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Stratified Political Trust in a Nondemocratic Society: Magnitude, Forms and Sources of Political Trust in China

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Stratified Political Trust in a Nondemocratic Society:

Magnitude, Forms, and Sources of Political Trust in Urban China

Abstract

There has been a vibrant literature on political trust in China. However, a closer examination of this large literature points to no clear consensus on the measurement and sources of such support. To contribute to this literature, this study is to explore the magnitude, forms, and sources of political trust in urban China. In this study, we explore an alternative approach to the study of political trust, which treats political trust along two straightforward yet distinct dimensions: horizontal and vertical dimensions. Based on this approach, we find that people's political trust in urban China varies vertically, across different levels of government institutions (e.g., central and local governments), while it changes little horizontally, among different government institutions at the same level. Moreover, we find that the formation of political trust in each level of government institutions — along the vertical dimension — is shaped by a distinct combination of sociopolitical factors. We also explore some important theoretical and political implications from our findings.

Stratified Political Trust in a Nondemocratic Society:

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Political trust, as people's basic orientation toward political authorities and institutions, is critical for the viability and stability of any forms of political systems (Braithwaite and Levi 1998; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Hetherington 2004; Levi and Stoker 2000; Mishler and Rose 1997; Rose et al. 2011; Warren 1999). Not only is political trust a key manifestation of people's underlying diffuse support for a regime (Miller 1993; Citrin 1974; Citrin and Muste 1999; Norris 1999; Dalton 2004; Chen 2004), but it is also required for individuals' compliance to laws and government regulations (Hetherington 1998; Hetherington and Husser 2012; Marien and Hooghe 2011; Rudolph 2009;). Given the importance of political trust, some scholars have explored political trust in China, the most populous non-democratic society in the world (e.g., Shi 2001; Chen 2004 and 2005; Li 2004, 2008, 2011, 2013 and 2016; Ma and Wang 2014; Chen 2017; Lu and Dickson 2020). Nonetheless, there seems no clear consensus on the measurement and sources of political trust in that country.

To contribute to the current debate and help fill some gaps in the current literature on political trust in China, this study is to explore the magnitude, forms, and sources of political trust in urban China based on data from a representative survey conducted in Beijing between 2011 and 2012. Specifically, we try to answer several important questions as follows: How can we measure political trust among the ordinary Chinese citizens? What sociopolitical factors shape political trust among ordinary people? And, finally, what are the theoretical and political implications of our findings? The answers to these questions are critical not only for our

assessment of political stability in China, but also for our understanding of the relationship between citizens and various political authorities and institutions under an authoritarian regime.

I. Political Trust and Its Conceptualization

Political trust is widely defined as citizens' basic belief that political actors or institutions are "producing outcomes consistent with their expectations" (Hetherington 2004, 9).[1] The earlier research on political trust, strongly influenced by Easton's (1965, 1975) concepts of "diffuse support" and "specific support," was focused primarily on whether political trust reflects citizens' fundamental support for a regime or it simply manifests people's immediate feelings about political incumbents and their policies (e.g., Citrin 1974; Weatherford 1987).

Later empirical evidence collected in North America and Western Europe suggested that people's trust in specific political actors and institutions (i.e., specific support, according David Easton), though bearing a strong correlation with their diffuse support for a political system, were more likely to be affected by immediate causes such as perceptions of the economy, political scandals, and ongoing policy debates (e.g., Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Chanley et al. 2000; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Kornberg and Clarke 1992; Miller and Listhaug 1999). More important, these studies indicated that people did not trust various political institutions equally, with some institutions being considered more trustworthy than others (e.g., Gibson et al. 2003; Klingemann 1999; Kornberg and Clarke 1992). Altogether, this empirical evidence suggested that the Eastonian notion of specific support seemed to lose its relevance with reality, particularly when it came to an analysis of citizens' trust in various political authorities.

