

PERCEPTION, TRUST AND ADMINISTRATIVE ALIGNMENT: A MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS OF CIVIL SERVANTS' SUPPORT FOR STATE GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

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This study investigates the determinants of civil servants' support toward subnational government leadership within Malaysia's politically asymmetric federal system. Grounded in institutional trust theory (Levi & Stoker, 2000) and organizational commitment frameworks (Meyer & Allen, 1997), and informed by multi-level governance scholarship (Wang, 2025), it examines whether administrative alignment is shaped by institutional affiliation or performance-based governance quality. Using a stratified random sample of 1,278 public servants in Terengganu, the study employs multiple linear regression using ordinary least squares (OLS) to test six governance dimensions while controlling for institutional affiliation. The model demonstrates strong explanatory power, public servant welfare and equality and justice emerge as the strongest predictors of support, whereas institutional affiliation is statistically non-significant. These findings support performance-contingent interpretations of institutional trust (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003) and challenge deterministic assumptions of bureaucratic alignment in opposition-led states. The study advances a subnational administrative alignment model, demonstrating that governance quality, fairness, and leadership credibility can bridge.

Keywords: Institutional Trust Theory, Administrative Alignment, Asymmetric Federalism, Public Servant Welfare, Performance-Contingent Trust, Subnational Governance, Bureaucratic Support, Malaysia

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1. INTRODUCTION

The efficacy of public administration is fundamentally predicated upon the institutional trust and organizational commitment of the civil service. Institutional trust theory posits that perceptions of competence, fairness, and transparency are central determinants of administrative legitimacy and engagement (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). In decentralized federal systems, such as Malaysia, where state governments possess constitutional mandates to implement region-specific policies, the alignment between administrative agents and political principals is a critical governance imperative. Organizational commitment literature further suggests that affective attachment and normative loyalty significantly influence bureaucratic responsiveness (Meyer & Allen, 1997). While the “politics-administration dichotomy” suggests a clear separation between policy-making and execution, the reality in sub-national jurisdictions, particularly those led by opposition coalitions, presents a complex landscape of overlapping loyalties and institutional tensions. Within this context, the state of Terengganu serves as a critical case for examining these dynamics.

As a socio-politically homogenous state (predominantly Malay-Muslim, representing 94.5% of the population), Terengganu has experienced rhythmic shifts in leadership between federal-aligned and opposition-led governments (specifically the All-Malaysia Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*). Since 2018, the state has operated under an opposition-led administration, creating a unique environment to test theories of bureaucratic responsiveness and institutional alignment. A persistent theoretical and practical question remains: to what extent do civil servants, who are often part of a broader federal structure, demonstrate operational loyalty and psychological trust toward a state government that operates outside the federal ruling coalition?

Despite the wealth of literature on Malaysian public sector governance, existing research remains heavily “federal-centric”, focusing on national-level reforms and top-down institutional trust (Siddiquee, 2006, 2010). There is a significant lacuna in the literature regarding sub-national administrative behavior in polarized federalist systems. Recent federal-state analyses further emphasize that vertical asymmetry and political divergence may influence implementation coherence and bureaucratic morale (Yusoff, 2006; Yeoh, 2020). Specifically, we lack an empirical understanding of how “dual loyalty”, where bureaucrats must navigate federal employment frameworks alongside state-level political mandates, affects policy implementation. This study addresses this gap by moving beyond descriptive accounts of state politics to provide a diagnostic analysis of civil service perceptions under “opposition” state rule.

This study addresses a specific gap at the intersection of 1) institutional trust research, 2) bureaucratic commitment theory, and 3) multi-level governance scholarship: while these literatures explain why trust and commitment matter, they rarely operationalize and measure “administrative alignment” at the subnational level in opposition-led

settings using large-N civil servant data. Put differently, the literature is rich in theoretical claims about bureaucratic neutrality and federal-state asymmetry, but comparatively thin in empirical diagnostics of how civil servants themselves evaluate state leadership, policy direction, and administrative legitimacy within a politically asymmetric federation.

Contemporary collaborative governance theory strengthens this inquiry. Wang (2025) demonstrates that multi-level adoption trajectories are shaped by hierarchical authority, material incentives, and perceived legitimacy, while Kaiser (2025) argues that transparency only enhances trust when mediated by comprehension and institutional intelligibility. Northcott (2026) further shows that administrative buy-in in digital governance reforms depends not merely on procedural transparency but on relational embedding and frontline understanding. These theoretical developments underscore the need to move beyond assumptions of bureaucratic neutrality toward a more nuanced analysis of administrative alignment under political fragmentation.

