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The Geopolitics of Civic Honesty: The Role of Interpersonal and Political Trust Amid Varying Degrees of Mafia Influence and State Resilience

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ABSTRACT

Civic honesty—the moral standards that define citizens’ commitment to the public good—serves a fundamental role in societal functioning. Prior research has emphasized the role of vertical trust (trust in institutions) and horizontal trust (trust in fellow citizens) in predicting the endorsement of such standards among citizens. However, this research has mainly focused on the political conditions typical of the Global North while neglecting environments where criminal organizations, such as mafias, challenge state sovereignty and its monopoly over governance functions. Using a mixed-effects multilevel model and an extended Johnson–Neyman method for multiple moderators, we analyzed the role of two crucial contextual factors (i.e., criminal groups’ influence and state resilience) on the relationships between trust and civic honesty across 84 countries ($N = 132,602$). Results revealed that vertical trust is positively associated with civic honesty in contexts where the influence of criminal groups is lower and state resilience is higher. However, this relationship reverses when the influence of criminal groups is stronger and state resilience is weaker, suggesting that, in these circumstances, trust in institutions may reflect trust in (and adherence to) a system that is corrupt. In contrast, horizontal trust was negatively associated with civic honesty only in states characterized by lower resilience. Policy implications and future research directions are discussed.

1 | Introduction

Humans are inherently social beings, and their ability to survive and thrive in large, complex societies depends on balancing self-interest with altruistic drives (Campbell 1975). These competing forces make it essential for individuals to establish and adhere to standards regulating the use of collective resources (Hechter

and Horne 2009; Hechter and Kanazawa 1993; Tyler 2021). For instance, many of the public goods on which citizens of modern states rely—such as infrastructure, healthcare, and education—depend on the state’s ability to successfully collect taxes (Besley 2020). Evading taxes may offer an individual a short-term gain. However, this behavior ultimately undermines collective welfare by reducing the resources available for essential services.

Alberto Mirisola and Giovanni A. Travaglino have contributed equally to this article and share the first authorship.

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This tension between individual incentives and collective well-being underscores the importance of civic honesty—the moral standards that define citizens’ commitment to the public good (Balliet and Van Lange 2013b; Cohn et al. 2019; Fehr and Fischbacher 2002; Letki 2006; Van Lange et al. 2013). Adhering to these standards is crucial, as it encourages ethical behavior without the need for costly systems of surveillance or punishment (Jackson et al. 2012; Tyler 2006). In contrast, dishonesty in the civic context weakens the state’s capacity to provide essential services, ultimately fostering social instability.

Beliefs about the trustworthiness of others are crucial to the endorsement of civic honesty (Neville 2012; Sullivan and Transue 1999). Greater trust in fellow citizens (Kuwabara et al. 2014) or political institutions (Letki 2006) has been linked to higher levels of cooperation and honesty. However, recent evidence suggests that these relationships may be shaped by the features of a country’s political system. For instance, perceiving public representatives as corrupt erodes interpersonal trust, in turn reducing prosocial behavior (Spadaro, Molho, et al. 2022). Similarly, in countries where state sovereignty is contested by the strong influence of organized criminal groups, the link between trust in political institutions and civic honesty weakens (Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024; Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. 2024).

The influence of organized criminal groups, especially mafias, is a particularly relevant factor, as they undermine the state’s monopoly over political power. By challenging, infiltrating, and even co-opting institutions, these groups undermine the state’s capacity to foster and enforce positive behavior (Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024; Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. 2024). In the present research, we build on recent work on the role of mafias by exploring, for the first time, how the relationship between interpersonal and institutional trust and civic honesty varies depending on both the influence of organized crime and the state’s capacity to resist these groups. We propose that while the influence of organized crime weakens the relationship between institutions and citizens, the state’s ability to resist and counteract these groups may independently shape how individuals’ interpersonal and institutional trust relate to civic honesty because state resilience signals institutional competence and reinforces the centrality of integrity in society.

2 | Trust and Civic Honesty

Trust is a multifaceted concept that operates across different levels of analysis and domains (Uslaner 2002; Weiss et al. 2021). In examining the links between trust, honesty, and cooperation, research has primarily focused on two key dimensions: vertical trust (trust in institutions) and horizontal trust (trust in fellow citizens) (Chan et al. 2017; Spadaro et al. 2022).

Trust in institutions refers to individuals’ beliefs in the reliability of domestic political and legal institutions, such as the government, the police, and the courts (Geng et al. *in press*; Jackson 2013; Levi and Stoker 2000). It reflects the perceived legitimacy of these institutions and plays an important role in shaping civic behavior (Cavazza et al. 2022; Letki 2006; Lozza et al. 2017; Marien and Hooghe 2011; Marien and Werner 2019). When individuals trust institutions, they are more likely to respect their

dictates out of a sense of duty (Levi and Stoker 2000; Tyler 2006). This, in turn, reduces the need for surveillance and strengthens the state’s capacity to govern effectively and promote civic honesty.

Trust in fellow citizens promotes social cohesion by fostering positive expectations about others (Yamagishi 1986). When individuals believe that others are generally honest and cooperative, they are more likely to reciprocate these behaviors, thereby reinforcing a social norm of honesty (Bjørnskov 2021; Knack and Keefer 1997). High interpersonal trust reduces perceived risks associated with prosocial behavior because individuals expect others to act similarly. Moreover, generalized trust may contribute to a sense of shared responsibility for the collective good, discouraging behaviors that undermine social welfare. Such expectations are, in turn, associated with stronger cooperation (Balliet and Van Lange 2013a, 2013b).

