) further caution that comparative survey research in Europe has been affected by declining participation rates and methodological variation across countries. Although these issues do not invalidate the present analysis, they do require caution in interpreting the stability and comparability of estimated relationships.

Third, the analysis cannot fully capture all the social and ideological sources of democratic dissatisfaction. Vigna (2024) shows that political discontent is often shaped by regional inequality, territorial imbalance, and social underrepresentation rather than by performance judgments alone. Hassan (2024) likewise argues that legitimacy can also emerge from non-state arenas such as workplaces and civil society organizations. These dimensions are not fully represented in the present dataset, which means that the study necessarily provides a more limited picture focused on formal institutional trust, monarchy trust, and democratic satisfaction. Important aspects of everyday legitimacy formation may therefore remain outside the scope of the analysis.

Finally, the measurement of democratic legitimacy itself remains conceptually challenging. Eck and Paulis (2025) note that survey-based measures often sit uneasily between perception and normativity, meaning that responses may reflect not only genuine satisfaction with democracy but also accommodation to the political status quo. This study recognizes that limitation. The findings therefore should be read as evidence of how respondents perceive democracy and legitimacy under specific institutional conditions, not as a definitive measure of democratic quality in a broader normative sense. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs, broader cross-national comparison, and mixed-method approaches that can capture more fully how symbolic legitimacy and institutional performance interact over time and across different political contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that trust in the monarchy has a positive and significant association with satisfaction with democracy in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. It also shows that symbolic legitimacy becomes more influential when citizens perceive

representative institutions as performing effectively. In this sense, democratic satisfaction is shaped not by symbolic attachment or institutional performance alone, but by their interaction. The cross-system comparison further reveals that symbolic legitimacy plays a stronger role in the United Kingdom's majoritarian setting than in the Netherlands' consensus-oriented system, indicating that institutional design conditions how symbolic and performance-based legitimacy combine to sustain democratic support. The main theoretical contribution of this study lies in showing that democratic legitimacy in constitutional monarchies is both dual and context-dependent. The findings extend Easton's distinction between diffuse and specific support by demonstrating that the two can interact rather than simply coexist, and they refine Norris's democratic deficit argument by showing that dissatisfaction with institutional performance does not necessarily weaken overall democratic support when symbolic institutions continue to command trust. More broadly, the study contributes to debates on democratic resilience by showing that stable democratic support depends on a balance between symbolic unity and institutional effectiveness. At the same time, the study remains limited by its focus on two countries and by its reliance on cross-sectional data. Future research should therefore use longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-method designs to examine whether similar patterns hold in other constitutional monarchies or in alternative symbolic settings such as ceremonial presidencies and other non-partisan institutions.

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