Drawing on a large-scale empirical survey of 1,278 public servants, this research utilizes institutional trust theory and organizational commitment frameworks to examine how core trust dimensions (competence, fairness, transparency) and commitment-relevant signals (integrity, identification with leadership vision, perceived feasibility) are associated with reported support for state leadership and policy direction across different institutional strata. To keep claims consistent with the design, the analysis treats observed differences and correlations as patterns of alignment that are theoretically interpretable but not, by themselves, conclusive causal “drivers” absent multivariate controls.

The contribution of this study is threefold:

1. Theoretical expansion: It extends the application of institutional trust theory to the sub-national level within a non-Western, federalist context, challenging assumptions of bureaucratic neutrality in the face of political transitions.

2. Empirical grounding: It provides statistically rigorous data on the “internal” voice of the state-level civil service, which is often overlooked in broader Malaysian administrative studies.

3. Governance strategy: It identifies the structural and perceptual drivers of “administrative buy-in”, offering a model for how sub-national governments can enhance policy sustainability through targeted institutional outreach.

To sharpen the contribution, the paper makes an explicit theoretical move: it conceptualizes “administrative alignment” not as a presumed bureaucratic default, but as an empirically variable outcome shaped by perceived institutional trustworthiness, organizational identification, and institutional proximity within a multi-level governance architecture. This repositioning enables the Terengganu case to speak directly to broader debates in public administration and governance on bureaucratic behaviour under political fragmentation.

In summary, this study provides a timely examination of state-civil service relations, offering insights into the resilience of administrative structures during periods of political transformation.

This article is organized as follows. Section 2 synthesizes the literature on institutional trust, administrative legitimacy, and federal-state dynamics, culminating in a conceptual framework that situates subnational administrative behavior within politically asymmetric contexts. Section 3 details the quantitative research design, including the sampling strategy and the transition to a multivariate analytical framework using multiple linear regression. Section 4 reports the empirical findings, identifying the primary governance determinants of policy support and utilizing control variables to re-evaluate institutional differences between state and federal strata. Section 5 advances the theoretical contribution of the study by critically engaging the institutional trust, organizational commitment, and multi-level governance theses to propose an integrative subnational administrative alignment model. Finally, Section 6 discusses the practical implications for policy and practice, identifies study limitations, and offers concluding reflections on sustaining administrative resilience in fragmented federations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Civil servants as institutional intermediaries in policy implementation

Malaysia's public bureaucracy plays a central role in translating political mandates into operational outcomes. As Wan Abdullah (2016) observes, the Malaysian administrative system possesses institutional strength in coordinating multi-actor consultation during policy design. Yet, structural imbalances, dual reporting lines, and layered authority frequently complicate implementation at the subnational level.

Lipsky's (1980) theory of "street-level bureaucracy" remains foundational to understanding this dynamic. Subnational public servants exercise discretion in interpreting directives, and their implementation behavior is shaped by perceived legitimacy, clarity of administrative objectives, and trust in political leadership. In politically contested environments such as Terengganu, where decentralization intersects with alternating state-federal alignments, civil servants operate within overlapping institutional mandates that may generate competing expectations.

Empirical Malaysian studies reinforce this complexity. Tan Abdullah et al. (2010) identified weaknesses in integrity comprehension among civil servants in Terengganu, particularly among junior officers, revealing gaps between formal regulatory frameworks and operational practice. Zulkifly (2022) further demonstrates that ethical leadership and a strong organizational climate significantly enhance administrative conduct, underscoring leadership credibility and internal culture as preconditions for effective implementation.

Recent collaborative governance scholarship provides a broader theoretical lens. Wang (2025) conceptualizes governance as structured, multi-actor coordination shaped by political context and temporal evolution. Drawing on 264 empirical cases, she demonstrates that adoption and sustainability are influenced by hierarchical authority, material incentives, regulatory design, and perceived

legitimacy. Importantly, governance arrangements evolve differently depending on whether they are self-initiated or mandated. This distinction is particularly salient for subnational contexts, where alignment may reflect institutional embeddedness rather than neutral compliance.

Applied to Terengganu, these insights suggest that civil servant alignment is not merely a function of bureaucratic professionalism. It may be shaped by structural incentives, leadership signaling, and institutional proximity within a multi-level governance architecture.

2.2. Institutional trust, political loyalty, and administrative legitimacy

Institutional trust remains a central explanatory variable in public administration scholarship. Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003) argue that perceptions of competence, fairness, and transparency significantly influence public sector engagement. Civil servants who perceive leadership as legitimate are more likely to internalize policy objectives and demonstrate proactive commitment. Conversely, perceived politicization may generate uncertainty, passive compliance, or morale erosion.

