

## A Literature review of China's public political trust

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### Abstract

In recent years, with the development of China's society into the transition period, the Chinese public doubts about the government seems to have increased." Whether the Chinese public trusts the government or not, and how well the Chinese public trust the government," the issue has aroused widespread concern from all walks of life, including scholars. With the China slowdown in economic development, the introduction of multiple values of freedom, "What are the sources of public political trust in contemporary China? Has there been a change in the sources of Chinese public political trust?" this issue which also attracted academic attention. This paper aims to make a brief analysis of the general level of political trust and the sources of the current political trust in China, based on the theory of political trust.

**Key words:** Political trust, China, Institutional theory, cultural theory

### Introduction

Trust is the core concept of the theory of social capital, trust is extended to the political field of scientific research is the political trust. As one kind of political attitude, political trust is the interaction and cooperation of citizens and political system in the social environment. Political trust, as an important part of the research category of political psychology, is also regarded as the basic evaluation and emotional orientation of the people toward the political system. And as a kind of authoritative trust, political trust refers to the people's confidence in the government or the political system, they believe that the government will formulate policies that are in their interest and provide them with the desired policy results. Specifically, they want to know whether the government performance is consistent with the public expectations of the community and the extent of its consistency. The scholar Liu Yunxian defines it as "Public reliance on the political system, government, policy and the conduct of public servants based on the people's rational thinking, perception of practice and psychological expectations"(Liu Yunxian, 2009). According to Easton's (1998) classification of political system, political trust can be divided into three major types: the trust of the political system, the trust of the government and the trust of the government personnel. The important role of political trust determines that the study of political trust must be perfected constantly. For the government, political trust is the source of the

legitimacy of the political system. According to Hetherington's (2005) theory of source of legitimacy of government, Ideological legitimacy and the legitimacy of process, they all maintain political stability by gaining people's support and trust, stimulating public satisfaction with the political system, and thus responding to the call of the government and the implementation of government policies. From the influence of citizen's political behavior, Letki(2006) pointed out that, on the macro level, the higher level of political trust can shape good values of citizens and enhance people's moral standards. On the micro level, high level of

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political trust is conducive to cultivate people's political participation, improving citizens' social expectations, and the formation of the power of social progress.

### **The Development of Political Trust Theory**

Political trust as an important source of the legitimacy of the government, plays a key role in maintaining social stability, reduce the cost of running the government. In the interactive relationship between the public and the government, political trust is an important indicator to measure the relationship between the two. At the same time, it is also beneficial to enhance the public's response to government policy and the satisfaction of the political system.

Since 1970s, the research of political trust has been active in the western academic circles, After the Second World War, the continuous decline of the political trust of the European and American people has aroused widespread concern in the academic circles about the issue of political trust.

European and American academic reference to the research on political trust has provided valuable experience to us, tell us with the economic and social development to further deepen, with a growing number of critical citizens, political trust, especially the performance based political trust is likely to be eroded, the political trust level of the people is likely to decline(Wang, 2002).Now, China is in a period of social transition, in a special phase of economic growth slowing down and social problems concentrated, especially the violent conflicts between social development and individual distribution of interests, lead to the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and then lead to a crisis of confidence in the government. As a subjective psychological perception, people's trust in government not only has certain group infectivity, but also has the characteristics of continuous and expanding intergenerational transmission. Therefore, people's political trust as an important indicator to measure the stability of the regime, in the transition period of today must be sufficient attention.

### **A Summary of the Study on the Political Trust in China**

As an effective index to judge the stability of political power, political trust has become more and more important in the period of social development and transformation, and has attracted more and more attention from the academic circles. Some scholars began to analyze the overall level of China people's political trust, mainly through the comparison between countries or China's domestic urban and rural comparative form to elaborate. Other scholars have carried out research on political trust from different groups, which focus on the study of target groups such as farmers and College Students.Hu Rong(2007) pointed out that the petition of farmers has directly led to the loss of political trust of governments at various levels in the countryside, and the higher the level of government that the peasants have visited, the lower the political trust to the grass-roots government. Through the study of the political trust structure of college students, Li Guiying(2010) found that the degree of political trust of college students declined gradually with the abstract degree of their political values declined. College students have high trust in the country, the basic political system and the ruling party, and have low confidence in government agencies, officials and political propaganda. This is basically consistent with Wang Xiangmin's research on the "U" structure of Chinese young students' political trust (Wang Xiangmin, 2002) .Some scholars focus on the special period of transition of China, through theoretical research, put forward some macro policy suggestions. Many of these studies have not only attracted people's keen attention to the current political trust in China, but also raised controversy about the political trust of Chinese people, The differences are mainly concentrated in two aspects:(1) what is the general level of political trust of the Chinese people , whether it has risen or decreased in recent years?(2) what is the source of the modern Chinese political trust?