Thus, evidence indicates that trust plays a crucial role in shaping compliance with standards of honesty. Some research suggests that vertical trust—trust in institutions—plays a primary role in upholding civic honesty (e.g., Letki 2006). Nonetheless, horizontal trust—trust in fellow citizens—may also contribute by reinforcing shared norms of cooperation (Balliet and Van Lange 2013a). Societies with high levels of trust are more likely to reject civically dishonest behaviors (Knack and Keefer 1997). Overall, these findings are consistent with theoretical perspectives suggesting that when institutions are perceived as legitimate, individuals are more likely to adhere to civic norms voluntarily because they internalize compliance (Tyler 2006). Likewise, the trustworthiness of others implies reciprocity in the use of the common good (Bjørnskov 2021).

However, such perspectives do not fully account for the complexities of the relationship between trust and civic honesty across diverse political and social settings. Existing theoretical frameworks are primarily shaped by the socio-contextual conditions of liberal states and the Global North, while paying comparatively less attention to the dynamics specific to other political arrangements (Zaloznaya 2022). Indeed, research highlights substantial cross-country heterogeneity in the relationship between vertical and horizontal forms of trust and civic honesty. For example, analyzing tax compliance in 108 countries, Chan et al. (2017) identified a number of instances in which vertical and horizontal forms of trust were either not associated with or even negatively linked to standards of honesty. Moreover, research from Zaloznaya (2022) suggests that, in certain contexts, civic connectedness and social trust may facilitate rather than hinder corruption and dishonesty (cf. also Popescu and Jugl 2025). This variation across different countries and contexts remains largely unexplained (Chan et al. 2017; Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024; Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. 2024).

The present research adopts a geopolitical psychology perspective to advance our understanding of how trust relates to civic honesty across diverse contexts. Geopolitical psychology emphasizes the role of spatially situated power relations and institutional dynamics in shaping individuals’ attitudes and behaviors (Bettache et al. *in press*; Obradović et al. 2025). From this standpoint, civic honesty is not solely a reflection of internalized moral commitments or beliefs. Rather, it emerges from—and is shaped

by—the broader geopolitical landscapes in which individuals are embedded. These landscapes include contested sovereignty, institutional fragility or strength, and the presence of competing regimes of authority, all of which can potentially influence how individuals interpret and respond to norms of civic conduct (Bettache et al. 2020; Chan et al. 2017; Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024; Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. 2024).

A geopolitics of civic honesty, therefore, entails examining individuals' adherence to civic norms as embedded in political geographies of trust and legitimacy. It recognizes that such adherence is conditioned not only by personal dispositions but also by the institutional and territorial configurations of power that structure everyday life (cf. also Reddy and Gleibs 2025). In this study, we investigated how the relationship between vertical and horizontal trust and civic honesty varies depending on the territorial influence of mafia-type organizations (Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024; Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. 2024). Additionally, we examined the parallel role of state resilience in combating organized crime, specifically its capacity to counteract the influence of these groups. Understanding civic honesty in the context of varying configurations of governance helps situate this construct within a geopolitical framework that highlights features such as state capacity and legitimacy, as well as the broader structural and spatial distribution of authority across the globe.

3 | Mafia Influence and State Resilience

Organized crime encompasses a broad range of actors characterized by their ability to displace the state, weaken its monopoly on the use of force, and assume governance functions in its place (Travaglino and Abrams 2019). The degree of organized crime's influence within a country is a crucial factor shaping the relationship between citizens and institutions, as its presence constitutes an implicit challenge to state sovereignty (Sung 2004). This challenge is *implicit*, as organized criminal actors typically do not seek to dismantle the state's fundamental structures or advance explicit political ideologies. Yet, these groups can become deeply embedded within communities, where they establish alternative frameworks of norms and rules (Travaglino and Abrams 2019) and can be viewed as a parallel state (Marinaci et al. 2025). Moreover, the presence of organized crime erodes institutional morality and weakens the quality of democracy (Allum and Siebert 2003; von Lampe 2016).

Recent research has begun to empirically examine how the presence of these groups affects the relationship between individuals and institutions. Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. (2024) and Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. (2024) employed a newly developed indicator (The Global Organized Crime Index; ocindex.net) to explore this question. The index comprises three main components, assessing countries on the prevalence of illicit markets, the influence of various types of organized crime groups, and the state's ability to counter these groups. Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. (2024) and Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. (2024) focused on the component quantifying organized crime groups' influence to investigate how the presence of these actors moderates the relationship between vertical trust and civic honesty.

The findings revealed that a stronger influence of organized criminal groups across countries corresponded to a weaker association between individuals' trust and civic honesty, suggesting that the state loses its capacity to drive citizens' moral choices in those contexts. Interestingly, at more extreme levels of influence by organized criminal groups, the relationship between trust and civic honesty reversed to a negative one. Expressing confidence in institutions situated in contexts highly influenced by the presence of criminal groups was associated with a lower endorsement of honesty in the civic context. The findings were robust to controls involving other crime statistics and economic indicators. Moreover, supplementary analyses reported by the authors showed that the results were specifically driven by the influence of a subtype of organized crime, namely mafia-type actors (both foreign and homegrown). Mafia-type groups are typically characterized by a clear hierarchy, long-term entrenchment within societies, and a recognizable name. Because they are highly structured, these groups have a more substantial impact on the quality of institutions in a country, exerting more active control over communities and territories than other less organized criminal networks.

These findings suggest that the influence of criminal groups—specifically mafia-type ones—across countries might have important implications for individuals' stance toward the public good. In the present research, we built on this work and extended it in two distinct ways. First, we examined how both cross-country variations in mafia influence and state resilience against these groups additively moderate the relationships between trust and individuals' civic honesty. In the context of organized crime, resilience refers to a state's capacity to establish “appropriate legal, political and strategic frameworks to address organized crime” (Methodology [s.d.](#)). It serves as an indicator of the state's capacity to resist mafia infiltration and protect civil society from the influence of organized criminal actors.