Since the early 1990s, an emerging trend in the literature has been to conceptualize political trust as a multidimensional phenomenon. This conceptualization differentiates peoples' trust in different institutions and actors (e.g., Norris 1999; Dalton 1999, 2004; Klingemann 1999; Kornberg and Clarke 1992; Weatherford 1992). Nonetheless, there has thus far been no consensus on what the specific dimensions of political trust are (e.g., Booth and Seligson 2009; Norris 1999; Dalton 2004; Klingemann 1999; Kornberg and Clarke 1992). There seem two reasons for the lack of consensus. On the one hand, the political institutions and their corresponding powers could vary significantly across countries and political systems. Given the marked cross-national variations, it is difficult to find a multidimensional construct of political trust that is universally applicable.

On the other hand, the multidimensional conceptualization assumes that ordinary citizens have an adequate understanding of the power structures of a particular political system. Empirically, however, it remains unclear to what extent the "theoretically well-elaborated multidimensional construct actually exists in the minds of citizens of real polities" (Booth and Seligson, 2009, 14). For instance, as revealed in some earlier studies, citizens' inability to differentiate political institutions and actors could result from the lack of clarity of power division among these institutions and actors (Anderson 2000, 2006; Nadeau et al. 2012; Powell and Whitten 1993). Ambiguity of power division, and blame shifting and credit taking between competing political actors (e.g., between national and local governments, or between executive and legislative branches) significantly hinder ordinary citizens from developing a set of clear and consistent views of various political institutions and actors. Thus, the multidimensional approach to political trust, though heuristic for revealing the complex nature of political trust, encounters difficulties in specifying a framework that is universally appropriate.

In this study, we argue that one way to conceptualize political trust is to explore citizens' political trust along two distinct yet straightforward conceptual dimensions: horizontal and vertical dimensions. The horizontal dimension refers to the variation of political authorities and institutions at any one level of a political system (e.g., legislative vs. executive branches at the national level or state level in the United States). The variation of people's trust in different political institutions along the horizontal dimension perhaps is the most often discussed. Moreover, such horizontal variation in political trust has been observed at both national and subnational levels of governments mostly in democratic societies. At the level of national government, for example, when examining political trust in such an established democracy as the U.S., Gibson et al. (2005) find that citizens tend to have much stronger confidence in judicial institutions than legislatures at the national level. At the level of subnational government, for instance, based on a study of public's confidence in branches of state government in the U.S., Kelleher and Wolak (2007) find that American people's trust in state institutions is not a monolithic; instead, such trust varies significantly among the state legislature, the office of the governor, and the state court.

The vertical dimension stands for the variation of political authorities and institutions cross various levels of governments in a political system. As for variations of political trust along vertical dimension, citizens in any society interact with a multiplicity of governments at different levels almost simultaneously (Jennings 1998). A comprehensive understanding of popular trust in any political system, therefore, requires an investigation of such trust in governments at different levels. In fact, many scholars in the west have long noted that there are considerable variations in political trust across levels of governments (e.g., Hill 1981; Pharr 1997; Jennings 1998; Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002;

Hetherington 2004). More importantly, some China scholars have also detected such variations in trust in governments at the central and local levels (e.g., Li 2004, 2008, 2011, 2013 and 2016; Ma and Wang 2014; Chen 2017). For example, based on data from five national surveys, Li found that about one- to two-thirds of people in China held "hierarchical trust"—namely, they trusted the central government more than their local governments.

In sum, the advantage of our two-dimension approach is twofold. At the cognitive level, this approach focuses primarily on two general yet distinct conceptual dimensions of power dispersion, horizontal and vertical, and hence helps alleviates one's cognitive burden of separating each government office from one another. At the contextual level, this approach provides a more flexible and thus more useful framework to comprehend how political trust varies across different political systems and in different societies.

II. Understanding Political Trust in the Chinese Setting

In contrast to many democracies distressed by declining political trust, authoritarian China has seemed to maintain a high level of political trust since the early 1990s, as indicated in many survey studies conducted in China (e.g., Shi 2001; Chen 2004; Tang 2005; Kennedy 2009; Yang and Tang 2009; Wang 2010; Chen 2017; Lu and Dickson 2020). Yet, what makes the case of China more perplexing is that despite such a high level of political trust as these survey-study findings suggested, the social unrest and popular resistance has reportedly surged in the country (e.g., O'Brien and Li 2006; Cai 2008; Chen 2011). Given this discrepancy between the survey-study findings and the reports on unrests in many locales, how can we assess the magnitude of political trust among Chinese people? How can the horizontal-vertical framework, as introduced

above, help advance our understanding of such trust? And how does political trust vary along the horizontal and vertical dimensions in the Chinese setting?