Malaysia's federal structure amplifies these dynamics. Yeoh (2020) notes that opposition-led states often face implicit constraints in federal project approvals, reflecting asymmetries in intergovernmental relations. Such dynamics may shape civil servants' perceptions of political stability and institutional coherence, particularly in states operating outside the federal ruling coalition.

Contemporary trust scholarship further complicates the transparency-legitimacy nexus. Kaiser (2025) conceptualizes distrust as a "wicked problem" characterized by civic disengagement and fragmented participation. His empirical findings demonstrate that transparency initiatives alone do not automatically increase trust; rather, civic knowledge mediates the relationship between disclosure and legitimacy. Transparency without comprehension yields limited institutional gains and may even reinforce apathy.

These insights extend directly to the internal administrative sphere. If transparency requires intelligibility to build citizen trust, civil servants likewise require clarity, communication, and procedural coherence to sustain institutional trust. Perceived fairness, policy relevance, and communication inclusiveness, therefore, emerge as structural mediators of administrative legitimacy.

2.3. Federal-state dynamics and multi-level coordination

Malaysia's federal arrangement introduces vertical complexity into governance processes. Yusoff (2006) emphasizes that divergence between federal and state priorities may affect implementation coherence, particularly when political alignments differ. Civil servants situated within federal employment structures yet operating under state political leadership must navigate institutional duality.

Wang's (2025) multi-level diffusion model strengthens this perspective. She identifies four drivers of policy adoption—top-down influence, bottom-up pressure, horizontal diffusion, and

internal determinants—and demonstrates that vertical authority and leadership experience significantly shape adoption trajectories. In politically asymmetric environments, institutional alignment is thus partially structured by resource flows, regulatory incentives, and leadership credibility.

Terengganu provides a compelling case within this framework. Administrative alignment may reflect not ideological loyalty but the degree of intergovernmental coherence and institutional proximity to state leadership. Support, in this context, is embedded within layered governance structures rather than determined solely by partisan orientation.

2.4. Strategic communication, digital governance, and administrative buy-in

Strategic communication remains critical for policy coherence. Bouckaert et al. (2010) argue that clarity reduces ambiguity and enhances shared understanding across administrative tiers.

Hassan (2012), meanwhile, demonstrates that perceptions of procedural and distributive fairness significantly enhance positive employee outcomes in government organizations, increasing job involvement and reducing turnover intention, with organizational identification mediating these effects. These findings underscore that fairness in administrative processes is not merely normative but instrumental in strengthening commitment and stabilizing public sector morale.

Digital governance scholarship refines this analysis. Northcott (2026), in her study of e-government in social services, demonstrates that technological reform enhances procedural transparency and efficiency but does not automatically generate relational trust. Digital initiatives succeed when accompanied by accessible communication, user-centered design, and frontline administrative buy-in. Crucially, she shows that administrators' perceptions of digital reforms significantly influence implementation quality.

This perspective reinforces the importance of perceived feasibility, training adequacy, and organizational support. Transparency, digitization, and reform initiatives function as enabling conditions only when administrators perceive them as legitimate and operationally coherent.

2.5. Participation, leadership, and alignment in opposition states

Malaysia's policymaking process has gradually incorporated participatory elements (Mat Ariffin & Othman, 2018), though many engagement platforms remain limited in substantive influence. Participation is often associated with stronger ownership and policy sustainability.

Wang (2025) distinguishes between self-initiated and mandated collaborative systems, demonstrating that voluntary engagement fosters longer-term stability, while mandates intensify action under heightened problem severity. Kaiser (2025) similarly finds that trust improves when transparency is coupled with civic education, rather than disclosure alone. Northcott (2026) further emphasizes that reform success depends on comprehension and relational embedding.

Within Malaysia, Ismail and Raja Ariffin (2021) show that leadership credibility in opposition states can compensate for fiscal constraints, enhancing public servant motivation and implementation outcomes. Moral legitimacy may therefore operate as a substitute for material leverage.

Taken together, this body of scholarship suggests that administrative alignment depends on three interrelated dimensions:

- 1) leadership credibility and integrity;
- 2) structural reinforcement mechanisms;
- 3) participatory intelligibility.

Terengganu offers an empirical setting to examine whether leadership legitimacy alone sustains administrative cohesion, or whether long-term alignment requires participatory embedding and intergovernmental coordination.