By incorporating state resilience into our analyses, we account for the coexistence of multiple normative frameworks within society, legal and illegal (Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024; Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. 2024). In many contexts, especially but not exclusively those in the Global South, citizens are often situated within a network of distinct power structures, encompassing both formal and informal institutions, none of which fully saturate the governance space or manage to monopolize authority in society (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Heyman 1999; Strange 1996). Taking this complex configuration of social authority into account may offer a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic structures that shape individuals' attitudes toward the common good.

Notably, some countries may experience both strong criminal influence and effective policies to counter organized crime, demonstrating that organized crime influence and state resilience can coexist as distinct forces (Mirisola et al. 2024). For example, the Global Organized Crime Index that we employ in the present research places Italy in the top quartile for both the influence of criminal organizations (score of 6.70 on a 1–10 scale) and state resilience (score of 6.46), highlighting that even countries with robust counter-crime policies may still experience strong organized crime presence. This coexistence suggests that state resilience and organized crime influence can operate

independently: while effective state measures help sustain institutional legitimacy and bolster public trust, the pervasive influence of criminal groups simultaneously undermines these institutions by establishing alternative normative frameworks (Mirisola et al. 2024). Consequently, examining both factors simultaneously is crucial, as each may additively moderate the relationship between trust and civic honesty.

Second, in this research, we extended prior work by examining the moderating role of country-level mafia influence and state resilience on the relationship between both vertical and horizontal forms of trust and individuals' endorsement of civic honesty. Regarding vertical trust (trust in institutions), the research discussed earlier indicates that the relationship between trust and honesty weakens as the influence of organized criminal groups increases across countries (Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024; Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. 2024). Moreover, in contexts where mafia influence is extreme, this relationship becomes negative. These findings are consistent with the idea that expressing confidence in institutions deeply affected by powerful mafia groups may lead to lower civic honesty, as these institutions are perceived as compromised or ineffective. Likewise, we expect state resilience to strengthen the link between trust and civic honesty. In countries with high state resilience—where effective policies, strong institutional capacity, and an active civil society are more prevalent—individuals' confidence in institutions is more likely to be associated with a stronger endorsement of civic honesty. In contrast, in contexts of low resilience—where the state is perceived as weakened—the social contract between the state and its citizens tends to break down. In such cases, institutions may be viewed as lacking the integrity and competence necessary to uphold civic norms, leading to a weaker association between trust and civic honesty.

To test the parallel effects of mafia influence and state resilience, we included the interactions between both of these factors (two country-level indicators) and vertical trust in our model. Overall, we expected the relationship between trust and civic honesty to be strongest in contexts where mafia influence is lower and state resilience is higher. By contrast, in contexts where mafia influence is stronger and state resilience is weaker, we predict a negative relationship between trust and civic honesty, as these conditions may signal that the state has effectively surrendered to the power of organized crime. The relationship should weaken as either mafia influence increases or state resilience declines, because either of these two factors might contribute to weakening the social contract between individuals and institutions.

With regard to horizontal forms of trust, there is less research exploring its role in predicting civic honesty in contexts where organized crime exerts influence. One possibility is that the effects of horizontal trust mirror those of vertical trust. In countries where mafia influence is high, criminal organizations establish themselves as alternative sources of security and dispute resolution while simultaneously making cooperation outside their structures more difficult and riskier (e.g., Gambetta 1996). As a result, the link between interpersonal trust and cooperation may weaken as social interactions become more constrained by dependence on criminal authority. Similarly, when the state lacks the capacity to protect citizens, trust in others may no longer be linked to cooperation in the same way, as interactions among

people are shaped by uncertainty (Spadaro et al. 2020; Spadaro, Molho, et al. 2022).

However, this pattern may not be straightforward. Existing research suggests that when political trust is accounted for, horizontal trust becomes less relevant in predicting civic honesty because civic attitudes are more strongly informed by individuals' views of institutions than by the trust in other citizens (Letki 2006; Marien and Hooghe 2011). Moreover, in contexts characterized by weaker state resilience, high horizontal trust might not encourage honesty but instead facilitate alternative social arrangements that might even reinforce dishonest behaviors (Popescu and Jugl 2025; Zaloznaya 2022). That is to say, when state presence is weak, individuals may still rely on social connectedness and trust, yet these networks may be embedded within systems of informal governance, where cooperation is oriented toward illegitimate or self-serving ends rather than the collective good. Given these competing possibilities, the present research explores whether and how mafia influence and state resilience moderate the relationship between horizontal trust and civic honesty.

4 | Method

4.1 | Participants

The sample was drawn from representative data obtained from the combined European Values Study and World Values Survey Version 4.0 (EVS/WVS 2022). We did not conduct a formal power analysis but employed all data and countries for which the measures were available. Data from all available countries in Wave 7 (survey period: 2017–2022) were included, yielding a total sample of 132,602 participants (53.55% female, 46.45% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 45.50$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 17.04$). Participants represented 84 nations across six continents: 8 countries from Africa, 5 from North America, 9 from South America, 26 from Asia, 34 from Europe, and 2 from Oceania. Our analyses were not pre-registered, but the code to reproduce them is available at the following link: <https://osf.io/v7hbs/>.

4.2 | Measures

Using the items available in the EVS/WVS (2022), we modeled three variables at the individual level: Civic Honesty, Institutional Trust, and Interpersonal Trust. Civic Honesty was measured with four items derived from the Morally Debatable Behaviors Scale (Harding et al. 1986). These items were designed to assess individuals' moral standards in civic contexts by asking participants about the justifiability of the following behaviors: accepting bribes, evading taxes, dodging fare on public transportation, and claiming undue state benefits (from 1 = never justifiable to 10 = always justifiable). Responses were recoded such that higher values on this scale indicate a stronger endorsement of civic honesty ($\alpha = 0.76$).