To answer these questions, one must first understand, among others, two critical features of China's current political system. One is a high degree of integration between government (政府) and party （党） institutions at each level of the political system, and the other is a high level of decentralization of administrative power from the center to local government and party institutions. In terms of the integration, the Chinese party-state is characterized by the CCP's ubiquitous penetration of the entire government apparatus through the nomenklatura (personnel control) system. As a result, all government and party institutions are highly integrated. Such a high degree of integration between government and party institutions has made it extreme difficult, if not entirely impossible, for Chinese people to distinguish government institutions from party organizations at each level of the political system or along the horizontal dimension.

The administrative decentralization in the post-Mao era can be characterized as a "downward transfer of power and authority between different levels of government" (Chung 2000, 4). In the framework of decentralization, there has been an increasingly clear division of authority between the central and local governments in the past several decades (Naughton and Yang 2004). Subsequently, the local authorities have assumed administrative responsibilities in many policy areas at the local level, ranging from local economic development to local public goods provision (e.g., Montinola et al. 1995; Nathan 2003; Oi 1999; Remick 2002; Yang 2008). This kind of decentralization is most notable in the area of economic development, which has been depicted as "market-preserving federalism" by Montinola et al. (1995). Under this market-preserving federalism, China's subnational government expenditure constitutes about 70 percent of China's total government expenditure (Landry 2010). Such a large share of China's

subnational government expenditure in the post-Mao era not only surpasses that in the Mao era but also outpaces the subnational government expenditures in Western countries, such as the United States and Switzerland (which are two of the most decentralized democracies in the world). In addition, the decentralization gives local governments more autonomy and power to deal with such non-economic issues as social unrests at local levels. In a recent study, for example, Yongshun Cai (2008) finds that the central government has deliberately assigned the responsibility for dealing with public resistance and protest to local governments. In short, the transfers of significant portions of administrative authorities and financial resources from the national government to subnational governments in the post-Mao era has helped ordinary people to internalize the distinction among various levels of governments along the vertical dimension, particularly between the central and local governments

Based on our understanding of these two critical features of China's current political system, we argue that while ordinary people in China might not be able to differentiate their trust in various government and party institutions at the *same* level (or horizontal dimension) due to the integration of these institutions, they may distinguish their confidence in government and party institutions across *various* levels (or vertical dimension) of the political system due to the decentralization of administrative authorities.

All in all, based on existing studies conducted in and outside of China, we expect that Chinese people's political trust may vary significantly along the vertical dimension, instead of the horizontal dimension. Relying on data collected from a survey conducted in Beijing, this study is intended to contribute to the understanding of political trust in a nondemocratic setting by exploring the magnitude, components, and sources of political trust in urban China along the vertical dimension (vs. horizontal dimension).

III. Data: The Beijing Survey

The data used in this study came from a public opinion survey conducted in the urban and rural areas of Beijing between November 2011 and February 2012. The survey was carried out in cooperation with the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences (BASS), and well-trained college students were employed as field interviewers. The sample was selected with a combination of probability proportional to size (PPS) and multistage sampling techniques. In the first stage, street-level units (*jiedao* and township) were selected within each of 10 surveyed district units (*qu* and county in Beijing) using the PPS technique, in which the probability of selection is proportional to the population size of the district based on China's 2010 census data. In this sampling step a total of 36 street-level units were randomly chosen. In the second sampling stage, 4 residential communities (or villages) were randomly selected from each sampled street-level unit. At the final stage, 10 individuals were chosen randomly from each sampled community as the interviewee. The adjusted response rate of this survey was 92 percent (1318), which was quite similar to the response rates from other surveys conducted in Beijing (e.g., Shi 1997; Chen, 2004).