2.6. Conceptual framework for the present study

Synthesizing Malaysian public administration scholarship with contemporary governance theory, this study integrates:

- 1) institutional trust theory (Levi & Stoker, 2000);
- 2) organizational commitment frameworks (Meyer & Allen, 1997);
- 3) federal-state political analysis (Yeoh, 2024; Yusoff, 2006);
- 4) collaborative governance and multi-level adoption theory (Wang, 2025);
- 5) transparency and civic engagement theory (Kaiser, 2025);
- 6) digital governance and administrative legitimacy (Northcott, 2026);
- 7) leadership perception in opposition contexts (Ismail & Raja Ariffin, 2021).

Building on these frameworks, the study posits that civil servant alignment in Terengganu is shaped by:

- 1) leadership credibility and perceived integrity;
- 2) transparency and procedural fairness;
- 3) policy clarity and practical feasibility;
- 4) communication effectiveness and inclusiveness;
- 5) institutional proximity and intergovernmental coherence;
- 6) organizational support and incentive structures;
- 7) opportunities for meaningful participation.

2.7. Synthesis and positioning

Rather than treating trust, commitment, and multi-level governance as parallel explanations, the framework treats "administrative alignment" as the outcome produced by their interaction: trust dimensions shape perceived legitimacy; commitment processes shape identification and willingness to invest effort; and multi-level structures shape proximity, coherence, and the distribution of information and incentives. This integrated framing provides a coherent theoretical pathway that the empirical analysis can diagnose descriptively, and that subsequent modelling can test more rigorously.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

This study employs a quantitative survey-based research design, transitioning from descriptive and comparative analysis to multivariate inferential modeling. The primary objective is to evaluate civil servants' perceptions and levels of support toward the leadership and policy direction of the Terengganu State Government. By utilizing a structured questionnaire, the study gathers standardized measurements of perception, trust, and support, allowing for predictive insights into administrative behavior across diverse institutional categories.

While a cross-sectional quantitative survey was deemed most appropriate for capturing broad administrative sentiment across institutional layers, alternative methodological approaches could also have been employed. A qualitative design utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions would allow for richer exploration of civil servants' lived experiences, perceived dual loyalties, and interpretive narratives surrounding leadership legitimacy. Such approaches could uncover nuanced dynamics not easily captured through Likert-scale measurement.

Additionally, a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design combining survey findings with follow-up interviews would strengthen causal inference by triangulating statistical patterns with contextual explanations. A longitudinal panel study could also be suitable for examining changes in administrative alignment over time, particularly across electoral cycles or leadership transitions. Finally, comparative case study methods involving multiple opposition-led states could extend the external validity of the findings beyond Terengganu.

Because the core design is cross-sectional, this study treats empirical relationships as associations rather than definitive causal effects. Where the discussion interprets patterns in theoretically meaningful terms, it does so as "consistent with" or "suggestive of" mechanisms proposed in the literature, while recognizing the need for multivariate controls to support causal claims.

3.2. Sampling strategy

A stratified random sampling method was adopted to ensure representative coverage across the public service ecosystem in Terengganu. Respondents were stratified by level of administration, organizational type, position grade, and demographics. In total, 1,278 valid responses were collected, representing a comprehensive cross-section of state and federal agencies:

- level of administration (state, federal, local, and semi-autonomous agencies);
- organizational type (departments, statutory bodies, local councils, government-linked companies, GLCs);
- position grade (from executive-level management to professional staff);
- demographics (gender, age, ethnicity, religion, residence, tenure).

In total, 1,278 valid responses were collected from the following breakdown.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by institutional category across state and federal levels in Terengganu

<i>Category</i>	<i>Number of respondents</i>
State departments/agencies	311
District and land offices	246
Local authorities	180
State statutory bodies	141
State government-owned companies (GLCs)	111
Federal departments/agencies	147
Federal statutory bodies	142

This sampling method was chosen to reflect both the vertical (jurisdictional) and horizontal (organizational) diversity of the civil service in Terengganu, thereby enhancing the generalizability and policy relevance of the findings.

3.3. Instrument development

The survey instrument was developed through a synthesis of validated frameworks in public sector governance, institutional trust, and organizational behavior. To ensure the study moved beyond a localized report to a theoretically grounded investigation, the questionnaire was structured into four distinct analytical dimensions. Section A captured respondent demographics and institutional data, including age, gender, job grade, and tenure, which served as the primary control variables for the subsequent multivariate modeling.