Institutional Trust was measured using items that evaluated individuals' confidence in six domestic institutions, including Parliament, Police, Civil Service, Government, Political Parties, and the Justice System/Courts. Responses ranged from 1 (a great deal of confidence) to 4 (no confidence at all). The scale was

reversed, with higher scores indicating stronger institutional trust ($\alpha = 0.87$). Interpersonal Trust was measured by using a single dichotomous item with statement anchors: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” (1 = Most people can be trusted; 2 can’t be too careful). The item was reversed so that higher scores indicated stronger interpersonal trust.

Demographic variables used as covariates in the model encompassed gender, age, income, and education. Income was assessed using the WVS’s scale of household income perception (ranging from 1, the lowest income group, to 10, the highest) and the EVS’s household income decile. Participants’ education levels were gauged by the highest level of education attained, employing the one-digit International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) code (0 = less than primary to 8 = doctoral or equivalent).

At the country level, we used the *Global Organized Crime Index* (ocindex.net) to measure state resilience and criminal groups’ influence. State resilience is a composite indicator reflecting states’ capacity to safeguard civil society from the impact of organized crime. The State Resilience Index was developed through a comprehensive assessment framework comprising 12 dimensions organized into four clusters: leadership and governance, criminal justice and security, economic and financial systems, and civil society and social protection. The composite indicator evaluates the effectiveness of resilience measures aimed at counteracting criminal activities while adhering to international human rights standards. The index score ranged from 1 (the lowest level of resilience) to 10 (denoting a robust presence of frameworks that are responsive to current organized crime risks and emerging threats).

The influence of criminal groups was quantified by averaging the mafia-style and foreign mafia indicators. These indicators measure the influence exerted by mafia-type groups (foreign or homegrown) within a country on a scale from 1 (minimal influence) to 10 (severe influence). We focused on these two components of the broader Criminal Actor index because they capture the impact of groups characterized by a clearer internal hierarchy, organizational structure, and durability over time—features that increase their capacity to exert control and governance functions within society (von Lampe 2016). Moreover, from an empirical standpoint, they emerged as the best moderators of the relationship between institutional trust and civic honesty across nations in prior research (see the Supporting Information of Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024).¹ Additional country-level controls included the Human Development Index (HDI) and Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDPpc), both of which served as proxies for a country’s economic status.

5 | Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations among variables at the country and individual levels.

Both institutional trust, $r(145594) = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$, and interpersonal trust, $r(143839) = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$, exhibited negligible positive correlations with civic honesty, yet displayed variability across countries with ranges of 0.46 and 0.27, respectively. To

explain this heterogeneity and test our hypotheses, we used a hierarchical linear modeling approach in which individuals (Level 1) were nested within countries (Level 2). Following recommendations from Enders and Tofighi (2007) and Hox et al. (2017), we group-mean-centered the Level 1 variables to isolate within-country variance and added aggregated country-level means to capture between-country differences. This approach reduces confounding between individual-level and country-level variation, thereby improving the accuracy of our parameter estimates in the multilevel models. We started from a baseline model and proceeded to test more complex models, assessing whether the loss in model parsimony was compensated by a statistically significant increase in explained variance at each phase.

In the baseline model (Model 0), the intercept of civic honesty was allowed to vary randomly across countries without other explanatory variables. The baseline model’s intraclass correlation coefficient ($ICC = 0.15$) indicated that a substantial proportion of the variance in civic honesty was attributable to differences at the country level, indicating the appropriateness of a multilevel analytical framework. Next, we added individual variables in Model 1 and country indicators in Model 2. In Model 3, we modeled random slopes for institutional and interpersonal trust, and in our final Model 4, we added our assumed two-way interactions. Chi-square tests and the substantial decrease in AIC (≥ 9) confirmed improvements in model fit at each stage (see Table 2).

The final model is reported in Table 3. As predicted, the positive main effect of institutional trust on civic honesty was qualified by the two cross-level interactions with criminal groups’ influence and state resilience, respectively. Specifically, state resilience and criminal groups independently and additively moderated the direction and intensity with which participants’ endorsement of trust in institutions was associated with their level of civic honesty.

To jointly examine these interactions, we applied a novel statistical approach. Specifically, we extended the Johnson–Neyman (J–N) technique (Bauer and Curran 2005; Johnson and Fay 1950) to cases where the relationship between predictor and criterion is independently and additively modified by two moderators (for additional details about the methodology employed, see Supporting Information including, Figures S1 and S2). In our model, which incorporated two Level 2 moderators—namely, criminal groups’ influence and state resilience—the slope values are represented on a two-dimensional plane defined by these moderators. Each point indicates a specific slope value of the relationship between institutional trust and civic honesty in this plane. Statistically, the relationship between institutional trust and civic honesty does not differ significantly from zero within the area defined by the regions of significance.

As shown in Figure 2, the sign and significance of the slope of institutional trust on civic honesty varied as a function of country levels of criminal groups’ influence and state resilience. Countries characterized by a strong influence of criminal groups and low state resilience (i.e., the red area in the bottom right of Figure 2) exhibited a significant and negative relationship between institutional trust and civic honesty. Conversely, in

TABLE 1 | Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

Country level	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	
1. Criminal groups	5.05	1.46	—				
2. State resilience	5.5	1.62	−0.32**	—			
3. HDI	0.8	0.11	−0.20	0.72***	—		
4. GDPpc (US\$)	20,936.63	22,832.65	−0.10	0.76***	0.78***	—	
Individual level	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	7	8	9	10	11
5. Civic honesty	8.63	1.7	—				
6. Institutional trust	2.34	0.7	0.05***	—			
7. Interpersonal trust	1.29	0.45	0.05***	0.21***	—		
8. Education	3.67	1.97	0.01***	−0.01**	0.17***	—	
9. Income	4.93	2.34	0.01*	0.04***	0.14***	0.30***	—
10. Age	45.66	17.2	0.17***	0.04***	0.09***	−0.10***	−0.12***

Note: The influence of criminal groups and state resilience (see Figure 1) constitutes two distinct dimensions, exhibiting a small-to-medium negative correlation, $r(82) = -0.32$, $p = 0.003$.