IV. Forms and Magnitude of Political Trust

Ever since the National Election Studies (NES) trust-in-government questions were introduced for the first time in the studies of political trust in democratic societies, the literature in the field has focused on and made some progress in the development of a set of valid measures

of political trust (Citrin and Muste 1999; Cook and Gronke 2005; Craig et al. 1990; Dalton 2004; Feldman 1983; Hill 1981; Levi and Stoker 2000; Seligson and Carrión 2002). The development of such measures in the Chinese setting, however, has presented a formidable challenge. Due to the unique features of China's political system as discussed above, survey instruments of political trust developed in non-Chinese settings cannot be applied, at least directly, to China. Facing such a challenge, some China scholars have explored some alternative measures of political trust in the central government and local governments. For example, based on earlier studies of trust in China, Lu and Dickson (2020, 679 and 680) designed a set of survey instruments for trust emphasizing "popular trust in and support for *three* kinds of political institutions at the *national* level. The Asian Barometer Surveys deployed one simple question of how much trust respondents had in the national or local governments to measure trust in the central government and local governments. It is hoped that this study can also contribute to the development of political-trust measures in China by designing a more comprehensive and inclusive set of instruments than those measures in the earlier studies.

Applying the two-dimension approach and considering unique features of China's party-state, as discussed above, we developed our measurement of political trust by focusing on *four different levels* of the Chinese political system—national, municipal (province equivalence in Beijing), district-level (county equivalence in Beijing), and street-level (village equivalence in Beijing). Moreover, at the national, municipal, and district-level, we also included both the administrative and legislative bodies (i.e., the people's congresses).[2] Altogether, *seven institutions* at the four levels were included in our measurement of political trust: (1) the Central Government, (2) the National People's Congress (NPC) and its standing committee, (3) the Beijing Municipal government, (4) the Beijing Municipal People's Congress and its standing

committee (MPC), (5) the county-*qu* government, (6) the county-*qu* people's congress and its standing committee (CPC), and (7) the township-*jiedao* government office. We believe that this set of institutions reflects both vertical power hierarchy and horizontal bureaucratic structures of China's party-state in reality (see, Shambaugh 2000), and hence we argue that our measurement for political trust in China are more comprehensive and inclusive than the measurements in the earlier studies

We used the following statement to measure the respondent's trust in each institution: "I believe that the following institutions are always acting in my best interests." For each of the seven political institutions included in our survey, the respondents were asked to assess their trust on a 5-point scale, where "strongly disagree" is scored "0" and "strongly agreed" is scored "4."

To detect the natural dimensions among the seven institutions for political trust, we used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with the method of varimax rotation. The results of this analysis are reported in Table 1.

[Table 1 is about here.]

As presented in Table 1, two factors, composed of all the seven survey items, emerged from the EFA. These two factors deal with two general dimensions: trust in higher-level institutions (Component 1) and trust in lower-level institutions (Component 2). While the factor of trust in higher-level institutions encompasses the four administrative and legislative institutions at the national and provincial-municipal levels, the factor of trust in lower-level institutions includes the other three institutions at the county-*qu*- and township-*jiedao*-level. Overall, the two factors explain over two thirds (74.0 percent) of the variance among the seven items.[3]

From these results, two important findings stand out: (1) ordinary Chinese are able to distinguish their trust in government institutions *vertically*, and (2) they do not differentiate their trust those institutions *horizontally*. These findings confirm our aforementioned argument: that is, the transfers of significant portions of administrative authorities and financial resources from the central government and local governments in the post-Mao era have helped ordinary people to internalize the distinction among various levels of governments along the vertical dimension, particularly between the central and local governments; but such transfers have not changed the long-time penetration of the Party into all aspects of governments and the integration of government institutions at each level so that people do not differentiate those institutions along the horizontal dimension. It should be noted that our survey instruments are by no means exhaustive. The inclusion of additional political institutions like the court and police could greatly strengthen our analysis. To supplement our main analyses here, we conduct additional factor analysis using data from the most recent wave of the World Value Survey (2016-2020, for more details please see the Appendix). The results are consistent from those from Table 1.

