POLITICAL TRUST in CHINA

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For my family

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Acknowledgments

When I started to explore if rightful resisters sincerely trusted the Center they appealed to or strategically played local officials against the central leadership, I did not expect that my digression would turn into an adventurous long march that lasted a quarter century. It is a big relief to have finally cracked the nut.

In retrospect, I feel fortunate for all encounters during the long journey, especially those that were disappointing initially. I have the luxury of working under the controllable pressure of publishing or perishing in Hong Kong. It proves critical that I can survive by publishing in journals devoted to the study of contemporary China. My freedom from the pressure of publishing in mainstream political science journals based in the United States allowed me to pursue a more accurate understanding of a single country without prematurely worrying about the generalizability of my empirical findings. Another good fortune is that the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong has continued to offer me moderate financial support (recent grants are nos. 14601820 and 14614422). Without enough funding for a national survey, I relied on manageable local surveys using questions that were designed based on field observations and in-depth interviews. An apparent disadvantage turned into a real opportunity. In the end, unexpected delays in the manuscript refereeing process enabled me to benefit from the recently released Asian Barometer Survey data. Leibniz is right: The existing world is the best of all possible worlds.

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I dedicate this small book to my family.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The 2021 Summit for Democracy in Washington, DC, declared an ideological war against autocracy. Naturally, the offense triggered counterattacks. Even before the summit convened, the authoritarian regime in China, one of the unnamed but unmistakable prime targets, launched a preemptive defense. The ruling party's propaganda machine contended that democracy has multiple valid models and that each nation has the right to choose a form of democracy that fits its unique conditions. In addition, the regime insisted that "whole-process democracy" is superior to the electoral democracy championed by the United States–led democratic alliance (Gan and George 2021; also see Reigadas 2022). More notably, the regime began to bolster its claims with empirical evidence from social scientists. For instance, a Foreign Ministry spokesman cited a Canadian research team's survey finding to support the ruling party's claim of "enjoying the wholehearted support of the people" (Zhao 2021). According to the survey, over 90 percent of nearly 20,000 respondents nationwide are satisfied with the central government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Satisfaction with the government's performance in protecting people's lives, in turn, enhances public confidence in the central government (Wu et al. 2021, 930). The Chinese government's message is clear: attacking the one-party rule in China amounts to attacking the vast majority of Chinese people.

A prima facie case can be made that the finding of the Canadian team's massive survey is plausible. National surveys in the last three decades consistently show that about 80 percent of Chinese people have strong or moderate trust in the central government (Shi 2001; World Values Survey

1995, 2002, 2007, 2012, 2018, see Haerpfer et al. 2022; AsiaBarometer Survey 2003, 2006; China Survey 2008; Research Center for Contemporary China Survey 2008, 2009; Asian Barometer Survey 2002, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019; Stockmann and Luo 2018; Lu and Dickson 2020). Despite the corroborating results of multiple national surveys, however, analysts disagree on how Chinese people judge the trustworthiness of the authoritarian regime.

Skeptical scholars dismiss the survey findings as invalid and unreliable. In particular, Newton (2001, 208) argues that the World Values Survey's finding about political trust in China "is likely to be a response to social pressures and political controls." Other scholars do not dismiss survey results, though they also caution against taking the data at face value. Some researchers examine if political fear affects responses to politically sensitive questions such as trust in government. However, they find little evidence that the respondents exaggerate trust in the central government out of fear (Shi 2001, 406–7; Chen 2004, 34; Tsai 2007, 357; Shi 2014, 128). Also relying on observational data, Ratigan and Rabin (2020, 823) observe that people who decline to answer questions about trust in government seem to have weaker confidence than those who offer responses. However, they do not accurately estimate how item nonresponse artificially pushes up estimates of political trust. It is unclear if the inflation is severe enough to discredit survey findings.

Neither can experimental studies settle the debate. Researchers have conducted experimental studies to test the validity and reliability of survey results, reaching different conclusions. On the one hand, some analysts observe a significant amount of preference falsification (Jiang and Yang 2016; Robinson and Tannenberg 2019; Carter, Carter, and Schick 2024). On the other hand, other scholars conclude that the observed dissimulation and response bias are not severe enough to invalidate survey findings (Lei and Lu 2017; Munro 2018; Stockmann, Esarey, and Zhang 2018; Shen and Truex 2021).

A series of questions awaits answers. What is political trust in China? How much do people trust the authoritarian regime? What accounts for the formation and change of political trust in the country? How does political trust affect political participation and system support? This book addresses these issues. Chapter 2 argues that political trust in the country is an underdeveloped member of the political trust family. The concept of political trust applies to the country because the ruling party recognizes

the principle of popular sovereignty. However, political trust in the country is not full-fledged because people do not have an enforceable right to retract trust through free, fair, and regular elections. The conceptual analysis suggests that national survey results are reliable, but their validity requires a contextualized reading. Above all, verbal identity should not be mistaken for conceptual equivalence.

Chapter 3 proposes a two-dimensional measurement of political trust in the country. The scheme consists of four elements. First, the target or object of trust is not the central government but the central leadership of the ruling party, known as the Center. The Center is the supreme decision-making institution but ultimately the paramount leader. Second, the domain over which people assess the Center's trustworthiness is policymaking-cum-policy-implementation. Third, with the Center as a personalized institution, its trustworthiness has two distinct dimensions. One dimension is its political commitment to ruling in the people's interests, and the other is its capacity to make local agents faithfully enforce its policies. Last, the two-dimensional trust in the Center has four major patterns. Total trust is having trust in commitment and capacity; partial trust is having trust in commitment but distrust in capacity; skepticism is having mistrust or doubts about commitment and capacity; and total distrust is having distrust in commitment and capacity.

Chapter 4 examines how the regime constructs trust in the Center through earning, engineering, and embedding. First, the Center performs to win and sustain trust, promulgating policies that appear to be in people's interests. Second, the regime engineers trust in the Center by claiming credit for combating corruption. Last, the regime embeds trust in the Center by subjecting people to ideological indoctrination and paternalist cultural influence. The three-pronged strategy is effective but has its limits. The earning and engineering tactics enhance trust in the Center's capacity without increasing trust in its commitment. The embedding tactics work but have questionable sustainability.

Chapter 5 investigates how trust in the Center affects political participation. Neither trust in the Center's commitment nor trust in its capacity affects the attempt to voice one's opinions through the official media, which is institutionalized but ineffective. Partial trust increases the likelihood of joining a collective petition, which is semi-institutionalized but more effective than petitioning individually. It seems that trust in the Center's commitment encourages political activities targeting poor implemen-

tation of central policies, while distrust in its capacity induces a sense of agency for taking action. Equally noteworthy, total distrust in the Center increases the likelihood of joining a disruptive demonstration and engaging in defiant rights-defending activities.

Chapter 6 analyzes the implication of trust in the Center for system support. The loss of confidence in either the president's commitment or his capacity induces a stronger preference for popularly electing the president. Similarly, the loss of confidence in either the Center's commitment or its capacity induces a stronger preference for the popular election of the president. More notably, the loss of trust in the Center's commitment weakens support for the one-party rule. In general, distrust in the incumbent central leadership undermines support for the prevailing leadership selection system.

Chapter 7 summarizes the key findings of this study and charts several promising topics for future research. Regarding the formation of trust in the Center, future studies may draw on multiyear survey data and incorporate regional-level factors to address the problem of endogeneity inherent in correlational analyses. Regarding the behavioral and attitudinal implications of trust in the Center, future research may examine how the varying ratios of people holding the four patterns affect an individual's perception of risks and opportunities of adopting a course of action or making a political claim. As regards a macro-historical factor that affects trust in the Center, this study calls for attention to the central leadership's pendulum swing between a consultative collective leadership and an autocratic personal rule.

CHAPTER 2

Definition

Political trust, like other basic concepts in social sciences, can only be defined in reference to notions bearing "family resemblances" (Wittgenstein 1953, 67), for example, belief, confidence, expectation, and faith (for a comprehensive review of trust definitions in the social science literature, see PytlikZillig and Kimbrough 2016; for a recent review of definitions of political trust, see Hetherington and Rudolf 2022). To avoid the terminological quagmire, this study adopts a minimalist definition: political trust refers to powerless people's expectation or belief that powerful government and politicians are willing and able to act in the public interest (Miller 1974, 989; Abramson and Finifter 1981, 298; Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990; Levi and Stoker 2000, 479–80; Cook and Gronke 2005; Citrin and Stoker 2018, 50).

Simple as it looks, the idea of political trust is counterintuitive. Above all, trust presupposes ultimate equality between the truster and trustee, but it is unclear how citizens can claim equality with the government. Second, an expectation is a wishful hope if not backed up by credible accountability, yet it is not evident how powerless people can hold powerful government and politicians to account if the latter fail to live up to their expectations. Third, a belief is a faith if the believer depends on what she believes in. In reality, ordinary people depend on the government for personal safety and public goods. Last, trust presupposes that the truster has an intuitive judgment that the trustee is not inherently untrustworthy. Yet, Lord Acton warns that "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Rogow and Lasswell 1963). Given their inequality and the corruptible nature of power, how can powerless people trust powerful government and politicians?

The chapter seeks to provide a few clarifications. It starts with an analysis of intuitive interpersonal trust. Then, it traces the conceptual leap from interpersonal trust to political trust, describing the defining features of political trust in its original context. Next, it argues that political trust has two presuppositions. In theory, it presupposes the Lockean notion of popular sovereignty. In practice, it presupposes electoral democracy as the institutional mechanism for enforcing popular sovereignty without resorting to a violent revolution. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the Chinese variant of political trust. It argues that the concept of political trust applies to China because the ruling party acknowledges the principle of popular sovereignty. However, the concept suffers a fundamental limitation because Chinese people have no guaranteed political right to retract trust through free, fair, and regular elections.

Interpersonal Trust

Interpersonal trust combines the willingness to risk suffering loss or harm, the readiness for mutual help, and the expectation of enhanced interests and security (Levi and Stoker 2000, 476; Cook 2001). An individual initiates interpersonal trust by offering a valuable resource or exposing a vulnerability to another person, expecting the reciprocation of goodwill. If the targeted individual or trustee meets the expectation of the truster, interpersonal trust takes root and grows. Otherwise, trust aborts.

Once formed, interpersonal trust is mutually beneficial because it creates better protection for both individuals, enhancing the chances to survive and thrive (Luhmann 1979, 8; Hollis 1998, 144; Hardin 2002, 13; Ostrom and Walker 2003). As Putnam (2000) points out, interpersonal trust is the basis for social capital and the presumption of cooperation as the default option when dealing with strangers. Both parties of an interpersonal trust relationship can preserve the resources otherwise required for self-defense. Furthermore, both sides can count on each other when they face any threat from a third party. To the same extent, distrust between two individuals is mutually harmful. In particular, betrayal of trust can be devastating to the victim, especially if she cannot hold the betrayer to account.

Moral and Practical Foundations

Initiating a trust relationship presupposes perceived equality between a truster and a trustee. The moral foundation of equality is that the two parties are equal before a higher principle, for example, a creed of faith, a code of honor, and binding customs and values (Hardin 2002, 101; Uslaner 2002). The Christian faith in the Final Judgment, the Buddhist faith in karma, and folk religions' belief in after-death justice are all valid moral foundations for establishing interpersonal trust. For instance, core tenets of the Christian faith—that is, all people are created in the image of God, one shall love one's neighbors as oneself, and there will be a Final Judgment—constitute a solid moral foundation for building interpersonal trust. These religious beliefs establish the innate trustworthiness of people, offer the benefit of mutual trust, and promise the ultimate punishment for betrayers. The moral foundation ensures that one party can retract trust if the other proves untrustworthy. Meanwhile, it ensures that one party can hold the other accountable by resorting to moral pressure before using brute force (see Rotter 1980).

Equally important as the moral foundation is the practical pillar of the equality of resources. Generally speaking, the two parties of an interpersonal trust relationship have comparable resources in terms of wealth and social status. For instance, a crucial resource for interpersonal trust in China is the social network developed around the nuclei of blood ties (Fei 1992, 134). The practical foundation enables the truster and the trustee to hold each other to account for a breach of confidence when moral condemnation does not constitute an effective sanction (O'Neill 2002, 45).

Trust, Belief, and Faith

Trust is more general and profound than beliefs that occur between individuals during incidental encounters. The stake of an incidental belief is usually singular, low, and short-lived. Misplaced incidental belief usually means little more than an inconvenience or annoyance. For instance, a traveler saves time and energy if a local person points in the correct direction, but it usually does not cause much loss or harm if the local tells a lie.

In contrast, trust emerges between individuals who have much to do with each other in the long run over issues of higher stakes. Therefore, misplaced trust in a person can result in severe and irreparable harm or loss.

Although it is more substantial and profound than incidental belief, interpersonal trust runs less deep than personal faith. Trust is conditional, while faith is unconditional. Unlike trust, faith does not presuppose ultimate equality between the two parties. More precisely, faith presupposes inequality between a believer and the object or person she believes in. The object of faith is more powerful than the believer. Typically, an individual develops faith in another person only when she finds the latter incomparably more resourceful or powerful than her. The goal of having faith in another person is to receive favor or protection.

Another distinction between trust and faith is that the latter does not entail accountability. A believer can abandon her faith when disenchanted, but she is not in a position to hold the object of her faith to account if the latter fails to meet her expectations. Moreover, the inequality between the two parties of a faith relationship determines that faith is more resilient than trust. Trust dissolves when either the truster or the trustee proves untrustworthy. In contrast, faith can withstand (and even thrive on) a shortfall between what a believer hopes for and what she is given. Humans also develop faith in other humans, which indicates intellectual immaturity, according to philosophers of the Enlightenment. Examples of adults having faith in other adults include religious cults and cults of personality in politics.

Domains, Dimensions, and Patterns

Interpersonal trust varies across domains, for example, daily life, business, and community affairs (Rotenberg 2000). An individual may trust another over one domain but not another. For instance, we may trust a person as a neighbor but not as a business partner. Conversely, we may trust a person as a business partner but not as a neighbor. Similarly, we may trust an individual as a private citizen but not as a community leader.

Interpersonal trust implies the expectation that the trustee will and can reciprocate favors. Therefore, an individual's trustworthiness has two essential dimensions over a particular domain. One is the commitment to help another person, and the other is the ability or competence to do so (see

Giffen 1967; Blomqvist 1997). Accordingly, as the judgment of another person's trustworthiness, interpersonal trust consists of two dimensions. One dimension is trust in commitment, and the other is trust in competence, capability, or capacity.

Equally important, confidence in commitment is logically prior to confidence in competence: "When we call someone trustworthy, we often mean only his commitment" (Levi and Stoker 2000, 496). Confidence in commitment assures the truster that the trustee will not betray or deliberately harm her. Nonetheless, confidence in competence is also essential. After all, it is confidence in the trustee's competence that assures the truster that she can benefit from a trust relationship.

Trust in commitment and trust in competence are inherently related but distinct. Technically, the two dimensions are "non-compensatory"; that is, the strength in one does not offset the weakness in the other (Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen 2020, 359). Generally speaking, we emphasize commitment when assessing an individual's trustworthiness because lacking competence is a lesser vice than lacking commitment. Unable to avoid the risk of misplacing trust, we prefer a person who has goodwill but is less competent to someone who is competent but lacks goodwill. However, a comprehensive assessment of a person's trustworthiness always takes both her commitment and her competence into account.

Since it has two distinct dimensions, interpersonal trust is best captured with a two-dimensional typology. Trust in commitment is a continuum, ranging from extremely low to extremely high. Similarly, trust in competence is a continuum, ranging from extremely low to extremely high. The typology becomes too complex when both dimensions are measured with refined scales. Although it is a common practice to adopt a dichotomy of trust and distrust, scholars disagree on the merit of applying a dichotomous question to gauge trust. Uslaner (2012) argues that a dichotomous question induces the respondents to think deeper before responding, generating a more valid response to generalized trust. However, a more recent study (Lundmark, Gilliam, and Dahlberg 2016) shows that a multilevel question captures a more refined picture of how people think about the trustworthiness of another person.

The problem with the dichotomy of trust and distrust is that it fails to capture mistrust or skepticism, a critically important attitude (Norris 2022). If we measure trust in commitment and trust in capacity with a dichotomous measure, the two-dimensional typology has four categories:

(1) trusting both commitment and competence; (2) trusting commitment but distrusting competence; (3) distrusting commitment but trusting competence; and (4) distrusting both commitment and competence.

The typology is imperfect in that it misses the critically important pattern of having doubts about both commitment and competence. In reality, skepticism is perhaps more prevalent than trust and distrust in most societies, especially in countries where people are culturally predisposed to tone down mistrust or distrust in others. In China, for example, people may sound confident about others even though they are skeptical, especially when talking with casual acquaintances or strangers. During a survey administered by a stranger, respondents may choose to sound trustful even when they have doubts when asked to choose between trust or distrust. In addition, under the influence of the Confucian philosophy that human nature is good, Chinese people have a particularly strong inclination to tone down doubts about other people's moral character, commitment, or intention.

A more comprehensive assessment of the trustworthiness of a person's commitment and competence is the more graded trichotomy (Levi and Stoker 2000, 476), that is, trust, mistrust, and distrust. Based on two trichotomous measures, a two-dimensional typology of interpersonal trust has nine distinctive patterns (see table 2.1).

For simplicity, we merge the five substantively similar subpatterns of skepticism. Then, five major patterns of interpersonal trust emerge. First, total trust means trusting both commitment and competence. An individual who fully trusts another person may count on the trustee for essential protection and assistance on critical matters. For instance, a mother can leave her son in the neighbor's home if she has total confidence that the neighbor is both willing and able to take care of the child.

Second, partial trust combines trust in commitment and distrust in competence. Partial trust has an inherent tension. On the one hand, trust in commitment is the belief that the trustee has the intention to help the truster. On the other hand, distrust in competence is the judgment that the trustee is unable to help the truster. Henceforth, partial trust generates a sense of safety but not empowerment. An individual holding partial trust in another feels safe around the trustee but does not expect protection and assistance on critical matters. For instance, a mother holding partial trust in her neighbor will feel at ease letting her son play in the backyard. However, she will not leave her child in the neighbor's home when she has to go out.

TABLE 2.1. Patterns of Interpersonal Trust

		Commitment		
		Trust	Mistrust	Distrust
Competence	Trust	Total trust	Skepticism	Paradoxical trust
	Mistrust	Skepticism	Skepticism	Skepticism
	Distrust	Partial trust	Skepticism	Total distrust

Third, skepticism is a mixed bag. It may be the combination of mistrust in commitment and mistrust in competence. However, skepticism may also consist of four other combinations, that is, trust in commitment and mistrust in competence, trust in competence and mistrust in commitment, distrust in commitment and mistrust in competence, and distrust in competence and mistrust in commitment. The common feature of the five subpatterns of skepticism is that they involve the suspension of a decisive judgment about a person's overall trustworthiness. Psychologically, skepticism implies hesitation, ambivalence, and reservation. A mother who is skeptical about her neighbor is unlikely to hire her as babysitter.

Fourth, paradoxical trust combines distrust in commitment and trust in competence. Trust in commitment is logically prior to trust in competence. If one does not trust another person's commitment to helping another individual, one would only assess that person's competence on a hypothetical basis. In practical terms, having paradoxical trust in a person is equivalent to having skepticism or even total distrust. Once a truster begins to develop doubts about the trustee's commitment, the trust relationship deteriorates. For high-stakes issues, even mistrust in commitment renders it meaningless to assess competence. Over time, the emergence of paradoxical trust may forebode total distrust. For instance, trust starts to decay once a mother suspects that her neighbor could have helped her son more promptly when he accidentally fell from the slide in the backyard.

Last, total distrust means distrusting both commitment and competence. Total distrust can be original if two individuals never manage to build trust in each other. A more dangerous form of total distrust is derivative, resulting from the loss of previously existing trust. Total distrust implies a sense of insecurity and even threat. A mother who completely distrusts a neighbor will always keep an eye on her child.

Political Trust

It takes a gigantic leap of imagination to extend the intuitive idea of interpersonal trust to characterize the relationship between the powerless governed and the powerful government and politicians. It is true that the governed invariably have expectations of the governor. At the minimum, the governed people expect the governor to rule in their interests or at least not against their interests (Levi and Stoker 2000, 498). However, the expectation falls short of being trust if the governed cannot hold the governor to account when the latter proves untrustworthy. In theory, the governed can always hold an untrustworthy government to account by overthrowing it with a revolution. However, the government commands a formidable army and other forces of coercion. Therefore, a revolution is mutually destructive, inflicting graver harm on the governed people than on those in power. The lack of equality in resources and power between the governed and the government makes it difficult to imagine how political trust comes into being.

The concept of political trust is rooted in John Locke's social contract theory ([1689] 1988). According to Locke, men in the state of nature are sovereign bearers of natural rights. The state or government comes into being when individuals in the state of nature agree to entrust their rights to the government by entering into a social contract. The governed transfer some of their alienable natural rights to the government in exchange for enhanced security and better advancement of their inalienable rights to life, freedom, and property. Entering the contract is voluntary, and the contract is binding on both parties. In this conception, political trust is a contractual relationship in which citizens with natural rights are the trusters while the government with entrusted power is the trustee. The governed consent to obey the government on the condition that the latter proves its trustworthiness in performing its contractual duties. However, the governed reserve the right to retract their trust by withdrawing from the social contract if the state violates their inalienable rights and proves untrustworthy (see Parry 1976, 130; Dunn 2000, 183). The Lockean theory places the governed and the government on equal footing before a transcendental principle, that is, the principle of natural rights and popular sovereignty.

The idea of political trust acquired a practical foundation when forerunners of modern representative democracy translated the Lockean principle of popular sovereignty into the practice of constitutional rule and

democratic elections (Abramson 1972; Kaase and Newton 1995; Seligman 1997; Maloy 2009). Political trust is a contractual relationship in which citizens are trusters with rights while political parties and politicians are trustees with entrusted power. Trusters are independent and free individuals (Cole 1973; Citrin et al. 1975; Citrin and Stoker 2018, 57).

In an ideal electoral democracy, the constitutional principle of popular sovereignty places the governed and the government on equal footing. The market economy guarantees that citizens do not depend on the government for a livelihood. The freedom of the press secures the provision of factual political information. Meanwhile, the system of electoral democracy converts popular sovereignty from an abstract and ideal entitlement to a concrete and enforceable right. Under electoral democracy with competing political parties, the governed can grant and retract trust through regular, free, and fair elections (Dahl 1971). The governed can grant trust to a political party or politician they find trustworthy, henceforth converting trust into power. Equally important, the governed can retract trust when the incumbent government and politicians fail to meet their expectations, converting distrust into enforceable accountability. Political trust is thus inherently conditional, and trust in government implies a binding expectation. As trustees, governments and politicians must work to win and sustain popular trust. In sum, political trust is meaningful to the extent that the power-holding government and politicians must "prove their trustworthiness—or be removed" (Levi and Stoker 2000, 484).

Admittedly, the reality of electoral democracy always deviates from the ideal type. Like people living under undemocratic regimes, citizens living in democracies tend to be dissatisfied with the political reality they face (Achen and Bartels 2017). In fact, citizens of democracies are expected to express stronger political distrust than subjects of an undemocratic regime because democracy is by nature divisive and always entails the dichotomy of election winners and losers (Anderson et al. 2005). Nevertheless, only in an electoral democracy can the powerless governed develop full-fledged political trust. The reason is that they have a secure and enforceable right to hold the powerful government and politicians to account without resorting to a mutually destructive violent revolution. In other words, citizens' full-fledged trust in government is based on their institutionally guaranteed status as bearers of inalienable and enforceable political rights.

To conclude, the concept of political trust embodies a relationship between rights and power in its original context. Trusters are citizens with

guaranteed political rights, while the trustee is the government. Rights precede power. Trust is the converter of rights and power. Electoral democracy is the institutional mechanism of conversion. An individual citizen remains infinitely less powerful than a government, but the citizenry as a whole decides which political party and politicians shall hold power. Most importantly, powerless trusters have the right to grant and retract trust with ballots instead of bullets, holding the powerful trustee accountable without resorting to a mutually destructive revolution.

The Chinese Variant

China is not an electoral democracy. Instead, the country is under the rule of the authoritarian-oriented Communist Party. Nonetheless, the concept of political trust is applicable to the country because the ruling party recognizes the principle of popular sovereignty. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China (2018) acknowledges that "all power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people" (Art. 2). However, political trust in the country is bound to be underdeveloped because of another constitutional principle: "Leadership by the Communist Party of China is the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Art. 1).

Like the reality of constitutional principles, the reality of political trust is mixed. Political trust exists but remains underdeveloped. The regime is like a monarchy, with the central leadership of the ruling party being "the organizational emperor" (Zheng 2009). Holding on to Mao Zedong's motto that "political power comes from the barrel of a gun," the ruling party treats the People's Liberation Army as its revolutionary guard (Joffe 1996). Under the one-party rule, popular sovereignty remains largely an unenforceable principle. The long list of constitutional rights remains "programmatic" rather than institutionalized and enforceable rights (Nathan 1985, 116). Above all, Chinese people do not have the right to enforce popular sovereignty through institutionalized channels like elections. Consequently, they do not have the institutional foundation to develop full-fledged political trust.

Underdeveloped as it is, political trust in China is not an epiphenomenon. Although it can and sometimes does, the authoritarian regime usually does not impose absolute dictatorship or tyranny on the people. Instead,

since the ruling party rose to power through a revolution, the central party leadership seems to have a vivid historical memory of the dynastic changes that resulted from rebellions and revolutions. Therefore, the central leadership seems mindful of the credible threat of a popular uprising. Consequently, although they do not have the guaranteed political right to grant and retract trust through democratic elections, Chinese people can pose a credible threat of retracting trust through protest without resorting to a revolution. The gray zone between an electoral democracy and a dictatorship is the context in which the Chinese variant of political trust emerges, exists, and functions.

Conclusion

Trust presupposes ultimate equality between the truster and the trustee. The equality between the two parties is evident in interpersonal trust. However, the two parties of political trust are fundamentally unequal in power, so it is counterintuitive to think that the governed can trust the governor or the government. The theoretical solution to the apparent paradox of trust in government is the principle of popular sovereignty, which places the two parties on equal footing. More importantly, the practical solution is an electoral democracy that transforms popular sovereignty from an abstract principle to an enforceable political right. In sum, political trust presupposes the principle of popular sovereignty and electoral democracy as the mechanism for enforcing the principle.

Political trust is well developed in an electoral democracy. The governed are in a position to trust a government or a politician because they can effectively retract trust if the government or politician proves untrustworthy. More importantly, they can retract trust without resorting to a mutually destructive revolution. In practice, political trust in an electoral democracy entails a binding expectation because citizens who grant trust can hold competing political parties and politicians to account by retracting and reallocating trust. Citizens of a democracy have the right to choose between at least two competing political parties or politicians; they have access to political information secured by the freedom of the press and the competitive media market; and they can peacefully and effectively hold untrustworthy political parties and politicians to account through regular

elections. For a democratically elected government, losing popular trust is losing the mandate to govern. In sum, political trust in an electoral democracy is a rights-based binding expectation.