Abbreviations: *SD*, standard deviation; HDI, human development index; GDPpc, gross domestic product per capita (in US\$).

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

TABLE 2 | Model fit changes.

Models	$X^2(df)$	AIC
Model 0	—	495,991.5
Model 1	3061.21(6)**	492,942.3
Model 2	21.08(6)*	492,933.3
Model 3	990.28(5)**	491,953.0
Model 4	28.02(4)**	491,933.0

Note: Model 0 was the intercept-only model; Model 1 added the Level 1 variables; Model 2 added the Level 2 indicators; Model 3 added the random slopes; Model 4 added the cross-level interactions. X^2 tested the improvement in model fit compared with the prior model.

Abbreviation: AIC, Akaike Information Criterion.

* $p < 0.01$. ** $p < 0.001$.

countries where the state was resilient and the influence of criminal actors was low (i.e., the blue area at the top left of Figure 2), the relationship between institutional trust and civic honesty was significant and positive. Countries with similar levels of both state resilience and criminal actors (i.e., in Figure 2, the area delineated by the two blue lines demarcating the white area) were characterized by a non-significant relationship between institutional trust and civic honesty. Generally speaking, the relationship between institutional trust and civic honesty tends to be more negative as the influence of criminal groups strengthens and state resilience weakens; conversely, when the influence of criminal groups is minimal and state resilience is robust, this relationship tends to be more positive.

Finally, only state resilience, but not criminal groups, moderated the relationship between interpersonal trust and civic honesty. Using the Johnson–Neyman technique (Figure 3) to decompose the interaction, we found that as state resilience decreased, the relationship between interpersonal trust and civic honesty became more negative. Specifically, this relationship

was significant and negative for levels of state resilience below 0.67 *SD*, becoming non-significant at higher levels of state resilience.²

6 | General Discussion

Individuals' endorsement of civic honesty—their standards of moral conduct toward the public good—is essential to societies worldwide. Such standards facilitate the functioning of the state, reducing the need for costly and often ineffective systems of surveillance and punishment (Jackson et al. 2012; Letki 2006). Prior research has emphasized the importance of trust in shaping individuals' endorsement of civic honesty (Bjørnskov 2021; Letki 2006; Neville 2012). However, existing studies predominantly adopt theoretical perspectives that reflect political conditions typical of the Global North, leaving cross-country heterogeneity in the trust-honesty relationship unexplained (Chan et al. 2017; Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024; Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. 2024). In the present research, we address this gap by examining the relationships between vertical and horizontal trust across a diverse range of socio-political contexts. Specifically, we investigate how these forms of trust are associated with civic honesty in countries that vary in their levels of mafia-type group influence and state resilience against them.

Criminal organizations such as mafias challenge state sovereignty and its capacity for governance, while state resilience reflects the state's ability to counteract these groups and uphold institutional integrity. We predicted that organized crime influence and state resilience would additively moderate the relationship between trust and civic honesty. Specifically, we tested the prediction that vertical trust would be positively associated with individuals' endorsement of civic honesty under conditions of low criminal group influence and high state resilience. These conditions reflect a stronger state hold on sovereignty and governance, reinforcing institutions' ability to model and promote honesty in the context

TABLE 3 | Final model.

Predictors	<i>B</i>	95% CI	<i>p</i> value
Intercept	8.61	8.48 to 8.74	<0.001***
Institutional Trust	0.06	0.02 to 0.11	0.008**
Interpersonal Trust	−0.10	−0.15 to −0.05	<0.001***
Gender	0.06	0.05 to 0.07	<0.001***
Age	0.01	0.01 to 0.01	<0.001***
Education	0.04	0.04 to 0.05	<0.001***
Income	−0.00	−0.01 to 0.00	0.054
Criminal Groups	−0.13	−0.23 to −0.04	0.005**
State Resilience	−0.00	−0.13 to 0.13	0.985
HDI	−1.11	−3.07 to 0.84	0.264
GDPpc	0.37	0.09 to 0.64	0.010*
Criminal Groups X Institutional Trust	−0.05	−0.09 to −0.02	0.002**
State Resilience X Institutional Trust	0.04	0.01 to 0.07	0.004**
Criminal Groups X Interpersonal Trust	−0.01	−0.05 to 0.02	0.414
State Resilience X Interpersonal Trust	0.04	0.01 to 0.07	0.017*
Random effects			
Var(country)	0.34		
Var(Institutional Trust)	0.04		
Var(Interpersonal Trust)	0.04		
Marginal <i>R</i> ² /Conditional <i>R</i> ²	0.055/0.179		

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; GDPpc, gross domestic product per capita (in US\$); HDI, human development index.

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

of public goods. Conversely, we expected that either higher criminal influence or lower state resilience would weaken this relationship, as these conditions indicate a state more directly challenged by criminal actors. Finally, we anticipated a negative association between trust in institutions and civic honesty in countries where both criminal influence is strong and state resilience is weak, suggesting that trust in institutions may reflect confidence in a corrupt or compromised system in such contexts (Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024; Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. 2024). We advanced more tentative predictions for horizontal trust, as its role in shaping civic honesty across these contexts is less studied. Horizontal trust may either follow a similar pattern to institutional trust, be less relevant in shaping civic honesty, or even be negatively associated with honesty in contexts where state authority is weak and social ties fulfil alternative, potentially illegitimate functions (Zaloznaya 2022).