To further explore the vertical variation of political trust in China, we compared the levels of Beijing residents' confidence in the seven different political institutions (see Table 2). The overall results of the comparison indicated that the levels of political trust declined as the levels of government institutions descended. Specifically, among our respondents, the degrees of trust in political institutions at the national- and provincial-municipal levels were higher than were those in authorities at the county-*qu* and township-*jiedao* levels. For example, the mean scores of all the four items of political trust in high-level institutions were well above "3," ranging from a low of 3.07 for trust in municipal people's congress and its standing committee to a high of 3.36 for the Central government. In contrast, none of the mean scores of the three

items of trust in low-level institutions exceeded "3," with a high of 2.84 for trust in district government and a low of 2.51 for trust in street government. These findings suggested that the majority of our respondents had stronger confidence in the national and provincial authorities than in the lower-level governments. These results generally are consistent with the pattern observed in rural China (Li 2004; 2008).

[Table 2 is about here.]

In sum, the results about the forms and degree of political trust in China provide answers to some of the questions raised at the outset of this paper. As demonstrated here, ordinary Chinese people seem to be able to distinguish trust in high-level government institutions from low-level government institutions. This suggests that the formation of these two kinds of trust may be influenced by different combinations of sociopolitical factors, which are explored the section that follows.

V. Explaining Political Trust along the Vertical Dimension

Political scientists have long been debating over the sources of political trust (e.g., Lee 2003; Keele 2005, 2007; Lock et al. 1999; Weatherford 1987; Zmerili and Newton 2008; Booth and Seligson 2009). Within the extant studies of political trust in China, there seems no clear consensus on the sources of trust in higher-level and lower-level government institutions with those of lower-level (or subnational) government institutions (Zhong 2014; Tang and Huhe, 2016; Dickson et al. 2016; Chen 2017; Dickson, Shen, and Yan 2017; Lu and Dickson 2020)). For example, Ma and Wang (2014) find that the quality of government, impartiality of institutions, and authoritarian values are the main sources of trust in local governments; Zhong

(2014) discovers that the perception of local government performance affects trust in both central and local governments; Chen (2017) detects that the evaluation of national economic conditions positively affects trust in governments at *both* national and local levels, while the perceived quality of public service tends to increase trust in local government than in the national government. Given the divers findings from recent studies on the subject, we assume that the impacts of a set of key sociopolitical factors differ on each of the two kinds of political trust. Conceivably, this is because these two kinds of political trust encompass distinct sets of political objects and thus are formed through different socio-political and socio-psychological processes. Particularly, we hypothesize that while variables such as diffuse support and evaluation of government performance are positively and similarly associated with the two kinds of political trust, factors like perception of local collusion, media consumption, and interpersonal trust may exert different, or even opposite, impacts on the two kinds of trust. The expected relationships between the two kinds of trust on the one hand, and various sociopolitical and socio-psychological factors on the other hand, can be summarized in Table 3.

[Table 3 is about here.]

A. Diffuse Political Support

Political scientists have noted that diffuse political support, defined as a person's general affect for the fundamental values and structures of a political regime, is strongly associated with one's confidence in various objects of the political system (e.g., Lipset and Schneider 1987; Weatherford 1987). As a person's conviction that the political system conforms to one's moral or ethical principles, diffuse political support not only encompasses citizens' affect for the values and norms that a regime stands for, but also strongly influences their view about whether

political actors or institutions produce outcomes consistent with their interests. Those who support a regime may be more willing to believe that the specific institutions, high-level or low-level governments, operate in their best interests. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that respondents' diffuse support is positively and significantly correlated with both kinds of political trust.

B. Evaluation of Government Performance

The evaluation of government performance is perhaps one of the most obvious and commonly-cited determinants of both kinds of political trust. One's trust in any political authority may in large part come from a conviction that policies executed by the political authority have satisfied and will meet his or her demands. The findings from empirical studies of various political systems have confirmed that there is a significant, positive relationship between people's evaluations of government policy performance on one hand and their political trust on the other (e.g., Booth and Seligson 2009; Dalton 1999, 2004; Rose and Mishler 2011). More relevantly, some scholars have found that Chinese citizens link their support for the political regime with the overall policy performance of the incumbents at both the national level (e.g., Chen, 2004) and the local level (e.g., Li, 2004). We therefore expected that those who have positive assessment of government performance are more likely to have a high level of political trust in both the higher- and lower-level institutions.

