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Beyond Performance Legitimacy:
Procedural Legitimacy and Discontent in China

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom maintains that the Chinese Communist Party is upheld by performance-based legitimacy. Yet what about procedural legitimacy? Analyzing national survey data on China, this study finds that governance procedures affect the legitimacy of subnational levels of governing, if not necessarily that of the national level. Good governance contributes to trust in local leaders, while corruption not only detracts from trust in local and regional leaders, it increases the public's willingness to protest. This reality was not well-incorporated into the core legitimacy-building approach adopted during the Hu-Wen era. Despite low priority and constrained governance reforms, the main legitimation strategy in the Hu-Wen era remained focused on performance—as growth and equity—even as the public valued procedural legitimacy. While performance legitimacy and traditional legitimacy are also shown to be important phenomena, this study highlights why these are fragile bases for legitimacy, especially considering rising modernization forces and economic slowdown.

Keywords

legitimacy, trust, governance, corruption, protest, election, modernization, China

That the Chinese Communist Party is upheld by performance-based legitimacy is the accepted conventional wisdom. Yet what about procedural legitimacy? In particular, do good governance procedures—especially open elections, transparency, participatory channels, and control of corruption—affect legitimacy in China? Do they matter for the legitimacy of all levels of the political system? And do related frustrations translate into active discontent? Analyzing national survey data collected at the close of the Hu-Wen administration, this paper finds that contrary to what many believe, the Chinese public does care about multiple dimensions of governance. This significantly affects their trust in leaders and willingness to engage in activities the Party considers destabilizing. Good governance procedures—specifically open local elections and participatory channels—contribute to trust in neighbourhood leaders. Poor governance—specifically, corruption—not only detracts from trust in neighbourhood and provincial leaders, it increases the public's willingness to protest. Thus, even though there is not evidence that governance procedures affect national level legitimacy at this stage, frustrations do project onto higher levels and encourage activities that the Party views as destabilizing.

In short, procedural legitimacy concerns are raising challenges for the regime.

This reality is especially interesting because it was not well-incorporated into the core legitimacy-building approach adopted during the Hu-Wen era (2002/03 to 2012/13). Despite low priority and constrained governance reforms, the main Hu-Wen strategy for buttressing legitimacy seemed to rest on the broadening of access to economic development and social policies. While distinct from earlier legitimation strategies, this approach was ultimately still a performance-based legitimacy strategy, albeit one designed to appeal to more of the public. To a degree, this strategy was sensible: performance legitimacy and traditional legitimacy are, as this paper confirms, important pillars at higher levels of governing in particular. Moreover, awareness of centrally-driven social policy improved the legitimacy of the central government. Yet, as I also show, there is reason to see both performance and tradition as precarious bases for legitimacy given evolving economic and cultural realities. First, modernization erodes legitimacy over time. Second, economic hardships—which naturally tend to rise as economic performance becomes more difficult to sustain—drive up the public's willingness to protest.

This paper contributes to the body of literature on authoritarian political legitimacy both theoretically and empirically. First, it finds that political legitimacy in China partly rests on governance procedures, and that negative governance has the potential to mobilize active discontent. Previous work on China has tended to emphasize performance legitimacy and traditional legitimacy instead. Second, this study considers whether the drivers of political legitimacy vary for different levels of governing in China. Previous studies have mostly examined the legitimacy of one level of government, which

cannot capture varying legitimacy patterns across levels. Third, this paper explores the possibility that ongoing socio-economic shifts in traditional belief systems and modernization forces might independently heighten pressure for further procedural legitimation, especially at higher levels, over time.

Methodologically, this paper employs multiple strategies to check the robustness of the analyses. One key strategy is to focus on objective measures like experiences, rather than subjective measures like satisfaction, to explain legitimacy—an approach made possible by a special governance module designed in part for this purpose. In addition, endogeneity concerns are addressed using both an instrumental variables approach and a fixed effects approach.

This paper proceeds as follows. In Part 1, I discuss competing strategies for political legitimation in theory and practice. I highlight how much of the debate about China has focused on whether or not legitimacy is performance-based or tradition-based, even though there are good reasons to think that procedural legitimacy matters in China as well. I identify dimensions of procedural legitimacy that might be particularly relevant to the Chinese political context and generate hypotheses for testing. In Part 2, I test the hypotheses using data from the 2012 China Local Governance Module, an extension of the 2012 China World Values Survey. I present the findings after explaining the construction of the survey instruments, the analytical models, and the robustness techniques. In Part 3, I discuss the findings in light of the actual legitimacy-building strategies followed in the Hu-Wen era. I close with a discussion of how these findings extend theoretical understandings of legitimacy under authoritarianism, and I reflect on what the findings imply for legitimation in China in particular.

1 COMPETING THEORIES OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

By political legitimacy, I mean the degree to which the governing system is "considered right and proper" by major groups in the public, as Seymour Martin Lipset writes.[1] While regimes may rely on multiple sources of legitimacy, regime types are often principally associated with a dominant source of legitimacy. Liberal democratic regimes are widely associated with procedural legitimacy, while authoritarian regimes are widely associated with outcome-based or belief-based sources of legitimacy. Such sources may include performance, traditional culture, modern ideologies like Communism, and long-standing or new invocations of nationalism. Given the extent to which authoritarian regimes like China actively craft legitimation strategies around these sources,[2] research on these strategies has been very valuable. Much work on China has looked especially at the relative contributions of performance legitimacy versus traditional legitimacy. Exploring this tension makes sense since performance may be considered part of the "social compact" of Communist systems,[3] even as many Chinese still carry traditional beliefs associated with deference to authority and expectations of benevolent rule. Solid evidence has been found of both performance legitimacy[4] and traditional or cultural legitimacy.[5]

In contrast, procedural legitimacy is rarely mentioned as a strong basis for

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[1] Lipset 1959, 465.

[2] Dickson 2016; Wang, Alex 2013; Zhu 2011.

[3] White 1986, 465.

[4] Li and Mayraz 2016; Munro et al. 2013; Yang and Tang 2010; Yang and Zhao 2015; Zhu 2011.

[5] Chu 2013; Shi 2001.

legitimacy in authoritarian regimes and in China in particular. In part, this may be because widespread liberal procedural reforms, of the type most often associated with procedural legitimacy, have not occurred in China. Yet governance reforms have occurred in a more limited sense, with regard to limited rule of law, limited local elections, and modest opportunities for voice through, say, making suggestions to leaders. While modest, these reforms do represent discernable moves on the spectrum. For instance, as Archon Fung writes about the varieties of participation, the ability to "express preferences" or "develop preferences" are more intense modes of communication and decision than the least intensive possibility (to "listen as spectator"). While they may not be as intense as the most intense possibilities (which he identifies as to "deliberate and negotiate" and "deploy technique and expertise"),[6] they are meaningful in degree. Gunter Schubert argues that, as modest as they are, China's governance reforms may be "engendering critical degrees of political legitimacy for the current regime" .[7] It thus seems well worth asking the question: Could governance procedures be an important basis for legitimacy in China as well?