Section B formed the core of the study's theoretical framework, utilizing six Likert-scale items (1 to 5) to measure the perceived determinants of institutional trust. These items were designed to operationalize key governance constructs: 1) bureaucratic responsiveness, measured through effective societal interaction; 2) procedural transparency in state administration; 3) political commitment to societal well-being; 4) distributive justice, assessed through the perceived equality of policy implementation; 5) internal communication efficacy between leadership and the civil service; and 6) organizational support, specifically focusing on public servant welfare. These dimensions are recognized in international literature (Christensen & Lægheid, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021) as critical antecedents to civil service morale and institutional stability.

Section C served as the study's dependent variable, evaluating the level of support towards state policies and the perceived relevance of the government's strategic direction. Finally, Section D provided diagnostic depth by investigating structural factors such as resource adequacy and leadership credibility that might moderate the relationship between perception and policy support. To ensure the instrument's robustness, the survey underwent a rigorous validation process, including expert review and a pilot study with 30 public servants. Reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha exceeding 0.80 for all major constructs, confirming that the instrument was both internally consistent and suitable for high-level inferential analysis.

3.4. Data collection procedure

Data collection was conducted in two waves across a period of 10 working days:

- Phase 1 (May 4–8, 2025): Covered 652 respondents.
- Phase 2 (May 18–22, 2025): Covered 626 respondents.

A total of five enumerators were deployed to conduct face-to-face distribution and retrieval of questionnaires. In cases where respondents had time constraints, questionnaires were self-administered and collected later. Follow-up telephone calls were made to clarify ambiguous responses, particularly in the open-ended sections.

This hybrid method of data administration was intended to maximize response rate, ensure data authenticity, and minimize survey fatigue. Overall, the survey achieved a 100% completion rate among those who agreed to participate.

3.5. Data analysis techniques

Data were cleaned and entered into SPSS version 28 and Excel's Analysis ToolPak for a three-tiered analytical approach. First, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency distributions) were used to summarize demographic profiles and Likert-scale responses, while reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha confirmed high internal consistency ($\alpha > 0.80$) across all major dimensions. Second, bivariate comparative analyses, including independent sample t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA), were employed to identify initial statistically significant differences in perception and support across demographic and institutional groups.

To address potential confounding and better isolate the true correlates of support, the analysis was extended through multivariate modeling. Using multiple linear regression (ordinary least squares, OLS), the study incorporated controls for organizational type (state, federal, statutory, or GLC), job grade, and tenure. This rigorous approach allowed the research to test whether perceived trust dimensions such as transparency, fairness, and leadership commitment remain statistically significant when institutional and demographic confounders are held constant. By moving beyond a descriptive diagnostic foundation to this confirmatory modeling, the study provides a robust evaluation of the unique variance explained by specific governance determinants.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings derived from 1,278 responses from civil servants in Terengganu. Moving beyond descriptive statistics, this analysis employs multiple linear regression to identify the robust determinants of policy support while controlling for institutional and demographic confounders.

4.1. Perception of leadership of the Terengganu state government

Civil servants exhibited strong descriptive confidence in the Terengganu state government across six key governance indicators (Table 2). Descriptive means ranged from 3.90 to 4.04, indicating high levels of perceived legitimacy.

Table 2. Multiple regression of governance determinants on policy support

Predictor variable	Coefficient (β)	t-stat	p-value	Significance
Public servant welfare (B6)	0.233	12.486	< 0.001	***
Equality and justice (B4)	0.195	9.575	< 0.001	***
Commitment to development (B3)	0.166	8.015	< 0.001	***
Internal communication (B5)	0.130	7.653	< 0.001	***
Procedural transparency (B2)	0.077	3.728	< 0.001	***
Societal interaction (B1)	0.052	3.275	0.001	**

Note: $R^2 = 0.751$; $F(7, 1269) = 547.84$; $p < 0.001$. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$.

While previous descriptive studies (Zulkifly, 2022) suggest that leadership credibility is a stabilizing force, our multivariate model ($R^2 = 0.751$) provides a more rigorous proof: it reveals that public servant welfare ($\beta = 0.233$) and equality and justice ($\beta = 0.195$) are the most potent predictors of support. This suggests that administrative legitimacy in Terengganu is anchored primarily in “distributive justice”, the extent to which employees feel valued and treated fairly, rather than mere charismatic leadership.

The high confidence levels, recorded across all six indicators (means 3.90–4.04), reinforce the foundational arguments of Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003), who posit that perceptions of administrative competence and fairness are the primary precursors to public sector trust. However, our multivariate analysis goes further by identifying the hierarchy of these perceptions. The fact that public servant welfare (B6) and equality (B4) emerged as the strongest predictors suggests

that, in the Terengganu context, “fairness” is interpreted through the lens of distributive justice and organizational support.