C. Decentralization and Perception of Local Collusion

As discussed earlier, a key characteristic of China's post-Mao reform is decentralization of administrative power. But such decentralization, through the transfer of considerable

administrative authorities and financial resources to local governments, has led to a problem of "local collusion." As noted by Zhou (2010), this problem can be seen as local officials trying to develop their own strategies to sidetrack or sabotage policies of the Central government in order to benefit the officials themselves. This local collusion is vividly captured in a popular Chinese saying: "From above there are imposed policies, and from below there are evading strategies" (*shang you zhengce, xia you duice*). Those who perceive intense local collusion are more likely to believe that a lower-level government is less constrained and more corrupted, and thus are less likely to place their trust in a lower-level government.

While most China scholars agree that people's perception of local collusion tend to lower the level of their trust in local governments, there is no consensus on how such perception might affect people's trust in governments above the local governments. For example, while Lianjing Li (2004) suggests that the perception of local collusion could weaken peasants' trust in the Center, Yongshun Cai (2010) argues that local collusion may boost people's trust in a high-level government especially when the high-level government intervenes against local collusion. Based on these studies, on the one hand, we hypothesize that perception of local collusion is negatively and significantly associated only with people's trust in low-level government. On the other hand, we have an ambivalent hypothesis about the impact of perceived local collusion on people's trust in the governments above the local level: the perceived local collusion may be either negatively or positively associated with trust in higher-level governments.

D. Media Consumption

News media have been cited as a key factor influencing political trust (Kennedy 2009; Yang et al. 2014). In China, all the media are controlled by the party-state, and act as the agents

of government propaganda. All news information about sociopolitical issues is monopolized and censored by the party-state agencies. The media have therefore been considered bolstering support for the authoritarian regime and its institutions (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Kennedy 2009; Stockmann and Gallapher 2011). As a result, we expect that the more individuals are exposed to the state-run media, the higher the level of trust they might have in the regime and its institutions at different levels. However, it is difficult to use objective measurement to gauge media consumption. Instead, we rely on subjective indicators, asking the extent to which they are interested in national and local news respectively. We expect that the respondents' interested in local news is positively correlated with their trust in low-level governments, and interest in national news is likely to boost trust in high-level governments.

E. Interpersonal Trust

Interpersonal trust, as an important component of political culture, has long been regarded as a key determinant of political trust (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart 1997; Mishler and Rose 2001; Pye and Verba 1965). To a certain extent, political trust can be seen as an extension of interpersonal trust (e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1997; Putnam, 1993; Huhe 2014). Trusting people are inherently more cooperative and participatory. As a result, they are more likely to interact and cooperate with government officials and institutions, particularly those at the local level, and hence they tend to trust these officials and institutions. Empirical studies in China seem to confirm a strong correlation between social trust and political trust. Li (2011), for instance, finds that interpersonal trust serves as an important source of political trust in rural China. However, since interpersonal trust is more likely to be related to trust in local officials and institutions than national ones (Jennings 2003), we expect that

respondents who are socially trusting are more likely to trust the low-level government institutions, but are less light to have strong feelings about high-level government institutions.

F. Sociodemographic Controls

A large body of literature on political trust in both Chinese and non-Chinese settings suggests that certain key sociodemographic attributes may influence individuals' attitudes toward the political authorities (e.g., Chen, 2004; Kornberg and Clarke, 1992; Miller, 1993). The primary reason is that key sociodemographic attributes may play a significant role in shaping the processes of political socialization, which in turn affect people's attitudes toward various political institutions. Drawing on these earlier studies, we included the following key sociodemographic attributes as control variables: sex, age, education, Community Party membership, income and *hukou* status (i.e., urban and rural residences). We suspect that these variable may also affect the respondents' political trust.

VI. Results and Analysis

Table 4 presents the results of two multiple regression (OLS) models, which explore the sources of our respondents' political trust in low-level and high-level government institutions.[4] Overall, the results are consistent with our expectations: Chinese public's trust in the high- and low-level government institutions are affected by different combinations of socio-political and socio-psychological factors. We also conducted an ordered logistic analysis by exploring respondents' trust in each of the seven political institutions, ranging from National People's Congress and its Standing Committee to township (street, *jiedao*) government office (see

Appendix). The results of the ordered analyses are highly consistent with those from the OLS analyses based on the two factor scores (presented in Table 4).

[Table 4 is about here.]