In contrast, political trust in China is underdeveloped. The concept of political trust applies to the country because the ruling Communist Party recognizes the principle of popular sovereignty. However, the concept does not fully apply to the country because Chinese people cannot engineer a government or leadership change by revoking their trust through voting. Without free and fair elections, Chinese citizens can only resort to the threat of a revolution if they want to hold the government accountable. However, history shows that a revolution is mutually destructive. Therefore, the regime usually recognizes the credible threat of a popular uprising and refrains from alienating the people to the extreme. The ensuing political space is the context in which a mutant of political trust forms and functions. In sum, political trust in China implies a nonbinding hope rather than a binding expectation.

CHAPTER 3

Measurement

Measuring interpersonal trust is a complex matter, as it involves identifying the target or object, the issue domain, and critical dimensions such as commitment and competence (Bauer and Freitag 2018). The task is more challenging when it comes to gauging political trust (for a review, see Citrin and Stoker 2018, 50–51). Above all, the object of political trust can be either a government institution, a political party, or a politician. Existing measures of political trust are sometimes vague about the object of trust. In the United States, Stokes (1962) designed questions in the National Election Studies to assess the extent to which American people have favorable opinions about politicians who run the government institutions in Washington, DC. The questions ask about politicians' commitment to serving the public interest, their abilities to make the right decisions, and their moral character. Since Stokes did not explicitly use the concept of political trust or trust in government (Levi and Stoker 2000, 477), his survey findings gave rise to a long-standing debate. One side argues that the observed discontent is system oriented, reflecting declining confidence in the principles and procedures of American democracy, while the other side argues that the discontent reflects distrust in incumbent administrations and politicians (Miller 1974; Citrin 1974).

In addition to the vagueness of the object, the ambiguity of measurement scales is another source of disagreements. For instance, Hill (1981, 258) argues that a generic description of the object and broad indicators of trust inflate public distrust in the American government, as respondents might "express distrust of leaders generally when only certain specific leaders are actually seen as culpable." The technical complexity is also over-

whelming. A comprehensive review of survey studies covers a bewildering number of question batteries (Citrin and Muste 1999).

Despite continuing controversies and disagreements, scholars generally agree that a comprehensive measurement scheme of political trust takes four steps (Levi and Stoker 2000; Levi, Sacks, and Tyler 2009; Citrin and Stoker 2018). The first step is to identify the target or object of trust, which can be a political institution or an individual politician (Abramson and Finifter 1981, 298; Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990; Barber 1983). The second step is to identify the domain of issue over which citizens assess the trustworthiness of a government or politician. A domain can be a specific field, such as economic development and foreign policy, but it can also be a general field, such as political decision-making and policy implementation (Levi and Stoker 2000, 499; Gerber et al. 2010; Levi 2019). Then, when it comes to assessing trust in an individual politician, the third step is to assess trust in commitment and trust in competence separately (Abramson 1972, 1245; Barber 1983, 5; Citrin and Muste 1999, 479; Levi and Stoker 2000, 497–98; Hill 1981, 268). The fourth and last step is to synthesize multiple indicators of trust in commitment and trust in capacity into a comprehensive scale (Hetherington 2005, 16).

Existing measurements of political trust in China largely follow the scheme established in electoral democracies. As a pioneer, Shi (2001, 406) transplants the measures of trust in government from the National Election Studies. In the first nationwide survey that assesses political trust in the country, respondents are asked if they agree with statements such as "You can generally trust decisions made by the central government," "You can generally trust the people who run our government to do what is right," and "The government can be trusted to do what is right without our having to constantly check on them." The transplanted measures inherit the strengths and weaknesses of the original questions. In the underlying measurement scheme, the object of trust is the central government, the issue domain is policymaking, and the trustworthiness of the central government's commitment and that of its capacity are assessed together.

In recent years, some national surveys have adopted a single ordinal measure to tap confidence in the national government. For instance, the World Values Survey asks respondents the following question: "How much confidence do you have in the central government or the national government in the Capital?" (Haepfer et al. 2022). In contrast, several other surveys also include a measure of confidence in local government.

For instance, the Asian Barometer Survey (2002, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2019) asks respondents to rate their confidence in the central and local governments on an ordinal scale. The AsiaBarometer Survey (2003, 2006) adopts a more specific measure, asking respondents to rate their confidence that the central and local governments "operate in the best interests of society."

Useful as it is, the imported measurement scheme developed in electoral democracies is not a perfect fit for the reality in China. There are three major mismatches. First, national surveys treat the central government as the object of political trust. The measurement scheme assumes that the object of trust is a political institution, hence implicitly assuming the constitutional rule under which even the most powerful political leader is not above the law. In reality, however, a more important object of political trust is the central leadership, particularly the supreme leader. Second, the imported measurement scheme assumes that the domain over which people assess the trustworthiness of the central government is policymaking, implicitly assuming the rule of law. However, there is no established rule of law in the country. An equally important issue domain is policy implementation. Last, the scheme does not distinguish between trust in political commitment and trust in policy implementation capacity, implicitly assuming the presence of a politically neutral bureaucracy. However, policymaking and policy implementation are inherently unified in the political process. The object of trust is in charge of policymaking and policy implementation simultaneously.

Setting aside the implicit assumptions about political trust in China, this chapter presents a two-dimensional measurement scheme and the results of applying the new scheme. It proceeds in three sections. The first section lays out the four steps of the scheme. The second section draws on local surveys to test the validity of the scheme. The last section presents the results of applying the scheme to reinterpret national survey data.

Two-Dimensional Measurement

The two-dimensional measurement scheme is a stepwise protocol. It starts with identifying the object of trust. Then, it locates the domain over which people assess the trustworthiness of the object's commitment and capacity. Third, it identifies indicators or proxies of trust in commitment and

trust in capacity. Last, it constructs a two-dimensional typology to identify major trust patterns.

Object

The target of interpersonal trust is another person. In contrast, political trust has two kinds of targets or objects. The object can be a government institution, which is an impersonal collectivity that consists of many individuals and operates under established rules. However, the target can also be a political leader, for example, a president or a prime minister. The duality of the object leads to a debate. One side argues that political trust has three forms, pending whether the object is the parliament, a political party, or a political leader (Fisher, van Heerde, and Tucker 2010; Fisher, van Heerde-Hudson, and Tucker 2011). The other side argues that political institution is the sole legitimate object and there is only one form of political trust (Hooghe 2011). This study agrees that both political institutions and political leaders are legitimate targets of trust, although the existing literature focuses on institutional trust. In fact, the recent surge of authoritarian populism in established democracies shows that more attention should be directed to trust in individual politicians (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2019).

National surveys treat the central government as the object of political trust in China. However, the practice risks confusing verbal equivalence with conceptual identity. Although interchangeable, "the central government" in the country and "the national or federal government" in an electoral democracy refer to different things. A national or federal government of an electoral democracy is an elected political institution operating under the rule of law. In China, the central government is the organizational embodiment of the central leadership of the ruling party. When they talk about the national or central political authority, people use a variety of words, including "the Center," "the Party Center," "the state," or "the Party Center and the State Council." The most frequently used terms are "the Party Center" and "the Center."

This study argues that the object of political trust is the Center. Furthermore, it argues that the Center is a highly personalized institution. On the one hand, the Center is the ultimate political decision-making institution that operates under established principles of democratic centralism

and collective leadership. According to the charter of the ruling party, the Center can be the Central Party Committee, the politburo, and the standing committee of the politburo. In theory, members of the collective leadership are politically equal, decisions shall be made by consensus building, and critical decisions shall have a vote or at least a show of hands when members cannot reach a consensus.

However, the central collective leadership is an atypical political institution. Political institutions such as the Congress and Senate in the United States also consist of a group of individuals. However, operating under established rules, these institutions are so depersonalized to the extent that the commitment-competence dichotomy becomes irrelevant. Citizens do not need to distinguish between political commitment and policy implementation capacity when they assess the trustworthiness of these institutions. In contrast, more often than not, the central party leadership in China is practically reducible to the paramount leader.

Despite the principle of democratic centralism and collective leadership, the Center is a group of senior leaders known as "party and state leaders," with a single "core leader" being the dominant player (Guo 2019). The supreme leader has veto power on all critical decisions. The Center functions as an institution of collective leadership when the top leader exercises self-restraint. However, the top leader can break the rules he has made when he feels it is necessary. Moreover, he can conveniently bypass institutional constraints. For instance, Mao Zedong called enlarged politburo meetings, handpicking participants who were not politburo members but giving them full voting power. Controversial instances include his insistence on sending troops to Korea in 1952 and keeping the Great Leap Forward in high gear after the Lushan meeting in 1959. At times, Mao openly superseded the collective central leadership by claiming the utmost loyalty of the rank and file of the party (Walder 2015, 136).

The supremacy of the "core" leader remains largely intact in the Dengist era (1979–95), despite the effort to establish collective leadership and the rule by law (Wang 2014; Lampton 2014; Shirk 2018; Béja 2019; Fewsmith 2021). Deng Xiaoping seemed sincere about establishing collective leadership. Ironically, he further personalized the Center by holding the ultimate decision-making power without any official position. The crowning moment of the personalization of the Center under Deng was when he held an "inner party life meeting" at his residence to force Hu Yaobang to resign from the position of general party secretary (Fewsmith 2021).

Another case in point is his Southern Tour in 1992, which put the country back on track with economic reforms after the 1989 setback.

The Center has become even more personalized under President Xi Jinping. He chairs a dozen "small leadership groups" that supersede the corresponding party-government institutions at the central or national level (Vogel 2021). In addition, he ordered the removal of the constitutional term limit on the president, giving him unlimited tenure. Arguably, the Center of the ruling party has once again become the paramount leader, and the one-party rule has become practically a one-man rule (Wu 2022). A case in point is his insistence on imposing a three-month-long lockdown of Shanghai from April to June 2022 (see Yang 2022).

Domain

Like interpersonal trust, political trust varies across domains (Levi and Stoker 2000, 499). In electoral democracies, people may have varying levels of trust in a political leader over domestic politics and foreign policy. Moreover, citizens assess the government's trustworthiness primarily over lawmaking over specific domains. The elected government makes laws while a politically neutral bureaucracy enforces them. Although it is an integral part of the government, the bureaucracy in charge of law enforcement is a nonpartisan government agency. Consequently, assessment of law enforcement affects trust in government only when an enforcement problem (e.g., lack of effectiveness, fairness, and efficiency) is due to an inherent flaw in the policy (Porumbescu 2017). For example, some American voters found the food stamp program a waste of their tax money and lost confidence in the federal government when they learned that people on welfare used food stamps to buy liquor (Hetherington 2005, 27). In sum, policymaking and law enforcement are two separate domains.

Unlike trust in government observed in an electoral democracy with the rule of law, political trust in China has a distinctive domainality. Chinese people assess the Center's trustworthiness simultaneously over policymaking and policy implementation because the two processes are inseparable from each other. The Center is solely responsible for policymaking. An ambiguous term in Chinese political discourse, the word "central policy" may refer to anything coming from the Center, including state laws and regulations, party documents, leadership speeches, and other official com-

munications, such as party propaganda. A policy can be an enforceable "primary rule" or a "secondary rule" that governs rulemaking (Hart 1960, 89–96; Dworkin 1977, 19–31). Examples of the primary rules include enforceable laws or regulations. In contrast, secondary rules include the Charter of the Communist Party of China and the Constitution. As a result, a "central policy" can be as general as the "party line" that members and cadres should "serve the people" or as specific as the State Council's regulation that forbids local governments from levying fees on peasants that exceed 5 percent of their previous year's net income. It can be as formal as national law or as informal as a top leader's casual remark, such as Mao Zedong's words "The people's commune is good."

Unlike a legislature or the executive branch in an electoral democracy, the Center does not stop at making policies. In addition to monopolizing the power to make all important political decisions, the Center also monopolizes the power of policy implementation. Thanks to the rule of law and the depoliticization of civil servants, policy implementation in an electoral democracy is basically a bureaucratic process (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984). In contrast, policy implementation is a political process in the country (Lampton 1987; O'Brien and Li 1999; Ahlers and Schubert 2015). Central policies are all-encompassing, but the country is large in territory and population. Facing the dictator's dilemma (Dickson 2016), the Center has to delegate discretionary power to a hierarchy of party committees and people's governments (Harding 1981; Yang 2004; Zhou 2022). Under the unitary top-down control of the Center's Organization Department, every unit of the party-state is headed by two political appointees, the party secretary as the chief and the government head as the lieutenant (Manion 1985; Burns 1989, 1994; Chan 2004; Landry 2008). In the final analysis, the top leader sits at the apex of the pyramid, being the sole decision-maker and holding the ultimate power to monitor and discipline his agents (Wedeman 2001).

Since the Center plays the dual role of the ultimate decision-maker and the ultimate principal for policy implementation, the domain over which people assess its trustworthiness is policymaking-cum-implementation. People assess the trustworthiness of the Center in making political decisions, focusing on its political commitment and policy intent. Meanwhile, they assess the trustworthiness of the Center's policy implementation capacity, focusing on its capacity to make local agents faithfully enforce its decisions. What separates China from a typical electoral democracy

is that both the domain of political decision-making and the domain of policy implementation involve three contentious actors. The Center is in tension with its local agents, local government officials are in tension with the people, and the people are in tension with both the Center and local power holders. Over the domain of political decision-making, people assess the trustworthiness of the Center's commitment to serving their interests rather than favoring its agents, that is, local power holders. Over the domain of policy implementation, people assess the trustworthiness of the Center's capacity to ensure local agents do its bidding.

Dimensions

Interpersonal trust has a dimension of confidence in commitment and confidence in competence. Similarly, political trust has two dimensions. One is whether a government or politician has a credible commitment to serving the interests of the governed. The other is whether the government or politician has the capacity to deliver on the commitment. The distinction between the two dimensions is not salient for a government institution in an electoral democracy, thanks to the existence of a politically neutral bureaucracy and the rule of law. Citizens judge the government institution's commitment and capacity, but the assessment of capacity is secondary. For instance, when it comes to assessing the national government, American citizens tend to focus on the intent of the public policy. They judge if the federal government is committed to doing what is right by seeing if a public policy conforms with their ideological persuasions and serves their interests. They also judge the government's law enforcement capacity by assessing if the bureaucracy efficiently implements a public policy such that the intended beneficiaries cannot misuse the policy. However, dissatisfaction with the implementation of a policy usually leads to doubts about whether the government is doing what is right. In other words, dissatisfaction with the government's apparent lack of law enforcement capacity fosters mistrust about its political commitment. In sum, the government's lack of capacity seems secondary because it can be reduced to misguided commitment. As a result, a common practice is to synthesize multiple indicators of trust in commitment and trust in capacity into a unidimensional scale when it comes to assessing trust in a government institution (Abramson and Finifter 1981; Feldman 1983; Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990; Hetherington 2005, 16–17).

While they agree that the commitment-capacity distinction is largely irrelevant when assessing the trustworthiness of a political institution, scholars find it critical to distinguish between trust in commitment and trust in capacity when it comes to assessing the trustworthiness of a political leader. Like interpersonal trust, trust in a political leader always has two dimensions, even in an electoral democracy with the rule of law. One dimension is whether a politician has trustworthy moral character, integrity, or probity, and the other is whether he has trustworthy aptitude or competence (Abramson 1972, 1245; Weatherford 1984, 188–89; Citrin and Muste 1999, 467).

The distinction between the two dimensions is particularly prominent in democracies that adopt the presidential system rather than the parliamentary system. A president wields more power than a prime minister. More importantly, it is far more difficult to depose an untrustworthy president than to depose an untrustworthy prime minister. Consequently, citizens in a presidential democracy pay special attention to the commitment-capacity distinction when they choose between presidential candidates. On the one hand, they judge if a politician is committed to serving the public interest. On the other hand, they judge if the politician is capable of honoring his commitment. Like what happens with interpersonal trust, the two assessments often mismatch. Barber (1983, 4–5), for instance, observes that many American voters found Jimmy Carter had a more trustworthy "fiduciary commitment" while Robert Kennedy had a more credible "technical competence." Like what occurs with interpersonal trust, one may have total trust, partial trust, skepticism, paradoxical trust, or total distrust in a political leader.

The trustworthiness of the Center, as a personalized institution, has two distinct dimensions. Correspondingly, trust in the Center has two dimensions. One is confidence in its commitment to rule in the interests of the people, and the other is confidence in its capacity to monitor and discipline local agents so that they faithfully implement central policies.

Patterns

Interpersonal trust has five major patterns: total trust, partial trust, skepticism, paradoxical trust, and total distrust. Paradoxical trust is a valid pattern when it comes to assessing the trustworthiness of a trustee over the domain of helping the truster. When it comes to helping another person,

an individual may be competent but unwilling to help, that is, trustworthy in terms of competence but untrustworthy in terms of commitment. Paradoxical trust is also a valid pattern for politicians regarding serving the public interest in an electoral democracy, where no political party, let alone a politician, can legitimately claim to be the sole and genuine representative of all people's interests. The fact that political parties and politicians win and lose elections regularly precludes the idea that the interests of a political party or politician are identical with those of the people. Given the inherent discrepancy between a politician's self-interest and the public interest, citizens can conclude that a politician is capable of serving the public interest but unwilling to do so (Craig 1993). Barber (1983, 4), as it was mentioned above, suggests that many American voters had paradoxical trust in Robert Kennedy, being confident about his "technical competence" but lacking confidence in his "fiduciary commitment."

However, when it comes to assessing the trustworthiness of the Center, paradoxical trust becomes a practical self-contradiction for many people. The reason is that the Center is a special object of trust. Ultimately, the Center is the top leader. With the absolute one-party rule, it is the Center's self-interest to enforce the policies that it makes. Holding absolute power, it is in the top leader's self-interest to make all local agents do his bidding. It is plausible to argue that a moral or altruistic individual is able to but does not want to act in his self-interest. For instance, a captain of a sinking ship who chooses to go down with the ship is more capable of saving his life than willing to save it at the expense of his crew and passengers. However, it seems illogical to say that the top leader can but does not want to act in his self-interest. It harms the Center's self-interest if the top leader turns a blind eye to local officials who defy its orders and alienate the people. After all, "it is in the emperor's own interest to take care of his 'realm' and 'subjects'" (Li 2013, 14). To say that the Center is capable of implementing a policy but unwilling to do so implies that the top leader can but does not want to act in his self-interest, implying that he is either too stupid to know his self-interest or too despotic to predictably enforce rules of his own making (see Simmel 1950, 186–87). Either way, paradoxical trust in the top leader implies mistrust or even total distrust.[1]

1. The faith-like trust in the national leader's commitment to governing in the people's interests can also be observed in electoral democracies, particularly as regards revolutionary leaders who risked their lives for national independence and democratization. Many American people, for instance, seem to "have an almost naïve trust in the Founding Fathers" (Carmen 1966, 329), especially in George Washington.

When trust in the Center's commitment is measured by the proxy of trust in the central government and trust in its capacity by the proxy of trust in local government, paradoxical trust in the Center looks similar to a trust pattern called "the paradox of distance" in electoral democracies. Paradox of distance is common in the United States, Japan, and South Korea, where citizens have stronger confidence in the local government than in the national government (Frederickson and Frederickson 1995; Pharr 1997; Jennings 1998, 230). However, the paradox of distance and paradoxical trust are fundamentally different from each other. In an electoral democracy, residents elect the local government and expect it to act in their interests. A local government, just like the national government, is an object of trust in its own right (Baldassare 1985). Therefore, the paradox of distance is a valid trust pattern.

In China, however, local governments are primarily policy implementation agencies of the central leadership. Leaders of particular local governments vary in terms of promoting economic growth and providing public goods, hence enjoying varying levels of confidence of local people (Zhong 2014; Dong and Kübler 2018; Huhe and Chen 2022). Generally speaking, however, local government leaders have neither independent sources of power nor institutional incentives to prioritize local people over the central leadership, when an order from above clashes with the interests of local people. In other words, the pattern known as the paradox of distance has no institutional foundation (for a debate on whether local government officials protect local people from the penetration of the central government, see Shue 1988; Unger 1989). It is reported that, during the Great Famine, exceptionally brave and sympathetic local officials defied the directives from their superiors to save local people (Dikötter 2010). However, the norm at that time was that local government officials slavishly obeyed orders from above, even when doing so endangered the lives of their community members. Based on these considerations, this study argues that paradoxical trust looks like a logical self-contradiction, which suggests cynicism, mistrust, or even total distrust.

Evidence from Local Surveys

Four findings from two local surveys in 2006 and 2014 support the analysis above (see appendix A for sampling information). First, political trust in China has four representative patterns: total trust, partial trust, skepticism,

and total distrust. Second, trust in the incumbent president's commitment and capacity to protect people's lawful rights and interests, improve people's livelihood, and combat corruption has four representative patterns. Third, trust in the Center as an institution has four representative patterns. Last, the results of the typological analysis of trust in the president and trust in the Center as an institution are consistent with each other, suggesting that they reflect the same latent trust in the Center.

Four Patterns of Political Trust

A popular saying was circulating in rural China in the 1980s: "The Center is our benefactor, the province is our relative, the county is a good person, the township is an evil person, and the village is our enemy" (Li and O'Brien 1996, 43). To capture the underlying judgment of the trustworthiness of the party-state, I conducted a survey in 2006 covering 1,600 villagers sampled in four counties. The local survey employs a full battery of indicators to gauge trust in government, asking respondents to rate the level of popular trust enjoyed by five levels of government: central, provincial, city, county, and township. The design is based on the political division of labor of the party-state. The central government promulgates policies and decisions, and the provincial government adapts central policies and passes them downward through the government hierarchy. City government is like a linkage between policymaking and policy implementation. County and township governments bear the responsibility for policy implementation (Zhou 2022).

Instead of using the conventional four-point scale that excludes mistrust, the survey uses a five-point ordinal scale: (1) very low, (2) low, (3) so-so, (4) high, and (5) very high. The term "so-so" is often used in daily discourses, so including it in the list of provided answers can reduce social desirability bias. As Wang and You (2016) point out, Chinese people are culturally predisposed to understate doubts or distrust, especially when it comes to assessing the trustworthiness of higher-ranking government authorities. In light of their analysis, this study expects that "so-so" reflects skepticism or mistrust rather than neutrality. Table 3.1 summarizes the survey results.

The survey observes that popular trust is highest for the central government and declines steadily for the four levels of subnational government.

TABLE 3.1. Trust in Five Levels of Government

	Central	Provincial	City	County	Township
Very high	42.7	18.3	10.3	5.9	4.8
High	27.9	37.4	30.8	24.8	20.1
So-so	23.2	36.1	48.7	50.6	50.1
Low	3.0	4.4	6.3	12.1	13.1
Very low	3.3	3.9	4.0	6.6	12.0

Source: Data from author's 2006 survey.

Note: N = 1,600. Column entries are percentages. Column totals may not equal 100 due to rounding errors. Missing responses are multiply imputed.

The pattern is also observed in national surveys (Liu and Raine 2016; Wu and Wilkes 2018; Lü 2014; Li 2016). Factor analysis shows that underneath the five indicators are two latent components. Trust in the central government and trust in the provincial government load heavily on the first component, which seems to reflect trust in the Center's political commitment. Meanwhile, trust in the county government and trust in the township government load heavily on the second component, which seems to reflect trust in the Center's policy implementation capacity. Trust in the city government has roughly equal loadings on both components, suggesting that it reflects something that straddles between trust in the Center's political commitment and policy implementation capacity. The results support the proposition that latent trust in the Center has two distinct dimensions.

This study employs K-means clustering to explore the optimal number of clusters that underlie the five feature vectors of trust in government (see appendix B). In theory, observations of the five measures can form 3,125 combinations. The survey observes 207 combinations of scores on the five ordinal scales. However, the elbow method (Thorndike 1953), a commonly used heuristic index, suggests that an optimal solution may be obtained by grouping respondents into four clusters. Figure 3.1 plots the within-cluster sum of squares (WCSS) for different cluster numbers. There is an identifiable "elbow" point when the number of clusters equals four, where WCSS starts to level off.[2]

K-means clustering analysis identifies four patterns that correspond to

2. Two other popular heuristic indexes, the silhouette value (Rousseeuw 1987) and the gap statistic (Tibshirani et al. 2001), also suggest that the optimal way to summarize the data is to group respondents into four clusters.

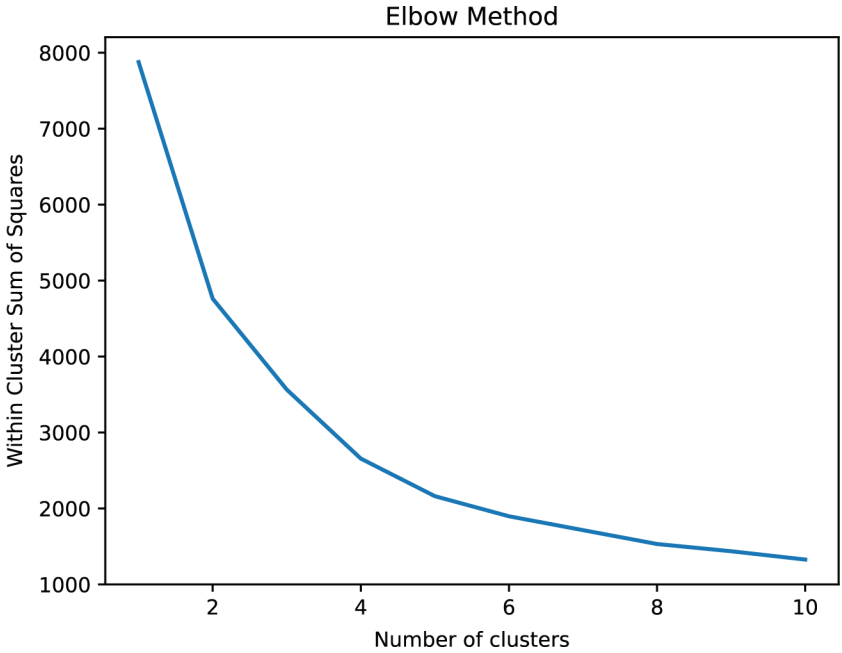

Fig. 3.1. Four patterns of political trust

the preconceived patterns of trust in the Center. The results support the proposition that, unlike the two-dimensional trust in another person, trust in the Center has four instead of five representative patterns. Among 1,600 respondents, 29.0 percent have total trust, 31.6 percent partial trust, 30.0 percent skepticism, and 9.4 percent total distrust. Table 3.2 summarizes the cluster mean scores of trust in five levels of government, which define the coordinates of the four cluster centroids.[3]

Trust in the President

My 2014 survey asks respondents to rate the incumbent president's commitment over three issues on a 100-point scale, with 0 indicating not sincere and 100 indicating entirely sincere. The issues are (1) protect-

3. A centroid is the conceptual center of mass of a cluster. A centroid is not always a member of the cluster (Guttag 2021, 387–88).

TABLE 3.2. Four Patterns of Trust in the Center

	Trust in . . .				
	Central government	Provincial government	City government	County government	Township government
Total trust	4.6	4.5	4.3	4.2	3.9
Partial trust	4.7	4.0	3.4	2.7	2.4
Skepticism	3.2	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Total distrust	2.8	1.9	1.7	1.4	1.4

Source: Data from author's 2006 survey.