Theory and preliminary evidence provide strong reasons to think that the answer might be 'yes'. First is the possibility that performance legitimacy itself drives an inevitably rising expectation of procedural legitimacy. The logic is that economic performance causes socio-economic modernization as seen in higher incomes, higher education, higher aspirations for self-actualization, a more capable and organized society,

[6] Fung 2006,

[7] Schubert 2008, 191.

and/or improved senses of internal efficacy. These in turn may lead to a preference for more political openness. While 'modernization' theories may work through changing beliefs, power structures, or otherwise, one prominently discussed mechanism is a shift in values. Ronald Inglehart & Christian Welzel find evidence that, globally, modernization created demand for more democratic societies, due to a decline in traditional values in favor of secular-rational values, and a shift from survival values to self-expression values.[8] Using a similar logic, Zhengxu Wang argues that although performance enhances legitimacy in the short run, it will undermine regime legitimacy in the long run. However, writing in 2005, he finds that "at least for now, the regime-enhancing effect of economic development still dominates the regime-eroding effect. … The emergence of critical citizens has not yet taken place". [9] Yet considering the speed of China's growth—in the single decade of the Hu-Wen administration, China's economy grew more than fourfold—it might since be that expectations around procedural legitimacy have since risen.

Second, some of the literature that focuses on the importance of performance legitimacy or traditional legitimacy also draws suggestive empirical links to procedural legitimacy. For instance, in exploring the relative importance of performance legitimacy versus cultural legitimacy in China, Zhong Yang finds that legitimacy rises with positive views of how the government is performing on certain procedural categories, such as perceptions of corruption and transparency .[10] Yun-Han Chu finds that cultural factors

[8] Inglehart & Welzel 2010.

[9] Wang, Zhengxu 2005, 156.

[10] Zhong 2014.

are the most important basis of legitimacy, but also that certain perceptions of better governance, such as the belief that there is freedom of speech and association, increase regime support.[11] An empirical limitation of these studies, however, is that they rely on subjective measures of governance. Given the difficulty of obtaining objective information on governance procedures, this approach is justifiable yet still could potentially generate spurious correlations or biased coefficients. I address this concern by relying on objective governance measures, as I explain in Part 2. In addition, since these studies do not focus mainly on exploring procedural legitimacy, more work is merited to better identify if, why, and when procedural legitimacy matters.

Third, when it comes to local levels, there is empirical evidence that good governance procedures do improve the legitimacy of the local governing system. Provided they are well-implemented, village elections help legitimize local leaders.[12] Poor governance may also hurt local legitimacy. One study shows that the stimulus package of the late 2000s increased trust in local leaders (in line with performance legitimacy), but also that increased corruption counteracted some of this effect (suggestive of procedural legitimacy).[13]

Taken together, the points above raise the first hypothesis examined in this study:

H1: Procedural governance is a significant determinant of political legitimacy.

Yet, the literature reviewed above also show that trust in national leaders is especially

[11] Chu 2013.

[12] Birney 2007; Kennedy 2009a.

[13] Li and Mayraz 2016.

resilient, suggesting the second hypothesis below: [14]

H2: Procedural governance has a greater effect on legitimacy of the local level.

In investigating the above hypotheses, I allow that only some dimensions of governance may influence procedural legitimacy, either because they are the only dimensions on which meaningful-enough reform has taken place or because they are the only dimensions to which the public responds. I consider four dimensions: elections (at the village / neighbourhood level), participatory channels, transparency, and corruption control. The first three enhance open government and accountability, while corruption control is a dimension of rule of law.[15]

In addition to the above hypotheses about political legitimacy, I add a hypothesis about a related concept: political discontent. The drivers of political discontent are important to understand in conjunction with political legitimacy, because one much-debated issue is whether political legitimacy, which captures attitudes, really may translate into political actions. I expect poor governance to not only reduce legitimacy, but also to increase active political discontent that could potentially translate into action:

H3: Poor procedural governance drives political discontent.

As a separate effect, based on the modernization literature, I expect that socio-economic shifts will affect both political legitimacy and political discontent, even beyond any impact they have on procedure and performance. Specifically, I hypothesize:

H4: Modernization lessens political legitimacy and increases political discontent.

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[14] Li 2013.

[15] World Justice Project 2017.

While modernization encompasses many dimensions, in this paper I am able to specifically examine the impact of declining traditional values, higher education, migration, and membership in younger generations. The four hypotheses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Key Hypotheses

	Legitimacy		**Political Discontent**
	Lower Levels	*Higher Levels*	
Procedures			
Good Governance	+	+	–
Poor Governance	–	–	+
Modernization	–		+

2 RESEARCH DESIGN: DOES GOVERNANCE AFFECT POLITICAL LEGITIMACY IN CHINA?

I test the above hypotheses using national survey data from the 2012 China Local Governance Module implemented in conjunction with the 2012 World Values Survey in China.[16] The survey encompasses 2300 individuals drawn from across 80 locales, randomly selected using a population proportional to size sampling technique. In this section, I explain the research design, including construction of the survey instruments,

[16] Acknowledgements: The Governance Module was designed in collaboration with Pierre Landry (NYU-Shanghai) with generous input from others, especially Wenfang Tang, Jie Yan, and Mingming Shen. Many thanks to the Research Center for Contemporary China and the World Values Survey for cooperation in developing and implementing the survey. Many thanks also to the Suntory & Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines (STICERD) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), for generous funding support.

the analytical models, and the robustness strategies.

2.1 SURVEY INSTRUMENTS

Survey instruments are developed for four dependent variables (representing levels of political trust and political discontent); key explanatory variables (representing performance, procedure, tradition and modernization); and several additional control variables. Care is taken to measure governance procedures with objective rather than subjective information—something the 2012 China Local Governance Module was designed to do. This protects against the potential spurious correlation that might arise from correlated measurement error in the explanatory and dependent variables. For instance, people who tend to overstate the positive might strongly agree that there is freedom of speech and also strongly trust the government; and the subsequent correlation might be misinterpreted as evidence of a causal link between governance and legitimacy, when in fact it is simply evidence that certain people are consistently 'overly' positive. It also provides a stronger test of whether objective factors, such as governance procedures, really do drive legitimacy, as opposed to simply subjective perceptions of governance that may not necessarily represent concrete reality.

2.1.1 Political Legitimacy: Political Trust

I use political trust to capture political legitimacy, as commonly done in the

literature on China.[17] When legitimacy is defined as the ways in which different social groups view the political system, "the notions of legitimacy, political support, and political trust often become interchangeable".[18] Moreover, in the context of China (as opposed to liberal democratic systems), the legitimacy of the political system and the legitimacy of political leaders is fused, since the system produces given sets of political leaders. Even in villages, where sometimes-competitive elections may allow the public to choose half the village leaders, the typically more powerful Party Secretary and Party Committee are not chosen by the public. From the standpoint of the public, political leaders represent and define the parameters of the political system, as opposed to the other way around. I therefore interpret trust in political leaders as trust in the political system, an approach with much precedence when it comes to authoritarian contexts. Weber follows a parallel logic when equates the legitimacy of traditional authoritarian leaders to the legitimacy of their political system;[19] and Gunter Schubert finds, in China, that "public opinion regarding local cadres and governments is indeed a strong and quite reliable indicator of regime and system legitimacy". [20] In this study, political trust is examined for three levels of politics: the local (village / urban neighbourhood), provincial, and national levels. This allows for the possibility that political legitimacy might have different drivers at different levels. Political trust is measured on four point scale: very much trust (feichang xinren 非常信任), relatively trust （bijiao xinren 比较

[17] Wang, Zhengxu 2005.