First of all, it should be noted that the respondents' trust in the lower-level government institutions and their trust in higher-level government institutions do share *some* common sources. As we expected, respondents' diffuse support for the regime has a strong, positive impact on their confidence in both levels of government institutions. This finding is consistent with many earlier studies that people's support for the political regime could positively affect their support for specific government and party intuitions in China. In addition, the results from the regression models confirm our expectation for the positive association between people's evaluation of government performance and political trust. Yet it should be noted that those who were more satisfied with government performance were more likely to place trust in higher-level government institutions. As revealed by Xiaobo Lü (2014), this has a lot to do with the fact that ordinary citizens tend to credit the higher-level political institutions for policy successes but not to the lower-level political institutions.

But more interesting results from this study are those about the factors that variably affect the political trust at the two levels. First, people's perception of local collusion, though significantly positively affecting their trust in higher-level institutions, was negatively associated with their trust in lower-level institutions. This reconfirms the importance to examine the variations in political trust along the vertical dimension. Moreover, the results emerged from our analysis confirm that interpersonal trust could serve as an important source of citizens' trust in low-level government.

With respect to the impact of media exposure, on the one hand, the exposure to *local* news had a significant, positive impact on trust in the lower-level government intuitions, but did not have any significant effect on trust in the higher-level government institutions. On the other hand, the exposure to *national* news reduced one's trust in lower-level government institutions, but enhanced trust in the higher-level government institutions. The results have a lot to do with negative reports about local governments and almost all the positive reports on the national and provincial governments in the state-run media. With economic liberalization, there has been a wave of commercialization of the mass media in China. The newly commercialized media, however, are still "dancing in shackles" of the state censorship. As a result, any critical news reports in the media are allowed only on institutions of local governments. While local officials and government agencies have become under media scrutiny, top political leaders or key political institutions in the central government are almost completely immune from media criticisms. Thus, it is not surprising that exposure to mass media in China could reduce people's trust in lower-level government institutions.

VII. Conclusion and Discussion

This study starts with a new approach to understanding political trust under different political and institutional settings. We concur with the argument in some earlier studies that political trust is a multidimensional concept. Different from earlier studies, however, our study explores political trust along *two straightforward yet distinct dimensions*: horizontal and vertical dimensions. Applying this analytical framework to the case of China, we argue that people's political trust in that country varies vertically, across different levels of government institutions,

while it changes little horizontally, among different government institutions at the same level. Based on data collected from a survey in Beijing, we have found that citizens in China mainly differentiate their trust in higher-level governments from trust in lower-level governments, and the reported levels of trust in the local government institutions are significantly lower than those in the center. Furthermore, we have found that the formations of political trust in higher-level political institutions and trust in lower-level political institutions are shaped by distinct combinations of sociopolitical factors.

The findings from this study have important theoretical implications. First, this study suggests that while it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify a multidimensional construct of political trust that is universally applicable, one desirable approach to advancing our understanding of political trust is to explore citizens' political trust along two general dimensions, horizontal and vertical. This approach not only lowers the requirement of individuals' cognitive capacity but also provides a more flexible framework for cross-nation studies. Second, this study highlights an underexplored dimension in the comparative studies of political trust—trust in the local government. The current research has predominantly concentrated on trust in the national government, and trust in the local government is either poorly theorized or inadequately explored.[5] Third, the findings from this study indicate that the CCP rule is not as resilient as implied in earlier studies. The ostensibly high level of trust in the center masks the eroding basis of trust in the local governments, which in turn will affect the long-term stability of the regime.

The findings emerged from this study also have important political implications. First of all, the trust gap between the higher-level and lower-level political institutions, as noted in this and other studies, has increasingly fueled the public protests and other contentious activities in

China (e.g., Li 2008; O'Brien and Li 2006). When ordinary people perceive such a gap between the benevolent Center and predatory local governments, they are more likely to engage in public protests against the local governments in order to get the Center's intervention. Moreover, the public's continuing distrust in the lower-level government institutions will inevitably reduce those institutions' ability to implement various public policies. Local governments' inability of implementing public policies, including those mandated by the Center, further endangers the viability of the CCP regime.