Note: N = 1,600. Row entries are the mean feature values on the five-point scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high).

ing common people's lawful rights and interests, (2) fighting corruption, and (3) enforcing beneficial policies such as providing welfare for low-income people. The three measures constitute a reliable summation index of trust in the president's political commitment (Cronbach's alpha = .76, meeting the conventional threshold of .70). The summation index is treated as a proxy of the latent trust in the president's commitment to governing in the interests of the people. Overall, 1,779 respondents express a high level of confidence, giving the president an average score of 86.8 out of 100. The observation probably has to do with the fact that the president's anticorruption campaign and precision poverty alleviation program were in high gear at the time of the survey (Wedeman 2017; Zuo, Wang, and Zeng 2023).

However, trust in the president's capacity to enforce the three policies is less impressive. In the understanding of many people, a crucial element of the Center's policy implementation capacity is its ability to monitor the process and outcome of the policy implementation. A common complaint is that the Center does not know how local government officials implement its policies. For example, a college student who returned home during the summer break wrote: "If central decision makers knew the real situation in the countryside, they would be too frightened to sleep. They must have absolutely no idea about how central policies are actually being carried out at local levels" (Li 2004, 238). Like villagers, urban residents also use the age-old saying "The mountains are high and the emperor is far away" or "The heaven is high and the emperor is far away" to express their frustration with the Center's inability to monitor the behavior of local officials (e.g., Pattison and Herron 2002).

TABLE 3.3. Trust in the President

	Trust in commitment	Trust in capacity
Total trust	97.0	86.1
Partial trust	90.1	35.4
Skepticism	82.0	70.0
Total distrust	59.3	49.3

Source: Data from author's 2014 survey.
Note: Row entries are the mean feature values on the 100-point scale.

The survey asks respondents to assess how much the president knows about the actual implementation of the three policies in their county or city on a 100-point scale, with 0 indicating knowing nothing and 100 indicating knowing everything. The simple summation index is treated as a proxy of trust in the president's policy implementation capacity (Cronbach's alpha = .71). Overall, the respondents express remarkably weaker confidence in the president's policy implementation capacity, giving him an average score of 70.1 out of 100.

Trust in the president's commitment and trust in his capacity have a moderate correlation (Pearson's r = .50). The two indexes do not constitute an adequately reliable summation scale (Cronbach's alpha = .62), suggesting that trust in the president is best captured by a two-dimensional typology rather than a unidimensional scale. Since trust in commitment and trust in capacity are both measured on a 100-point scale, there can be 10,000 combinations. K-means clustering analysis identifies four representative trust patterns. Table 3.3 summarizes the cluster mean scores that define the coordinates of the four cluster centroids.

Public confidence in the president is high. First, 43.0 percent of 1,779 respondents have total trust in the president on the three policy issues. They are highly confident about his commitment, giving him an average score of 97.0 out of 100. Meanwhile, they are quite confident about his capacity, giving him an average score of 86.1 out of 100. In the eyes of people holding total trust, the president is committed to and capable of governing in the people's interests.

Second, 11.0 percent of the respondents have partial trust. They are highly confident about the president's political commitment but lack confidence about his implementation capacity. They give the president

an average score of 90.1 on the 100-point scale of trust in commitment. However, they give him an average score of 35.4 on the 100-point scale of trust in capacity. In other words, they agree that the president is highly sincere about protecting people's rights and interests, improving people's livelihood, and combating corruption. However, they do not believe that the president can monitor the actual implementation of his policies.

Third, 33.7 percent of the respondents are skeptical about the president, having doubts about his commitment and capacity. They give him an average score of 82.0 on the 100-point scale of trust in commitment. Meanwhile, they give an average score of 70.0 on the 100-scale of trust in capacity. Both scores are exceptionally high for a political leader in an electoral democracy. However, they are underwhelming for the Chinese president, who won 99.9 percent of votes in the election at the National People's Congress held in 2013 (Saich 2015, 10).

Last, 12.4 percent of the respondents totally distrust the president. They distrust his commitment, giving him an average score of 59.3 on the 100-point scale. Again, although it is decent in an electoral democracy, the score is unacceptable for the Chinese president. Meanwhile, respondents holding total distrust have even stronger distrust in the president's capacity, giving him an average score of 49.3 on the 100-point scale. It is worth noting that Chinese schools adopt a 100-point scale, on which 60 is the threshold of pass.

Trust in the Center as an Institution

In addition to measuring trust in the president, my 2014 survey also measures trust in the Center as an institution. It asks respondents to assess the level of popular trust in the central, provincial, and city/county party committees on a five-point scale: (1) very low, (2) relatively low, (3) so-so, (4) relatively high, and (5) very high. Like my 2006 survey, the survey observes that respondents have remarkably higher trust in the Central Party Committee than in provincial party committees and city/county party committees (table 3.4).

In light of the fact that the Central Party Committee issues policies while provincial and county or city party committees implement central parties, this study treats the observed trust in the Central Party Committee

TABLE 3.4. Trust in the Central, Provincial, and County/City Party Committees

	The central committee	Provincial committees	County/city committees
Very high	49.8	18.5	10.3
Relatively high	34.0	45.0	24.5
So-so	13.9	31.8	45.9
Relatively low	1.0	2.9	11.3
Very low	1.4	1.8	8.0

Source: Data from author's 2014 survey.

Note: N = 1,779. Column entries are percentages. Column totals may not equal 100 due to rounding errors. Missing responses are multiply imputed.

TABLE 3.5. Trust in the Center

	Trust in the central party committee	Trust in the provincial party committee	Trust in the county/city party committee
Total trust	5.0	5.0	4.7
Partial trust	4.6	4.1	3.4
Skepticism	4.3	3.1	2.2
Total distrust	2.7	2.7	2.6

Source: Data from author's 2014 survey.

Note: N = 1,779. Row entries are the mean feature values on the five-point scale ranging from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high).

as a proxy of the latent trust in the Center's political commitment. Meanwhile, it treats the observed trust in the provincial and city/county party committees as a proxy of the latent trust in the Center's policy implementation capacity. The three five-point ordinal measures can have 125 possible combinations. However, K-means clustering analysis identifies four representative patterns from 37 observed combinations. Table 3.5 summarizes the defining features of the four patterns of trust in the Center as an institution.

Among 1,779 respondents, 15.0 percent have total trust in the Center as an institution, having high confidence in its commitment and capacity. In addition, 45.6 percent of respondents have partial trust, trusting the Center's commitment yet distrusting its implementation capacity. Notably, 23.3 percent are skeptical about the Center's commitment and capacity, and 16.0 percent have total distrust.

The Consistency of Trust in the President and Trust in the Center as an Institution

A cross-tabulation analysis shows that the directly measured trust in the president regarding combating corruption and the indirectly measured trust in the Center as an institution are fairly consistent with each other (table 3.6). The results of the two typologies have a positive correlation (Gamma = .45, $p < .001$), suggesting that they are consistent measurements of the same latent attitude. Overall, respondents with total trust in the president's commitment and capacity are more likely to have total trust or partial trust in the Center as an institution. In addition, respondents with partial trust in the president are more likely to have partial trust or skepticism in the Center as an institution. Similarly consistent are the other two patterns of trust. For one, respondents who are skeptical about the president are more likely to have skepticism or total distrust in the Center as an institution. For another, respondents who totally distrust the president are more likely to have total trust or skepticism in the Center as an institution.

The two typologies do not match perfectly, which is hardly surprising because the Center is not identical to the president. Nonetheless, the remarkable consistency between the results of the two typological analyses suggests that, in the minds of many people, the Center is a personalized institution whose trustworthiness has a dimension of commitment and one of capacity. Furthermore, the consistency of the two typologies suggests that trust in the Central Party Committee is a valid proxy of trust in the Center's political commitment, while trust in the provincial and

TABLE 3.6. Trust in the President and Trust in the Center

Trust in the Center	*Trust in the president*			
	Total trust	Partial trust	Skepticism	Total distrust
Total trust	26.4	4.6	7.5	5.0
Partial trust	50.8	44.6	46.7	25.9
Skepticism	14.5	35.4	28.3	29.5
Total distrust	8.2	15.4	17.5	39.5
Observations	764	195	600	220

Source: Data from author's 2014 survey.

Note: N = 1,779. Column entries are percentages. Column totals may not equal 100 due to rounding errors.

county/district party committees is a valid proxy of trust in the Center's implementation capacity. Jointly, the findings of the local survey constitute a solid foundation for reanalyzing data collected in national surveys.

Evidence from National Surveys

So far, no national survey directly measures trust in the top national leader's political commitment and policy implementation capacity. Nor does any national survey measure trust in the Center as an institution directly. However, a number of national surveys measure trust in the central government and local government, which can be treated as proxies of trust in the Center's commitment and capacity. The government and the party committee are practically the same in China because the country is a party-state (Zheng 2009). Despite the constitutional principle that the local people's congress elects government leaders at the corresponding level, it is the central party leadership that appoints, directly or indirectly, government leaders at all levels through a strictly top-down chain of power delegation (Manion 1985; Burns 1989, 1994; Chan 2004; Landry 2008; Pang, Keng, and Zhong 2018).

Under such an integrally nested hierarchical system, local governments are administrative appendages of the Center. Since local governments have considerable discretionary power, popular trust in local government has a dual meaning. On the one hand, observed trust in local government indicates how ordinary citizens assess local government's commitment and capacity to act in their interests. On the other hand, the observed trust also indicates citizens' assessment of the central leadership's capacity to make local authorities do its bidding. The second aspect of trust in local government is reflected in an often-heard criticism of local officials, which is that they deceive the Center and suppress the people. While it targets local authorities, the complaint implies mistrust and distrust in the central leadership's capacity to monitor and discipline its local agents.

This study draws on the fourth and fifth waves of the Asian Barometer Survey completed in 2015 and 2019 to examine the four patterns of trust in the Center in the whole population. Both surveys ask respondents how much trust they have in the central government and local government on a six-point scale, ranging from (1) distrust fully to (6) trust fully (2015, Q9

TABLE 3.7. Trust in the Central and Local Governments

	2015		2019	
	Central government	Local government	Central government	Local government
Trust fully	36.7	9.6	47.3	14.3
Trust a lot	42.7	23.0	42.6	34.9
Trust somewhat	16.3	37.5	8.4	33.9
Distrust somewhat	3.1	18.2	1.3	12.2
Distrust a lot	0.7	6.8	0.3	3.4
Distrust fully	0.4	4.9	0.1	1.3
Observations	4,068		4,941	

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2015, 2019.
Note: Column entries are percentages. Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding errors. Missing responses are multiply imputed.

and Q15; 2019, Q9 and Q15; see appendix B for variable descriptions).[4] Table 3.7 summarizes the responses to the two questions in both waves of the survey.

The two six-point scales can form 36 combinations, 34 of which are observed. Based on the findings of local surveys discussed above, this study treats the observed trust in the central government as a proxy of the latent trust in the Center's political commitment. Meanwhile, it treats the observed trust in local government as a proxy of the latent trust in the Center's policy implementation capacity. In addition, this study postulates that underlying the six-point scale is a trichotomy of trust, mistrust, and distrust. K-means clustering analysis identifies four representative patterns of trust in the Center. Results are summarized in table 3.8.

Further analysis identifies the defining features of the four patterns of trust. Table 3.9 summarizes the cluster mean scores of respondents holding the four representative patterns of trust in the Center. In the 2015 survey, respondents holding total trust have a mean score of 6 out of 6 when they assess the Center's political commitment. Meanwhile, they have a mean

4. The previously released version of the 2002, 2011, and 2015 survey data recodes "trust fully" as "a great deal of trust," merges "trust a lot" and "trust somewhat" into a broader category of "quite a lot of trust," renames "distrust somewhat" as "not very much trust," and merges "distrust a lot" and "distrust fully" into "none at all." The Asian Barometer Survey released the original six-level responses in May 2023.

TABLE 3.8. Patterns of Trust in the Center

	2015	2019
Total trust	28.1	28.6
Partial trust	19.8	25.1
Skepticism	32.6	36.8
Total distrust	19.5	9.6
Observations	4,068	4,941

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2015, 2019.
Note: Column entries are percentages. Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding errors.

TABLE 3.9. Defining Features of Patterns of Trust in the Center

	2015		2019	
	Central government	Local government	Central government	Local government
Total trust	6.0	4.9	6.0	5.5
Partial trust	5.4	2.5	5.7	3.3
Skepticism	5.0	4.5	5.0	4.9
Total distrust	3.7	3.2	3.8	3.5

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2015, 2019.
Note: Row entries are the mean feature values on the six-point scale ranging from 1 (distrust fully) to 6 (trust fully).

score of 4.9 out of 6 when they assess the Center's policy implementation capacity. In contrast, respondents holding partial trust have a mean score of 5.4 out of 6 when they assess the Center's political commitment, but their mean score is 2.5 out of 6 when they assess the Center's policy implementation capacity. Respondents holding skepticism have a mean score of 5 out of 6 regarding the trustworthiness of the Center's political commitment. Meanwhile, they have a mean score of 4.5 out of 6 regarding the trustworthiness of the Center's policy implementation capacity. Respondents holding total distrust have a mean score of 3.7 out of 6 regarding the trustworthiness of the Center's political commitment. Meanwhile, they have a mean score of 3.2 out of 6 regarding the trustworthiness of the Center's policy implementation capacity. Similar patterns are observed in the 2019 survey.

Conclusion

Political trust in China has four distinctive characteristics. First, the object of trust is not a decision-making institution but a personalized institution known as the Center. More specifically, the object of trust is not the central government but the central leadership of the ruling party. The central leadership is like a set of concentric circles, with the top leader at the core. Trust in the paramount leader as a person and trust in the Center as an institution are isomorphic, though not identical.

Second, the domain over which people assess the Center's trustworthiness is policymaking-cum-implementation. This is different from what is observed in an electoral democracy with the rule of law, where citizens assess the trustworthiness of national political institutions primarily over decision-making. Policy implementation is a sideshow in a democracy but shares the center stage with policymaking in China.

Third, the trustworthiness of the personalized Center has two dimensions. One is whether it has a credible political commitment, and the other is whether it is capable of making its local deputies do its bidding. Chinese people assess the Center's political commitment by examining if its policies are in (or at least not against) people's interests. Meanwhile, they assess the Center's implementation capacity by observing whether the appointed local government leaders faithfully carry out central policies, especially policies designed to benefit the people.

Last, although they are moderately correlated with each other, trust in the Center's political commitment and trust in its policy implementation capacity do not match each other well enough to constitute a reliable unidimensional scale. Therefore, an accurate measurement of trust in the Center requires a two-dimensional typology, which reveals four representative patterns: total trust, partial trust, skepticism, and total distrust.

The new measurement scheme generates a more accurate assessment of political trust in China. According to the conventional measurement, the 2015 and 2019 national surveys show that over 80 percent of the population trust the central government. In contrast, applying the new measurement scheme to reinterpret the survey data, it turns out that about a quarter of the population has total trust in the Center, while another quarter has partial trust. In addition, about a third of the population has skepticism, and about 15 percent of the population has total distrust. The new interpretation paves the way for achieving more accurate understandings of the sources and implications of political trust in the country.

CHAPTER 4

Construction

Scholars have proposed a variety of theoretical frameworks to explain the formation of political trust. Taking the lead, Cole (1973) integrates socioeconomic factors, personality variables, and political efficacy measures into a causal model. More broadly, Mishler and Rose (2001a) synthesize institutionalist and cultural approaches. The institutionalist approach emphasizes the importance of government performance, while the cultural approach argues that values shape public expectations of government performance and the probity of political leaders (Inglehart 1971; Pharr, Putnam, and Dalton 2000, 20; Dalton 2005; Dalton and Welzel 2014). Focusing on more specific mechanisms, Citrin and Green (1986) highlight the effects of policy process, government performance, partisanship, and probity of political leaders, while Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) point out that priming and political polarization also matter.

Existing theories can be reduced to three complementary perspectives. Most intuitively, the trust-earning perspective focuses on how governments and politicians earn and sustain citizens' trust with satisfying performance (Williams 1985; Hetherington 1998; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Mishler and Rose 2001a; Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017). To earn trust is to perform and let people evaluate the performance and judge the performer's trustworthiness. Assuming that citizens base their judgments on reliable information, scholars find that positive experiences with the policy processes and outcomes of a government, on the one hand, and the competency and morality of political leaders, on the other, lead to a higher level of trust. Conversely, negative experiences result in mistrust and even distrust. Key domains of performance include securing economic

growth (Kinder 1981; Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000), championing distributive justice (Uslaner and Brown 2005; Anderson and Singer 2008), and controlling government waste and corruption (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Morris and Klesner 2010; Hart 1978; Keele 2005; Bowler and Karp 2004).

The trust-earning perspective assumes that the trust formation process is factual and egalitarian, with would-be trustees and would-be trusters on equal footing. In other words, the trust-earning perspective highlights the rights element of political trust. On the part of trusters or citizens, it presupposes economic autonomy, freedom of ideas, and factual information. On the part of trustees or politicians, it presupposes adequate honesty and effective accountability.

The trust-engineering perspective shares the reflection theory underneath the trust-earning perspective, agreeing that political trust derives from citizens' informed evaluation of the process and outcome of politicians' job performance (Hardin 1993). However, it problematizes the production and consumption of the information on government performance and politicians' character, highlighting the fact that such information is invariably coded, subtly packaged, and artfully sold. Even in electoral democracies, the context in which citizens access and process information on politicians' performance is susceptible to manipulation (Mendelsohn 1996; McGraw and Ling 2003; Hetherington and Rudolph 2008).

The trust-engineering perspective cautions that political trust exists between power-holding politicians and powerless people, noting that trust engineering is an orchestrated effort to persuade the governed into believing a political party or a politician without presenting full and factual proof of trustworthiness. In other words, the trust-engineering perspective highlights the manipulative aspect of political trust formation. On the part of trusters or citizens, it presupposes limited economic autonomy, compromised freedom of ideas, and a mixture of information and misinformation. On the part of trustees or politicians, it presupposes minimum honesty and adequate accountability.

The trust-embedding perspective highlights the deceptive dimension of political trust construction, emphasizing that would-be trustees may extort trust by making would-be trusters feel dependent. To embed trust is to place people in an existential, ideational, and informational environment that entices people to develop intended political beliefs.

Trust embedding is typically antagonistic. Regardless of whether they are in power or opposition, politicians embed trust by engaging in what social movement scholars call framing (Benford and Snow 2000), attributing economic and social problems to political malaises, blaming the establishment or political rivals, and promising prompt and effective panacea. Politicians prime citizens' minds by framing their own performance in a positive light. Meanwhile, they mobilize discontent, deprivation, and desperation among targeted social groups to induce distrust in their opponents. Politicians deceive directly with repeated lies or plant biases through business proxies in the market of information and ideas. Seemingly neutral mass media and social media may enable populist demagogues to push conspiracy theories and prime citizens' minds with biases, misinformation, and disinformation (Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring 1979; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Moy and Scheufele 2000). For instance, right-wing politicians in Israel collude with the super-rich to run a news media that subtly but systematically misleads the public (Grossman, Margalit, and Mitts 2022).

Moreover, since political trust is a judgment under uncertainty (Tversky and Kahneman 1974), politicians embed trust by capitalizing on people's fear and hope. Politicians play up people's fear of losing and hope of retaining what they have. Meanwhile, they play up people's fear of not getting and hope of obtaining what they believe they are entitled to. To maximize the rallying effect of fear and hope, political parties often iconize charismatic leaders by manipulating nationalism, racism, and religious fervor. Consequently, trust embedding often involves doctoring history and propagating attractive political programs. Incumbents claim to be inheritors of great traditions and creators of a bright future, whereas challengers call for change by deploying revolutionary legends, fantasies of heroes, and utopian ideologies.

To convince people of their unwavering commitment, incumbents deploy circular ideological legitimation, while challengers promise self-sacrifice to demonstrate dedication to the public interest. To convince people of their capabilities, incumbents claim to be the choice of history and destiny, while challengers claim to be blessed with supernatural power. Meanwhile, politicians promise immediate and ultimate relief and posture as the ordained deliverers. In sum, trust embedding works through two mechanisms. On the one hand, socioeconomic insecurity and deprivation

lead to dependency on politicians. On the other hand, the belief of having found a godlike savior induces political pride. The combination of dependency and pride generates faith-like political trust.

Trust earning, engineering, and embedding exist everywhere: established electoral democracies, transitional societies, and authoritarian countries (Sztompka 1999; Guriev and Treisman 2020). Trust embedding, in particular, exists in seemingly unlikely places, as evidenced by the recent upsurge of populism and demagoguery in electoral democracies like the United States (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Milner 2021). Regardless of the regime type, the practical process of trust formation runs between two extremes. On the one hand, would-be trustees treat trusters as citizens with rights, while citizens judge the trustworthiness of would-be trustees based on full and factual information. On the other hand, would-be trusters treat nominal trusters as powerless subjects, while apparent rights-bearing citizens are converted into blind followers.

What distinguishes the operation of the three trust-constructing tactics in different countries is whether governments and politicians face effective constraints. Generally speaking, governments and politicians in electoral democracies face harder constraints derived from the market economy and the freedom of the press. More specifically, the market economy secures citizens the freedom from depending on the government for livelihood, and the freedom of the press ensures that there are competing sources of political information. In addition, the market of ideas ensures the openness and competitiveness of the cultural context, as the government cannot arbitrarily manipulate history, traditions, and cultural values. In contrast, governments and politicians in authoritarian countries have more autonomy to deploy economic subjugation, systematic indoctrination, and disinformation.

Three-Pronged Strategy

The Chinese party-state deploys a three-pronged strategy to construct public confidence in the Center. The central leadership of the ruling party earns trust by performing, that is, by promoting economic development, securing law and order, and providing basic social welfare. Meanwhile, the regime engineers trust in the Center by claiming credit for fighting

problems of its own making, for example, corruption, waste, and excessive police force. In addition, the party-state also embeds trust in the Center by subjecting people to economic dependence, pervasive ideological indoctrination and media censorship, and paternalist cultural values.

Earning

The Center performs to earn trust, working as well as acting (Ding 2020). Although it rejects electoral accountability, the regime works to ensure the normal functioning of the economy and society, enforcing law and order, and providing basic social security. The party-state has performed well in three areas. First, the central leadership provides competent stewardship of the economy. The regime was obsessed with class struggle and political campaigns during its reign from 1949 to 1976 due to the worsening paranoia of Mao Zedong, the paramount leader. Starting in 1979, the ruling party began to focus on economic development thanks to a more open-minded top leader, Deng Xiaoping. Learning from past blunders, the central leadership loosened the rigid and inefficient planned economy, withdrawing from non-essential economic sectors that affect the regime's survival, hence unleashing the creativity and productivity of the market (Huang 2008; Whyte 2021). The strategy works. Survey studies repeatedly show that satisfaction with the country's rapid and sustained economic growth strengthens trust in the central government (Wang 2005; Yang and Tang 2010; Lewis-Beck, Tang, and Martini 2014; Dickson et al. 2016; Chen and Xiang 2020).

Second, the regime works to provide public goods, improve health care, and build a social welfare system. In particular, the government works to eliminate absolute poverty. The effort pays off. Studies show that satisfaction with the government's provision of public goods, poverty relief, and health care enhances trust in central and local governments (Yang and Tang 2010; Solinger and Hu 2012; Dickson et al. 2016, 873; Duckett and Munro 2022; Zuo, Wang, and Zeng 2023).

Last, the regime makes efforts to restrain local power holders. It allows ordinary citizens to exert some constraining force on local power holders on policy implementation by introducing grassroots democratic reforms, instituting administrative litigation, and institutionalizing the letters and

visits system (O'Brien and Li 2000; Minzner 2006). The effort also pays off. Free and fair village elections enhance trust in village cadres and local government (Manion 1996; Manion 2006).

Engineering

The ruling party does not allow opposition parties to exist. Nevertheless, it adopts the antagonistic strategy of trust engineering. Without an external political opposition to wrestle with, the regime cultivates trust in the top leader by purging his rivals as "anti-revolutionaries," "traitors," or "corrupt" (e.g., Walder 2015; Fewsmith 2012; Wedeman 2017). Moreover, the party-state fosters trust in the central leadership by making local government officials nemesis and scapegoats (Kuang 2018). In other words, the party-state fosters trust in the Center's political commitment at the expense of confidence in the Center's policy implementation capacity.

By design, the regime enforces a sophisticated system of division of labor to engineer trust in the Center. Institutionally, the division of labor between the Center and its local agents enables the supreme leader to claim credit for all successes without taking the blame for any failure (Dickson 2016, 129). For the Center, governing the country consists of two integrated parts. The first part is to make policies, while the second part is to have local agents implement policies. The Center makes general political programs. Subnational governments adapt broad-brushed policies into enforceable targets and directives. The division of labor becomes the division of credit and blame. The regime can conveniently frame a policy disaster originating from the "core" leader as a result of the unfaithful implementation of a well-informed and well-designed central policy, shifting the responsibility from the Center to local officials (see Lampton 1987; O'Brien and Li 1999; Göbel 2011; Ahlers 2014; Ahlers and Schubert 2015).

A case in point is the Center's handling of peasant burdens. Although its rise to power depended on the sacrifice of millions of peasants, the ruling party adopted policies that systematically discriminated against the rural population. Shortly after redistributing land to peasants, the regime took it back by imposing collectivization (Shue 1980). Rural policies throughout the Maoist era (1949–76) were characterized by segregation, exploitation, and discrimination. The household registration system banned rural

residents from migrating to cities (Cheng and Selden 1994). Grains were siphoned to the government granary through the commune system (Oi 1989). Rural residents also suffered systematic discrimination in education and medical care (Whyte 2021).

The decollectivization in the early 1980s restored for the rural population some of its deprived economic freedom (Oi 1999). However, even after the celebrated decollectivization of agriculture and the dissolution of the commune system, the rural population remained under systematic discrimination. Economic freedom remains severely curtailed because the land remains under the three-tier ownership of the village, township government, and the central state (Ash 2010). Moreover, starting in the 1980s, rural taxation became excessive and arbitrary in much of the countryside. The agricultural taxes imposed by the central government were relatively light, making up about 5 percent of farmers' income. However, collecting agricultural taxes became a convenient platform for local governments to hitchhike numerous fees. The problem of peasant burden became a prominent political problem (Bernstein and Lü 2003).

The party-state then adopted a double-handed strategy. From 1987 to 2003, the Central Party Committee kept calling for reducing peasant burdens. The central leadership even authorized rural residents to take the law into their own hands when central directives were ignored. The 1991 State Council's regulation concerning peasant burdens states: "It is the obligation of farmers to remit taxes to the state, to fulfill the state's procurement quotas for agricultural products, and to be responsible for the various fees and services stipulated in these regulations. Any other demands on farmers to provide financial, material, or labor contributions gratis are illegal, and farmers have the right to reject them" (Bernstein and Lü 2003, 48). Even more authoritatively, the Agriculture Law (1993, Art. 18) explicitly grants villagers the right to reject illegal fees.

Repeating the same policy without delivering it had a dual effect on trust in the Center. On the one hand, repeating the pledge to reduce peasant burden seemed to sustain public confidence in the Center's political commitment, convincing many rural people that "central authorities were on their side with regard to excessive burdens" (Bernstein and Lü 2003, 247). On the other hand, the repeated failure to reduce peasant burden undermined public confidence in the Center's implementation capacity. The result is partial trust.