[18] Wang, Zhengxu 2010.

[19] Weber 1947.

[20] Schubert 2014, 594.

信任), not much trust (butai xinren 不太信任), and very much do not trust（feichang bu xinren 非常不信任）.

2.1.2 Political Discontent: Willingness to Protest

The willingness to protest is measured on a scale of zero to three, according to how many of the following activities respondents say they might participate in or have participated in: signing petitions, peaceful demonstrations, and/or petitioning in person at the letters and visits office (xinfang/shangfang 信访/上方). In China, where the party views protests and formal complaints as instability incidents that are politically threatening, the willingness to protest represents the potential for political challenge. I examine it here as a way of understanding how likely any reductions in legitimacy are to translate into actual political challenges by various actors.

2.1.3 Procedure

I consider four dimensions of governance procedures: neighbourhood elections, participatory channels, transparency, and corruption control (a dimension of rule of law):

2.1.3.1 Electoral Openness (Neighbourhood)

By law, all rural areas in China are supposed to hold competitive and open village elections. In urban areas, urban neighbourhood (juweihui 居委会) elections are also supposed to be held, although they are not required to be meaningfully competitive and residents often have a more limited awareness of them. Village elections are typically far more open than urban neighbourhood elections, yet wide variations exist within both, and

there is evidence that some urban neighbourhood elections may still be good enough to affect political awareness and participation.[21] This sometimes arises through local experimentation or when newly urban areas are allowed to retain features of the village elections they used to have. Therefore, I choose a measure of electoral openness applicable to both rural and urban elections: the percentage of local respondents who reported that they were allowed to participate in the nominations process. Across the 80 locales in the survey, this measure ranged from zero to 65 percent by locale. In rural areas, 18.4 percent of individuals reported the right; and in urban areas, 6.9 percent of individuals reported the right.

2.1.3.2 Corruption Exposure

Corruption is also measured objectively, as a dichotomous index of exposure to corruption. The index is coded one if the respondent reported that they themselves, their family, or close friends had experienced corruption in the three years; or if they reported that their area had experienced corruption by township leaders in the past three years. Twenty-three percent of respondents reported such exposure, underscoring corruption's widespread prevalence.

2.1.3.3 Participatory Channels

Channels for participation are measured by whether or not the respondent had seen information on how to give suggestions to the government or information on how to contact government officials, within the past year.

[21] Heberer 2006.

2.1.3.4 Government Transparency

Government transparency is a dichotomous variable, measured by whether or not the respondent had seen at least one of the following in the past year: a government work report, legal rights information, local budget information, or land planning information.

2.1.4 Performance

Four dimensions of performance are captured. To take into account the respondent's own economic situation, family income and recent hardship are taken into account. Family income is measured using respondents' assessment of where their relative income falls on a scale of one to ten, with missing data filled in from interviewers' assessments. Hardship is measured on a scale of 0 to 12, as the extent to which respondents reported that, over the past year, they sometimes did not have enough food, lacked medical care, or did not have a cash income. In addition, the local growth environment is measured using official county GDP growth rates as reported in provincial statistical yearbooks and government work reports.[22] Finally, to capture the local government's performance in promoting new nationwide social policy initiatives, which included a New Rural Cooperative Medical System, a measure is included of whether or not respondents had encountered any health insurance information in the last year.

[22] County GDP growth rates are not always reported. Where the 2012 GDP growth rate is not reported, 2011 or 2010 data was used. In one case where no figure was available, the county growth rate was estimated based off of municipal GDP data.

2.1.5 Modernization & Tradition

An index of traditional cultural values is created based on three apolitical questions about deference to hierarchy. The first asks respondents how much they would agree that "tradition is important…to follow the customs handed down by one's religion or family" and is scored on a six-point scale. The second asks respondents how much they agree that, "One of my main goals in life has been to make my parents proud". The third asks whether responds think that obedience is an important quality to encourage children to learn at home. The three measures are equally weighted in the construction of the index.

Three measures aim to capture respondent's exposure to modern economic structures and culture. First is a migration index, which divides respondents into five categories: those living outside the municipality of their officially registered residence (hukou 户口), those living in the same municipality but a different county, those living in the same county but a different town, those living in the same town but different village, and those who are not migrants. Second is a generation index. Generations are divided into four cohorts: those born after 1980 or later (in the Reform Era), those born from 1963 to 1979 (who grew up in or around the Cultural Revolution years), those born from 1948 to 1962 (who mainly grew up before the Cultural Revolution); and those born 1937 to 1947. Third is higher education, which has been associated with more independence of thought in the China context.[23]

[23] Kennedy 2009b.

2.1.6 Additional Controls

Additional control variables are included for gender, whether or not respondents live in an urban area, mobilization, and political fear. Mobilization in captured in three ways: First, since official propaganda is especially promoted through the non-higher education system,[24] a dummy variable is included for those whose education falls between the primary and secondary school levels. Party membership is also included since members are more exposed to official mobilization. Finally, self-reported political interest is also included, measured on a four-point scale, since those with political interest may be more exposed to official political messages.

One concern with surveys conducted in a repressive authoritarian context is that political fear might drive respondents to misrepresent their true political views. Following Qing Yang & Wenfang Tang, I include a dummy variable for whether or not a third party adult is present at the interview.[25] If significant, this would suggest that respondents are less willing to respond truthfully to questions in the presence of others. There is not robust evidence that this variable is significant.

2.2 ANALYTICAL MODELS & ROBUSTNESS STRATEGIES

Each of the dependent variables is analyzed using three different specifications, to ensure the findings are robust to different assumptions about the data. These models

[24] Ibid.

[25] Yang and Tang 2010.

include a basic ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regression model (Model 1); an instrumental variables two-stage least squares analysis (Model 2); and a fixed effects model (Model 3). Survey weights are used throughout to adjust for any random over- or under-representation of key populations in the dataset.

2.2.1 Instrumental Variables

An instrumental variables analysis is used to address the possibility that the openness of neighbourhood elections is endogenous. While I am interested in the effect that open neighbourhood elections has on political trust and political discontent, the endogeneity concern is that leaders, particularly local leaders, might selectively undermine the elections where they have a poor relationship with the public. That is, perhaps open neighbourhood elections are only be allowed in places where there is already a degree of political trust and/or low levels of political discontent. In this case, any positive relationship between open elections and political trust might be due to reverse causation rather than evidence of the hypothesis I am testing; and similarly, any negative relationship with political discontent might be due to reverse causation. The instrumental variables approach allows me to control for these possibilities by using a two-stage least squares method that produces a final regression that highlights the effect I wish to capture: the impact of election openness on the dependent variable. Its successfulness rests on the use of good instrument, one that is both valid and strong.