Results from a mixed-effects multilevel model revealed that the relationship between vertical trust and civic honesty was simultaneously and additively moderated by the influence of mafia groups and state resilience. Specifically, in line with the hypothesized pattern, the relationship between vertical trust and civic honesty was significant and positive in contexts where the state was more resilient, and there was a lower influence of mafia groups. It turned negative and remained significant when the state was weaker and mafia groups stronger. The relationship was not significantly different from zero in other cases.

This finding helps clarify the conditions under which confidence in institutions may be linked to a lower endorsement of civic honesty (Travaglino, Burgmer, et al. 2024; Travaglino, Mirisola, et al. 2024). Specifically, consistent with the idea that organized crime and the state exert independent influences (Mirisola et al. 2024), only when powerful mafia influence coexists with a fragile state does the relationship between institutional trust and civic honesty reverse. These conditions likely characterize contexts where corruption is widespread and state institutions have succumbed to criminal influence, effectively “abdicating” their role in safeguarding the common good and promoting positive civic behavior. In such settings, expressing confidence in institutions may carry negative implications for the common good, as it may reflect trust in a system that no longer upholds integrity and public welfare.

Notably, the relationship between horizontal trust and civic honesty was negative, but only when the state exhibited lower resilience against the influence of organized criminal groups, suggesting the emergence and mobilization of personal networks that render dishonesty more acceptable in the absence of strong institutions (Zaloznaya 2022). Under other conditions, horizontal trust was not associated with individuals’ endorsement of civic honesty. This result is consistent with the literature emphasizing that individuals’ views of institutions are more relevant than their views of fellow citizens in predicting the endorsement of

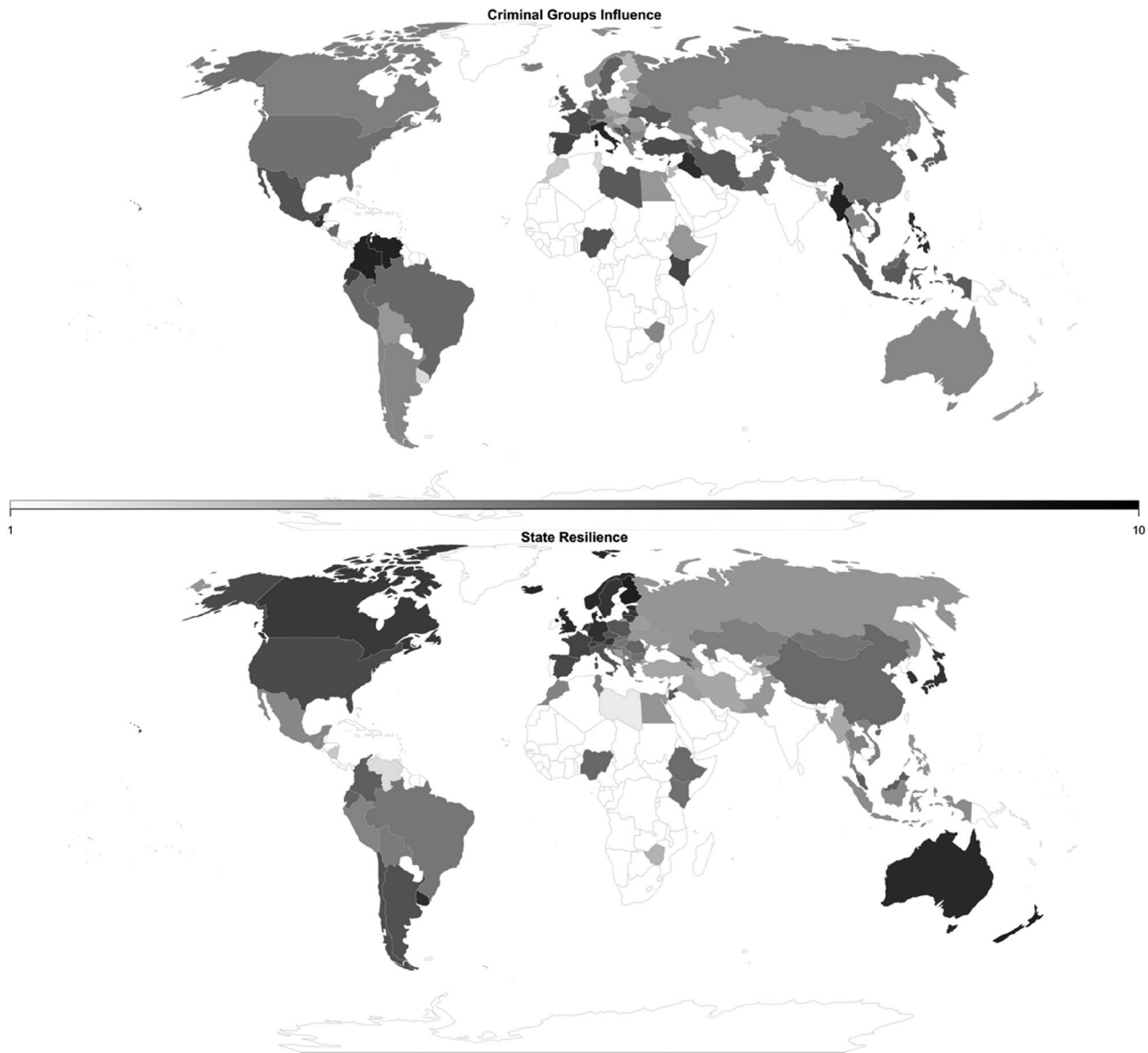


FIGURE 1 | Levels of criminal groups' influence and state resilience across countries.

standards of honesty in the civic context (Letki 2006; Marien and Hooghe 2011).