A similar and ongoing trust-engineering endeavor is to fight corrup-

tion without introducing institutional changes that prove effective in many other countries. On the one hand, the regime selectively goes after high-ranking corrupt government officials to convince people of its commitment to eliminating corruption. Every now and then, the official news media reports on catching yet another "big tiger" (Wedeman 2022), aiming to reinforce people's belief in the Center's unwavering commitment to eliminating corruption. On the other hand, the regime persistently refuses to adopt anti-corruption measures proven effective elsewhere, sustaining a political environment that fosters and protects corruption (Manion 2004; Sun 2004; Wedeman 2012; Ang 2020; Gong and Tu 2022). Similar to what happened with peasant burdens, the double-handed tactic has a two-fold effect on trust in the Center. Satisfaction with anti-corruption achievements increases public confidence in the central leadership's commitment to combating corruption but raises doubts about its anti-corruption capacity (Chen 2019; Zhu, Huang, and Zhang 2019; Kang and Zhu 2021). The result is also partial trust.

Embedding

The party-state adeptly deploys the embedding tactic to predispose people to believe in the Center, especially in its commitment. Existential embedding places people in a situation where they depend on a trustworthy Center for economic security and social dignity. Ideational embedding induces the belief that the Center deserves absolute trust, creating the psychological stress that distrust in the Center implies practically the loss of hope for a better life. Informational embedding creates an echo chamber that keeps reinforcing trust in the Center.

Existential Embedding

Existential embedding consists in placing people in an environment that makes them feel dependent on the party-state for survival. First, the regime subjects people to political domination, generating political insecurity and uncertainty. The ruling party pays lip service to the principle of popular sovereignty. Meanwhile, it monopolizes political power and rejects electoral accountability. Under the one-party rule, people are rights-bearing

citizens de jure but remain de facto political subjects with no right to seek political representation (Mattingly 2019). The central leadership relaxes and tightens political control to create hope for political rights on the one hand and to remind people of the party's power monopoly on the other. For instance, the regime tolerated some "independent candidates" in the 2006–7 election of deputies to grassroots people's congresses, perhaps to create an appearance of political freedom for the approaching 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing (He 2010; Yuan 2011; Sun 2013). However, immediately after the international sports event, the party no longer tolerated independent-minded individuals running. Without exception, "independent candidates" were eliminated in ensuing elections.

Second, the regime subjects people to economic dependence, creating socioeconomic insecurity and uncertainty. Aiming to remove the economic foundation on which people may claim political freedom and rights, the regime nationalized industry and commerce and collectivized agriculture in the Maoist era. The work unit system in cities and the commune system in the countryside made people dependent on the government for subsistence (Walder 1986; Oi 1989). Similar to what happens to political control, the regime relaxes its grip on the economy and then tightens it at will, keeping people unsure of what may happen next. The government even controls charity organizations (Shue 2011), making people dependent on the government for disaster relief. The regime continues to control critical economic sectors through state-owned enterprises (Chen 2000), and it keeps private entrepreneurs on their toes by clinging to the ideological pledge to ultimately abolish private ownership (Chen and Dickson 2008, 2010; Osburg 2013).

Last, the regime subjects people to strict social control, engendering social insecurity and uncertainty. The household registration system deprives people of the freedom to migrate (Cheng and Selden 1994). The politically determined class system makes people dependent on local officials' caprice for dignity (Walder 2015). Social organizations are subject to tight control, particularly churches of organized religions (Saich 2000). The regime also plays the game of relaxing and tightening with social control. Since 2012, the once-relaxed political and social surveillance has been reinstituted and reinforced with digital technologies (Xu 2021). Recently, the regime has resumed its abandoned practice of encouraging college students to report on independent-minded professors (Jiang 2021).

Ideational Embedding

The regime has established a comprehensive system of ideological indoctrination and cultural influence, predisposing people to believe in the Center or at least believe in its political commitment. Aiming directly to cultivate trust in the Center, the propaganda machinery creates and indoctrinates three narratives. First, it adapts and reinforces the "Mandate of Heaven" myth (Esherick 1995), concocting a narrative that history and people have chosen the ruling party. According to the choice narrative, the ruling party was destined to save the country from feudal rule and colonial powers, and it is now destined to lead the nation to a glorious national revival (Gries 2004; Wang 2008; Shen and Guo 2013). According to the narrative, Chinese people have chosen the ruling party by helping it win the Liberation War (Vickers 2009, 528). The narrative credits the ruling party for liberating the peasant class from the exploitation and oppression of the landlord class in the countryside and the urban working class from capitalism. To sustain the narrative, the regime rewrites history and manipulates collective memories (Chang and Manion 2021). The Propaganda Department bans the media from using words that may foster rights consciousness, for example, "taxpayer," "civil society," "constitutionalism," and even "universal values." The National Press and Publication Administration promotes fictitious dramas and movies that "emit positive energy," that is, foster pro-regime sentiments.

Second, the regime creates a narrative that the ruling party, particularly the paramount party leader, is the rightful owner of the country. The ownership narrative derives from the choice narrative. Adapting the age-old saying "Whoever wins the heart of the people wins the right to rule the under-heaven," the ownership narrative suggests that the central party leadership is the new dynasty and that the top party leader is the newly ordained "son of heaven." According to the ownership narrative, the Center, especially the supreme leader, has a self-interest in protecting commoners from abusive local authorities (Pye 1992). Once one recognizes the supreme leader as the legitimate owner of the country, it becomes paradoxical to question his commitment to governing in the people's interests. If we compare the Center to a black hole, accepting the ownership narrative is like crossing the event horizon. To sustain the ownership narrative, the regime selects and exploits what they find useful in the warehouse

of traditional culture, which stores competing political philosophies, religious beliefs, secular values, icons, and symbols. The Ministry of Culture cultivates emperor worship by granting licenses to fictions of benevolent and wise emperors, creating and disseminating made-up stories about emperors as if they were historical facts (e.g., Zhu 2013). In particular, the regime advocates paternalist values, which emphasize hierarchical order and harmony between the authoritative but benevolent ruler and his obedient subjects. A favorite metaphor of paternalism is that the country is a large household in which the supreme party leader is the patriarch while local officials are his butlers (Pye 1992; Pines 2012).

Last, the regime creates an infallibility narrative about the Center. Ideologically, the propaganda machinery upholds the Leninist dogma that the supreme party leader enjoys the same status as the pope, which is traceable to the Oriental Orthodox in Russia (Russell 1945, 383). Culturally, the infallibility narrative derives from the traditional myth of the sage king, that is, the wise emperor who is inwardly a sage and outwardly a king. According to the narrative, the supreme party leader is by definition the greatest living Marxist, who alone understands the long-term interest of the people and the nation, knows the laws that govern the future of humankind, and holds the "truth of the universe" (Ford 2015, 1043). In support of the infallibility narrative, the supreme leader is attributed to all virtues, including wisdom, courage, erudition, stamina, and endurance (Torigian 2018).

To sustain the infallibility narrative, the regime repackages traditional cultural symbols to foster the belief that the emperor was wise and benign but surrounded by corrupt and deceptive court officials (Shi 2001; 2014, 119; Wang and You 2016). When it is impossible to deny that a paramount party leader made catastrophic blunders, the regime quietly dilutes the infallibility narrative by deploying the inevitability argument. A case in point is Mao Zedong. Deng Xiaoping, for instance, argued that Mao Zedong had an unwavering commitment to serving the people and stumbled while exploring truths in uncharted territories. The conclusion is that Mao's mistakes were forgivable because he had an unquestionable commitment.

Jointly, the three narratives create a set of circular arguments that predispose people to trust the Center. The choice narrative puts the ruling party in an undoubtable position. The ownership narrative entrenches

confidence in the central leadership's commitment. The infallibility narrative consolidates the faith that the supreme party leader is all-knowing and all-capable. In sum, the ideational embedding predisposes people to have total trust or at least partial trust in the Center, implanting a "confirmation bias" (Nickerson 1998) that primes people to look for evidence that the Center has trustworthy commitment and capacity.

Informational Embedding

Equally important is informational embedding. To sustain and entrench existential and ideational embeddings, the regime monopolizes political information. The Propaganda Department imposes strict censorship on the news media and the internet (Lei 2011; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Kuang 2018; Huang and Yeh 2019; Lei and Lu 2017; Roberts 2018; Jaros and Pan 2018; Zhu, Lu, and Shi 2013; Chen 2019). The government-owned media runs nonstop campaign-like political shows for senior central leaders, especially the top leader. Meanwhile, it quietly covers up calamitous political mistakes, especially those made by the top leader (Wallace 2022, 58). In recent years, the internet police have stayed on high alert for information that may arouse doubt about the "core" leader and his close allies (Han 2018). To prohibit people from passing collective memories to younger generations, the propaganda machinery infiltrates fabrications and myths in textbooks on history, literature, and arts (Lifton 1989). The Education Ministry demands that all educational institutions offer political education courses using government-approved textbooks that preach the narrative that history and people have chosen the ruling party (Vickers 2009, 528; Wang 2013).

Empirical Evidence

National and local surveys provide fragmentary evidence of the effect of earning, engineering, and embedding. The 2015 and 2019 Asian Barometer Surveys reveal the overall effect of the three-pronged strategy. Focusing on the effect of engineering and informational embedding, my 2014 local survey shows how exposure to a *New York Times* report affects confidence in the anti-corruption commitment of former premier Wen Jiabao and former president Hu Jintao.

Evidence from Two National Surveys

The Asian Barometer Surveys in 2015 and 2019 shed light on the effectiveness and limitations of the three-pronged trust construction strategy. Both surveys measure trust in the central government and the local government, which constitute four patterns of trust in the Center: total distrust, skepticism, partial trust, and total trust. Substantively, the four patterns constitute an ordinal scale, ranging from lowest to highest. Table 3.9 in the preceding chapter summarizes the average trust in the Center's commitment and capacity held by holders of the four patterns of trust. However, further analysis shows that moving from a weaker trust pattern to a stronger one involves substantively different changes in confidence for commitment and confidence for capacity. As table 4.1 illustrates, moving from total distrust to skepticism involves a large increase in trust in commitment and capacity. However, moving from skepticism to partial trust involves a large increase in trust in commitment but a large decrease in confidence in capacity. Last, moving from partial trust to total trust involves a large increase in confidence in capacity but a smaller increase in trust in commitment. All differences are substantial in terms of Cohen's *d*,[1] confirming that the four patterns of trust in the Center do not constitute a typical ordinal variable.

Both surveys contain three groups of factors that may affect trust in the Center. The trust-earning factor is the assessment of the national economy. The two trust engineering factors are the perception of corruption among local government officials and the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures. Trust embedding factors are paternalist orientation, internet use, education, and party membership. Gender and age are controlled.[2] An ordinal logit regression model proves a poor fit to the data, failing the test

1. Cohen's *d* is an indicator of effect size (Cohen 1988). By a rule of thumb, a Cohen's *d* below .2 indicates that the effect is a substantively trivial effect, though it can be statistically significant. A Cohen's *d* of .2 indicates that the effect is small but nontrivial; .5 indicates that the effect size is medium; and .8 indicates a large effect. The Cohen's *d* of all changes in the table is larger than 1.0. It ought to be noted that interpretation of effect size varies with the field and context of this study. Social scientists tend to adopt less stringent criteria (see Fritz, Morris, and Richler 2012; Gignac and Szodorai 2016).

2. Since it relies on cross-sectional survey data, the research focuses on identifying theoretically important correlation patterns. It uses terms such as "dependent," "explanatory," and "control variables" solely for convenience. It does not make causal arguments due to the thorny problem of endogeneity.

TABLE 4.1. Differences between the Four Patterns of Trust in the Center

	2015		2019	
	Trust in commitment	Trust in capacity	Trust in commitment	Trust in capacity
Total distrust → Skepticism	+1.3	+1.3	+1.2	+1.1
Skepticism → Partial trust	+.5	−2.0	+.8	−1.3
Partial trust → Total trust	+.6	+2.4	+.3	+2.2

Note: Row entries are the changes in the mean feature values on the six-point scale ranging from 1 (distrust fully) to 6 (trust fully). All changes are statistically significant ($p \leq .05$).

for parallel lines ($p < .001$).[3] Since the variation across trust patterns is unbalanced in substance, this study fits a multinomial logit model, examining how a one-unit change in an independent variable affects the probability of holding a particular pattern of trust in the Center instead of the other three. Total distrust is set as the reference group.[4] Tables 4.2 and 4.3 summarize the results of the multinomial logit regression. The three columns of regression coefficients in each table indicate the effects of a unit of change in a predictor on the probability of having partial trust, skepticism, or total trust instead of total distrust. For simplicity, results of supplemen-

3. When running ordinal logistic regression, one of the key assumptions is the proportional odds assumption (or the parallel lines assumption). The assumption posits that the odds of being in a particular category or higher versus all lower categories are the same regardless of the value of the predictor variables. In other words, the assumption posits that the effect of any given predictor is consistent across all thresholds (cut points) of the ordinal outcome variable. Failing to pass the test suggests that the model may not accurately represent the relationship between the predictors and the outcome. Hence, the estimated coefficients may be inaccurate or even misleading. Methodologists observe that the test is overly restrictive, especially when the model has many predictors, when it has a continuous predictor, and when the sample size is large (e.g., Williams 2006, 60; Long and Freese 2014, 331). Researchers adopt two alternatives. The conservative one is to fit a multinomial logistic regression model or a generalized ordered logit model, which does not assume proportional odds. Treating a substantively ordinal variable as a nominal one helps test the hypothesis, although it sacrifices simplicity. The more exploratory alternative is to fit an ordinal logit model, aiming for a simpler model without seeking statistically best fit. This study adopts the more conservative approach.

4. In a multinomial logit model, one outcome is used as the "reference group" (also called "base category"), and the coefficients for all other outcome groups describe how the independent variables are related to the probability of being in that outcome group versus the reference group (see Long and Freese 2014, chap. 8). The choice of total distrust as the reference group is based on two considerations. One is that total distrust represents the strongest distrust in the Center, forming the baseline for comparison. The other is that total distrust is the predictor of interest for participatory propensity and system preference in chapters 5 and 6.

TABLE 4.2. Predicting Trust in the Center (2015)

	Skepticism	Partial trust	Total trust
The state of the national economy	.418***	.325***	.632***
(1 = very bad; 5 = very good)	(.057)	(.088)	(.067)
Corruption of local officials	−.936***	.414***	−.830***
(1 = almost none; 4 = almost all)	(.114)	(.076)	(.125)
Effectiveness of anti-corruption measures	.518***	.203†	1.002***
(1 = not effective; 4 = very effective)	(.099)	(.105)	(.124)
Government leaders are like family heads	.447***	.442***	1.039***
(1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree)	(.081)	(.078)	(.093)
Internet use	−.021	−.094**	−.044†
(1 = never; 8 = frequent)	(.025)	(.027)	(.025)
Education	.029	−.001	.025
(years of schooling, 0–27)	(.021)	(.014)	(.018)
Party member	.062	−.192	.242
(0 = no, 1 = yes)	(.228)	(.263)	(.227)
Gender	.111	.465***	.479***
(0 = female; 1 = male)	(.108)	(.124)	(.096)
Age	.001	.009†	.017***
(18–94 years)	(.003)	(.005)	(.004)

Note: N = 4,068. Entries are multinomial logit regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. The base category of the dependent variable is total distrust. Missing responses are multiply imputed. Data are weighted.

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

tary analysis using other patterns as base categories are presented in discussions rather than in tabular form.

Four findings emerge. First, the Center can effectively earn trust by steering the development of the national economy. Overall, a more positive assessment of the national economy is associated with stronger trust in the Center. The majority of respondents in the two surveys feel positive about the condition of the national economy when they rate it on a five-point scale, ranging from very bad to very good (2015, Q1; 2019, Q1; see appendix B for variable descriptions). Nearly two-thirds of 4,068 respondents in the 2015 survey rate the national economy as good or very good, and almost 80 percent of 4,941 respondents in the 2019 survey feel the same about the national economy. Since it requires both commitment and capacity to develop the national economy, individuals who think more positively about the national economy are more likely to have skepticism,

TABLE 4.3. Predicting Trust in the Center (2019)

	Skepticism	Partial trust	Total trust
The state of the national economy	.308***	.384***	.710***
(1 = very bad; 5 = very good)	(.080)	(.062)	(.078)
Corruption of local officials	−.803***	.138	−1.329***
(1 = almost none; 4 = almost all)	(.108)	(.115)	(.085)
Effectiveness of anti-corruption measures	.514***	.444**	1.148***
(1 = not effective; 4 = very effective)	(.137)	(.138)	(.148)
Government leaders are like family heads	.363***	.375**	.745***
(1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree)	(.069)	(.113)	(.094)
Internet use	−.024	−.029	−.036
(1 = none; 9 = non-stop)	(.020)	(.022)	(.021)
Education	.029	.003	.053**
(Years of schooling, 0–25)	(.017)	(.017)	(.018)
Party member	.183	.043	.313
(0 = no, 1 = yes)	(.192)	(.201)	(.201)
Gender	.143	.356**	.121
(0 = female; 1 = male)	(.106)	(.130)	(.122)
Age	−.001	.010†	.011*
(18–94 years)	(.005)	(.005)	(.005)

Note: N = 4,941. Entries are multinomial logit regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. The base category of the dependent variable is total distrust. Missing responses are multiply imputed. Data are weighted.

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

partial trust, or total trust instead of total distrust. The result corroborates earlier findings that satisfaction with the national economy enhances trust in the central and local governments (Wang 2005; Lewis-Beck, Tang, and Martini 2014; Chen 2017; Wu and Wilkes 2018).

The analysis reveals an important nuance. Positive evaluation of the national economy has a larger positive effect on confidence in the Center's capacity than on confidence in its commitment. In the 2015 survey, holding all other variables at their sample means, compared with a person who rates the national economy as "very bad," an individual who rates it "very good" is significantly more likely to have total trust (the predicted probability increases from .10 to .32). However, the two individuals have nearly equal probabilities of having partial trust. The 2019 survey observes a similar pattern. Holding all other variables at their sample means, compared with a person who rates the national economy as "very bad," an

individual who rates it "very good" is significantly more likely to have total trust (the predicted probability increases from .09 to .35). Again, the two individuals are almost equally likely to have partial trust. The two patterns of trust are practically indistinguishable in terms of confidence in commitment, but total trust contains significantly stronger confidence in capacity than partial trust does. The implication of the observation is that a positive evaluation of the national economy induces a significant increase in the Center's capacity.

That the assessment of the national economy affects trust in the Center's capacity rather than trust in its commitment becomes more evident when three pairwise comparisons are set side by side (table 4.4). First, as one's evaluation of the national economy becomes more positive, an individual is more likely to have skepticism instead of total distrust. Skepticism contains stronger trust in commitment and capacity than total distrust does. The implication is that a positive evaluation of the national economy induces stronger confidence in the Center's commitment and capacity. Second, a positive evaluation of the national economy has no significant impact on the probability of having partial trust instead of skepticism. Compared to skepticism, partial trust contains weaker trust in capacity but stronger trust in commitment. The implication of the observation is that a positive evaluation of the national economy does not significantly enhance trust in the Center's commitment. Last, an individual who feels more positive about the national economy is more likely to have total trust instead of partial trust. As mentioned above, the two patterns of trust are practically indistinguishable in terms of confidence in commitment, but total trust contains significantly stronger confidence in capacity than partial trust does. The implication of the observation is that a positive evaluation of the national economy induces a significant increase in the Center's capacity. The finding is subtle but important. If the state of the national economy primarily affects confidence in the Center's capacity, then trust in the Center's commitment is not immediately susceptible to the influence of a fluctuating economy.[5]

5. The effect of assessment of the national economy on political trust cannot be precisely observed without using the two-dimensional measurement of trust in the Center. Three alternative models with the same independent variables are fitted to the data collected in the two waves of the survey. The models treat, respectively, the observed trust in the central government, the observed trust in local government, and a simple summation index of trust in government, as dependent variables. The three models show that the assessment of the national economy has a

TABLE 4.4. The Evaluation of the National Economy and Trust in the Center

	2015	2019
Total distrust → Skepticism	.418***	.307***
	(.057)	(.080)
Skepticism → Partial trust	–.093	.076
	(.065)	(.059)
Partial trust → Total trust	.307***	.326***
	(.072)	(.061)
Observations	4,068	4,941

Note: Entries are multinomial logit regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Control variables are omitted.
† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

TABLE 4.5. Perception of Local Government Corruption

	2015	2019
Almost everyone	3.9	1.1
Most	21.4	11.2
Not a lot	71.7	83.2
Hardly anyone	2.9	4.5
Observations	4,068	4,941

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2015, 2019.
Note: Column entries are percentages. Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding errors. Missing responses are multiply imputed.

The second finding is that corruption among local government officials weakens trust in the Center's capacity without immediately undermining trust in its commitment. The surveys ask respondents, "How widespread do you think corruption and bribe-taking are in your local/municipal government?" (2015, Q117; 2019, Q125). Table 4.5 summarizes the results.

The perception of more widespread local corruption weakens trust in the Center's capacity without immediately undermining trust in its commitment. The correlation becomes evident when three pairwise comparisons are placed side by side (table 4.6). Compared with those who perceive less corruption, individuals who perceive more widespread corruption are less likely to have skepticism instead of total distrust. Conversely, they

highly significant positive correlation with the dependent variables in both waves of the survey ($p < .001$). However, there is no way to discern that the assessment of the national economy enhances trust in local government without increasing trust in the central government.

are more likely to have total distrust instead of skepticism. As mentioned above, skepticism contains stronger trust in commitment and capacity than total distrust does. The implication is that widespread corruption weakens trust in the Center's commitment and capacity. The observation corroborates earlier findings that local government corruption weakens trust in the central government (Chen 2019; Zhu, Huang, and Zhang 2019).

However, the apparent effect of perception of local corruption on trust in the Center's commitment and capacity is only partially corroborated by two additional observations. First, individuals who perceive more widespread corruption are more likely to have partial trust instead of skepticism. As was mentioned above, compared to skepticism, partial trust contains weaker trust in capacity but stronger trust in commitment. The implication of the observation is that individuals who perceive more widespread local corruption may become less confident about the Center's capacity but simultaneously more confident about its commitment.

Second, individuals who perceive more widespread corruption are less likely to have total trust than partial trust. Conversely, they are more likely to have partial trust than total trust. As mentioned above, the two patterns of trust share similar confidence in commitment but partial trust contains much weaker confidence in capacity than total trust does. The implication of the observation is that a more negative perception of local government corruption undermines trust in the Center's capacity.[6] Taking all three observations into account, we conclude that individuals who perceive more widespread corruption among local government officials may lose confidence in the Center's capacity without losing confidence in its commitment simultaneously.

The third finding is that the Center can effectively engineer trust by combating corruption with campaigns. The 2015 survey asks respondents, "In your opinion, is the government working to crack down on corrup-

6. The nuanced effect of the assessment of local government corruption on political trust cannot be observed accurately without using the two-dimensional measurement of trust in the Center. The three alternative models described in the preceding footnote show that the assessment of the local government corruption has a highly significant negative correlation with trust in the central government, trust in local government, and overall trust in government in both waves of the survey ($p < .001$). However, there is no way to discern that the assessment of the local government corruption undermines trust in local government without simultaneously weakening trust in the central government.

TABLE 4.6. Perception of Local Government Corruption and Trust in the Center

	2015	2019
Total distrust → Skepticism	−.936***	−.803***
	(.114)	(.108)
Skepticism → Partial trust	1.350***	.940***
	(.086)	(.081)
Partial trust → Total trust	−1.244***	−1.466***
	(.106)	(.121)
Observations	4,068	4,941

Note: Entries are multinomial logit regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Control variables are omitted.
† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

tion and root out bribery?" (Q119). Among 4,068 respondents, 1.3 percent think the government is doing nothing, 6.8 percent think it is not doing much, 69.3 think it is doing something, and 22.7 percent think the government is doing its best. Similarly, the 2019 survey asks about the anti-corruption effort using a different question: "How effective is the government in cracking down on corruption?" (Q126). Among 4,941 respondents, 0.6 percent think the government is not effective at all, 9.0 percent think it is not very effective, 71.8 percent think it is somewhat effective, and 18.6 percent think the government is very effective. Combating corruption requires both commitment and capacity. Correspondingly, positive assessment of the government's effort to fight corruption is expected to be associated with stronger confidence in the Center's commitment and capacity. All else being equal, respondents who find that the government is working hard or effectively to combat corruption are more likely to have skepticism, partial trust, or total trust instead of total distrust. The finding implies that individuals who find anti-corruption measures effective have stronger confidence in the Center's commitment and capacity.

However, further analyses show that positive evaluation of the government's anti-corruption efforts enhances confidence in the Center's capacity without enhancing confidence in its commitment. The one-sided effect becomes evident when we take three pairwise comparisons into account. First, all else being equal, respondents who find the government is working hard or effectively to fight corruption are more likely to have skepticism instead of total distrust. As mentioned above, skepticism contains stronger trust in the Center's commitment and capacity than total distrust does.

TABLE 4.7. Evaluation of Anti-Corruption Efforts and Trust in the Center

	2015	2019
Total distrust → Skepticism	.518***	.514***
	(.099)	(.137)
Skepticism → Partial trust	–.315**	–.071
	(.114)	(.079)
Partial trust → Total trust	.799***	.705***
	(.101)	(.093)
Observations	4,068	4,941

Note: Entries are multinomial logit regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Control variables are omitted.

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

The implication of the observation is that a positive assessment of ongoing anti-corruption efforts improves trust in the Center's commitment and capacity. Second, individuals who positively assess the government's anti-corruption effort are equally likely or even less likely to have partial trust instead of skepticism. Partial trust and skepticism, as mentioned above, share low confidence in the Center's capacity but partial trust contains a much stronger confidence in commitment. The implication of the observation is that a positive evaluation of the anti-corruption effort does not enhance trust in the Center's commitment. The third and last observation is that individuals who positively assess the current anti-corruption effort are more likely to have total trust instead of partial trust. The two patterns of trust share similar confidence in commitment, but total trust contains a much stronger confidence in capacity. The implication of the observation is that the positive evaluation of anti-corruption effort significantly enhances trust in the Center's capacity. Overall, the implication of the three findings is that a positive evaluation of the anti-corruption effort strengthens confidence in the Center's capacity without simultaneously enhancing trust in its commitment.[7]

7. The effect of assessment of the existing anti-corruption measures and efforts on political trust cannot be accurately observed without using the two-dimensional measurement of trust in the Center. The three alternative models described in footnote 6 show that the assessment of the anti-corruption measure and effort has a highly significant positive correlation with trust in the central government, trust in local government, and overall trust in government ($p < .001$). However, there is no way to discern that the assessment of the anti-corruption measure or effort strengthens trust in the central government without simultaneously enhancing trust in local government.

TABLE 4.8. Government Leaders Are Like Family Heads

	2015	2019
Strongly agree	9.6	6.9
Agree	58.5	65.3
Disagree	30.2	26.6
Strongly disagree	1.7	1.1
Observations	4,068	4,941

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2015, 2019.
Note: Column entries are percentages. Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding errors. Missing responses are multiply imputed.