A valid instrument must be correlated with the variable I wish to instrument (neighbourhood election openness) yet have no effect on the dependent variable except through the instrument. To identify a valid instrument, I leverage the fact that village

elections were initiated in different provinces in different years, which means that the provincial bureaucratic infrastructure, including procedures for implementing and overseeing the elections, was put into place much earlier in some places than in others. This province-wide bureaucracy is very important for handling the logistics and promoting good standards for elections, so it is highly correlated with election openness (at -0.39). This is consistent with the expectation that later-starting provinces have worse elections infrastructure and thus lower quality elections. Because this province-wide electoral support structure exists independently of current politics, theory suggests it should be uncorrelated with the dependent variables, namely the legitimacy of leaders or the public's potential discontent. The specific instrumental variable is the year in which a province held its fifth round of village elections—which ranged from 1994 to 2012 in the dataset—as compiled by China Elections & Governance. [26] Tests confirm that the instrument is also strong; the first stage F tests range from 22 to 23 across analyses of the four dependent variables; and the partial r-squared of the first-stage regressions is greater than 0.10 for each.

2.2.2 Fixed Effects

The third model specification uses fixed effects analysis to control for the possibility that the unobserved characteristics of different local areas might otherwise bias the results. This technique essentially inserts a dummy variable for each location at

[26] China Elections & Governance, 2005. Accessed 2005 September 28. http://www.chinaelections.org/en/readnews.asp?newsid={8A5FF5BC-3AB0-4AFD-BAE7-F0BD45FD0F76}&classid=10&classname=Villages

the primary sampling unit (psu) level, which is the county level, to capture any unchanging differences between counties. The remaining variables are therefore able to capture only relationships driven by within-county variations. This specification is not always better since it prevents further investigation of between-county variations that might be of interest. However, it is preferable if unobserved differences between the locales exist that would otherwise bias the results. In the analyses in this paper, the inclusion of fixed effects adds significant explanatory value to the overall regression, indicating that they are capturing county level variations that help explain trust and willingness to protest. However, their inclusion does not meaningfully alter the significance of most other variables, indicating that within-county variations drive those findings and that they are robust to the use of fixed effects.[27]

3 RESULTS & INTERPRETATION

These results of this study confirm the hypothesis that procedural legitimacy does matter in China, not only performance legitimacy and traditional legitimacy. They also show how it matters in different ways over different levels of governing. Moreover, political discontent is heightened by poor procedures and modernization, as also hypothesized. Table 2 below summarizes the findings, including only those results that

[27] Because the instrument used for village elections is measured at the provincial level, and thus fully multicollinear with any fixed effects, it is not possible to combine instrumental variables and fixed effects analyses. This is not a concern, however, since fixed effects do not alter key results here.

are robust to all three model specifications. Most results are robust to all three specifications, as can be seen in the Appendix, where the detailed results of all three analytical models, on all four dependent variables, are presented in Tables 3, 4, 5, & 6. Contextualized in the socio-economic realities of China today, the results further suggest that the current high reliance on performance and traditional legitimacy is unsustainable. Yet, despite the evidence that relying more heavily on procedural legitimacy might counteract growing challenges to legitimacy from other fronts, the Hu-Wen administration eschewed the prioritization of governance reforms. While governance experiments took place, they were hemmed in and sometimes reined in.

Table 2: Summary of Robust Results

	Legitimacy			Political Discontent
	Lower Level	*Higher Levels*		
	Village	*Province*	*Center*	*Willingness to Protest*
Procedures				
Good Governance	+	.	.	.
Poor Governance	−	–	.	+
Performance	.	+	+	−
Modernization	−	−	−	+

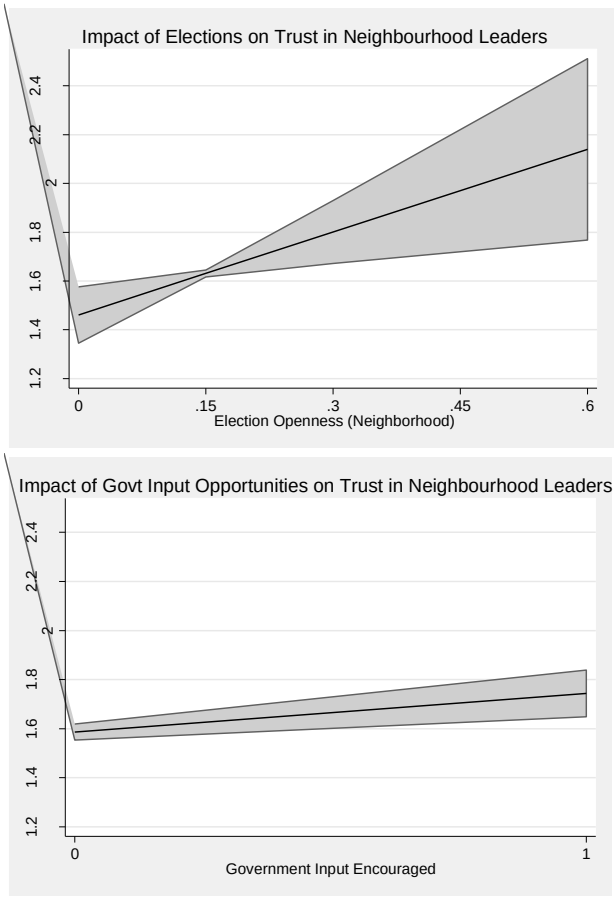
In the following subsections, I discuss the three key implications of this study: the importance of procedures, the fragility of legitimacy in China, and the partial mismatch between the public's preferences and the political legitimation strategy pursued during the Hu-Wen era.

3.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF PROCEDURES

This study finds governance procedures to be a significant determination of legitimacy at the neighbourhood and provincial levels, if not at the national level. At the neighbourhood level, three of the four types of governance reforms explored are significant explanations of political trust: electoral openness, participatory channels, and corruption exposure. Traditional values also contribute to the legitimacy of neighbourhood leaders; and there is no evidence that performance directly buttresses neighbourhood leaders' legitimacy. Figure 1 shows the predicted impact of open elections and participatory opportunities on trust in neighbourhood leaders, using the

specification in model 3. All else equal, where elections are not open at all, trust in neighbourhood leaders is predicted to be halfway between "not much trust" and "relatively trust". Yet where elections are at their most open, trust in neighbourhood leaders is predicted to be above "relatively trust", part way to "very much trust". This demonstrates how critical good governance can be for local legitimacy. Poor governance—as captured through corruption exposure—is also a significant determinant of legitimacy at the neighbourhood level, and also at the provincial level.

Figure 1: Predicted Impacts of Good Governance Procedures (Model 3)



Source: Author's calculations based on 2012 China Local Governance Module Data.