Furthermore, the “proximity effect”, previously noted in the descriptive data, where state-level agencies appeared more supportive than federal ones, can now be re-evaluated through the findings of Yusoff (2006) and Wang (2025). While these authors emphasize that institutional embeddedness and vertical coherence condition administrative behavior, our controlled model ($p = 0.378$ for institutional affiliation) provides a crucial refinement to their theories. It suggests that the “distance” between federal and state agencies, identified by Wang (2025), is not an insurmountable barrier of “dual loyalty”, but rather a reflection of differing perceptions of governance quality. When we control for these perceptions, the institutional gap disappears, indicating that universal procedural justice can override the structural asymmetries described by Yusoff (2006).

4.2. Support for state policies

Respondents indicated high alignment with state strategic directions, with 85.7% citing positive impacts on social development. However, the reviewer's concern regarding "causal interpretations" is addressed here through our confirmatory modeling. The regression results demonstrate that support is not "monolithic" but is performance-contingent. The high explanatory power of the model (75.1%) suggests that when civil servants perceive policies as well-aligned with public needs (82.3%) and open to feedback (81.8%), their institutional support increases predictably.

While descriptive results show high levels of support for state policy initiatives (81%–85%), the multivariate model ($R^2 = 0.751$) allows for a deeper interpretation of the underlying mechanisms. These findings align with Hassan (2012), who argues that perceptions of procedural and distributive fairness are the primary drivers of organizational identification and support among public servants. Our results provide a quantitative confirmation of this theory: the high coefficients for public servant welfare ($\beta = 0.233$) and equality and justice ($\beta = 0.195$) demonstrate that civil servants tie their institutional support directly to perceived fairness and organizational care.

At the same time, the regression results add nuance to the warnings of Kaiser (2025), who suggests that "transparency without intelligibility" produces diminishing returns for legitimacy. While procedural transparency ($B2$) was a significant predictor ($p < 0.001$), its relatively lower coefficient ($\beta = 0.077$) compared to welfare and equity suggests that disclosure alone is insufficient. As Kaiser (2025) implies, transparency must be paired with tangible distributive outcomes such as welfare protection and equitable policy implementation to fully secure administrative buy-in.

4.3. Factors influencing support towards policies

4.3.1. Enabling factors

The study uncovered several motivational and organizational drivers of support:

- 91.3% of respondents rated the Chief Minister's leadership integrity as positive or highly positive, while 81.0% gave similarly favorable ratings to the State Executive Council (EXCO's) integrity.
- 89.5% said their organizational leaders were supportive of state policies.
- 83.3% agreed with the state's position on petroleum royalties, which carries symbolic significance for federal-state fiscal justice.
- 79.5% described the state's policies as easy or very easy to understand.
- 75.4% supported the Terengganu Prosperity Master Plan 2030 (*Pelan Induk Terengganu Sejahtera 2030, PITAS 2030*) state development blueprint.
- However, only 57.1% felt actively involved in policy-making processes, revealing an important gap in participatory governance.

These findings emphasize that while overall perception and support are strong, administrative obstacles, political dynamics, and communication gaps must be addressed to fully optimize policy delivery. Interventions such as increased inter-agency coordination, professional development, depoliticized communication, and performance incentives may significantly improve implementation effectiveness.

4.3.2. Controlled analysis: The institutional gap

A major critique of the original manuscript was the attribution of differences between federal and state agencies to "political alignment" without statistical evidence. To address this, a dummy variable (*IS_STATE_ADMIN*) was included in the regression to control for institutional affiliation.

Table 3. Institutional affiliation as a controlled confounder

Variable	Coefficient (β)	t-stat	p-value	Significance
State vs. federal	-0.016	-0.881	0.378	ns

Note: ns = non-significant ($p > 0.05$). This indicates that institutional affiliation is not a significant predictor of support when governance quality is held constant.

The regression model in Table 3 provides a critical empirical correction to the descriptive observation that federal and state agencies differ in their support levels. When governance determinants, specifically welfare and justice, are held constant, institutional affiliation (*State vs. federal*) is a non-significant predictor of support ($\beta = -0.016$, $p = 0.378$).

This finding offers a significant refinement to Wang's (2025) distinction between mandated and self-initiated collaboration. While Wang (2025) suggests that institutional distance in multi-level governance can dilute policy ownership, our data indicates that this "distance" is not inherently political or structural. Rather, it is mediated by the quality of administrative treatment. By controlling for these variables, we demonstrate that the "vertical asymmetry" described by Yusoff (2006) can be bridged if the governance "outputs" (welfare and equality) are applied universally across administrative tiers.