TABLE 4.9. Paternalist Orientation and Trust in the Center

	2015	2019
Total distrust → Skepticism	.447***	.363***
	(.081)	(.068)
Skepticism → Partial trust	–.006	.012
	(.086)	(.067)
Partial trust → Total trust	.598***	.381***
	(.098)	(.072)
Observations	4,068	4,941

Note: Entries are multinomial logit regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Control variables are omitted.
† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

Both surveys show trust embedding measures have mixed effects. Promoting paternalist cultural values seems effective in cultivating stronger trust in the Center, but in a one-sided manner. The surveys ask respondents if they agree that "government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions" (2015, Q142; 2019, Q149). Table 4.8 shows that the traditional paternalist orientation remains widely shared, as over two-thirds of respondents in both surveys agree or strongly agree with the statement that compares government leaders to household heads.

Overall, individuals with a stronger paternalist orientation tend to have stronger trust in the Center. Interestingly, paternalist orientation seems to induce a stronger confidence in the Center's capacity rather than trust in its commitment. Again, the pattern becomes more evident when three observations are placed side by side (table 4.9).

To start with, compared with those with weaker paternalist values,

individuals who have stronger paternalist orientations are more likely to have skepticism instead of total distrust. Skepticism contains stronger trust in commitment and capacity than total distrust does. The implication of the observation is that a stronger paternalist orientation is associated with stronger trust in the Center's commitment and capacity.

However, the observation that adherence to stronger paternalist values is associated with stronger trust in the Center's commitment and capacity is not corroborated by the other two observations. First, individuals who have stronger paternalist values are equally likely to have partial trust or skepticism. Compared to skepticism, partial trust contains somewhat weaker trust in capacity but much stronger trust in commitment. The implication of the observed correlation is that individuals who are more paternalistic do not have more confidence in the Center's commitment.

Second, individuals who are more paternalistic are more likely to have total trust than partial trust. The two patterns of trust share similar trust in the Center's commitment, but total trust contains stronger trust in capacity. The implication is that individuals who have stronger paternalist orientations may have stronger confidence in the Center's capacity. Interviews with petitioners in Beijing suggest that their confidence in the Center is based on their belief that central leaders are like heads of large families (Li 2013, 14). It seems that people with stronger paternalist orientations are more likely to believe that national leaders are able to control local government officials, just like a family head is able to control his butlers or housekeepers.

The effects of other trust embedding measures are a mixed story. Internet censorship works to neutralize the negative effect but fails to generate a positive impact. Studies based on earlier surveys find that respondents who use the internet more frequently tend to have weaker trust in the central government (Lei 2011; Xiang and Hmielowski 2017, 419; Chen 2017, 320; Lyu and Li 2018). To the extent that the internet weakens the regime's monopoly of information, internet use is a proxy for exposure to uncensored information on the regime's failures and blunders. In particular, the internet circulates allegations of corruption and other wrongdoings of senior central leaders. Individuals who use the internet more frequently are expected to have more exposure to the unflattering truth about the regime, hence, weaker trust in the Center. For one, people who totally distrust the regime are more likely to resort to the internet for reliable political information. For another, the internet exposes users to censored

information, for example, reports on the Great Famine, the Great Cultural Revolution, and the crackdown on the 1989 student movement (Huang and Yeh 2019; Desposato, Wang, and Wu 2021).

Admittedly, the correlation between internet use and total distrust can also be a relationship of mutual reinforcement. Generally speaking, people who use the internet more frequently are more likely to have skepticism or total distrust, probably because they have more exposure to the unflattering truth about the regime. People who distrust the regime are more likely to use the internet for reliable political information.

The two more recent surveys, however, show that internet use no longer has much effect on trust in the Center. In the 2015 survey, respondents who use the internet more often are more likely to have total distrust instead of partial trust. Otherwise, internet use has no effect. In the 2019 survey, internet use has no effect at all. The decline of the internet's influence allows for two interpretations. One is that internet use is now a constant, as three-quarters of the adult population use the internet as of 2019.[8] The other possible cause is that the party-state has considerably enhanced its technical capacity to censor the internet. What is noteworthy is that, although it is successful in neutralizing the effect of the internet, the party-state does not manage to cultivate trust in the Center through internet propaganda (Han 2018).

School education is an important instrument of political indoctrination. However, educational background has no effect on trust in the Center, contradicting earlier findings that school education enhances trust in the central leadership (Kennedy 2009; Kang and Zhu 2021, 434). Further investigation is called for because the regime keeps changing its education policy. As a result, a given educational level may have different implications for different age cohorts. For instance, people who went to college before and after the student movement in 1989 may well have considerably different political values.

More interestingly, party membership has no effect on trust in the

8. The number of internet users has grown fast and steadily in the last twenty years. The Asian Barometer Survey does not ask about internet use in its first wave completed in 2002. The next four waves observe a dramatic decline of people who never use the internet. In the second wave in 2008, 82.8 percent of 5,098 respondents never use internet. The number drops to 62.8 percent of 3,473 respondents in the third wave completed in 2011, 43.9 percent of 4,068 respondents in the fourth wave completed in 2015, and 25.1 percent of 4,941 respondents in the fifth wave completed in 2019.

Center. Partisanship has a strong effect on trust in politicians in electoral democracies (Citrin and Stoker 2018, 53). In the United States, for example, citizens identified as Democrats have stronger trust in Democratic presidents. Conversely, citizens identified as Republicans have stronger trust in Republican presidents (Hetherington and Rudolf 2015, 447). The party-state in China resorts to organizational embedding, recruiting elites to join the ruling party and subjecting members to intensive indoctrination. However, the strategy does not seem to work.

An earlier study observes that party members do not always trust the central government more than nonparty masses (Cui et al. 2015, 103). The two surveys corroborate the earlier finding, offering additional support to the argument that many party members join the party out of careerist calculations rather than political conviction and loyalty (Dickson 2014). More importantly, the observations suggest that the recent measures have yet to revitalize the "party spirit" (Pieke 2018; Liang, Chen, and Zhao 2021). After all, the lack of effect of party membership on trust in the central party leadership may derive from ordinary party members' lack of voice (see Rhodes-Purdy 2021, 412). Despite the central leadership's repeated commitments to building intraparty democracy, the ruling party remains a strictly hierarchical political organization where "most ordinary Party members are not insiders" (Naughton 2016, 411). Under Leninist democratic centralism, ordinary party members have practically no opportunity to exert any meaningful impact on selecting even low-ranking party leaders, let alone the central leadership (see He and Thøgersen 2010, 690; Koss 2018). All ordinary citizens are practically disenfranchised, but the lack of voice may be particularly demoralizing for party members. After all, they may have joined the party because of its ideological appeal as a vanguard party.

The finding is even more interesting in light of a recent observation that party members, on average, hold substantially more modern and progressive views than the public on gender equality, political pluralism, and openness to international exchange (Ji and Jiang 2020, 651). Being more enlightened and having stronger internal efficacy, party members are more likely to feel disappointed by their lack of voice.

Political trust in electoral democracies reflects primarily experiences of political life and perceptions of policy processes and outcomes rather than personalities and social characteristics (Levi and Stoker 2000, 481). However, demographic backgrounds in China may reflect political experiences.

The two surveys show that older people are more likely to have total trust in the Center, probably because they have been exposed to trust embedding measures since they were young. Further research on the generational change of political trust is called for because China has witnessed remarkably distinctive generations since 1949 (Wu, Li, and Song 2020).

The Effect of an Unconfirmed Corruption Investigation Report

While the two national surveys generate findings about the overall effects of trust earning, engineering, and embedding, my local survey in 2014 opens a window on the effect of informational embedding. The survey caught a rare glimpse into how an unconfirmed corruption scandal affected trust in a former premier, Wen Jiabao, and a former president, Hu Jintao.

In 2012 the ruling party underwent leadership succession. The incumbent president, Hu Jintao, and the State Council premier, Wen Jiabao, had served two terms and were due to retire. As a formal procedure, the national congress of the ruling party was to make decisions on the forthcoming leadership change. Then, out of the blue, two weeks before the 18th Party Congress convened, the *New York Times* dropped a bombshell. In a detailed investigation report, Barboza (2012) alleged that the family of the retiring premier, Wen Jiabao, had amassed a huge fortune. Thanks to the internet, the report found its way to China, circulated among internet users, and then spread through word of mouth. Despite the regime's apparent effort to contain the spread of the report, many people learned about the allegation. How did the exposure to the unconfirmed report affect popular trust in the former premier? How did it affect trust in the former president, who was the premier's superior?

The local survey asks respondents to rate Wen Jiabao's anti-corruption commitment: "Please rate the recently retired premier Wen Jiabao. A score of 0 indicates he is not truly committed to fighting corruption, and a score of 100 indicates he is fully committed. How many points do you give him?" The former premier receives an average score of 73.7 from 1,779 respondents. The same question is raised about the former president, whose mean score is 76.3.

The two ratings are treated as dependent variables. The predictor of interest is whether the respondent is aware of the report. The question goes as follows: "The American newspaper the *New York Times* reports that Pre-

mier Wen Jiabao's children have an asset of three billion *yuan* Renminbi. Have you heard about it?" Among 1,779 respondents, 30.2 percent know about the report, while others are unaware of it. The first research hypothesis is that respondents who are aware of the report have weaker confidence in the former premier's anti-corruption commitment. The second research hypothesis is that respondents who know about the report are also less confident about the former president's anti-corruption commitment.

The key control variable is the time at which the survey asks respondents about the *New York Times* report. For people who were unaware of the report before the survey, being asked about the report made them aware of the allegation. To examine if being exposed to the report during the survey affected respondents' trust in the two leaders, respondents were divided randomly into an experimental group and a control group in the last stage of sampling. Two versions of the questionnaire were administered. The question about the *New York Times* report appears before questions about political trust in the version administered to the experimental group. The question appears at the end of the questionnaire in the version administered to the control group. Among 1,779 respondents, 890 are in the experimental group, and 31 percent of them are aware of the report. The other 889 are in the control group, and 29 percent of them are aware of the report.

Another control variable is the respondents' knowledge of three high-profile anti-corruption investigations. Immediately after he rose to power as the general party secretary in October 2012, Xi Jinping launched an unprecedentedly far-reaching anti-corruption campaign. By the time of the survey, Bo Xilai, a former member of the politburo and a potential rival of the new leader, was already sentenced to jail after being convicted of corruption. At the time of the survey, Xu Caihou, one of the two vice chairmen of the Central Military Commission, was under investigation for corruption. More importantly, Zhou Yongkang, a former member of the standing committee of the politburo, was also under investigation (see Wedeman 2017). President Jiang Zemin and President Hu Jintao both deployed anti-corruption campaigns to purge political rivals (Fewsmith 2012). However, earlier anti-corruption campaigns did not go beyond the rank of politburo member. President Xi's breaking into a forbidden zone could have raised the expectation that even the former premier was not above the law.

Most respondents know about the three investigations. Among 1,779

TABLE 4.10. Predicting Trust in Wen Jiabao and Hu Jintao

	Wen Jiabao	Hu Jintao
Aware of the *New York Times* report (0 = no; 1 = yes)	−11.056*** (.428)	−4.565** (.472)
Timing of the survey question (0 = at the end; 1 = at the beginning)	1.580 (1.880)	.582 (1.187)
Aware of three investigations (1 = none, 2 = one or two; 3 = all three)	−4.015† (1.513)	−2.051 (.928)
Party member (0 = no, 1 = yes)	−1.062 (1.770)	−.738 (.824)
Education (Years of schooling, 0–22)	−.481 (.374)	−.274 (.176)
Gender (0 = female; 1 = male)	−4.531*** (.252)	−3.621** (.551)
Age in years (18–93)	−.292† (.122)	.069 (.050)
R-squared	.085	.028

Source: Data from author's 2014 survey.

Note: N = 1,779. Entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Missing responses are multiply imputed. Data are weighted.

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

respondents, 78.1 percent know that Bo Xilai has been sentenced to jail for corruption, 73.5 percent know that Xu Caihou is under investigation for corruption, and 82.2 percent know that Zhou Yongkang is under investigation. Of all respondents, 11.7 percent know about none of the three investigations, 22.4 percent know about one or two, and 65.9 percent know about all of them. This study hypothesizes that people who know more about anti-corruption investigations are less confident about the anti-corruption commitment of the former premier and the former president. For reasons discussed above, party membership, education, age, and gender are also controlled. An ordinary least square (OLS) regression model is fitted to the data. Table 4.10 summarizes the results.

The survey exposed 611 respondents to the *New York Times* report for the first time. However, learning about the report during the survey has no significant effect on trust in the two former national leaders. What matters is pre-survey exposure to the report. Although the report remains unconfirmed by the time of the survey, the pre-survey exposure to it has a significant and negative effect on trust in the former premier. Respon-

dents who are aware of the report are less confident about Wen Jiabao's anti-corruption commitment by 11 points on a 100-point scale than those who are unaware of it. Moreover, the effect size is substantial. The 1,241 respondents who are unaware of the report give the former premier an average score of 77.1 on a 100-point scale of confidence in anti-corruption commitment. In contrast, respondents who are aware of the report give him an average score of 65.6 out of 100. Cohen's *d* of the difference in means is .44, indicating that the difference is substantial.

The negative effect of the exposure to the unconfirmed report on confidence in the former premier's anti-corruption commitment is remarkable but hardly surprising. Wen Jiabao was arguably the most vocal senior leader in fighting corruption, repeatedly expressing his support for a "sunshine law." In particular, he lashed out at Bo Xilai at his last press conference as premier (Fewsmith 2012). Upon hearing about the report, people might wonder about the former premier's honesty. To the extent that the local survey captures a historical moment, the observation corroborates earlier findings that trust in politicians is highly susceptible to the erosive effect of corruption scandals (Seligson 2002; Citrin and Stoker 2018, 60).

Meanwhile, knowing about the report also has a negative effect on trust in former president Hu Jintao. Compared with those who are unaware of it, people who know about the report are less confident that the former president sincerely wants to fight corruption. Upon learning about the report, people may suspect that the president turned a blind eye to his lieutenant's corruption. The observation suggests that exposure to a suspected corruption scandal involving one politician has a spillover effect on other political leaders. The negative effect of the report on trust in the former president is also substantial (Cohen's $d = .30$), though weaker than that on trust in the former premier. It is well understood that the former president was overshadowed by his predecessor, Jiang Zemin, who was the patron of the three politicians under investigation (Fewsmith 2021, 273). People who know of high politics may attribute Hu Jintao's lackluster performance in controlling corruption to his lack of capacity rather than his lack of commitment.[9]

9. Hu Jintao was never bestowed the status of "leadership core." Jiang Zemin remained the de facto leadership core throughout Hu's tenure as the general party secretary. As a result, Hu did not have veto power over critical decisions, nor could he deviate from prevailing rules over succession. The consequence was "nine dragons taming the water" (e.g., Blanchette and Medeiros 2021), resulting in the mixture of economic growth and rampant corruption.

For research on the formation mechanism of political trust, the two findings showcase the power of embedding trust through controlling political information. More specifically, the findings demonstrate the power of the internet. Without the internet, the report could not have reached so many people in the country. Ironically, the observed effect of the internet reflects the power of censorship by highlighting the impact of the occasional crack on the Great Firewall. More than two years after the report's publication, over two-thirds of the respondents were unaware of it. Without the strict censorship, the *New York Times* report might have reached more people. The censorship proves its effectiveness when it cracks on rare occasions. The arrival of the internet age poses a novel challenge to the regime by drilling holes in airtight censorship. Despite the increasingly higher Great Firewall (Griffiths 2021), information on suspected corruption of senior leaders and their families slips through, affecting trust in the Center.

Conclusion

The party-state deploys a three-pronged strategy to construct trust in the Center. First, the Center performs to earn trust by promulgating policies that aim to develop the economy, provide basic social welfare, and improve people's livelihood. Second, the regime engineers trust by fixing problems of its making while rejecting institutional changes, for example, combating corruption while rejecting anti-corruption measures that prove effective in other countries. Last, the party-state embeds trust, subjecting people to political subordination, economic dependence, social control, and ideological indoctrination.

The strategy works. People judge the Center's commitment by listening to what the central government says, and they assess its capacity by observing what local governments do. Trust in the Center's commitment is more like faith resulting from indoctrination, while trust in its ruling capacity is more like an informed judgment. Two national surveys suggest that the majority of people are positive about all aspects of the country's governance. They feel positive about the national economy and approve of anti-corruption efforts. Correspondingly, they are more likely to trust the Center. Discontent exists. Overall, however, the Center enjoys multiple layers of protective buffers from the erosive effect of policy failures and

poor governance. In addition, the local survey suggests people are willing to give the benefit of the doubt to the supreme leader so that he can claim well-deserved credit without accepting equally well-deserved blame.

However, the three-pronged trust construction strategy has limits. First, trust earning is an uphill endeavor. If satisfaction with government performance in providing stewardship for economic development enhances trust in the Center, dissatisfaction surely cuts the other way. Economic performance legitimacy is unreliable because the economy has global cycles that no government can single-handedly control. To the extent that satisfaction with economic growth enhances trust in the Center's capacity, the effect may also indicate rising expectations of the government's performance. When economic growth slows down and a crisis occurs, trust in the Center is bound to get weaker. The same logic of the rising expectations occurs with other efforts to earn trust.

Second, trust engineering can backfire. In the short term, the regime wins public confidence by working hard to fix the problem of corruption that it creates. In the long run, however, people may question why the regime refuses to adopt anti-corruption measures that prove effective in other countries. Similarly, censorship can be a double-edged sword. Keeping people in the dark can create unfounded confidence in the Center. When the firewall cracks, unconfirmed corruption scandals involving a single leader can cause substantive and long-term damage to the trustworthiness of the central leadership in general.

Last, measures of trust embedding may be unsustainable. It takes an enormous amount of political, economic, and social control to structurally subjugate ordinary citizens, the rank and file of the ruling party, and multiple levels of party and government officials. Moreover, excessive control can be counterproductive. Relying on state-owned enterprises and agricultural collectivization has proven devastating to the national economy. Unrelenting political control stifles economic entrepreneurship and social creativity. Systematic indoctrination depletes the economic resources required to sustain expensive monitoring and tutelage. Yet another twist and turn is that the constructed partial trust can encourage contentious political participation.

CHAPTER 5

Effect on Political Participation

Political trust affects the choice of "courses of action" in politics (Levi and Stoker 2000, 196). Students of political trust in electoral democracies have examined the effect of political trust on two types of participation. First, they examine if more trusting citizens are more willing to participate in system-conserving activities. Some researchers find that more trustful citizens are more likely to engage in voting and attend election campaign activities (Shaffer 1981; Warren 1999; Citrin and Stoker 2018, 62; Bélanger and Nadeau 2005). Other scholars find that political trust does not have a significant impact on electoral participation in general (e.g., Citrin and Luks 2001), but distrusting citizens seem more likely to support third-party candidates in a long-standing two-party system (Hetherington 1999). The question remains open-ended as elections have become increasingly contentious in established democracies in recent years (Citrin and Luks 2001; Norris and Inglehart 2019). A recent development is that distrusting citizens reject legitimate election results and even resort to violence to overturn an election that they dislike, as evidenced in the riot on Capitol Hill in the United States on January 6, 2021 (Kirk and Schill 2024).

Second, scholars examine how political trust affects citizens' participation in system-contesting activities. The most influential hypothesis in this regard is that "a combination of high sense of political efficacy and low sense of political trust is the optimum combination for mobilization—a belief that influence is both possible and necessary" (Gamson 1968, 48). Similar to what happens with the research on the relationship between political trust and institutionalized participation, scholars draw different conclusions. Some analysts find that distrust in government induces the

approval of and actual involvement in uninstitutionalized activities, for example, civil disorder, riots, and even anti-system activities (Aberbach 1969; Aberbach and Walker 1970; Paige 1971; Abravanel and Busch 1975; Muller, Jukam, and Seligson 1982; Seligson 1980; Kaase 1999). However, other studies find that the apparent effect of political distrust disappears when other factors are taken into consideration (e.g., Fraser 1970).

The literature on the effect of political trust on participation in electoral democracies makes three implicit assumptions. First, political participation concerns the choice of a national political leader and a ruling party. Second, although political trust has distinct dimensions, it can be adequately measured by a unidimensional summation scale. In other words, citizens are considered to have a certain level of overall trust or distrust in a political object, and there is little need to be alert to situations in which they have different levels of trust in different dimensions of the same political object. Last, participation is either institutionalized or uninstitutionalized, although the distinction is not always clear-cut and the boundary between the two modes of participation shifts over time.

However, the three assumptions are not fully applicable to China. First, there are no meaningful elections in the country. Chinese people have no say in the selection of national leaders, nor do they have any institutionalized channel to effectively influence central policymaking. Recently, the regime has stepped up the effort to prove its system superiority in response to the ideological challenge of the democratic alliance led by the United States. As evidence of its "whole-process democracy," the regime has opened channels for citizens to voice their concerns, opinions, and suggestions on selected national legislations such as health-care reform, local government budgets, and the appointment of local officials through group deliberations, telephone hotlines, and internet platforms (e.g., Korolev 2014; He 2018; Noesselt 2023). Despite the limited new openings, however, it remains true that political participation in the country occurs primarily in the realm of policy implementation. Second, trust in the Center is two-dimensional and has four representative patterns that embody distinct combinations of trust in commitment and trust in capacity. Last, political participation has three modes instead of only two. Citizens' activities can be institutionalized participation, boundary-spanning rightful resistance, or uninstitutionalized defiance (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 7; O'Brien 2003; O'Brien and Li 2006).

Drawing on the two waves of the Asian Barometer Survey in 2015

and 2019, this chapter examines how trust in the Center affects the likelihood of engaging in institutionalized action of voicing opinions through the official media, boundary-spanning collective petitions, and transgressive actions like mass demonstrations and risky rights-defending activities. It proceeds in three sections. The first section describes the three forms of political participation. The next section presents data, hypotheses, and analytic models. The last section discusses findings, highlighting how the two-dimensional measurement of trust in the Center improves scholarly understanding of the relationship between political trust and political participation in the country.

Voice, Petition, and Defiance

Chinese people are excluded from policymaking but included in policy implementation. Central policies have two elements. The substantive component may serve or harm people's interests. However, the procedural component invariably demands that local authorities respect people's lawful rights and interests. Even explicitly exploitative collectivization and taxation have a procedural component that requires local government officials to practice the "mass line" rather than resorting to coercion. In addition, there are also central policies that exclusively target local power holders, for example, serving the people, ruling by law, and combating corruption. The regime does not allow people to choose local leaders through elections, but it grants people the right to oversee local leaders over policy implementation and installs institutional channels such as the letters and visits system, administrative review, and administrative litigation (Diamant, Lubman, and O'Brien 2003; O'Brien and Li 2004).

First, the regime sets up platforms of voice that are easy to control. It requires the official news media to serve as "ears and eyes" of the central leadership. Newspapers create special columns to publish selected readers' letters. The China Central Television Station (CCTV) has a program called *Focused Interview*, which was close to investigative journalism during its heyday. As a result, although there is no specific law or regulation, expressing opinions through the media has become an accepted practice for ordinary citizens. It involves little political risk unless one criticizes the regime or the top leader without successfully hiding one's identity. Writing to the official media is a form of voice (Hirschman 1981, 30).

Second, the regime allows people to lodge complaints individually, though it imposes restrictions on collective actions. The Constitution declares that "Citizens of the People's Republic of China shall have the right to criticize and make suggestions regarding any state organ or state employee and have the right to file with relevant state organs complaints, charges or reports against any state organ or state employee for violations of the law or dereliction of duty" (Art. 41). However, the State Council issues regulations (1995, revised 2005) that impose restrictions on collective petitioning, forbidding people to send more than five representatives when lodging complaints (O'Brien and Li 1995; Luehrmann 2003; Minzner 2006). Consequently, joining a collective petition is a boundary-spanning activity, usually involving more mass mobilization than is legally permitted and politically tolerated (O'Brien 2003).

Last, the regime recognizes people's right to protest, though it practically forbids nonmobilized demonstrations. The regime has shifted its position on the right to protest dramatically. The Constitution in the Maoist era declared that citizens have the right to strike and take to the street (Nathan 1985). However, the post-Mao leadership abolished these constitutional rights in the name of maintaining political and social stability. In 1990, in the wake of the student movements, the central government promulgated the Law on Assembly, Procession, and Demonstration (see Findlay and Chiu 1991). The law requires that organizers of demonstrations seek approval from the Public Security Ministry and its local offices. However, approval is only granted when the government mobilizes a demonstration behind the scenes, for example, when apparently spontaneous anti-Japan protests took place in multiple cities across the country in 2012 (Weiss 2013).

Despite the regime's de facto ban on collective protests, some people engage in defiant political activities. Unapproved protests occur. People take to the street in the name of taking a walk, sit down in front of government office buildings, and even block the highway and the railroad. Moreover, disruptive protests sometimes evolve into unrest that involves besieging government buildings, ransacking government offices, and destroying police vehicles (Steinhardt and Wu 2016). While government authorities consider such activities illegal and punishable, protesters insist that they are defending their lawful rights and interests (e.g., Chen 2012). They defy decisions made by the central leadership on the grounds that such decisions are not laws enacted through due legislation process. Most defiantly,

protesters publicly demand the top leader to step down. The scenarios have played out in the past. The most recent case in point is the anti-lockdown protest known as the White Paper Movement (e.g., Thornton 2023).

Data, Hypotheses, and Models

The 2015 and 2019 waves of the Asian Barometer Survey ask if respondents have engaged in three activities that correspond to voice, petition, and defiance The question goes as follows: "In the past three years, have you done the following because of personal, family, or neighborhood problems or problems with government officials and policies?" The three activities are (1) contact news media to express opinions, (2) join others to cosign an appeal or petition, and (3) join a demonstration or protest parade (2015, Q73, Q75, Q76; 2019, Q73, Q74, Q79). In addition, the 2019 survey asks if respondents have risked harm to defend their rights (Q80). Regarding each activity, the provided answers are (1) I have done this more than once, (2) I have done this once, (3) I have not done this, but I may do it if something important happens in the future, and (4) I have not done this, and I will not do it regardless of the situation.[1] Respondents who have engaged in an activity are merged into one group, regardless of the number of times. Those who have not engaged in an activity are merged into another group, regardless of their expressed behavioral propensity. Table 5.1 summarizes the self-reported past engagement in the listed forms of political participation.

The observed level of political activism of Chinese people is consistent with field observations and estimates derived from internet data (O'Brien and Li 2006; Cai 2010, 2015; Chen 2000; Lee 2007; Chen 2012; Zhang and Pan 2019; Chen 2020). Less than 5 percent of respondents had sought to express opinions through the media. The activity is low-risk and ineffective. Collective petitions are more risky but also more effective than contacting the media. The regime has considerably tightened control over collective petitioning since 2012 (Qiaoan and Teets 2020). Consequently, participation in collective petitions declines remarkably. Nearly 10 percent of respondents say that they have joined petitions in the 2015 survey,

1. The Chinese wordings of the questions are slightly different in the two surveys. Moreover, the 2019 survey has an additional answer: "I have done this more than three times."

TABLE 5.1. Political Participation in the Past Three Years

	2015	2019
Contact the news media	3.8	3.7
Join a collective petition	9.9	3.7
Join a demonstration	1.9	1.4
Risk harm to defend rights	—	1.9
Observations	4,068	4,941

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2015, 2019.
Note: "—" indicates not asked. Column entries are percentages of respondents who engaged in the activity in the past three years. Missing responses are multiply imputed.

whereas less than 4 percent make the same statement in the 2019 survey. Engagement in disruptive demonstration involves even higher risks, but it is usually the most effective way of defending one's rights.