The superficial immunity of the central government to procedural legitimacy makes sense given its lack of obvious procedural reforms and its remoteness. The public

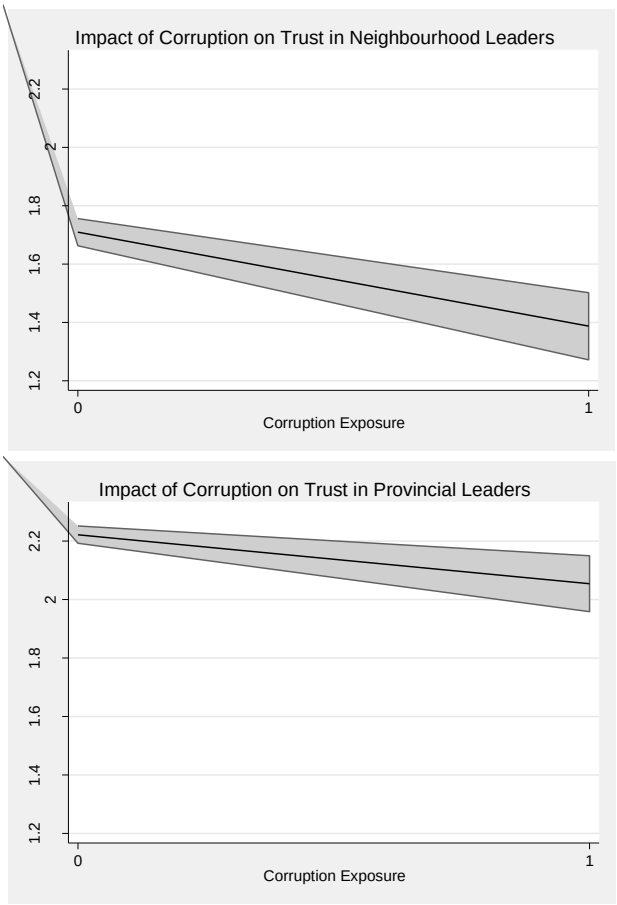
experiences governance principally in the local setting, even though the central level may have been the one mandating certain local-level reforms (as with village elections). The public has very little contact with the center, and any negative contact they might have might be rationalized as a one-off experience.[28] Yet since the findings show that the public does value better procedures where it experiences them, they leave open the possibility that higher levels too might benefit from procedural legitimacy if those levels too undertook new visible governance reforms.

3.1.1 Local Procedural Legitimacy Extends Upwards

Another key finding is that, even when governance is experienced locally, it may still affect the legitimacy of higher levels. This study shows that exposure to local corruption ricochets upwards to affect the legitimacy of leaders as high as the provincial level. This is especially interesting because it is very unlikely that the respondents' exposure to corruption took place at the provincial level itself. Most respondents would not have contact with provincial officials; and the corruption exposure variable is designed to capture corruption realities at the neighbourhood, town, and county levels. As earlier explained, it is based on the respondent's knowledge of township level corruption and their knowledge of whether they, their family, or close friends experienced corruption in the past three years. Figure 2 shows that exposure to local corruption significantly reduces the legitimacy of provincial leaders, by about half of the degree to which it drops the legitimacy of neighbourhood leaders.

[28] Li 2013.

Figure 2: Predicted Impacts of Negative Governance Exposure (Model 3)



Source: Author's calculations based on 2012 China Local Governance Module Data.

3.2 THE FRAGILITY OF LEGITIMACY

How insulated is the center from legitimacy concerns? Superficially, it seems very insulated. Reported trust levels are exceptionally high, as other studies of China have found, midway between "relatively trust" and "extremely trust". Only 8.2 percent of respondents say they do not trust central leaders very much or do not trust them at all. In addition, none of the governance procedure variables were significant determinants of

legitimacy at the central level. Yet, three findings of this study suggest that the legitimacy of central leaders, and of the regime as a whole, is nevertheless relatively fragile. These three reasons are apart from another possibility that Li Lianjiang has highlighted, which is that the levels of trust in the center may appear higher than they really are, because certain people may actually hold less trust than their reported answers indicate.[29]

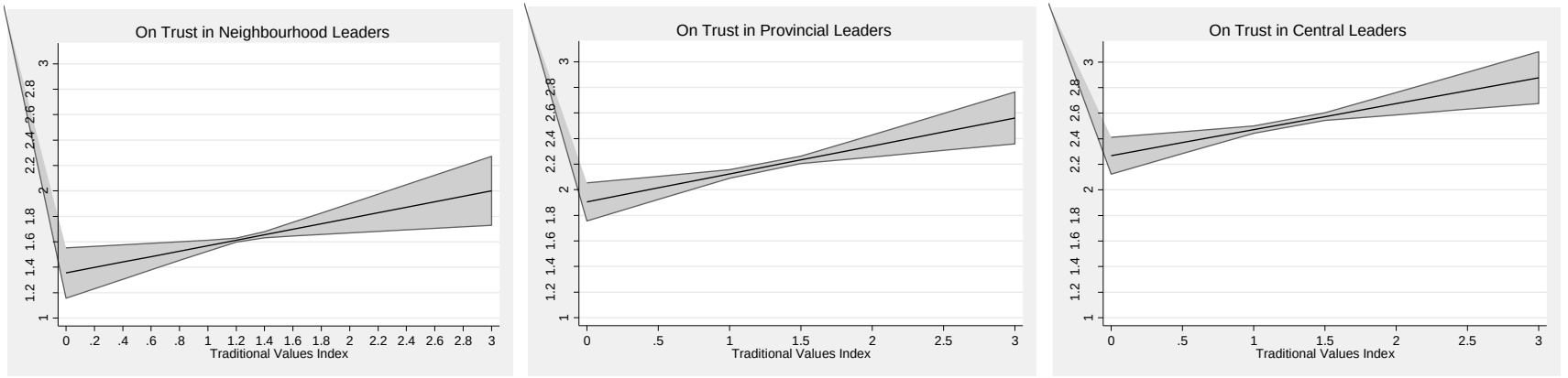
First is the finding reported just above: Even though local corruption might not impede trust in central leaders, the fact that it reduces trust in leaders as high up as the provincial level would surely be disconcerting to central leaders. Top leaders might wonder whether frustrations with local corruption would eventually also reach up to corrode their own legitimacy, if local corruption were not better managed or control of information carefully maintained. Second, broad socio-economic shifts have been giving rise to cultural, economic, and social changes that challenge the regime's ability to rely on either performance legitimacy or traditional legitimacy, the mainstays of the center's legitimacy. And third, poor procedures and performance—in the form of exposure to corruption and experience of hardships—are shown to raise the public's reported willingness to protest. Although protests typically happen at local levels, national leaders have long viewed local protests as destabilizing and a challenge to the legitimacy of the regime as a whole. I elaborate on these second two dynamics below.

[29] Li 2016.