### **A Summary of the General Level of Political Trust of the Chinese People**

## **during the Transition Period ----- Optimistic or Pessimistic? The Chinese Communist Party and the government.**

In view overall level of political trust in the transitional period Chinese, there exist certain differences, some scholars are optimistic that the current Chinese people's political trust is generally high,

at a moderate level. Li Yanxia(2014) uses the questionnaire data of mainland China in the East Asian democracy survey to find that the average political trust of the contemporary Chinese public to different political institutions is 3.407, higher than that of many countries and regions in East Asia. Mei Zurong's(2002) research also found that although the current Chinese citizen political trust level is in poor condition, but far not to the extent of the crisis, he believes that the partial distrust and the crisis of trust at a particular moment can not be equated with the continuous political trust in the whole political system. The summary of these research conclusion that optimism can be found, most of these studies on the measurement and evaluation in different political institutions, such as the generalization of the different levels of government as the object of trust, with "confidence" or "trust" for the specific formulation is measured, the results show that the political trust of the Chinese people is relatively high.

In contrast, another part of the scholars are pessimistic about the political trust of the Chinese people. Shi Tianjian, Lv Jie(2007), through the analysis of data from 1992 to 2003, found that Chinese people's trust in government is on the downward trend. Wang Zhengxu, through the analysis of 2002 and 2011 ABS questionnaire two wave data, found that the Chinese public confidence in the government , in the past ten years , has undergone a marked "down" correction (You Yu & Wang Zhengyu,2014). Zhong Qi(2011) expounded the question of "whether our government should be trusted" from the perspective of relationship alienation between grass-roots government cadres and the masses, and the questionnaire shows that the public trust in the government is not optimistic. And in Cheng Qian's(2004) study of public expectations of the political system, she pointed out that only a small proportion of the

Party and the government. They all believe that the overall level of government trust and social trust is declining, the trend of political trust loss is strengthened, the pressure of distrust increases, and it may even lead to the overall collapse of political trust and the crisis of the whole political system.

## **The Causes of the Great Difference in the General Level of Political Trust in China**

Why are there two diametrically opposite conclusions about the political trust of Chinese public? Some scholars have made a deep analysis of the causes of such a great difference. At present, the consensus research has concluded that the political trust level of the Chinese people is not a single one, and it may present a non-equilibrium pattern of coexistence. There is a hierarchical order of political trust between central and local governments, the trust of the Chinese people to the central government is far higher than that of the local government. Other studies have examined differences in what factors may lead to political trust measurements for the same object of trust. At present, the research attempts to give answers from two major aspects of measurement content and measurement methods.

First of all, there is no specific distinction between the types of political trust in the specific content of the measurement. That is, without considering that the subject's political trust in different aspects of the same object of trust may be different. Li Yanxia (2014) has classified the types of political trust of the contemporary Chinese public, and pointed out that there is a big difference between the public's trust in government capability and government's willingness. Towards the same political system, Chinese people's confidence in the ruling efficiency of government administration is much higher than that of the government in terms of democracy, justice and other aspects, She believes that this difference can explain to a great extent why the current theoretical circles have two different assessment conclusions, both optimistic and pessimistic, on the measurement of political trust. This view is

similar to Li Lianjiang's (2004) view that the Chinese peasants are contradictory to the central government's commitment to solving the problems of farmers and their ability to solve problems. And this hierarchical and split political trust is not only reflected in the measurement results, but also has two consequences.

Second, different ways of measurement also determine the different factors in political trust that influence it, which may lead to the difference of political trust measurement in China. Xiong Meijuan(2011) found two ways to measure political trust: direct measurement and indirect measurement, and the direct measurement of trust result compared to the indirect measurement showed a higher level of trust. She believes that this difference may be understood from the "abstract support" and "concrete

support", direct measurement represents the level of confidence in the political system in the public's subconscious. From the point of view of the abstract and the subconscious, they feel that the political system is good, in their mind, they directly stand on the government or political system and evaluation is more positive, so, the measurement results show the high score. Indirect measurement represents the specific evaluation of the political system, because there are specific things and feelings, experience as a basis, indirect measurement can bypass the subconscious, to make a more rational evaluation, and the evaluation of this specific behavior from perspective tend to be slightly worse, so the measurement results showed lower scores. Therefore, scholars on the evaluation of political trust differences may depend on the single dimension measurement of the content of political trust and different ways of measuring the content of political trust in different explanatory factors.

### **A Summary of the Sources of Political Trust of Chinese People      Institution or Culture?**

In the sources of political trust, researchers often explain from two dimensions of culture and institution. Two explanations for trust in institutions are cultural theories and

institutional theories.