This study examines the correlation between political trust and past engagement in these activities. It assumes that people who have engaged in a participatory act are more likely to do the same in the future than those who have not done so on the grounds that "activism begets future activism" (Tarrow 1994, 165; see also McAdam 1989). Moreover, the study assumes that the previous participation experience has not destroyed the cognitive foundation of the participatory action in question. Researchers generally agree that political participation tends to reinforce the trust or distrust that underlies it. In this view, institutionalized participatory activities like voting and attending campaign rallies enhance trust, whereas noninstitutionalized participation deepens distrust. Likewise, peaceful protest, in which the trusting and the distrusting are equally likely to participate, has little effect on trust (e.g., Iyengar 1980; Finkel 1987).

Based on the two assumptions, the study hypothesizes that trust in the Center affects the probability of engaging in participatory activity by affecting people's assessment of the risk and effectiveness of the action in question. More specifically, it tests the following four hypotheses. First, total trust is expected to be associated with political inactivity. People with total trust may feel no need to take any action as they may be fully satisfied with central policies and their implementation. Even if they are not fully satisfied with a central policy or its implementation, people with total trust may feel no need to take any action because they are confident that the Center will and can fix the problems.

Second, partial trust is expected to enhance the probability of joining collective petitions. Partial trust is characterized by the combination of trust in the Center's political commitment and distrust in its policy implementation capacity. The combination implies a tension arising from unmet expectations. Trust in commitment induces high expectations of the benefits promised in central policies. Meanwhile, distrust in capacity induces disappointment with undelivered promises. The combination also implies a sense of safe agency. Trust in commitment assures people that the Center will protect them against local authorities, serving as a "guarantor against repression" (Tarrow 1994, 88). Meanwhile, distrust in capacity encourages people to defend their rights and interests by helping the Center rein in rogue local officials (Li 2004).

Third, skepticism is expected to induce political apathy or inactivism, that is, reluctance to engage in the listed actions. In other words, skepticism is expected to be a disincentive for political activism. On the one hand, people who doubt the Center's commitment may not take central policies seriously. As a result, they do not have high hopes for what the Center promises. On the other hand, doubts about the Center's implementation capacity predispose people to expect poor implementation, which also contributes to low expectations. Working together, low expectation of the promised benefits leads to a low level of frustration with undelivered promises. For skeptics, participation is neither necessary nor promising. Respondents holding skepticism are expected to have the lowest likelihood of having taken a participatory action.

Last, total distrust is expected to encourage participation in defiant activities. People with total distrust do not expect demonstrations to bring about any positive changes, but they join protests to express discontent, to vent anger, and even to embarrass the regime and the central leadership.

The key control variable is internal political efficacy, that is, the sense of competence in understanding public affairs and participating in politics. Scholars distinguish between two kinds of political efficacy. Internal efficacy refers to the self-assessment of one's own competence to understand and participate effectively in politics, while external efficacy refers to the self-assessment of one's capability of making governmental authorities and institutions more responsive to citizens' demands (Abramson 1972; Balch 1974; Craig 1979; Craig and Maggiotto 1982; Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991). This study focuses on internal political efficacy because external efficacy is based on an individual's

TABLE 5.2. I Think I Can Participate in Politics

	2015	2019
Strongly agree	4.0	2.1
Agree	27.0	21.4
Disagree	62.3	69.3
Strongly disagree	6.7	7.3
Observations	4,068	4,941

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2015, 2019.
Note: Column entries are percentages. Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding errors. Missing responses are multiply imputed.

judgment and expectation of the responsiveness of political authorities, which is similar to trust in government (Anderson 2010). Both surveys gauge internal efficacy with a four-point ordinal scale. Respondents are asked if they agree with the following statement: "I think I have the ability to participate in politics" (2015, Q134; 2019, Q141). Provided answers range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Stronger agreement indicates a stronger sense of internal political efficacy. Table 5.2 summarizes the responses.

Party membership is controlled. Members are expected to be more likely to engage in the system-conserving activity of contacting the media but less likely to engage in potentially system-contesting activities, such as participating in collective petitions and joining mass protests, let alone risking harm to defend rights. In addition, following existing studies on political participation in the country (Jennings 1997; Guo 2007; Li 2008), this study also controls demographic backgrounds. Male, younger, and better-educated people are expected to be politically more active.

Findings and Discussions

Logistic regression models are fitted to the data to explore the correlation between trust in the Center and participation in voice, petition, and defiance. Previous engagement in the activities is treated as the dependent variable. The predictor of interest is trust in the Center. Total trust is set as the base category on the grounds that individuals who are fully confident about the Center are contented and henceforth inactive.

TABLE 5.3. Trust in the Center and Voice through the Media

	2015	2019
Total distrust	.144	.705**
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.280)	(.257)
Skepticism	–.402	.081
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.253)	(.200)
Partial trust	.128	.325
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.269)	(.212)
Political efficacy	.732***	.321*
(1 = very low; 4 = very high)	(.201)	(.156)
Education	.066*	.101***
(0–27 years)	(.027)	(.022)
Party member	.037	–.332
(0 = no, 1 = yes)	(.280)	(.274)
Gender	.580**	.404†
(0 = female; 1 = male)	(.197)	(.206)
Age in years	–.016*	–.005
(18–94)	(.006)	(.007)
Observations	4,068	4,941

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2015, 2019.

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Total trust is set as the base category of trust in the Center. Missing responses are multiply imputed. Data are weighted.

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

Voice

Perhaps because it involves little risk and hardly ever works, contacting the government-controlled news media does not presuppose a stronger trust in the Center. As table 5.3 shows, individuals who have previously engaged in the activity and those who have not are practically indistinguishable in how they assess the Center's trustworthiness. The only notable observation is that, in the 2019 survey, respondents who have contacted the news media are more likely to have total distrust instead of total trust than those who have not done so. The observation allows for two interpretations. One is that individuals with total distrust are inclined to contact the news media to air grievances even though they do not expect positive feedback. The other one is that people who have contacted the media are

disillusioned when they realize that it is futile to do so. The latter scenario seems more likely because government-owned news media do not have an adequate workforce to handle letters from readers and audiences.

While trust in the Center has hardly any effect on contacting the media, efficacy does. Corroborating an earlier study (Shen et al. 2011), individuals with stronger internal efficacy are more likely to have contacted the news media. In addition, respondents who have contacted the government-controlled media tend to be better educated. After all, contacting the media requires adequate fluency in the prevailing political discourse obtained in political education courses at schools (see Wang 2013).

Collective Petitions

Joining a collective petition involves higher political risk than writing to the official media. For one, collective action is considered a threat by the regime, especially after the central leadership makes stability maintenance a top priority (Wang and Minzner 2015; Gao 2015; Hou et al. 2018). Somewhat ironically, collective petitioning becomes more effective in attracting the attention of higher-ranking authorities who can deliver some relief because it is perceived to be a larger threat to stability (Cai 2010). People are quick to understand the logic of the risks and benefits of petitioning. However, how an individual weighs the cost and benefit seems to depend on how one assesses the trustworthiness of the Center, the ultimate object of petitioning. Participation in a collective petition presupposes a mismatch between confidence in the Center's commitment and capacity. Table 5.4 summarizes the correlations between previous engagement in collective petitions and different patterns of trust in the Center.

Consistently, both surveys show that respondents who have joined a collective petition are more likely to have partial trust instead of total trust. Holding other variables at their sample means, compared with a person holding total trust, an individual with partial trust is more likely to have joined a collective petition (the probability increases from .06 to .13 in 2015 and from .03 to .05 in 2019). Further analysis shows that holders of partial trust are also more likely to have engaged in collective petitions than those holding skepticism. Holding other variables at their sample means, compared with a person holding skepticism, an individual with partial trust is more likely to have joined a collective petition (the prob-

TABLE 5.4. Trust in the Center and Joining a Collective Petition

	2015	2019
Total distrust	.417	.684*
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.254)	(.258)
Skepticism	.253†	–.266†
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.144)	(.154)
Partial trust	.868***	.403*
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.161)	(.156)
Political efficacy	.356***	.398**
(1 = very low; 4 = very high)	(.087)	(.136)
Education	–.018	.062**
(0–27 years)	(.018)	(.020)
Party member	.348†	–.195
(0 = no, 1 = yes)	(.193)	(.295)
Gender	.315*	.162
(0 = female; 1 = male)	(.150)	(.172)
Age in years	.004	.001
(18–94)	(.006)	(.007)
Observations	4,068	4,941

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2015, 2019.

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Total trust is set as the base category of trust in the Center. Missing responses are multiply imputed. Data are weighted.

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

ability increases from .08 to .13 in 2015 and from .02 to .05 in 2019). The finding corroborates a field observation that the combination of high trust in the Center's policy intention and low trust in its implementation capacity induces rightful resistance (O'Brien and Li 2006, 46).

Corroborating the Gamson hypothesis, internal efficacy has a positive correlation with previous engagement in collective petitions. All else being equal, more efficacious individuals are more likely to have joined a collective petition than those with lower efficacy. Holding other variables at their sample means, compared with respondents with very low efficacy, having very high efficacy increases the probability of having joined a collective petition by nine percentage points in 2015 and five percentage points in 2019.

More interestingly, the joint effect of partial trust in the Center and internal political efficacy suggests an unobserved nuance of the Gamson hypothesis. As regards the likelihood of joining collective petitions, the

most agitative cognitive configuration is the combination of partial trust with high efficacy. Holding other variables at their sample means, compared with respondents with total distrust and high efficacy, having partial trust and high efficacy increases the probability of having joined a collective petition by seven percentage points in 2015, though the effect is not significant in 2019. The joint effect of partial trust and high efficacy is more evident if we treat skepticism as the base of comparison. Holding other variables at their sample means, compared with respondents with skepticism and high efficacy, having partial trust and high efficacy increases the probability of having joined a collective petition by nine percentage points in 2015 and four percentage points in 2019.

It is worth noting that the effect of the partial trust on joining a collective petition cannot be observed without using the two-dimensional measurement of trust in the Center. An alternative model can be fitted to the data collected in the two waves of the survey, treating trust in the central government and trust in local government rather than trust in the Center as predictors of interest. The results are consistent. In both surveys, trust in the central government has a negative and insignificant correlation with past engagement in collective petitions while trust in local government has a negative and significant correlation. Obviously, the regression model encounters a serious multicollinearity problem, failing to reveal the agitative effect of the gap between trust in the Center's commitment and distrust in its capacity.

Another noteworthy phenomenon is the relationship between previous participation and total distrust in the Center. The 2015 survey shows that previous engagement in collective petitions does not have a significant correlation with the likelihood of having total distrust. To the extent that partial trust enhances the likelihood of joining collective petitions, the observation implies that the experience of petitioning does not turn partial trust into distrust. In other words, a collective petition is not a disillusioning experience. However, the situation changes in the 2019 survey. Here, we see that individuals who have engaged in collective petitions are more likely to have total distrust than those who do not have the experience. The pattern allows for two interpretations. For one, it may be that people who totally distrust the Center may join a collective petition simply to air their grievances and embarrass the regime without expecting any favorable attention or solution to the problems they face. For another, it may be that people have partial trust when they start petitioning but end up losing all

their confidence in the Center's commitment due to the frustrations and even suppressions they suffer during the petitioning process (Li 2008).

The two surveys have inconsistent observations of the effects of demographic backgrounds on previous engagement in collective petitions. Nonetheless, observed significant correlations corroborate earlier studies. Other things being equal, better-educated people are more likely to have joined a collective petition than less well-educated people. Men are more likely to sign a petition letter than women. Age has little effect on participation in collective petitions.

Defiance

Trust in the Center also affects participation in defiance. One form of defiance is joining unapproved mass demonstrations, and the other form is risking harm to join unspecified rights-defending activities.

Joining Mass Demonstrations

Both the 2015 and 2019 surveys ask about participation in mass demonstration or protest parade. Table 5.5 summarizes the results of two logistic regression analyses. Previous engagement in collective demonstrations is treated as the dependent variable.

The two surveys have inconsistent observations about the relationship between previously participating in protest activities and having total distrust instead of total trust. The correlation is statistically insignificant in the 2015 survey, though it is significant in the 2019 survey. However, the apparent lack of significant impact of trust in the Center on protest participation is due to the inaccurate choice of the base category. Further analysis shows that respondents with skepticism rather than total trust are least likely to participate in a protest. Skeptics may find it too risky to protest because they doubt if the Center is truly committed to governing in the interests of the people. Meanwhile, they may not believe that protest can make any difference because they doubt the Center's policy implementation capacity.

An interesting pattern emerges when skepticism is set as the base category of trust in the Center. In both surveys, respondents holding total distrust are more likely to have participated in protest than those hold-

TABLE 5.5. Trust in the Center and Joining a Demonstration

	2015	2019
Total distrust	.180	.943*
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.257)	(.358)
Skepticism	–.455	.273
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.340)	(.354)
Partial trust	.341	.351
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.348)	(.423)
Political efficacy	.464***	.141
(1 = very low; 4 = very high)	(.123)	(.260)
Education	.024	.029
(0–27 years)	(.031)	(.041)
Party member	.195	–1.379
(0 = no, 1 = yes)	(.373)	(.832)
Gender	.584**	.008
(0 = female; 1 = male)	(.203)	(.330)
Age in years	–.047***	–.006
(18–94)	(.009)	(.014)
Observations	4,068	4,941

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2015, 2019.

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Total trust is set as the base category of trust in the Center. Missing responses are multiply imputed. Data are weighted.

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

ing total trust. All else being equal, an individual with total distrust is more likely to have participated in a collective protest than a person with skepticism. Field observation supports the survey findings. For instance, participants of an unapproved demonstration expressed their total distrust in the Center on the issue as follows: "Workers' representatives have analyzed [the situation] and concluded that it is impossible for the public security bureau to approve the application. Although China has a Law on Processions and Demonstrations, when has any application under it been approved?" (see Li 2010, 50).

Like the positive correlation between total distrust and participation in collective petitions observed in the 2019 survey, the results allow for two interpretations. On the one hand, people may join a protest to air grievances without hoping for a solution to their problems. On the other hand,

people may have some confidence in the Center before they join a protest but become totally disillusioned afterward. After all, the consequences of collective protests are uncertain. More often than not, protesters fail to wring any concession from targeted local governments. Even when popular protests succeed, leaders and organizers often suffer repressions (Cai 2010).

Again, it is worth noting that the effect of having total distrust on joining demonstration cannot be observed without using the two-dimensional measurement of trust in the Center. Fitting the alternative model described above generates confusing results. In the 2015 survey, trust in the central government has a positive but insignificant correlation with previous participation in demonstration while trust in local government has a negative and significant correlation. In the 2019 survey, trust in the central government has a negative and significant correlation with past engagement in demonstration, while trust in local government has a negative but insignificant correlation. The two results do not make intuitive sense.

The two surveys have inconsistent observations on the effect of internal efficacy. Party membership has no significant impact on the probability of having participated in a protest. The finding is noteworthy because party members are supposed to act in line with the central leadership in maintaining stability. Education is insignificant in both surveys, suggesting that citizens with varying levels of education are equally likely to protest. The two surveys do not have consistent observations of the effects of gender and age on previous engagement in collective protests. Male and younger respondents are more likely to have participated in protests in the 2015 survey, but gender and age have no significant effect in the 2019 survey.

Risking Harm to Defend Rights

The 2019 survey observes that trust in the Center also affects the likelihood of risking harm to defend rights. "Rights defense" or "defending rights" is a popular but vague term in Chinese political discourse (Pils 2006; Perry 2008; Li 2010). Broadly defined, rights defending activism refers to any contentious activity in which ordinary citizens dispute with a government authority over their "lawful rights and interests," ranging from contacting of media, petitioning, administrative litigation, labor action, and street protesting (e.g., O'Brien and Li 2006; Chen 2007; Benney 2013). Differ-

TABLE 5.6. Trust in the Center and Risking Harms to Defend Rights

	2019
Total distrust	.938*
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.361)
Skepticism	.122
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.301)
Partial trust	.094
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.354)
Political efficacy	.566*
(1 = very low; 4 = very high)	(.232)
Education	–.000
(0–27 years)	(.026)
Party member	.184
(0 = no, 1 = yes)	(.390)
Gender	.181
(0 = female; 1 = male)	(.267)
Age in years	–.009
(18–94)	(.008)
Observations	4,941

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey 2019.

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Total trust is set as the base category of trust in the Center. Missing responses are multiply imputed. Data are weighted.

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

ent forms of rights activism involve varying political risks. Survey researchers usually ask about actual participation in and propensity to participate in specific activities.

Unlike previous waves, the 2019 survey brings up the risk factor explicitly. Without specifying what activities respondents have taken, the survey asks if they have taken the risk of getting harmed or injured to defend their rights. The implication is that the activities in question must be publicly defiant of government authorities. The caveat of risking harm highlights the defiant nature of the activities. Furthermore, the caveat also suggests that the risk is personally shouldered rather than collectively shared. Table 5.6 summarizes the results of a logistic regression analysis that treats previous engagement in taking risks to defend rights as the dependent variable.

Three findings emerge. First, respondents holding total distrust are more likely to have taken the risk of getting harmed to defend their rights than those holding total trust. Additional analyses show that individuals with total distrust are more likely to have risked harm to defend rights than those holding skepticism and partial trust. Moreover, respondents holding total trust, partial trust, and skepticism are indistinguishable in terms of their engagement in risky rights-defending activities. The observations allow for two interpretations. On the one hand, an individual with total distrust is more likely to engage in risky rights-defending activities. On the other hand, an individual holding total trust, partial trust, or skepticism has taken risks to defend rights but ended up with total distrust. The implication is that risking harm to defend rights involves activities that are known or proven intolerable to the Center. Individuals who engage in such activities may act on total distrust or end up with total distrust.

While collective protest is contentious without publicly defying the authority of the central leadership, taking the risk of getting harmed to defend rights is defiant of the central authority. Such defiant activities often involve demands for a leadership change and even a regime change. For instance, the student movement in 1989 was subjected to a military crackdown after some protest leaders called for "the end of the old man," that is, then paramount leader Deng Xiaoping. They also called for political reforms that might undermine the one-party rule of the Communist Party (see Kovalio 1991). In 2022, infuriated anti-lockdown protesters shouted slogans such as "Xi Jinping, step down!" and even "Down with the Communist Party" (Kang and Wu 2022).

Yet again, it is worth noting that the effect of having total distrust on risking harm to defend rights cannot be observed without using the two-dimensional measurement of trust in the Center. Fitting the alternative model described above generates a partly plausible result. On the one hand, trust in the central government has a negative and significant correlation with past engagement in risking harms for rights defense, suggesting that the action is defiant of the central government. On the other hand, trust in local government has no significant correlation. The second observation is implausible because local governments are directly responsible for most incidents of violation of people's lawful rights.

The second finding is that internal efficacy has a positive correlation with risking harm to defend rights. Holding other variables at their sample

means, compared with those with very low efficacy, respondents with very high efficacy are more likely to have engaged in risky rights-defending activities by five percentage points.

Last, and most interestingly, the combined effect of internal political efficacy and total distrust in the Center on the participation in risky rights-defending activities unambiguously supports Gamson's hypothesis that the combination of high efficacy and low trust induces participation in anti-government activities. Holding other variables at their sample means, compared with a person with very low efficacy and total trust in the Center, an individual with very high efficacy and total distrust is remarkably more likely to have engaged in risky rights-defending activities, as the probability increases by nine percentage points (from .01 to .10). It will be interesting to explore whether this novel category of political participation includes the White Paper Movement that occurred in 2022 (see Henry 2022; Thornton 2023; Ong 2023).

Conclusion

Distinct patterns of trust in the Center have varying effects on the likelihood of engaging in contained, boundary-spanning, and transgressive participation. Total trust and skepticism are associated with political inactivity. The underlying mechanisms, however, may be different. Respondents holding total trust may see nothing wrong and feel no need to take any action. In contrast, respondents holding skepticism may have low expectations of the promised benefits, which reduces the sense of urgency in taking action. Meanwhile, doubts about the Center's implementation capacity may lower the expectation of the effectiveness of participation.

In contrast, partial trust and total distrust are more agitative of contentious political activities. Partial trust is associated with a higher likelihood of voicing and joining a collective petition, while total distrust is associated with a higher likelihood of joining a collective protest. Distrust is undesirable, regardless of whether it is about commitment or capacity. From the standpoint of the Center, however, distrust in its commitment to ruling in the people's interests implies a greater risk than distrust in its capacity to make local deputies do its bidding.

Much remains to be explored about how trust in the Center affects political participation and contention. In general, partial trust is likely to

be the most agitative pattern. On the one hand, high trust in the Center's commitment may raise people's expectations of the benefits promised in central policies. On the other hand, low trust in the Center's policy implementation capacity may aggravate discontent with local authorities. People with partial trust may feel more aggrieved when they find that local governments violate beneficial central policies. For them, the sharp contrast between what the Center promises and what local officials deliver may generate a sense of rights deprivation. Meanwhile, the combination of high trust in the Center's commitment and low trust in its capacity may also induce a sense of empowerment.

The dual effect of partial trust deserves special attention. On the one hand, an elevated level of trust in commitment is an asset to the regime because it creates larger elbow room for trial and error when making policies. However, the tension between trust in commitment and distrust in capacity can be a source of participation crisis. Trust in commitment may raise people's expectations, while distrust in capacity may weaken patience. The combination of trust in the Center's commitment and distrust in its capacity may encourage people to defy local officials in the name of the Center. In addition to encouraging voice and petition, having partial trust in the Center may also encourage other participatory activities, for example, seeking administrative review or filing administrative litigation, calling government hotlines, and posting on e-government platforms. Such participatory actions are not transgressive to the Center but involve contention with local authorities. Consequently, what appears to be institutionalized participation is, in practice, boundary-spanning contention. Successful boundary-spanning participation may reinforce partial trust. However, popular contention with local authorities is fraught with frustration, defeat, and repression. If they repeatedly fail to get what they expect from the Center, people may lose confidence in its commitment, developing "learned disenchantment" (Gallagher 2006). Total distrust, in turn, not only induces a stronger propensity to join a protest or risky rights-defending activities but also fosters a preference for a change in the political system.

CHAPTER 6

Implication for System Support

There is a long-standing debate on whether discontent with government policies and behaviors of politicians results only in distrust in incumbent government and politicians or also undermines support for the political system. The debate originated in the United States, where scholars disagree on how to interpret the survey findings about public evaluations of the honesty, ability, and efficiency of federal government officials (Stokes 1962, 64). Miller (1974), on the one hand, argues that the observed discontent with incumbent politicians is system oriented; that is, it indicates disillusionment with the political system. Citrin (1974), on the other hand, argues that the observed disapproval of politicians is incumbent focused, reflecting only distrust in incumbent governments and politicians.

Later on, the interpretive disagreement evolves into a causal debate over the long-term effect of untrustworthy government performance and the malpractice of politicians. One side argues that discontent with ill-conceived government policies and crooked politicians weakens trust in government without undermining support for the democratic system (Lipset and Schneider 1983; Abravanel and Busch 1975, 80; Citrin and Green 1986, 452; Finkel, Muller, and Seligson 1989; Rose and Shin 2001; Graham and Svolik 2020). The other side argues that political discontent not only weakens trust in the incumbent government but also undermines support for the democratic system. Regarding the United States, researchers argue that long-standing distrust in government can generalize into disillusionment with the democratic system and even foster support for authoritarianism (Nye 1997; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Avery 2007). Since both sides of the debate agree that untrustworthy government policies and

politicians' behavior weaken trust in government, the Miller-Citrin debate boils down to whether distrust in democratically elected government and politicians undermines support for the democratic system.

The Miller-Citrin debate has extended to other established electoral democracies (see Klingemann and Fuchs 1995; Thomassen, Andeweg, and Van Ham 2017). Similar to what happens in the United States, empirical studies in these established democracies remain inconclusive. On the one hand, recent studies observe that distrust in established European democracies results in support for the Islamic State (Franz 2015; Macdonald and Waggoner 2018; Bertsou 2019). On the other hand, it seems that the surge of populist authoritarianism does not shake public confidence in the democratic system (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 4).

The debate undergoes a significant mutation when it extends to developing or transitional democracies where elections are often flawed and the democratic system is yet to be consolidated. Scholars make three competing arguments. First, distrust in government elected through flawed elections weakens support for democracy (Waldron-Moore 1999; Seligson 2002, 180; Mishler and Rose 2005; Sarsfield and Echegaray 2006; Katz and Levin 2018). Second, distrust in government in countries where elections fall short of being free and fair has no erosive effect on support for democracy because even faulty democracy is a lesser evil than authoritarianism (Mishler and Rose 2001b; Bratton and Mattes 2001; Rose and Shin 2001; Rose 2007). Last, distrust in governments elected through flawed elections enhances the demand for further democratization (Johnson 2005; Moehler 2009; Jamal and Nooruddin 2010; Doorenspleet 2012).

Looking deeper into it, the Miller-Citrin debate makes two presuppositions. Theoretically, it presupposes the dichotomy of specific and diffuse support. According to Easton (1965), specific support is roughly equivalent to trust in the incumbent government and politicians, while diffuse support is roughly equivalent to acceptance of the fundamental principles and rules that regulate the government's formation and operation and that constrain political leaders' selection and action. For citizens of electoral democracy, diffuse system support is the endorsement of principles such as free and fair competition for power through regular elections, majority rule, and constitutionalism (Norris 1999, 10). As a clear object, diffuse system support is measurable.

Contextually, the debate presupposes that citizens can engineer government and leadership changes without changing the political system. Again,

the assumption holds well in an electoral democracy. Although individual citizens can do little about the government or politicians they find untrustworthy, the citizenry as a whole can vote an untrustworthy government or politician out of power without losing confidence in or support for the political system that enables them to do so. The implication is that it takes repeated frustrations for people to form a serious demand for system changes in an electoral democracy. However, they can freely express such a demand even when they do not take it so seriously.

Neither assumption fully applies to China. The Eastonian dichotomy of specific and diffuse system support becomes murky in a country that is under one-party rule (Lu and Dickson 2020). In addition, Chinese people are unable to engineer government or leadership change under the prevailing political system. The implication is that people are more likely to develop a demand for system changes due to frustrations with their inability to engineer any government or leadership changes, but they do not have the freedom to express such a demand. As a result, students of Chinese politics encounter the thorny problem of measuring diffuse system support.

Measuring Diffuse System Support

The problem of measuring diffuse system support in China is threefold. First, scholars disagree over whether the Eastonian dichotomy of specific and diffuse system support is valid for the country. Accepting the dichotomy, Chen (2004, 23–26) constructs two indexes. His specific support index includes satisfaction with policies concerning pressing issues such as job security, medical care, and corruption. In contrast, his diffuse support index contains confidence in political institutions, pride in the political system, and confidence in the legal system. Tang (2016, 69), however, argues that the Eastonian distinction is "less clear in China where there are no meaningful elections to replace the government and its officials; the political system is the incumbent government and the CC [i.e., Communist Party]."