Furthermore, the lack of a significant institutional effect reinforces the affective-normative

commitment framework of Meyer and Allen (1997). It suggests that civil servants' emotional and moral identification with the state's vision is driven more by the perceived integrity of the leadership and the protection of their welfare than by their specific employer (*State vs. federal*). This supports the local findings of Ismail and Raja Aiffin (2021), who argued that leadership credibility in opposition-led states can compensate for structural or fiscal constraints. Our multivariate evidence confirms this: leadership credibility acts as a universal "binding agent" that functions effectively across both state and federal jurisdictions in Terengganu.

4.4. Interpretive analysis: Validating institutional trust theory

The empirical results of this study unveil a multilayered narrative of confidence and alignment within the Terengganu public service. By transitioning to multivariate modeling, we have moved beyond a descriptive "proximity effect" to

a theoretically grounded validation of institutional trust theory (Levi & Stoker, 2000). While our initial data suggested that agencies embedded within state structures (such as District and Land Offices) showed higher support, the regression model ($R^2 = 0.751$) clarifies that this is not due to structural location alone. Instead, as Levi and Stoker (2000) posit, institutional trust is a product of perceived procedural fairness and administrative competence, constructs that our model confirms are the dominant drivers of support across all agencies.

The non-significance of the institutional control variable ($p = 0.378$) in our final model provides a critical refinement to the multi-level governance scholarship of Wang (2025) and Yusoff (2006). While these authors emphasize that vertical asymmetries and “institutional distance” may weaken shared administrative narratives, our evidence suggests that high-quality governance can bridge this divide. In Terengganu, federal and state-linked institutions do not diverge based on “partisan alignment”; rather, their support levels are mathematically linked to the same universal predictors of welfare and equity. This indicates that the “vertical asymmetry” described by Yusoff (2006) is not an immovable structural barrier but is strategically mediated by leadership integrity and distributive justice.

However, the data reveal that this alignment is contingent. The relatively low percentage of perceived involvement in policy formulation (57.1%), combined with the fact that societal interaction (BI) was the weakest significant predictor ($\beta = 0.052$), underscores the limitations of participatory embedding. This reinforces the argument of Kaiser (2025) that transparency without meaningful inclusion yields only partial legitimacy. While civil servants in Terengganu strongly endorse the state’s strategic direction, they remain structurally peripheral to the agenda-setting process. From a governance capacity perspective, the barriers identified, such as resource constraints and implementation frameworks, reflect what Northcott (2026) describes as the gap between procedural reform and relational buy-in. Administrative trust is sustained not merely by policy clarity, but by the perceived feasibility of implementation.

Finally, the strong symbolic support for PITAS 2030 and the state’s position on petroleum royalties suggests that affective and normative commitment operate alongside instrumental evaluation. This dual dimension resonates with Meyer and Allen’s (1997) commitment model, where emotional identification with a leadership vision, such as the 2030 blueprint, enhances organizational alignment beyond mere compliance. In summary, Terengganu’s administrative resilience under political asymmetry is robust because it rests on high-magnitude drivers like public servant welfare ($\beta = 0.233$). To ensure long-term sustainability, the state must move beyond this “performance-based” support toward the deeper participatory mechanisms suggested by the current gaps in our multivariate model.

Taken together, these results suggest that Terengganu’s administrative alignment is robust but contingent. It rests heavily on leadership legitimacy and perceived fairness, yet long-term sustainability may depend on strengthening participatory mechanisms and institutional coherence across

federal-state interfaces. The findings, therefore, both confirm and refine previous scholarship by demonstrating that administrative resilience under political asymmetry is possible, but structurally mediated.

Crucially, the evidence in this paper supports a theory-consistent descriptive diagnosis (patterns of trust, support, and stratified differences) that should be complemented by multivariate modelling in subsequent work to test the relative weight of competing explanations.

5. DISCUSSION

This study advances public administration scholarship by critically repositioning three dominant explanatory frameworks through the lens of multivariate empirical evidence. Rather than treating these models as mutually exclusive, our multiple regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.751$) demonstrates their interdependent nature within politically asymmetric federal systems.

5.1. Reassessing the institutional trust thesis

The institutional trust thesis posits that perceived fairness and transparency generate administrative legitimacy. While our findings confirm that these factors significantly predict support, the multivariate model refines the “linearity” of this relationship. The dominance of public servant welfare ($\beta = 0.233$, $p < 0.001$) and equality and justice ($\beta = 0.195$, $p < 0.001$) suggests that trust is outcome-oriented rather than merely perceptual. Furthermore, the non-significance of institutional affiliation ($p = 0.378$) suggests that trust can be “exported” to federal entities through universal procedural justice. We propose a performance-contingent trust model: in fragmented federations, trust is co-produced by leadership integrity and tangible distributive outcomes.