3.2.1 Modernization over Tradition

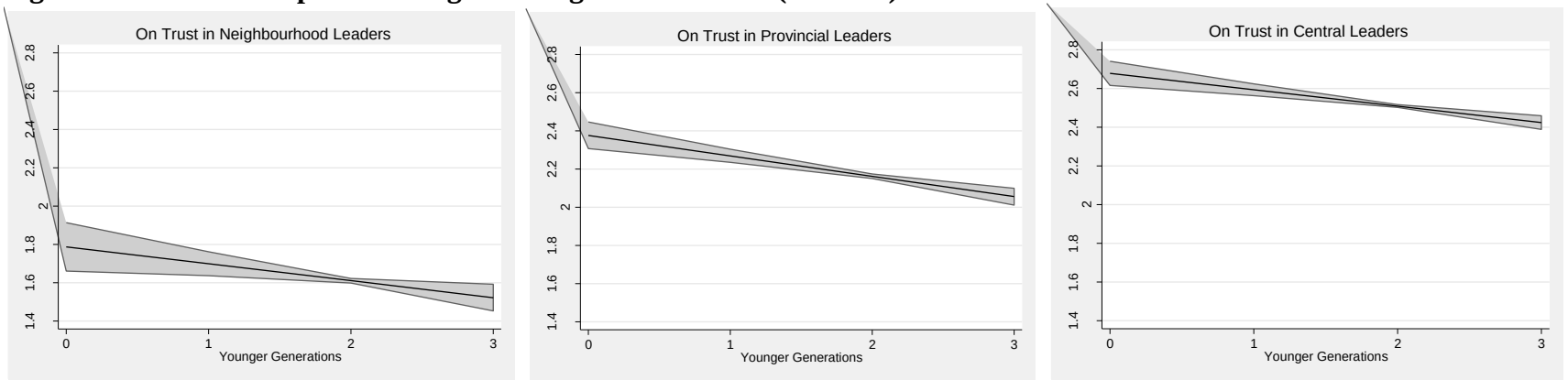
While traditional values significantly contribute to the legitimacy of the neighbourhood, provincial, and national levels, they are partly countervailed by modernization forces, namely the heightened skepticism of younger generations. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate this. While someone scoring zero on the traditional values index is predicted to have a trust in central leaders of 2.27 (close to "relatively trust"), someone scoring at the top on the index is predicted to have a trust in central leaders of 2.88 (close to "very much trust"), a difference of 0.61 points on a scale of zero to three. Meanwhile, someone in the oldest generation is predicted to trust central leaders at a level 0.26 points below someone in the youngest generation. These same trends repeat when it comes to trust in provincial leaders and trust in neighbourhood leaders.

Figure 3: Predicted Impact of Traditional Values (Model 3)



Source: Author's calculations based on 2012 China Local Governance Module Data.

Figure 4: Predicted Impact of Being in Younger Generations (Model 3)



Source: Author's calculations based on 2012 China Local Governance Module Data.

Since, as a broader historical trend, traditional values seem to be decreasing in the population and younger people seem to have increasing skepticism of leaders, these patterns suggest that all levels of governing will suffer serious legitimacy declines in the future. The result is especially striking because the regression analysis controls for factors that many assume are the causes of the younger generations' heightened skepticism. These include the fact that the younger tend to be more educated and less traditional in their values as scored on the traditional values index. The analysis also controls for their governance experiences, suggesting it may be the higher expectations that younger generations have of leaders (rather than actual experiences) that drive their greater skepticism. Such expectations might include expectations for more liberal governance and/or more performance. As Yang & Zhao 2015 posit, performance legitimacy "continuously raise the people's expectations," such that "the pressure faced by the Chinese government has never eased" despite great performance improvements.[30] If this phenomenon is truer amongst younger generations, they might help explain the trends revealed in this study. Further research is merited. Yet, whatever the precise drivers of the younger generations' increased skepticism, if the trend continues, the legitimacy of the regime will inevitably decline with time alone.

3.2.2 Political Discontent

The third finding that suggests the fragility of political legitimacy regards the public's willingness to protest. The public's reported willingness to protest is high and realistically likely to become higher, given political, economic, and demographic realities. In the 2012 survey, half

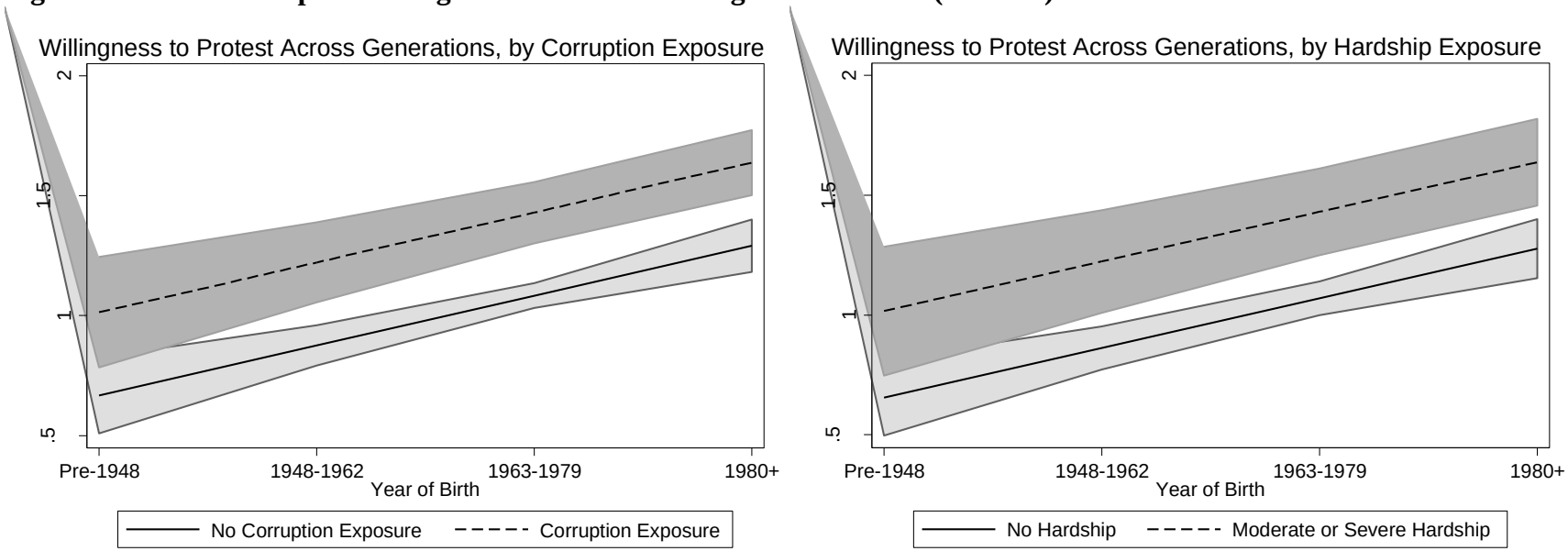
[30] Yang and Zhao 2015, 69.

of respondents said that they would be willing to peacefully demonstrate, sign a petition, and/or personally file a petition (xinfang 信访); and half of these were willing to do all three. Since any of these actions may be interpreted as instability incidents in China, simply the level of these figures suggests the possibility of increased instability if something triggers frustrations or heightens illegitimacy. Moreover, the findings identify two clear triggers for a rising willingness to protest, one procedural and the other about performance: corruption and hardship. In addition, younger generations are more willing to protest. As illustrated in Figure 5, someone of the youngest generation who is exposed to corruption is predicted to be willing to engage in more than twice as many types of protests, as compared to someone of the oldest generation who did not experience corruption. The same is true of exposure to hardships.