Second, it is hard to find valid measures of diffuse system support in the country. Some researchers employ seemingly irrelevant indicators to construct unidimensional support scales for the existing political system (Chu 2013; Alkon and Wang 2018, 328; Xiang and Hmielowski 2017, 416).

Other researchers gauge diffuse system support in China with acceptance of abstract values such as political equality, individual liberty, and freedom of ideas (Wang 2007; Wang and You 2016; Huhe, Tang, and Chen 2018). Still others employ even more abstract indicators such as attitudes toward desirability, suitability, preferability, efficacy, and priority of democracy (Chu et al. 2008). The problem with such abstract measures of system support is that the term "democracy" is vague and ambiguous in the Chinese political discourse (Nathan 1985; Guang 1996; Peng 1998; Hu 2019).

So far, the most comprehensive measurement of diffuse system support in China employs four indicators: (1) "In the long run, our political system can solve the main problems facing our country"; (2) "Overall, I am proud of our political system"; (3) "Even if our political system has one or another kind of problems, people should support it"; and (4) "Compared to those of other countries, I would rather live under the political system in our country" (Chen 2017, 321). The problem is that it is up to respondents to define the meaning of "the political system," yet the term is vague in the country. In theory, the political system consists of a utopian ideology that promises "programmatic rights," meaning little more than its grand names, for example, the people's democracy, the people's democratic dictatorship, and the socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics (Nathan 1985; Chen 2004; Tang 2005; 2016). In practice, the political system is an elusive ensemble of informal rules, obscure norms, and implicit understandings with which politicians obtain and exercise unconstrained power.

The indeterminacy of the prevailing political system in China leads to the indeterminacy of diffuse system support. In an electoral democracy, the political system is a well-defined set of operational principles, rules, practices, and norms that constrain the government's power and protect citizens' rights. Moreover, a citizen in an electoral democracy can learn about the political system through observation and participation. Consequently, diffuse system support in electoral democracies derives from personal political experiences, well-preserved collective memories, and reliable information on policy processes and outcomes. In contrast, the experiential substance of the political system in China is little more than a set of programmed rituals and choreographed theatrics. Ordinary people in the country learn about the political system primarily by studying abstract ideological principles in textbooks for political education courses, watching national leaders' staged appearances on state-run televisions, and reading

censored reports in government-controlled newspapers. As a result, it is hard to ascertain whether responses to the four questions reflect nationalist sentiment, patriotism, or acceptance of the existing political system.

The third and last problem with existing measurements of diffuse system support in China is that they tend to reduce to a dichotomy of support and not support. Chen (2017, 321) uses the four ordinal measures to construct a continuous summation scale of system support, but she reduces the scale to a dichotomy of high versus low support. In reality, however, people may neither support nor reject the prevailing political system. Instead, they may be indifferent, apathetic, or cynical. As Shue (2004, 43) points out: "Most people, most of the time, I would suggest, are quite appropriately ambivalent about the legitimacy of the system in which they find themselves. . . . The very experience of domination most often marries objection with acceptance. It is bivalent, and so people are ambivalent." Dichotomizing complex attitudes risks missing ambivalence, an essential variant of political attitude toward party systems.

This study adopts two specific and concrete measures of system preference. The first one asks whether the president should be popularly elected with one-person-one-vote. Instead of reducing to a dichotomy of support and rejection, this study adopts a trichotomy of support, ambivalence, and rejection. The second measure is more abstract, asking about support for the one-party rule. For clarity, the four-point ordinal scale on whether only one political party shall hold power is simplified into a dichotomous measure.

Popular Election of the President

The party-state adamantly refuses to let citizens elect government leaders at any level, let alone the national leader. Except for a few experimental elections of township heads in Sichuan Province and Guangxi Province, there is no popular election of government leaders at any level in China. Moreover, an experimental election was even declared unconstitutional by a newspaper (Li 2002; Saich and Yang 2003; Dong 2006). Instead of institutionalizing the promised people's democracy, the ruling party adheres to the people's congress system. By law, citizens directly elect deputies to township and county people's congresses, who then elect township and county government heads. Deputies to the prefectural, provincial, and national

people's congresses are elected by deputies at the immediately lower level of the congress. The indirectly elected people's deputies at a given level then elect government leaders at the same level (O'Brien 1990). During the heyday of political reforms in the mid-1980s, there were encouraging signs that some local people's congresses were changing from "rubber stamps" to "iron stamps" (Cho 2002). However, the party quickly restored strict top-down control after the 1989 student movement.

If it operates strictly according to the Constitution and to the Election Law for the National People's Congress and Local People's Congresses at All Levels of the People's Republic of China (adopted 1979, last amended 2020), the people's congress system is a legitimate form of electoral democracy. In reality, however, the system exists only on carefully choreographed political stages. Elections of deputies to the township and county people's congresses are under tight control (He 2010; Yuan 2011; Sun 2013). Moreover, ritualistic elections of government leaders are nothing but formalities to confirm decisions made by senior leaders behind closed doors (Manion 2015).

Furthermore, elections of people's congress deputies and government leaders at all levels are nothing but a show to confirm decisions confirmed at the subnational party's congresses in the previous year. The decisions are made by the Central Organization of the ruling party. As for the president, the election at the National People's Congress is nothing but a political show to reconfirm the decision that has been confirmed at the National Party's Congress in the previous year. Consequently, despite the constitutional principle that the people's congresses elect government leaders at the corresponding levels, it is the central party leadership that appoints, directly or indirectly, all government leaders through a strictly hierarchical chain of power delegation (Landry 2008). Against this backdrop, the preference for the popular election of the president reflects a preference for a fundamental system change.

My 2014 local survey gauges the preference for popular election of the president by asking respondents whether the president should be elected by the people directly through one-person-one-vote. Of 1,779 respondents, 28.6 percent choose the conservative position of "should not," 57.0 percent take the ambivalent position of "should, but the conditions are not ripe at present," and 14.4 percent hold the pro-change position of "should and can be held right now." The dichotomy of "should or should not" gauges the judgment of the desirability of the institutional change,

TABLE 6.1. Trust in the President and the Center

	The President	The Center
Total trust	43.0	15.0
Partial trust	11.0	45.6
Skepticism	33.7	23.3
Total distrust	12.4	16.0

Source: Data from author's 2014 survey.
Note: N = 1,779. Column entries are percentages. Totals may not equal 100 due to rounding errors.

while the dichotomy of "whether the conditions are mature or not" gauges the judgment of the practicality or feasibility of the institutional change.

Trust in the incumbent president is expected to affect the attitude toward the popular election of the president. Since the president is also the general party secretary, who is the core of the central leadership, trust in the Center as an institution is also expected to affect the attitude. Table 6.1 summarizes the number of respondents holding four patterns of trust in the president and trust in the Center as an institution.

Total trust is expected to be associated with the conservative position because people who have strong confidence in both the commitment and capacity of the president and the Center may see no need for a leadership change, let alone a change in the leadership selection system. Partial trust may induce a stronger preference for elections because people may see the election as an effective mechanism for choosing more competent leaders. The change from total trust to partial trust indicates a remarkable drop in the confidence for capacity. Skepticism may also foster a stronger preference for elections because people tend to feel more confident about elected leaders than selected ones. The change from partial trust to skepticism involves losing a remarkable amount of confidence in commitment. Total distrust is expected to induce the strongest preference for election. The change from skepticism to total distrust involves losing confidence in commitment and capacity. People who lose confidence in the commitment of the president and the Center may want to elect a national leader who has a more trustworthy commitment. Similarly, people who lose confidence in the capacity of the president and the Center may want to elect a more capable national leader.

Internal political efficacy is controlled. It is worth noting that scholars adopt different measures to assess internal political efficacy. Shi (1999a,

1131) adopts measures that gauge one's self-assessment of competence to understand the political situation in one's work unit. In contrast, Chen and Zhong (2002, 187) use a measure that gauges self-assessment of competence to make a difference in the political situation, which probably measures external efficacy. The survey focuses on internal efficacy. It asks respondents, hypothetically, if they think they can tell which one is better if two candidates for the county headship debate each other.[1] Among 1,779 respondents, 4.5 percent choose "definitely no," 18.3 percent "very likely no," 39.4 percent "unsure," 30.9 percent "very likely yes," and 7.0 percent "definitely yes." A more confident response indicates a stronger sense of internal political efficacy. More efficacious individuals are expected to have a stronger preference for the popular election of the president because they may see more opportunities to advance their interests under the new system.

Another control variable is party membership. Members of the ruling party are expected to reject the idea of letting the masses elect the national leader with one-person-one-vote because it runs against the Leninist principle of democratic centralism (Thornton 2021). Demographic backgrounds are also controlled. In theory, the relationship between educational level and preference for popular election can be curvilinear. People with poor educational backgrounds may disapprove of the election due to their lack of self-confidence, while well-educated people may disapprove of the election due to elitism. However, a preliminary analysis detects no curvilinearity. Gender is controlled because women are expected to be politically less assertive. Age is controlled because older people tend to be more politically conservative (see Jiang, Wang, and Zhang 2022). Place of residence is controlled to see if respondents from rural areas are more supportive of having a popular election of the national leader. An earlier

1. I designed this measure of internal efficacy based on my fieldwork on village elections. When I asked them about Peng Zhen's vision of extending direct election to township and county government heads, some villagers expressed reservations on the grounds that they could not tell which candidate was better. Then I told them about the televised presidential debates in the United States and asked if they could tell which candidate was better after watching such debates. Some villagers said they could, while some insisted that they knew too little about politics to understand the debates. It is difficult to fully establish the validity of a measure of subjective competence. However, a regression analysis shows that male, younger, and better-educated respondents had stronger internal efficacy gauged by the newly designed measure. The results are consistent with findings from two decades of research on sociodemographic correlates of political efficacy in 46 countries (Oser, Feitosa, and Dassonneville 2023).

TABLE 6.2. Predicting Preference for the Popular Election of the President

	Model I	Model II
Trust in the president/Center (1 = total distrust; 4 = total trust)	–.140** (.047)	–.158** (.056)
Internal political efficacy (1 = very low; 5 = very high)	.147** (.051)	.149* (.051)
Party member (0 = no, 1 = yes)	–.132 (.116)	–.123 (.116)
Education (Year of schooling, 0–22)	–.062*** (.014)	–.061*** (.014)
Male (0 = female; 1 = male)	–.100 (.097)	–.100 (.097)
Age in years (18–93)	–.011** (.004)	–.012** (.004)
Place of residence (0 = urban, 1 = rural)	–.089 (.109)	–.125 (.106)

Note: N = 1,779. Model I treats trust in the president as the predictor of interest. Model II treats trust in the Center as an institution as the predictor of interest. Entries are ordinal logit regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Missing responses are multiply imputed.

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

study argues that a likely long-term effect of holding competitive elections of village leaders may engender popular demand for further democratization (Shi 1999b; Landry, Davis, and Wang 2010). Table 6.2 summarizes the results of the ordinal regression analysis.[2]

Trust in the president and trust in the Center significantly affect the attitude toward the desirability and practicality of popularly electing the president. All else being equal, respondents with stronger trust are more likely to disagree that ordinary citizens should have the right to elect the president with one-person-one-vote. Conversely, respondents with stronger distrust are more likely to agree that ordinary people should have the right to popularly elect the president. All else being equal, for every step of

2. Treating trust in the president as the predictor of interest, an ordinal regression model passes the test of parallel regression assumption (chi-square = 8.84; degree of freedom = 7; p = .24). Treating trust in the Center as the predictor of interest, the model also passes the test (chi-square = 7.37; degree of freedom = 7; p = .39). The test results indicate that one unit of increase in a predictor has a consistent and equal amount of change in the probability of assuming a larger value in the ordinal dependent variable (Long and Freese 2014, 331).

the decline of trust, the probability of having a stronger preference for election increases. More importantly, either the loss of confidence in commitment or the loss of confidence in capacity is sufficient to induce a stronger preference for the popular election of the president, suggesting that people regard the popular election as a solution to the problem of lack of commitment or capacity.

Interesting details emerge from a series of comparative analyses. First, compared with one with total trust in the president or the Center, an individual with partial trust has a stronger preference for the popular election of the president. Individuals with total trust and those with partial trust share similar confidence in commitment. However, people holding partial trust have remarkably weaker confidence in capacity. In other words, the change from holding total trust to having partial trust indicates a loss of trust in capacity. The analysis shows that such a change enhances the preference for the popular election of the president. Holding other variables at their sample means, compared with a person with total trust, an individual with partial trust is more likely to agree that the president should be popularly elected and the election can be held right away, more likely to agree that the president should be popularly elected although the conditions are not mature, and less likely to agree that the president should not be popularly elected. The implication is that the decline of confidence in capacity alone enhances the preference for the popular election of the president, even when one remains fully confident about the commitment of the president or the Center.

Second, compared with a person with partial trust in the president or the Center, an individual holding skepticism is more likely to favor the popular election of the president. Individuals with partial trust and those with skepticism share similar confidence in capacity. However, people holding skepticism have remarkably weaker confidence in commitment. In other words, the change from holding partial trust to having skepticism indicates a loss of trust in commitment. The analysis shows that such a change enhances the preference for the popular election of the president. Holding other variables at their sample means, compared with a person with partial trust, an individual with skepticism is more likely to agree that the president should be popularly elected and the election can be held right away, more likely to agree that the president should be popularly elected although the conditions are not mature, and less likely to agree that the president should not be popularly elected. The implication is that

the decline of confidence in the commitment alone enhances the preference for the popular election of the president. In other words, with a given amount of confidence in capacity, an individual may develop a stronger preference for election due to a significant loss of confidence in commitment. The finding suggests that people may regard popular elections as a mechanism that improves the incentive compatibility or ideological congruence between elected elites and their constituents (Achen 1978; Dalton 1985; Bianco 1994; Huber and Powell 1994).

Last, when trust is already low, a small deterioration of confidence in commitment and capacity constitutes a qualitative change. The change from skepticism to total distrust involves a small decline of trust in commitment and capacity. However, the change can be the last straw that turns mistrust into disenchantment (Gallagher 2006), which induces demand for fundamental system changes. Compared with one with skepticism, an individual with total distrust is more likely to agree that the president should be popularly elected and that the election can be held right away, more likely to agree that the president should be popularly elected but the conditions are not mature, and less likely to agree that the president should not be popularly elected. The finding suggests that people who completely distrust the Center are aware of the necessity of protecting themselves from the central rule makers and want to obtain that protection through the popular election of the country's top leader.[3]

In addition to the effect of trust in the Center on the attitude toward popularly electing the president, several other findings are also noteworthy. First, internal political efficacy significantly enhances preference for the popular election of the president, suggesting that people who are confident that they can tell good candidates from poor ones are more likely to favor elections. Holding other variables at their sample means, compared with one with very low efficacy, a respondent with very high efficacy is less likely to agree that the president should not be popularly elected, more likely to

3. The effect of trust in the Center on the preference for popular election of the president cannot be accurately observed without using the two-dimensional measurement. Alternative models encounter multicollinearity problems. As a sole predictor of interest, trust in the incumbent president's capacity has a significant correlation with the preference for presidential election. However, controlling for trust in commitment, trust in capacity no longer has a significant effect. The same problem occurs with proxies of trust in the Center's commitment and capacity. As a sole predictor of interest, trust in the county/district party committee has a significant impact on the preference for direct election of the president. However, the effect disappears after controlling for trust in the Central Party Committee.

agree that the president should be popularly elected although the conditions are not mature, and more likely to agree that the president should be elected and the election can be held right away. It is clear that not all people accept the regime's argument that Chinese people are not ready to directly elect government leaders.

Second, party members are indistinguishable from nonparty masses regarding the popular election of the president. The finding is consistent with the observation that party members do not appear to have a stronger trust in the Center. It is also possible that the issue of popular election of the statement is not sensitive enough to ring the alarm bell in the minds of party members. When they respond to the question, party members may not be aware of the incompatibility between the ruling party's Leninist ideology and the idea of letting ordinary people elect the top national leader.

Third, older respondents have stronger reservations about popularly electing the president. The finding is consistent with the observation that older people tend to have stronger trust in the Center. Conversely, younger generations are more supportive of the idea of electing the top national leader with one-person-one-vote. Four decades of economic development synchronized with stringent family control may have created new generations who are more open-minded to democratic elections. However, it remains to be seen if young people today will become politically more conservative as they grow older.

Fourth, contrary to what modernization theory may predict (Lipset 1959; Deutsch 1961), better-educated individuals are less likely to support the popular election of the president. A likely explanation is that more educated individuals tend to be more elitist. They may be more supportive of broadly defined democracy, but they find it necessary to "keep democracy safe from the masses" (Kelliher 1993). They may even share the regime's argument that ordinary people "have too low qualities to practice democracy" (Pastor and Tan 2000, 492). Since the survey does not have a representative national sample, more research is called for, particularly in light of the intensive politicization of the school curriculum. A cautionary note is that the effect of school education on political values may vary across cohorts due to the dramatic changes of the education system since 1949.

Last, respondents from the rural area and the metropolitan city are indistinguishable on the issue, suggesting that attitude toward the popular election of the president does not vary with the place of residence. The finding indicates that village elections have yet to foster a stronger demand

for democratic elections. The finding is also noteworthy because the urban area covered by the survey is one of the most developed coastal cities in the country, well known for social and cultural openness. It remains to be explored if there is substantial regional variation in public preference for the popular election of the president.

Meaningful as it is, public preference for the election of the president poses little direct challenge to the party-state. Even if people have the right to elect the president with one-person-one-vote, such elections have only a symbolic meaning if the ruling party monopolizes candidate selection. If they hope for a meaningful choice of candidates, people shall demand a more fundamental system change, that is, ending the one-party rule. As it is shown below, such an escalation of rights claims seems to have occurred among some people.

Acceptance of the One-Party Rule

Unlike ruling parties in many other authoritarian countries, the ruling party of China does not bother to put up a facade of multiparty competition. Shortly after it rose to power, the Communist Party sheltered its pledge to build "a new democracy of the people" and relegated its allies during the civil war (1945–49). The ruling party establishes itself as the leadership party in the Constitution. To maintain a veneer of a people's democracy, the party claims to have established a system of multiparty collaboration under its leadership, allowing eight "democratic parties" to exist and supervise the ruling Communist Party. In reality, however, the marginalized "democratic parties" are no more than "political flower vases" (Tsou 1986, 1987; Guo 2001; Schubert 2008; Zheng 2009).

In addition to establishing its actual monopoly of power, the ruling party also banishes the term "multiparty democracy" from the political discourse. It has strictly forbidden any open discussion of the multiparty electoral competition since the Anti-Rightist Campaign in the late 1950s (Burns 1999). Even when they were seriously exploring political reforms in the early 1980s, senior party leaders suppressed the advocacy of a multiparty system (Sullivan 1988). In action, the party consistently represses dissidents who venture to found opposition parties (Chen 2018).

Under the influence of the long dynastic history, many people do not take issue with the one-party rule. However, they expect the party to

deliver on its words. Like other Leninist parties, the ruling party claims to "represent the people's interests" (Gunther and Diamond 2003, 180). However, the one-party rule and the personal dictatorship have wreaked havoc on the people and the nation. On top of the list of calamities, tens of millions of people starved to death during the human-caused famine after the catastrophic Great Leap Forward (Dikötter 2010). Deng Xiaoping, the ruling party's second paramount leader, admitted frankly that the party made serious mistakes. Nonetheless, he persistently rejected the suggestion of introducing a multiparty system. Deng insisted that only the Communist Party could provide the correct leadership for the country to become a strong and prosperous socialist country. Moreover, he argued that a multiparty system would spell chaos and instability (Dillon 2014, 45).

Since the ruling party firmly rejects any multiparty system, the attitude toward one-party rule becomes a valid indicator of system support. Acceptance of the one-party rule implies support for the existing authoritarian system, while disapproval implies the denial of the legitimacy of the existing system. Field observations show that, despite the regime's indoctrination, many people do not accept the regime's justification for the one-party rule. Instead, they regard multiparty electoral competition as an essential feature of genuine democracy. They find it ironic that the party claims to represent the people but denies people the right to choose representatives through elections. For instance, outspoken petitioners in Beijing condemned "the one-party rule" and "the dictatorship of the Communist Party" (Li 2013, 25).

Partly due to the sensitivity of the one-party rule, survey researchers invariably adopt indirect and vague measures to gauge public support for it. The 2008 China Survey, for instance, asks respondents if they agree that the ruling party alone can guarantee political stability in the country (see Harmel and Tan 2012). The third wave of the Asian Barometer Survey in 2011 is an exception, employing two direct measures, asking if respondents approve of multiparty electoral competition in principle and if they think it is feasible to hold such competitive elections (Li 2022b, 7). The two recent waves of the Asian Barometer Surveys gauge respondents' attitudes toward the one-party rule by asking if they agree with the following statement: "Only one political party shall hold power" (2015, Q131; 2019, Q138). The results are summarized in table 6.3.

The survey results are consistent with a recent finding that authoritarian ideological orientation remains widespread in the population (Pan and

TABLE 6.3. Only One Political Party Shall Hold Power

	2015	2019
Strongly agree	10.3	8.2
Agree	65.8	65.0
Disagree	21.6	24.7
Strongly disagree	2.3	2.1
Observations	4,068	4,941

Source: Data from Asian Barometer Survey.
Note: Row entries are percentages. Missing responses are multiply imputed.

Xu 2018). In light of the Miller-Citrin debate and Easton's distinction of specific and diffuse support, this study hypothesizes that trust in the Center affects diffuse support for the principle of the one-party rule. Attitude toward the one-party rule is the dependent variable, ranging from strong approval to strong disapproval. Trust in the Center is the predictor of interest, with total distrust set as the base category. The hypothesis is that people who have stronger trust in the Center are more likely to accept the one-party rule and vice versa. A further hypothesis is that distrust in the Center's commitment is more likely to induce disapproval of the one-party rule than distrust in the Center's capacity. In other words, it is hypothesized that, compared to the loss of confidence in the Center's capacity, the loss of confidence in the Center's commitment is more likely to prompt people to reflect on the structural defects of the one-party system.

The analysis controls party membership. Members of the ruling party are expected to approve the one-party rule. Although they do not have special political allegiance, party members may have an interest in sustaining the current political order that gives them privileged access to jobs in the government and state-owned enterprises (Dickson and Rublee 2000; Dickson 2014).

Another control variable is political efficacy. More efficacious individuals tend to be more ambitious. They may disapprove of the one-party rule because they see more opportunities in a multiparty system. Admittedly, such individuals may wish to do away with the multiparty system to maximize their chances of monopolizing political power and staying in power for good. Like revolutionary leaders in the past, they may advocate a multiparty system to overthrow the existing one-party rule, but they will establish their versions of a one-party rule if they rise to power. In other

words, instead of replacing one-party domination with institutionalized multiparty competition, political opportunists may use multiparty competition as an instrument for making a dynastic change.

In addition, school education is controlled because better-educated people may be more exposed to liberal political values. Men are expected to be politically more assertive and favor multiparty competition. Older people are expected to be politically more conservative and favor the one-party rule.

An ordinal logit model fails the test of parallel lines when fitted to the data ($p < .001$). Unlike the four patterns of trust in the Center, the four responses to the indicator statement reflect different degrees of unidimensional endorsement of the one-party rule. Therefore, instead of treating the ordinal variable as a multinomial variable, this study recodes it into a dichotomous measure, merging "disagree" and "strongly disagree" into a broad category of disapproval and "agree" and "strongly agree" into a broad category of approval. A logistic regression model is fitted to the data. The results are summarized in table 6.4.

The results support the research hypothesis that individuals with stronger confidence in the Center are more likely to accept the one-party rule. In both surveys, stronger trust in the Center is associated with a higher likelihood of accepting the one-party rule, whereas weaker trust and distrust are associated with disapproval. More interestingly, trust in the Center's commitment consistently upholds acceptance of the one-party rule, while trust in its capacity does not always do so. The evidence comes from a pair of comparisons. For one, all else being equal, respondents holding total trust and partial trust are not so remarkably different in terms of accepting the one-party rule. In the 2015 survey, respondents with total trust are more likely than those holding partial trust to accept the one-party rule by six percentage points. The two groups share strong trust in the Center's commitment, but partial trust holders distrust the Center's capacity. The implication is that stronger confidence in the Center's capacity enhances acceptance of the one-party rule. However, the difference between the two groups is so small that it is statistically insignificant in the 2019 survey. The implication is that individuals may accept the one-party rule as long as they remain confident about the Center's political commitment even though they distrust its policy implementation capacity. Conversely, given equal trust in the Center's commitment, individuals who distrust its capacity do not necessarily reject the one-party rule.

TABLE 6.4. Predicting Acceptance of the One-Party Rule

	2015	2019
Total trust	1.112***	.578***
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.146)	(.159)
Partial trust	.694***	.404**
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.153)	(.133)
Skepticism	.777***	.194
(0 = no; 1 = yes)	(.168)	(.127)
Communist Party member	.382*	.400*
(0 = no, 1 = yes)	(.185)	(.159)
Internal efficacy	–.064	–.127*
(1 = very low; 4 = very high)	(.085)	(.053)
Educational level in years	–.104***	–.012
(0–27)	(.012)	(.010)
Male	.085	–.081
(0 = female; 1 = male)	(.080)	(.086)
Age in years	.025***	.025***
(18–94)	(.003)	(.003)
Observations	4,068	4,941

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses beneath them. Missing responses are multiply imputed. Data are weighted.

† $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$.

For another, all else being equal, respondents holding partial trust are more likely than those holding total distrust to accept the one-party rule, as the probability increases by fifteen percentage points in the 2015 survey and eight percentage points in the 2019 survey. The two groups share similar distrust in the Center's capacity, but partial trust holders have a much stronger confidence in the Center's commitment. Again, the implication is that individuals may accept the one-party rule as long as they remain confident about the Center's political commitment even though they distrust its policy implementation capacity. Conversely, given equal distrust in the Center's capacity, individuals who also distrust its commitment are more likely to reject the one-party rule.[4]

4. The effect of trust in the Center's capacity and commitment on the acceptance of the one-party rule cannot be observed without using the two-dimensional measurement. Fitting an alternative model that treats trust in the central government and trust in local government as predictors generates inconsistent results. In the 2015 survey, both trust in the central government

The mechanism underlying the distrust in the Center's commitment and acceptance of the one-party rule may involve two links. A loss of trust in the Center's commitment induces a demand for systemic changes, such as popularly electing the president. However, a presidential election alone is inadequate under the one-party rule. Consequently, people may conclude that they must seek to end the one-party rule and have multiparty electoral competition, hoping that a multiparty system will enable people to choose a more trustworthy political party as the ruling party. Some disillusioned petitioners in Beijing seem to have come to this conclusion. After years of futile efforts to seek a fair hearing of their complaints against local government authorities, they concluded that the solution to the problem of injustice is to have a multiparty system that "allows competing political parties to supervise each other" (see Li 2013, 26).

Two other findings are noteworthy. First, although they do not express stronger trust in the Center, party members are more likely to accept the one-party rule than nonmembers. The observation is noteworthy in that party membership does not enhance trust in the Center. In other words, their support for the one-party rule does not derive from having a stronger trust in the central leadership. The implication is that perhaps party members prefer the one-party rule because party membership brings them privileges.