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Table 1. Rotated Factor Analysis of Political Trust in Different Institutions

	Components	
Items	1	2
Q77.2 National People's Congress and Its Standing Committee	.868	
Q77.3 The Municipal (provincial) Government	.818	
Q77.1 The Central Government	.807	
Q77.4 The Municipal (provincial) People's Congress and Its Standing Committee	.716	
Q77.7 The Township (street, *jiedao*) Government Office		.875
Q77.6 The County (district, *qu*) People's Congress and Its Standing Committee [a]		.869
Q77.5 The County (district, *qu*) Government		.740

Source: The 2012 Beijing Survey.
Note: All entries in this table are factor loadings of 0.50 or larger from varimax rotated matrix for all factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0.

Table 2. The Levels of Political Trust

	Trust in higher-level institutions								Trust in lower-level institutions					
	Central		NPC		Municipal		MPC		County		CPC		Township	
	N.	*(%)*	*N.*	*(%)*	*N.*	*(%)*	*N.*	*(%)*	*N.*	*(%)*	*N.*	*(%)*	*N.*	*(%)*
Strongly agree (4)	623	47.3	501	38.0	429	32.6	336	25.5	221	16.8	173	13.1	142	10.8
Agree (3)	566	42.9	668	50.7	699	53.1	773	58.7	723	54.9	654	49.6	512	38.8
Just so-so (2)	106	7.4	130	9.9	168	12.8	182	13.8	322	24.4	435	33.0	514	39.0
Disagree (1)	21	8.0	15	1.1	18	1.4	20	1.5	47	3.6	54	4.1	116	8.8
Strongly disagree (0)	2	.2	3	.2	3	.2	6	.5	5	.4	2	.2	6	.5
Mean Score	3.36		3.25		3.16		3.07		2.84		2.71		2.51	
Standard Deviation	.710		.694		.708		.700		.751		.747		.818	
N. of observations	1318		1317		1317		1317		1318		1318		1317	

Source: The 2012 Beijing Survey.

Table 3. Hypothetical Effects on the Two Kinds of Political Trust

Selected correlates	*Trust in the Higher-level*	*Trust in the Lower-level*
Diffuse support	+	+
Performance evaluation	+	+
Perception of local collusion	+/-	−
Media exposure		
Exposure to local news		+
Exposure to national news	+	
Interpersonal trust		+

Note: The "+" and "-" symbols indicate positive and negative relationships, respectively.

Table 4. Multivariate Regression Analysis of Two Kinds of Political Trust

	Trust in the Higher-level	*Trust in the Lower-level*
Diffuse support	0.508***	0.256***
	(0.026)	(0.030)
Performance evaluation	0.104***	0.008
	(0.025)	(0.028)
Perception of local collusion	0.069**	-0.149***
	(0.028)	(0.031)
Media consumption		
Local news	-0.119**	0.165***
	(0.047)	(0.053)
National news	0.155***	-0.159***
	(0.046)	(0.051)
Interpersonal trust	0.003	0.055**
	(0.019)	(0.022)
Sex (1= Male; 0 = Female)	0.049	0.005
	(0.048)	(0.054)
Age	0.004*	-0.0008
	(0.002)	(0.0025)
CCP membership (1 = Yes; 0 = No)	-0.026	-0.112
	(0.074)	(0.084)
Education	-0.013	0.013
	(0.031)	(0.035)
Income	-0.101**	-0.041
	(0.040)	(0.045)
Hukou status (1 = Urban; 0 = Rural)	-0.053	-0.032
	(0.074)	(0.084)
Constant	0.262	-0.692***
	(0.205)	(0.231)
Number of Observations	1272	1272
R^2	0.321	0.125
Adjusted R^2	0.315	0.116

Endnotes

[1] For definition of political trust, see also the works by Coleman (1990) and Levi and Stoker (2000).

[2] There is no people's congress at the township (also *jiedao*) level.

[3] To further test the strength of the latent structures emerged from EFA, we also employ the technique of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). A great advantage of CFA is its ability to utilize the full information in the dataset via maximum-likelihood estimation rather than listwise deletion of missing data. The results of CFA also suggest that the two components are strongly coherent.

[4] The sources of our respondents' political trust are measured by the two factor scores based on our EFA analysis explained in Section IV.

[5] For a welcoming exception, see Jennings (1998).