Interestingly, cross-country differences in criminal group influence did not moderate the relationship between interpersonal trust and civic honesty. In contexts where mafia groups exert greater influence, one might expect the link between interpersonal trust and civic cooperation to be inhibited, as these groups position themselves as alternative guarantors of security and order (e.g., Gambetta 1996). However, our analyses did not detect such an effect, indicating that the relationship between horizontal trust and civic honesty was only moderated by the resilience of the state.

These findings underscore the importance of considering diverse socio-political configurations when examining how trust relates to civic honesty across different contexts. This research contributes to the emerging field of geopolitical psychology in at least two important ways. First, it addresses the limitations of studies

that predominantly focus on Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) samples (Henrich et al. 2010) by clarifying the variability in the relationship between political trust and civic honesty across diverse political settings and geographical areas. The results highlight the importance of accounting for governance structures in individuals' moral attitudes toward the public good. While some political configurations are less typical in many Global North contexts, they are more representative of conditions in the Global South and warrant greater scholarly attention.

Second, our study emphasizes the importance of addressing the simultaneous interplay between different systems of authority, including both the state and the influence of organized crime. Most psychological research on moral and political attitudes has focused primarily on individuals' perceptions of legal institutions, often overlooking the role of non-state actors and alternative governance systems in shaping civic life (Travaglino and Abrams 2019). Conversely, while the negative economic impact of

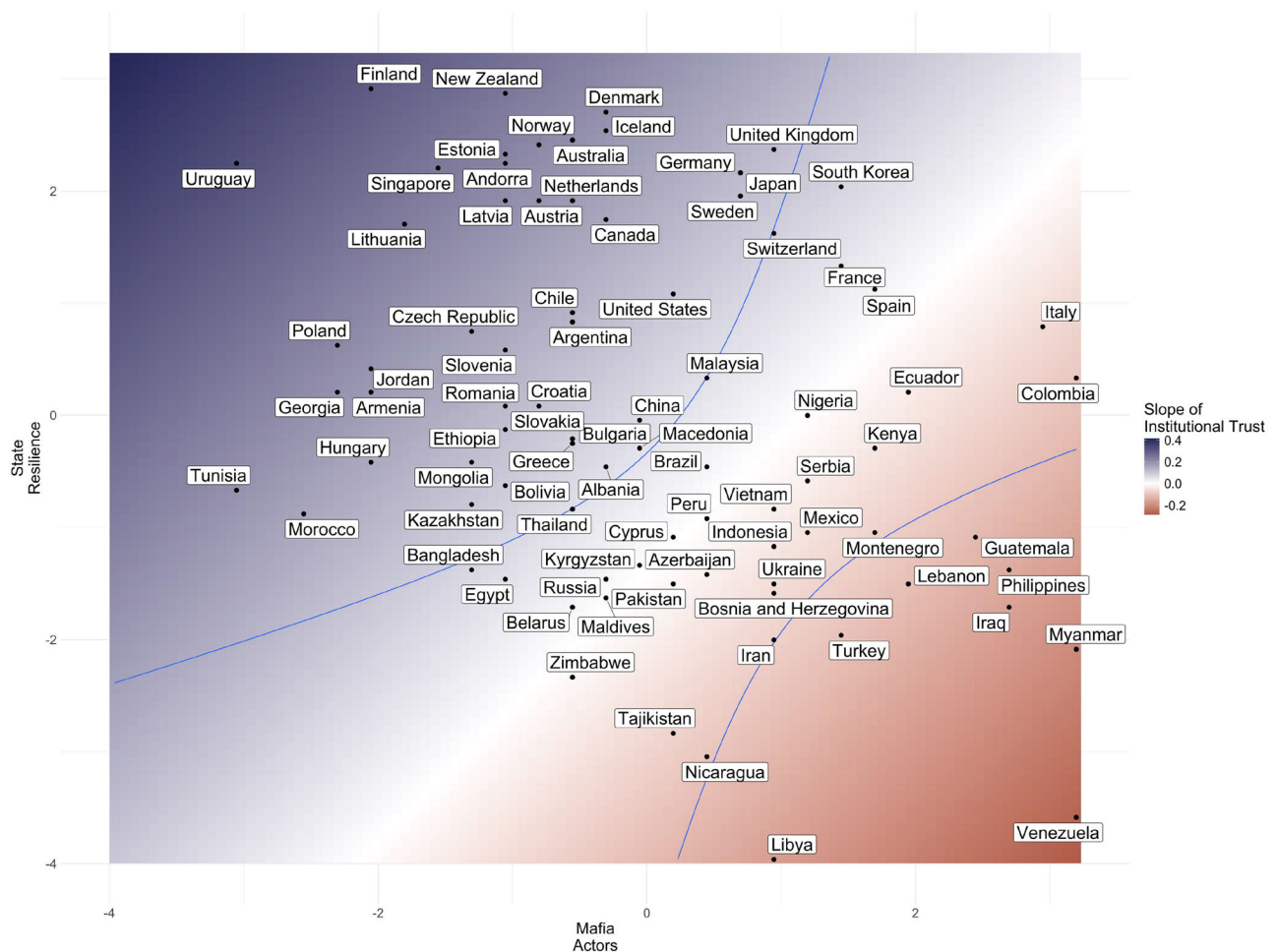


FIGURE 2 | Johnson-Neyman plot of the relationship between political trust and civic honesty across varying levels of state resilience and mafia actors' influence. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

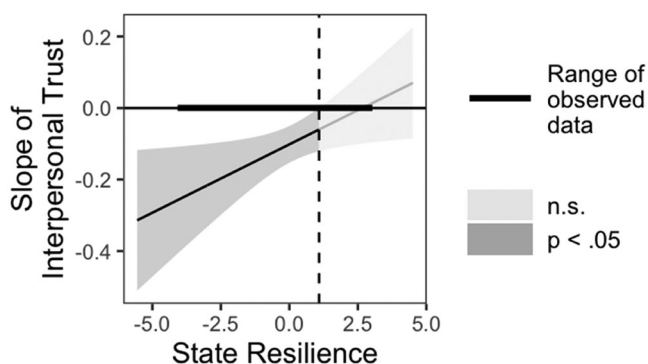


FIGURE 3 | Johnson-Neyman plot of the association between interpersonal trust and civic honesty in the range of available data on state resilience.

organized crime is well recognized (Pinotti 2015; United Nations 2011), the more subtle ways in which these groups influence democratic norms remain underexplored. Our research highlights the need for geopolitical psychology to consider how criminal organizations and other non-state actors, through their involvement in parallel power structures, may shape citizens' moral and civic attitudes.