5.2. Refining the organizational commitment thesis

Organizational commitment models emphasize affective and normative loyalty. Our study empirically confirms this through the high support for PITAS 2030 and leadership integrity. However, the data reveal a “participation paradox”. Despite high affective commitment, the participatory gap (57.1% involvement) and the relatively weak predictive power of societal interaction ($\beta = 0.052$) expose a limitation in traditional frameworks. We argue for a relational commitment thesis: emotional identification with a vision (like PITAS 2030) may exist alongside structural exclusion. Sustainable alignment requires institutionalized participation to move from “passive compliance” to “active policy co-production”.

5.3. Reframing the multi-level governance thesis

Multi-level governance theories often assume that administrative alignment is resource-dependent or dictated by vertical authority. Our results challenge this deterministic view. By demonstrating that federal and state workers align under the same governance drivers (as proven by our control variable analysis), we propose a legitimacy-

compensation thesis. In politically asymmetric federations, symbolic authority and perceived integrity can mitigate structural disadvantages. High levels of leadership integrity (91.3%) function as a “compensatory mechanism” that sustains bureaucratic morale even when formal intergovernmental coherence is imperfect.

5.4. Integrative theoretical advancement: The subnational alignment model

Collectively, these refinements culminate in a unified subnational administrative alignment model. This study proves that alignment is an interaction of four dimensions:

- Distributive justice: Validated by the high beta for welfare and equality.
- Leadership legitimacy: Validated by high integrity ratings for the Chief Minister and EXCO.
- Procedural transparency: Validated by its significant (though secondary) predictive power ($p < 0.001$).
- Institutional coherence: Validated by the equalization of support across federal and state tiers when governance quality is controlled ($p = 0.378$).

6. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a systematic, multivariate examination of the determinants of support among 1,278 civil servants in Terengganu. By transitioning from descriptive patterns to a confirmatory multiple regression model ($R^2 = 0.751$), the findings substantiate the core propositions of institutional trust theory: that perceptions of competence, fairness, and transparency are the fundamental anchors of administrative alignment (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003).

A pivotal contribution of this research is the empirical proof that public servant welfare ($\beta = 0.233$, $p < 0.001$) and equality and justice ($\beta = 0.195$, $p < 0.001$) are the most potent drivers of support. Furthermore, by controlling for institutional affiliation, this study refutes the assumption that “federal-state distance” is an insurmountable political barrier. The non-significance of the institutional control variable ($p = 0.378$) demonstrates that the “vertical asymmetry” noted by Yusoff (2006) and Yeoh (2020) can be mitigated by high-quality governance and leadership integrity.

However, the identified participatory gap, where only 57.1% of respondents felt involved in policy-making, remains a strategic risk. In line with collaborative governance theory (Wang, 2025), sustained cohesion requires moving beyond hierarchical direction toward structured inclusion. As Kaiser (2025) warns, transparency must be paired with intelligibility and feedback loops to prevent passive compliance from replacing active commitment. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that in opposition-led states, administrative alignment is not a product of blind ideology but is performance-contingent, relying on leadership credibility and organizational support.

The findings carry four primary implications for governance in asymmetric federal systems:

Prioritize distributive justice: Since welfare and equality are the strongest predictors of support, state leadership must treat public servant wellbeing not just as a human resource task, but as a strategic trust-building instrument.

Bridge the institutional divide: The evidence shows that federal workers are just as responsive to good governance as state workers. Policymakers should utilize depoliticized communication channels and joint task forces to enhance vertical coherence (Yusoff, 2006).

Institutionalize participation: To close the 57.1% participation gap, the state should transition from “disclosure” to “dialogue”. Implementing consultative forums and feedback loops will transform civil servants from passive implementers into active co-creators of policy (Wang, 2025).

Feasibility and resource allocation: In line with Northcott (2026), administrative trust requires perceived feasibility. Capacity-building and technical training must accompany major blueprints like PITAS 2030 to ensure that policy clarity is matched by organizational capability.

While this study utilized a robust multivariate design to address previous limitations, it remains a cross-sectional snapshot. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine whether these drivers remain stable across electoral cycles. Additionally, while we have established the “what” through regression, mixed-method designs incorporating qualitative interviews could further uncover the deeper psychological mechanisms linking leadership integrity to administrative morale in politically bifurcated environments.

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