As concerns increasingly arise about the sustainability of China's economic growth and the breadth of access to it, so too have come questions about whether China's political legitimacy can be maintained at a high level.[31] These findings confirm the validity of those concerns, showing not only how readily poor performance can threaten legitimacy and potentially spur instability, but also that poor corruption control has great potential to do so as well. Meanwhile, younger generations are more willing to protest. The legitimacy of the Chinese regime, at all levels, is more fragile than it superficially appears.

[31] The Economist 2015; Zhao 2009.

Figure 5: Predicted Impacts of Negative Shocks on Willingness to Protest (Model 3)



Source: Author's calculations based on 2012 China Local Governance Module Data.

3.3 ASSESSING POLITICAL LEGITIMATION STRATEGIES IN THE HU-WEN ERA

To what extent did the legitimation strategies pursued by the Hu-Wen administration address the factors that this study identifies as challenging legitimacy and stability in that era? Broadly speaking, they seem to have prioritized pursuing performance legitimacy over procedural legitimacy. As widely observed, the Hu-Wen period broadened the policy focus to aim at more equitable growth as opposed to pure growth,[32] although overall growth and efficiency were still key targets.[33] The banners of a harmonious society (hexie shehui 和谐社会) and scientific development (kexue fazhanguan 科学发展观) encapsulated the focus on stability and efficiency. As GDP increased fourfold and more during the era, major initiatives were issued to address inequality, especially between rural and urban areas. Prominent among these were healthcare reform, the effective extension of a minimum standards of living scheme to rural areas, the elimination of school fees, and the elimination of the regressive agricultural tax. The expansion of the Western Development Programme was also billed as a major push to reduce regional inequalities and help the country's poorest areas, although in reality it did more for urban areas in the West and East-West linkages than for the poorest rural areas.

The Hu-Wen focus on performance legitimacy did pay off in some legitimacy dividends. As this paper finds, awareness of the government health insurance policy, a major initiative in the era, increased trust in national leaders (Appendix Table 5); and higher incomes also are

[32] Guo 2010.

[33] Brown 2011.

associated with higher trust in provincial leaders (Appendix Table 4). In addition, in light of the finding that economic and medical hardships drive up the willingness to protest, the Hu-Wen policies to mitigate such hardships and provide a safety net may have tempered the extent of unrest. However, there was no strong push to deal with corruption, even though, as this study finds, corruption also drives up the willingness to protest and reduces legitimacy as high up as the provincial level. Meanwhile, the increasing dominance of large SOEs in certain sectors is thought to have created more structural opportunities for corruption.

More broadly, despite the legitimating value the public placed on good procedural governance, the Hu-Wen administration did not prioritize procedural and governance reforms. Some experimentation, particularly at local levels, took place on various fronts, including around minor channels for collecting public input and limited acceptance of civil society.[34] For instance, national environmental protection legislation was passed with recommended participatory guidelines; while not required, their inclusion was still seen as a victory by advocates. From the national level, government transparency was pushed, with a national Open Government Information regulations implemented in 2008. However, many reforms were later reined in, or not given much weight and thus left vulnerable to non-implementation. For instance, the implementation of environmental transparency lagged in cities dominated by large industrial firms, especially heavily polluting ones.[35] On the electoral front, the earlier practice of village elections continued, yet experiments with making urban neighbourhood elections seemed to be tolerated more than encouraged by top leaders. Local experiments with slightly more

[34] Zheng and Lye 2005.

[35] Lorentzen, Landry and Yasuda 2014.

competitive local People's Congress elections looked promising at the start of the Hu-Wen era, yet were sidelined and limited by the end. On the public accountability front, investigative reporting was dealt a blow when domestic journalists were forbidden from reporting on other provinces, a tactic that had allowed journalists to conduct more penetrating investigations because their own supervising officials were less concerned by sensitive reporting on other places. On the rule of law front, progress was made in the codification of more laws and professionalization of the judiciary, yet major institutional reforms did not take place and pressure was increasingly applied on activist lawyers.

Considering key findings of this study—that the Chinese public values procedural legitimacy, that its frustrations with local corruption are projected onto much higher levels and create more willingness to protest, and that younger generations are increasingly skeptical and willing to protest—it seems that the Hu-Wen administration missed an opportunity by not more seriously seeking procedural legitimacy. This is especially so in light of the likely unsustainability of performance legitimacy and traditional legitimacy given the economic uncertainty and modernization forces facing China. In the Hu-Wen period, scholars did recognize the crisis of legitimacy and many suggested going beyond dependence on performance legitimacy to invoke procedural legitimacy.[36] The findings of this study clarify the extent to which procedural legitimacy concerns existed amongst the public, even if they had not yet landed on the central leadership.

Viewed against this backdrop, the massive anti-corruption campaign subsequently launched by the Xi-Li administration does not seem as surprising. Broader forces pushed that

[36] Holbig and Gilley 2010; Lü 2010; Zeng 2014.

direction. The launch of the campaign should probably not be attributed simply to Xi Jinping's personal agenda, unexpected as many found it. The Xi-Li administration has staked a claim on procedural legitimacy, recognizing the reality of a public that values good governance and the inevitability of socio-economic developments that are undermining performance legitimacy and traditional legitimacy. Yet this study also provides reason to believe that the Xi-Li approach to pursuing procedural legitimacy may not be a winning strategy over time either. The Xi-Li approach, to date, has been to try to improve top-down oversight; and bottom-up mechanisms for participation and open information have been suppressed. While visibly fighting corruption may mitigate the public's frustrations with corruption (if successful), this study gives reason to believe that the crackdown on press freedom and voice may be delegitimizing. The public, at least at the very local level, views electoral and participatory processes as legitimizing. This is not to say that the public would actively demand such reforms—this paper cannot speak to that topic—only that there is evidence to suggest that they would find liberalizing procedural reforms legitimizing.