Overall, the findings offer new insights into how different forms of trust are linked to civic honesty across nations. The results contribute to theorizing about the role of trust and the various ways trust can be associated with civic morality across contexts. While trust is generally considered a positive force for social cohesion and cooperation, these findings highlight that its effects are not universally beneficial. Depending on the characteristics of the context, trust—particularly in compromised institutions or under a weak state—may have negative implications, reinforcing corrupt or dysfunctional systems. Thus, the findings emphasize the need to situate theories of trust and honesty within their broader socio-political context. Finally, the findings underscore the necessity of building resilient states that foster civic honesty even amid strong criminal influence.

7 | Methodological Contribution

Our analysis examined how organized crime influences and state resilience simultaneously moderated the relationships between vertical and horizontal trust and civic honesty at the individual level. Thus, our analyses incorporated two distinct country-level characteristics to address the complexity of geopolitical realities

and help explain heterogeneity in the relationship between psychological constructs across contexts.

To achieve this, we mathematically extended the Johnson-Newman method to decompose statistical interactions involving two additive cross-level moderators. This methodological advancement allows for a more precise understanding of how multiple contextual factors may be linked to changes in psychological relationships. The technique, along with our analysis code, is described in greater detail in the [Supporting Information \(https://osf.io/v7hbs/\)](https://osf.io/v7hbs/). We hope it will enable future research to apply it in studies involving multiple cross-level and within-level moderators, as well as interactions between multiple contextual factors.

8 | Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the associations explored here do not speak directly to causal effects. While our findings highlight important patterns and consider the role of key contextual variables, longitudinal research is needed to better understand the directionality of these relationships over time. Additionally, experimental research could be employed to manipulate individuals' perceptions of organized criminal groups' influence on institutions, allowing for causal inferences.

Second, our study focused on cross-country variation. However, cross-national analyses may obscure additional variation at the local (e.g., regional) level. The presence and influence of organized crime can vary significantly within countries, yet reliable subnational indices quantifying organized crime influence remain scarce (e.g., Cavalieri et al. 2023). Future research should prioritize the development of region-specific indices to capture these variations.

Third, because we employed pre-existing data, we had limited control over how the focal variables—such as institutional and interpersonal trust—were measured. For example, the available measures do not distinguish between different aspects of individuals' perceptions of institutions, such as competence and integrity (Hamm et al. 2019; Kong 2014). More fine-grained measures are needed to disentangle the role of these dimensions in predicting civic honesty.

Another promising avenue for future research is to explore the psychological mechanisms underlying the link between trust and civic honesty across different contexts. Identifying the cognitive and motivational processes that drive this relationship would increase our understanding of how individuals internalize civic norms across areas.

Additionally, it is critical to identify the conditions under which individuals are more likely to express confidence in corrupt systems. Some individuals may be more accepting of corruption in institutions and authorities (Gong and Wang 2013) due to factors such as cynicism toward the law (Gifford and Reisig 2019) or a perception that institutions share their membership in a superordinate group (e.g., the national group; Abrams et al. 2013, Abrams et al. 2021; Davies et al. 2024). More research is needed to explore these dynamics and the psychological mechanisms

that shape individuals' perceptions of corrupt but powerful institutions.

9 | Implications and Conclusions

Our findings have important policy implications, particularly for countries dealing with the pervasive presence of organized criminal groups or other entities, such as paramilitary groups, gangs, and terrorist organizations. The results highlight the opposing influences of state and non-state actors—institutions and organized crime—on individuals' moral standards of conduct in the civic context. These findings suggest that effective public policies should strengthen the state's capacity to combat organized crime while also targeting criminal groups' ability to subvert important norms. Addressing organized crime requires more than law enforcement and institutional reforms; it also demands broader social interventions aimed at disrupting their cultural influence.

Ethics Statement

No new data were generated in this study, and the ethics approval statement is not applicable.

Consent

No data from individuals under the age of consent are included in this manuscript. The patient consent statement is not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there exists no actual or perceived conflict of interest in the conduct and reporting of this research.

Data Availability Statement

All the analysis code is available at the following link: <https://osf.io/v7hbs/>. The data that support the findings of this study are openly available at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSEVSJoint2017.jsp> [Joint EVS/WVS dataset]; <https://globalinitiative.net/> [GI-TOC's Influence of Criminal Groups Index]; <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center> [Human Development Index]; <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD> [Gross Domestic Product Per Capita Indicator].

Endnotes

¹We also repeated the analyses reported below with the inclusion of the criminal markets index as a control variable (Supplementary Analyses Table A in the Supplementary materials). The results remained unchanged.

²In the supplementary materials, we report additional robustness checks employing the Worldwide Governance Indicators (Kaufmann et al., 1999) in place of the Resilience score, and the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index (or its subcomponents; <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/>) as a control variable (Supplementary Analyses Table B-Table G) in the Supplementary materials). Additionally, we tested whether the data collection year for each country included in the analyses affected the results (Table E). Across all checks, the results remained unchanged.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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