Second, the two surveys consistently show that older people are more likely to accept the one-party rule. The observation is consistent with the finding that older people tend to have stronger confidence in the Center. It remains to be explored whether older people are ideologically more supportive of the party-state or are politically more conservative, preferring the status quo to dramatic political changes.

Conclusion

Trust in the Center affects system preference. The decline of trust in the Center's commitment and capacity enhances the preference for the popular election of the president, which implies a demand for a fundamen-

and trust in local government have a positive and significant correlation with acceptance of the one-party rule. In the 2019 survey, trust in the central government has a positive and significant correlation with the acceptance of the one-party rule. Trust in local government also has a positive but insignificant correlation.

tal constitutional change. More fundamentally, the decline of trust in the Center's commitment undermines support for the one-party rule.

Admittedly, relying on cross-sectional survey data, the findings are about correlations rather than causalities. Nonetheless, a contextual analysis suggests that it is the distrust in the Center that enhances preference for system change rather than the other way around. It is true that an individual who has a preformed preference for popular election may be inclined to view the incumbent non-elected leader with skepticism or distrust. In China, however, this is an unlikely scenario. Most people have socialized into having faith in the Center, especially the supreme leader. It is hard to see how individuals develop an interest in the popular election without having developed severe doubts about incumbent national leaders. More likely than not, distrust in the Center occurs prior to the formation of the preference for the popular election of the president. An individual finds the Center untrustworthy, develops an interest in leadership change, and then realizes that she cannot engineer a desired leadership change without changing the prevailing political system under which she has no say in the selection of national leaders. Similarly, though it is plausible to argue that a person with a preconceived preference for a multiparty system is more likely to distrust the one-party regime, the actual sequence on the ground may well be that distrust in the Center occurs before one develops a preference for an alternative party system.

Regarding the debate about whether distrust in government authorities induces demand for systemic changes, the China case suggests that two mechanisms may be at work. The first mechanism is whether people find it necessary to introduce a system change, which depends on whether they can effectively engineer a meaningful government and leadership change under the prevailing political system. Whether ordinary people can engineer leadership changes through existing channels affects the generation of idealistic wishes for a better alternative system. The second mechanism is if people see any alternative that proves both preferable and feasible. The perceived availability of better and viable or "real" (Fraser 1970, 415) alternatives affects whether an idealistic wish becomes a practical preference. The local survey observes that about 15 percent of the people agree that it is feasible to have a popular election of the president immediately, suggesting that a considerable number of people in the country consider such elections a realistic alternative to the prevailing practice of elite selection.

The distinction between the two mechanisms helps explain why

authoritarianism may be more vulnerable to the corrosive effect of distrust in incumbent government leaders than democracy is. Under authoritarian rule, ordinary people have little institutionalized recourse to get rid of untrustworthy government leaders, so they are more likely to feel frustrated with the existing system and develop idealistic wishes for a better one. In the meantime, their idealistic wishes can readily develop into a practical preference for elections, which have proven elsewhere to be a better and more viable leadership selection system. Democracy, by contrast, has somewhat stronger immunity to the corrosive effect of distrust in incumbent government authorities. It enables the people to engineer leadership changes through regular elections, generating less frustration with the overall system and weaker wishes for a better one. Equally important, it is harder for an idealistic wish for a system better than existing electoral democracy to become a practical preference for a system change because a better and viable alternative is not in sight.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusions

This study solves the puzzle that political trust in China looks too high to be true. As we saw in the first chapter, over a dozen of national surveys observe that around 80 percent of the population trusts the central government. The common suspect is preference falsification due to political fear and social desirability bias. However, experimental studies are unable to definitely prove that the problem of falsification and bias is severe enough to invalidate the survey findings. Instead of implicitly doubting respondents, this study seeks to understand how Chinese people assess the party-state's trustworthiness. It starts with reconceptualizing political trust in the country. Based on in-depth interviews with ordinary people in the country, especially interviews with petitioners who were looking for "the real Communist Party" or "the true Center" in Beijing, this study argues that the concept of political trust that originated in Europe and the United States is not readily applicable to China. In theory and practice, political trust in an electoral democracy is a rights-based binding expectation. Above all, citizens have the right to choose between two or more competing political parties or politicians through free, fair, and regular elections. In addition, they have access to political information secured by the freedom of the press and the competitive media market. Most importantly, they can effectively hold untrustworthy political parties and politicians to account by retracting trust through elections.

In contrast, political trust in authoritarian China is a power-accommodating and nonbinding hope. Above all, Chinese people have no right to choose between competing political parties and politicians through elections. Although the ruling party acknowledges the principle of popu-

lar sovereignty, people have to accommodate power in real life (O'Brien 2023). Thanks to the regime's tight censorship, people have at best limited access to factual political information on policy processes and outcomes and politicians' moral character and performance. Most importantly, Chinese people cannot hold the ruling party and national leaders they find untrustworthy to account by retracting trust with ballots, and the threat of pursuing accountability with alternative means is at best remotely credible. In sum, although the concept of political trust is applicable to China, political trust remains underdeveloped in the country.

Applying the refined concept of political trust to China, this study proposes a contextualized measurement scheme, aiming to unveil deeper meanings of the survey data by interpreting them in reference to people's lived experiences. Through the lens of the new measurement scheme, we observe four distinctive features of political trust in the country. First, the ultimate object of trust in the country is not the central government. It is instead the central leadership of the ruling party, commonly known as the Party Center or the Center. Equally important, the Center is a highly personalized institution, often reduced to the paramount leader, though not entirely identical with the latter.

Second, the domain over which people assess the Center's trustworthiness is policymaking-cum-policy-implementation. Conventional understanding assumes that Chinese people assess the trustworthiness of the central government solely in terms of policymaking, hence, implicitly assuming that the country has effective rule of law. The new measurement scheme highlights that the Center is not only the ultimate decision-maker but also the ultimate principal of policy implementation. The Center works to enforce its decisions by appointing, monitoring, and disciplining a multilevel hierarchy of agents through a strictly top-down cadre management system.

Third, similar to that of an individual politician, trust in the personalized Center has two distinct dimensions. One dimension is trust in its political commitment, and the other is trust in its policy implementation capacity. With practically no access to information on policymaking, people assess the central leadership's commitment by listening to what the central government promises in its policies. With limited access to information on the top-down policy implementation process, people assess the central leadership's policy implementation capacity by watching what local governments do with central policies. In other words, although so

far no national survey directly measures trust in the Center's commitment and capacity, observed trust in the central government is a valid proxy of the latent trust in the Center's commitment to govern in (or at least not against) the people's interests. Meanwhile, the observed trust in local government is a valid proxy of latent trust in the Center's capacity to make local agents faithfully enforce its decisions.

Last, the innovative measurement scheme generates a more nuanced and accurate assessment of political trust in the country. Trust in commitment and trust in capacity are related but distinctive. The two-dimensional typology has five representative patterns when it is applied to assess an individual's trustworthiness in her relationship to another person as the truster. The five patterns are logically valid and empirically observable. Total trust is the combination of trust in commitment and trust in capacity, partial trust is the combination of trust in commitment and distrust in capacity, skepticism is the combination of mistrust in commitment and mistrust in capacity, paradoxical trust is the combination of distrust in commitment and trust in capacity, and total distrust is distrust in commitment and distrust in capacity. However, a two-dimensional analysis observes only four representative patterns of trust in the Center. Paradoxical trust turns out to be a practical self-contradiction because it implies that the Center can but does not want to act in its own best and long-term interests.

The two-dimensional measurement scheme generates a more comprehensive and accurate assessment of political trust in China, paving the way to achieving better understandings of its sources and implications. Treating the pattern of trust in the Center as the dependent variable, this study analyzes how the party-state earns, engineers, and embeds trust in the Center. Three findings emerge. First, developing the economy is effective in enhancing trust in the Center's capacity without boosting trust in its commitment. Second, it is effective to engineer trust in the Center by combating corruption through convenient campaigns rather than introducing fundamental institutional changes. However, the tactic enhances confidence in the Center's capacity without improving trust in its commitment. Last, the efforts to embed trust in the Center with organizational control, ideological indoctrination, and cultural manipulation have mixed effects. A noteworthy failure of trust embedding is that party members do not show stronger trust in the Center despite having been subjected to more intensive political education.

In addition to refining understandings of trust formation mecha-

nisms, the two-dimensional typology of trust in the Center sheds new light on how political trust affects political behavior. In particular, the two-dimensional measurement scheme offers a framework to categorize people based on patterns of trust in the Center, which constitutes a crucial element of the cognitive foundation for political participation. Three findings are noteworthy. First, partial trust induces a higher probability of engaging in collective petitions, which is a boundary-spanning contention that works in the gray area between legal and illegal and pursues rights that have not been explicitly granted in laws and policies (O'Brien 2003). Second, both skepticism and total distrust induce a higher probability of joining substantively defiant mass protests and demonstrations. Last, total distrust induces a higher probability of engaging in explicitly defiant action of risking harm to defend rights.

Moving beyond unveiling the immediate effect of trust in the Center on participatory behavior, the two-dimensional typology of trust in the Center sheds light on how political trust affects support for the prevailing political system and hence preference for system change. Two findings are noteworthy. The lack of confidence in either the commitment or the capacity of the president and the Center as an institution is associated with a stronger preference for popularly electing the president. Moreover, the lack of confidence in the Center's commitment to governing in the people's interests is associated with weaker support for the one-party rule.

The two findings shed light on a debate over whether Chinese people have developed a rights consciousness similar to that observed in Europe and North America. Perry (2007, 2008, 2009) argues that Chinese people have a deep-rooted rules consciousness but have yet to develop a full-fledged rights consciousness. Other scholars, however, argue that some people in the country have developed a full-fledged rights consciousness in that they distrust the central policymakers and demand the right to participate in the selection of national leaders (Li 2010; Lorentzen and Scoggins 2015). This study reconfirms that a considerable number of people have a full-fledged rights consciousness. Future research may investigate the multilink mechanism that runs from distrust in the Center's commitment or capacity to the hope for a leadership change, which may then evolve into a preference for a systemic change.

A better understanding of the past and present can lead to a better understanding of the future. By generating a more comprehensive and accurate description of the reality, the two-dimensional measurement

TABLE 7.1. Paths of Change

	Trust in commitment		
Trust in capacity	Grow	No change	Decline
Grow	total trust +	skepticism +	skepticism +
No change	partial trust +	no change	skepticism +
Decline	partial trust +	skepticism +	total distrust +

scheme charts four paths of change. As table 7.1 illustrates, trust in the Center's commitment and capacity may grow, remain unchanged, or decline. When both dimensions remain unchanged, trust in the Center remains unchanged. When either or both dimensions change, trust in the Center may change along four major paths. First, the number of total trust holders increases when trust in commitment and trust in capacity increase simultaneously. Second, the number of partial trust holders increases when trust in commitment grows, while trust in capacity remains unchanged or declines. Third, the number of skeptics increases if trust in commitment remains unchanged but trust in capacity declines or vice versa. Last, the number of people with total distrust increases when trust in commitment and trust in capacity decline simultaneously.

A major limitation of this study is that it relies on cross-sectional survey data. Unable to overcome the inherent problem of endogeneity, it aims to generate hypotheses rather than test them rigorously. Future research can address the endogeneity problem in three ways. The most effective solution is to apply experimental methods such as list experiments (Nicholson and Huang 2023; Huang, Intawan, and Nicholson 2023) and survey experiments (e.g., Peyton 2020; Carter, Carter, and Schick 2023). Continuing to draw on survey data, one approach is to apply time-series–cross-section analysis on multiyear survey data to explore if, how, and why trust in the Center fluctuates. In addition to the Asian Barometer Survey, three similar projects have made their data publicly accessible. The China Survey, the Research Center for Contemporary China Survey, and the AsiaBarometer Survey ask about trust in the central government as well as trust in local government. Although it asks about trust in the central government without asking about trust in local government, the World Values Survey has questions about confidence in the police and the court, which reflects trust in the Center's policy implementation capacity.

The other approach to address the endogeneity problem inherent in

individual-level survey research is to employ cross-region comparison as a substitute for longitudinal research when it comes to projecting the long-term effect of quantitatively traceable changes such as economic development. The country has a unitary political system but remarkable regional variations in terms of economic development. Merging individual-level survey data with county/district-level information on per capita gross domestic product in the year before the survey, a study observes that the level of economic development has a negative correlation with individual-level trust in the central government (Lyu and Li 2018). In light of the interpretation proposed in this study, the finding implies that people in economically more developed localities tend to have weaker confidence in the Center's political commitment. Another study merges individual-level data with provincial-level data and finds that provincial-level inequality weakens trust in local government but does not affect trust in the central government (Zhou and Jin 2018, 1052). In light of the new interpretation, the finding implies that people who are discontented about economic inequality tend to have weaker confidence in the Center's policy implementation capacity without losing confidence in its commitment to championing equality. More findings can be expected if researchers combine individual-level data and regional-level data on other factors, for example, education, ethnicity, and local revolutionary history (see Zhang and Liu 2019).

Other than explaining the formation and change of trust in the Center, future research can draw on multiwave survey data to investigate how the variations of trust in the Center affect political participation. In particular, future research can explore the behavioral implications of the changing ratio of people holding the four patterns of trust. For instance, individuals holding total distrust may be more likely to engage in contentious and defiant participatory activities if their number grows. Having more like-minded activists is reassuring that the chosen course of action is safe and effective. Equally important is that the effect of a particular pattern of trust in the Center may be contingent on the ratio of people holding the other three patterns. More specifically, the fluctuating ratio of people holding the four patterns of trust in the Center may constitute a critical element of the political opportunity structure (see Meyer and Minkoff 2004). For instance, people who totally distrust the Center may become more assertive if they find that the group of people holding skepticism grows larger. The protest against excessive zero-COVID measures in 2022 may be a case in point. Although only a small number of people directly took part in the

defiant protests, the activists might have been emboldened by the outpour of public discontent with the outdated policy and doubts about the central leadership's political calculation on social media. A similar analysis can be conducted on how the fluctuating ratio of people holding the four patterns of trust in the Center affects the support for the existing political system.

Without venturing to forecast how trust in the Center may change, this study lays out a few critical factors for consideration. Structurally, the ruling party is in a practically impregnable position to construct and sustain trust in the Center through earning, engineering, and embedding. Above all, the party has turned the nation into a "community of fate" (Levi 2022, 227), interlocking its monopoly of power with political stability and national unity. Moreover, the regime has cultivated a sizable group of devoted supporters who have a faith in the Center, especially in its commitment. A third favorable condition is that the regime has amassed a huge arsenal of economic resources and digital technologies to impose a "perfect dictatorship" (Ringen 2016; Economy 2018). Whenever it wants, the all-powerful Center can deprive citizens of their basic rights. A case in point is the enforcement of excessive zero-COVID measures in 2022 (see Guan et al. 2024).

However, the party-state also faces mounting challenges to the regime's attempt to maintain popular trust in the Center. Among other things, performance legitimacy has its limits, particularly when it is based on economic growth. The economy has its cycles, and expectations of wealth and welfare invariably grow faster than the economy. Meanwhile, trust engineering faces a mounting challenge in the internet era. Last, the tactic of embedding trust is costly, ineffective, and unsustainable.

Perhaps the greatest challenge comes from within the central leadership. Aside from the practical challenges of keeping up with performance, indoctrination, and embedding, a much graver challenge for the ruling party is maintaining the credibility of the paramount leader. As the ultimate object of political trust, the top leader is the soul and face of the Center. His credibility is critical for sustaining trust in the Center as an institution. Trust in the paramount leader endows credibility to the Center's claim to the ownership of the country and its people, which, in turn, sustains trust in the Center's commitment. Although the personalization of the Center as the paramount leader induces self-evident doubts about capacity, the resulting partial trust is nonetheless acceptable and even favorable for the regime.

The extraordinary importance of the top leader suggests that opportunities and challenges hinge on whether the ruling party can install and reinstall a credible and effective supreme leader in a reliable way. Critical as it is, the task remains unfinished for the ruling party. At its inception, the regime looked like a new monarchy in the making. However, the Korean War precluded the regime from becoming a family monarchy like the Kim monarchy in North Korea. Instead, the regime becomes an unprecedented party monarchy, with a nonhereditary top leader on the throne and a collectivity of senior central leaders as a proxy imperial house (Zheng 2009). Since then, the central party leadership has been moving back and forth between two modes of operation. One is a more consultative collective leadership, and the other is personal autocracy. Both strategies have merits and drawbacks. Collective leadership tends to be ineffective in disciplining subordinate agents, resulting in delegitimating corruption. Personal rule can be effective but implies delegitimating political purges and unpredictable succession of power (Leese 2011; Magnus 2018; Shirk 2022; Shih 2022).

It remains to be seen how Chinese people adjust their evaluation of the Center's trustworthiness. They do not have an institutionalized way of affecting the selection and behavior of the central leadership. Moreover, they are subjected to systematic trust engineering and embedding. Nevertheless, they observe, reflect, and judge the central leadership's trustworthiness and adapt behavioral orientation and system preference accordingly.

Other than refining the scholarly understanding of political trust in China, this study contributes a reference case for the comparative study of political trust. It highlights that, unlike interpersonal trust, political trust always occurs between two unequal parties regardless of regime type. The trustees or would-be trustees are invariably more powerful than the trusters, either in terms of political power or economic resources. The inequality between trustees and trusters implies an inherent tension. On the one hand, trustees have power, while trusters are powerless. On the other hand, trustees must make an effort to obtain and sustain trust, while trusters can retract trust in one way or another. The power and rights elements of political trust are variables, and so too is their combination. A conceptual framework for the comparative study of political trust needs to take all three factors into consideration.

That political trust has the same substance across regime types determines that its formation shares the same mechanism. Although they take

a more assertive form in China, trust earning, engineering, and embedding are universal political phenomena. The salience of each tactic varies with the strength of structural and institutional constraints on politicians, but its substance is the same. In particular, trust embedding appears to be an epiphenomenon in electoral democracies because constitutionalism, the rule of law, the market economy, and the free press make the tactic appear to be counterproductive and even politically suicidal. However, trust embedding proves effective in electoral democracies for politicians with the audacity, resources, and skills to aggravate insecurity and anxiety, mobilize prejudices, and deceptively frame reality at times of perceived crisis (Albertson and Gadarian 2015). Regardless of regime type, politicians everywhere invariably resort to hard and soft tactics to embed trust whenever they can get away with it.

Another point of reference is that the rise of authoritarian populism calls for reconsidering the assumption that political trust in an electoral democracy is for political institutions rather than individual politicians. In the age of social media, institutionalized political power in an electoral democracy can be conveniently personalized. A recent case in point is President Donald Trump's use of Twitter to announce cabinet member changes (e.g., Ott and Dickinson 2019). Another case in point is that a demagogue can win a presidential election by lavishing voters with fanciful political dreams on social media (see de Moraes 2023).

Last, the rapid changes in communication technology, data science and technology, and artificial intelligence are blurring the boundary between electoral democracy and authoritarian one-party rule. The implication is that researchers can no longer rely on conventional unidimensional measurement of political trust, assuming that the primary targets of trust are decision-making institutions, the domain of issue is lawmaking, and the commitment-competence distinction is irrelevant due to the rule of law. Instead, it is now imperative to factor the trustworthiness of individual politicians into the assessment of political trust in an electoral democracy. The distinction between the trustworthiness of political commitment and policy implementation capacity may regain its relevance. In a nutshell, comparativist scholars may learn more about political trust in countries with different regime types by focusing on the commonalities rather than the differences.

Appendix

A: Survey Data

This study draws on two local surveys and two national surveys. The 2006 local survey was conducted in four counties, which were selected by convenience. Sampling in each county was conducted in three stages. First, five townships were selected with probability proportionate to size (PPS). Second, four villages were selected from each township with PPS. Last, within each selected village, 20 randomly chosen individuals over the age of 18 were interviewed, regardless of village population size. Altogether, 1,600 villagers were interviewed.

The 2014 local survey was conducted in a district of a major city and three counties, also selected by convenience. The sampling procedure in the three counties was the same as the one adopted in the 2006 survey. Altogether, 1,200 villagers were interviewed. In the urban district, five streets were selected with PPS, and then four resident communities were selected from each street with PPS. Last, within each selected community, 30 randomly chosen individuals over the age of 18 were interviewed. Altogether, 599 urban residents were interviewed. Interested readers may contact the author for more information on sampling, the questionnaires, and the data.

This study draws on two national surveys to test if local survey findings are generalizable. One is the fourth wave of the Asian Barometer Survey completed in 2015, and the other is the fifth wave completed in 2019. The Asian Barometer Survey project was cofounded by Professors Fu Hu and Yun-han Chu. The survey adopts a probability sampling procedure that

gives every adult of the voting age population an equal chance of being selected to participate in the survey. The 2015 survey has 4,068 respondents drawn from 30 counties or county-level urban districts, which are Primary Sampling Units (PSUs), while the 2019 survey has 4,941 respondents drawn from 36 PSUs. Regression models use sampling weights to control the proportional contribution of each PSU to the overall population estimate. More information on the core questionnaire and sampling procedure is available at the website of the Asian Barometer Project Office (www.asianbarometer.org).

This study adopts the following practice to address the problem of missing responses. Assuming that observations are missing at random, it uses Amelia II to impute missing values (Schafer 1997; King et al. 2001; Honaker, King, and Blackwell 2011), aiming to increase the efficiency of estimation and to make inferences valid by reflecting additional variability due to the missing values (Rubin 1987). Estimates and standard errors of direct and indirect effects obtained from imputed datasets are then combined using the rules given by Rubin (Rubin 1987; Schafer and Olsen 1998, 556–57).

B: Variable Descriptions

TABLE A1. Variable Descriptions (2015 Asian Barometer Survey)

	Mean	SD
Q1. How would you rate the overall economic condition of our country today? (1 = very bad; 5 = very good)	3.64	.96
Q9. How much trust do you have in the central government? (1 = full distrust; 6 = full trust)	5.10	.88
Q15. How much trust do you have in local government? (1 = full distrust; 6 = full trust)	3.96	1.23
Q49. How often do you use the internet? (1 = never; 8 = several hours a day)	2.32	3.02
Q73. Sometimes, people need the help of government officials, have different opinions about a policy, have opinions about policy implementation problems, or encounter officials who use power for private gains. They often seek solutions in the following ways. In the past three years, have you contacted the news media? (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.04	.19
Q75. In the past three years, have you joined other people to sign an appeal or collective petition? (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.09	.29
Q76. In the past three years, have you joined a demonstration or protest parade? (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.02	.14
Q116. In your opinion, how many local government officials are corrupt? (1 = none; 4 = almost all)	2.03	.42
Q119. In your opinion, has the government made enough efforts to combat corruption and root out bribe-taking in the past three years? (1 = made no effort; 4 = it has done its best)	3.13	.58
Q131. Only one political party shall hold power. (1 = strongly agree; 4 = strongly disagree)	2.16	.62
Q134. I think I am very capable of participating in politics. (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree)	2.28	.65
Q142. Government leaders are like the head of a family; people should obey their decisions. (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree)	2.76	.64
Are you a member of the Communist Party? (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.10	.30
Educational level (0–22 years)	7.24	4.62
Gender (0 = female; 1 = male)	.49	.50
Age (18–94)	48.27	16.27

Note: N = 4,068. Cell entries are means and standard deviations. Missing data are multiply imputed. English translations of survey questions are based on the Chinese questionnaire.

TABLE A2. Variable Descriptions (2019 Asian Barometer Survey)

	Mean	SD
Q1. How would you rate the overall economic condition of our country today? (1 = very bad; 5 = very good)	3.92	.77
Q9. How much trust do you have in the central government? (1 = full distrust; 6 = full trust)	5.35	.73
Q15. How much trust do you have in local government? (1 = full distrust; 6 = full trust)	4.41	1.06
Q49. How often do you use the internet? (1 = never; 9 = always online)	5.48	3.45
Q73. Sometimes, people need the help of government officials, have different opinions about a policy, have opinions about policy implementation problems, or encounter officials who use power for private gains. They often seek solutions in the following ways. In the past three years, have you contacted the news media? (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.04	.19
Q74. In the past three years, have you joined other people to sign a collective appeal or petition? (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.04	.19
Q79. In the past three years, have you joined a demonstration or protest parade? (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.01	.11
Q80. In the past three years, have you risked harm to engage in a rights-defense activity? (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.02	.14
Q124. In your opinion, how many local government officials are corrupt? (1 = none; 4 = almost all)	1.90	.39
Q126. In your opinion, are the government's anti-corruption measures effective? (1 = not effective at all; 4 = highly effective)	3.08	.54
Q138. Only one political party shall hold power. (1 = strongly agree; 4 = strongly disagree)	2.21	.61
Q141. I think I am very capable of participating in politics. (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree)	2.18	.58
Q149. Government leaders are like the head of a family; people should obey their decisions. (1 = strongly disagree; 4 = strongly agree)	2.78	.58
Are you a member of the Communist Party? (0 = no; 1 = yes)	.12	.33
Educational level (0–27 years)	8.64	4.71
Gender (0 = female; 1 = male)	.47	.50
Age (18–94)	48.88	17.30

Note: N = 4,941. Cell entries are means and standard deviations. Missing data are multiply imputed. English translations of survey questions are based on the Chinese questionnaire.

C: A Note on Measurement

This study took five steps to measure political trust in China. First, following Husserl's motto of "going to the things themselves" (Husserl 2001; Butler 2016), I "bracketed" (i.e., suspended) existing measures of political trust. Instead of assuming that the concept of political trust, which originated in American and European democracies (see Citrin and Stoker 2018, 50–51), is fully applicable to the country, I explored what Chinese people had in mind when they assessed the trustworthiness of government officials, the government writ large, and the all-powerful but elusive Center.

Second, I built domain knowledge by seeking to understand Chinese people from their perspective rather than explaining them from the outside, following the three operational guidelines derived from the hermeneutics of Gadamer (1989). Instead of collecting data to test preconceived hypotheses, I sought to achieve a solid understanding of people who were acting on their judgments of the trustworthiness of the Center. I conducted open-ended interviews, believing that the interviewees might be right and seeking to achieve a fusion of horizons with them through dialogues. Having an open mind and being willing to learn from interviewees, I heard what I could never have imagined in my study. In-depth interviews with petitioners in Beijing, in particular, revealed the high degree of personification of the Center as the ultimate object of trust, the duality of the domain of policymaking-cum-policy-implementation, and the duality of the Center's trustworthiness.

Third, I drew on my domain knowledge to identify representative patterns of trust in the Center. In-depth interviews with petitioners in Beijing indicate that paradoxical trust is a logical paradox. My local surveys included questions designed based on my interviews with rural and urban residents. For the study of political trust, only my local surveys included measures that gauge public confidence in all five levels of party committees and governments. K-means clustering analysis of the full-information survey data identifies four representative patterns of trust in the Center: (1) total trust, (2) partial trust, (3) skepticism, and (4) total distrust.

Last, I employed K-means clustering to identify representative trust patterns in national survey data. Based on the findings of full-information local surveys and in-depth interviews, I set four as the optimal num-

ber of clusters. I standardized measures of trust in the central and local governments to ensure that the two feature vectors have equal weight in determining cluster assignments. In addition, I adopted the conventional practice of running the K-means algorithm multiple times with randomly chosen initial centroids and choosing the solution that has the minimum dissimilarity of clusters (Guttag 2021, 567).

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