4 APPENDIX

Table 3: Explaining Trust in Neighbourhood Leaders

	Model 1 OLS Regression		Model 2 Instrumental Variables		Model 3 Fixed Effects	
Performance						
Family Income	0.079		0.093	*	0.076	
GDP Growth	-0.046		-0.022		-0.401	
Social Policy Information (Health Insurance)	0.007		0.011		0.086	*
Hardship Over Past Year	-0.044		-0.024		-0.046	
Procedure						
Election Openness (Neighbourhood Level)	0.142	***	0.394	**	0.181	**
Participatory Channel	0.109	**	0.085	*	0.077	*
Government Transparency	0.026		0.010		0.005	
Corruption Exposure	-0.224	***	-0.213	***	-0.164	***
Modernization & Tradition						
Traditional Values Index	0.134	**	0.121	**	0.118	**
Younger Political Generations	-0.072		-0.083	*	-0.098	**
Migration Index	0.035		0.042		0.030	
Education Level: High (University to Graduate)	-0.084		-0.043		-0.068	
Political Exposure						
Education Level: Low (Primary to Secondary)	-0.078		-0.028		-0.073	
Party Membership	0.006		0.015		0.016	
Political Interest	0.023		0.014		0.033	
Political Fear						
Third Party Presence	-0.025		-0.035		-0.014	
Demographic Controls						
Urban Area	0.036		0.105		0.060	
Female	0.070	*	0.077	**	0.064	*
N	1806		1806		1806	
r2	0.14		0.08		0.26	

Survey weights applied; standardized beta coefficients; * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
Source: Author's calculations based on 2012 China Local Governance Module Data.

Table 4: Explaining Trust in Provincial Leaders

	Model 1 OLS Regression		Model 2 Instrumental Variables		Model 3 Fixed Effects	
Performance						
Family Income	0.084	*	0.095	*	0.094	*
GDP Growth	0.050		0.069		0.011	
Social Policy Information (Health Insurance)	0.027		0.031		0.072	
Hardship Over Past Year	0.004		0.019		-0.014	
Procedure						
Election Openness (Neighbourhood Level)	0.097	*	0.288		0.132	
Participatory Channel	0.063		0.046		0.062	
Government Transparency	0.007		-0.006		0.003	
Corruption Exposure	-0.104	*	-0.096	*	-0.104	**
Modernization & Tradition						
Traditional Values Index	0.161	***	0.151	***	0.146	***
Younger Political Generations	-0.121	***	-0.129	***	-0.145	***
Migration Index	-0.017		-0.012		-0.006	
Education Level: High (University to Graduate)	-0.089		-0.057		-0.046	
Political Exposure						
Education Level: Low (Primary to Secondary)	-0.071		-0.033		-0.052	
Party Membership	0.019		0.026		0.019	
Political Interest	0.069	*	0.063		0.057	
Political Fear						
Third Party Presence	0.035		0.027		0.059	
Demographic Controls						
Urban Area	-0.111	*	-0.060		-0.072	
Female	0.011		0.017		0.004	
N	1799		1799		1799	
r2	0.10		0.07		0.19	

Survey weights applied; standardized beta coefficients; * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
Source: Author's calculations based on 2012 China Local Governance Module Data.

Table 5: Explaining Trust in National Leaders

	Model 1 OLS Regression		Model 2 Instrumental Variables		Model 3 Fixed Effects	
Performance						
Family Income	0.041		0.052		0.027	
GDP Growth	0.065		0.084		-0.312	
Social Policy Information (Health Insurance)	0.090	*	0.093	*	0.106	*
Hardship Over Past Year	-0.050		-0.034		-0.023	
Procedure						
Election Openness (Neighbourhood Level)	0.031		0.222		0.131	*
Participatory Channel	0.000		-0.019		0.045	
Government Transparency	0.006		-0.006		-0.015	
Corruption Exposure	-0.024		-0.016		-0.045	
Modernization & Tradition						
Traditional Values Index	0.139	**	0.128	**	0.152	**
Younger Political Generations	-0.113	***	-0.122	***	-0.128	***
Migration Index	-0.086	*	-0.081	*	-0.056	
Education Level: High (University to Graduate)	-0.109		-0.077		-0.026	
Political Exposure						
Education Level: Low (Primary to Secondary)	-0.064		-0.027		-0.028	
Party Membership	0.030		0.037		0.022	
Political Interest	0.101	*	0.094		0.049	
Political Fear						
Third Party Presence	0.014		0.006		0.054	
Demographic Controls						
Urban Area	-0.025		0.027		-0.009	
Female	0.016		0.022		0.003	
N	1823		1823		1823	
r2	0.09		0.06		0.20	

Survey weights applied; standardized beta coefficients; * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
Source: Author's calculations based on 2012 China Local Governance Module Data.

Table 6: Explaining Willingness to Protest

	Model 1 OLS Regression		Model 2 Instrumental Variables		Model 3 Fixed Effects	
Performance						
Family Income	0.029		0.034		-0.008	
GDP Growth	-0.033		-0.027		-0.122	
Social Policy Information (Health Insurance)	0.049		0.050		0.033	
Hardship Over Past Year	0.148	***	0.153	***	0.100	*
Procedure						
Election Openness (Neighbourhood Level)	-0.006		0.062		0.077	*
Participatory Channel	-0.035		-0.041		-0.027	
Transparency	-0.016		-0.020		0.016	
Corruption Exposure	0.168	***	0.171	***	0.121	***
Modernization & Tradition						
Traditional Values Index	0.021		0.017		0.018	
Younger Political Generations	0.149	***	0.147	***	0.159	***
Migration Index	-0.018		-0.016		-0.053	*
Education Level: High (University to Graduate)	0.097		0.108	*	0.057	
Political Exposure						
Education Level: Low (Primary to Secondary)	0.070		0.083		0.059	
Party Membership	0.058		0.060		0.040	
Political Interest	0.115	**	0.112	**	0.137	**
Political Fear						
Third Party Presence	-0.042		-0.045	*	-0.054	*
Demographic Controls						
Urban Area	-0.004		0.014		0.047	
Female	-0.015		-0.013		-0.006	
N	1873		1873		1873	
r2	0.12		0.11		0.20	

Survey weights applied; standardized beta coefficients; * p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
Source: Author's calculations based on 2012 China Local Governance Module Data.

Table 7: Summary Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Trust in Neighbourhood Leaders	2,065	1.64	0.86	0	3
Trust in Provincial Leaders	2,052	2.13	0.74	0	3
Trust in Central Leaders	2,091	2.46	0.68	0	3
Willingness to Protest	2,187	1.13	1.27	0	3
Traditional Values Index	2,275	1.18	0.52	0	3
Hardship Over Past Year	1,956	1.03	1.60	0	9
Family Income	2,295	4.39	1.76	1	10
GDP Growth (County)	2,300	0.15	0.05	0.07	0.30
Social Policy Information (Health Insurance)	2,300	0.55	0.50	0	1
Government Transparency	2,300	0.43	0.50	0	1
Participatory Channel	2,300	0.22	0.41	0	1
Corruption Exposure	2,069	0.23	0.42	0	1
Election Openness (Neighbourhood Level)	2,300	0.13	0.12	0	0.65
Party Membership	2,297	0.08	0.27	0	1
Political Interest	2,252	1.37	0.94	0	3
Education Level	2,300	1.09	0.49	0	2
Younger Political Generations	2,300	1.81	0.97	0	3
Migration Index	2,289	0.57	1.15	0	4
Third Party Presence	2,294	0.40	0.49	0	1
Urban Area	2,300	0.63	0.48	0	1
Female	2,300	0.51	0.50	0	1

Source: Author's calculations based on 2012 China Local Governance Module Data.

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