Institutional theory focuses on explaining the sources of political trust from the political sphere and coincides with the theory of social exchange. According to the system theory, political trust is a rational judgment made by people based on the evaluation of the functions of the government and the material interests created by the government (Easton,1998) The core of the theory is that the performance of government institutions is the key variable to determine the degree of political trust. The so-called "government performance" refers to the willingness and ability of the government to provide good policies for the people, and whether people feel the high performance of the government. The two part of government performance: political performance and economic performance both have an impact on people's political trust. Political performance focuses on political participation, government response, political freedom and so on. Xiao Tangbiao and Wang Xin(2011) turn "political performance" into measurable and specific political policy, and measure the impact of political performance on the political trust of the Chinese people, they found that the implementation of various public policies had positive or negative correlation with the "political trust of farmers". Further reveals that the political performance of government can, to some extent, influence the "people's morale". While the economic performance, whether national macroeconomic performance or individual economic conditions, both the cognition and perception of the current economic situation, or to future expectations and evaluation, are important factors affecting people's political trust. In a word, Institutional theory holds that whether people trust the government depends on whether the performance of the government is satisfactory and whether the political system itself is trust worthy. Political trust is more dependent on the politics itself, so the politics of trust also depends more on the willingness of political leaders and the effective fulfillment of their roles (Damico, 2000). Institutional theory also points out that the foundation of trust is derived from a fair political system. For

example, the system of appointment and appointment of Party and government cadres and procedural fairness will enhance individual and social trust levels as a whole (Zhu Bowen&Xu Wei, 2016).It can be seen that the political structure and the system factor itself have a crucial influence on the public's view of authority and the change of the political orientation of the people. This is something that the cultural authority can not deny.

However, the trust under the rational choice path is more embodied as an awkward and fragile "strategic trust". Tucker( 2004) also pointed out that political trust should be "reflective" and that political trust itself is "a constantly moving commodity". Therefore, it seems inappropriate to try to cover all the sources of political trust on the basis of short-term material interest calculations, the values and ideas of social culture should also be paid attention to, especially in the China society where Confucianism and traditional culture prevail. Based on this, the cultural theory begins to seek the sources of political trust in the social sphere. Newton (2001) examines political trust from a cultural perspective and believes that "trust in the system is an extension of interpersonal trust", therefore, political trust should be derived from the cultural factors such as social trust. Putnam (2001) is more systematically expounded the social trust, social network and other cultural factors on the impact of government performance. The theory of cultural

generation holds that individuals in the process of political socialization are influenced by many factors at the social level and form relatively stable values, while the sources of political trust should be explored from cultural variables such as socialization and values. Different from the Institutional theory emphasizes the political system itself, Cultural theory holds that traditional cultural values and other cultural variables are the main factors affecting people's political trust. Especially in China with great authoritarianism and collectivism, the traditional political culture has a more profound influence on the political trust of the contemporary Chinese people (Shi T. J ,2001).

## **The Relationship between Institutional Theory and Cultural Theory in China**

Institutional theory and Cultural theory are two different approaches in the process of political trust formation. They emphasize that "want me to believe" (Is political object trustworthy)and "I want to believe"(Whether the political subjects tend to pay their own trust).The two theories are not mutually exclusive in empirical research. The difference between the two explanations of political trust lies in the determination of the scope of time. Compared with the Cultural theory which emphasizes the early life experience, Institutional theory pays more attention to what the government has done for us recently ".The two theories are not antagonistic, but complementary. When analyzing the sources of political trust in China, Tang Wenfang (2004?) pointed out that China's institutional trust is not only a product of traditional values, but also a rational choice made by individuals based on the evaluation of government performance. At the same time, it is the result of government control of individual Politicization. Wang Zhengxu (2014)constructs the meso theory of the sources of political trust, he pointed out that the political trust of Chinese public is formed under the influence of macro cultural factors such as values, interpersonal trust and so on, at the same time, the individual evaluates the government's performance according to the micro social and political information.

Institutional theory and cultural theory which impact on political trust stronger? Many studies have revealed that compared with cultural variables, government performance is the "hard power" of the government", and it is the direct source of political trust. Through analyzing the relationship between social capital and political trust, Xiong Meijuan(2011) points out that although social capital has certain influence and function on political trust, political trust depends more on people's evaluation of political system, that is, political performance is a more powerful factor in explaining political trust. Li Yanxia(2014) believes that the main basis for political trust is the perception of political

system governance performance. Through statistical analysis, she finds that the influence of traditional cultural values on the political psychology of the Chinese people is very weak compared to the factors that reflect the performance of the political system. Wenfang Tang(2010) divided China's institutional trust into three dimensions, namely, administrative system trust, legal system trust and social system trust, and pointed out that the trust of the administrative system mainly came from the satisfaction of the performance of government institutions. Wang Zhengxu also pointed out that the Chinese public's confidence in government institutions still showed a more obvious "institutional" characteristics, and the individual's positive evaluation of the national economic situation is one of its important sources. He also believes that political trust in authoritarian countries is likely to manifest what is called "authoritarian resilience". The impact of the values of democracy and freedom may lead to public questioning of government institutions, but such questions will still be subject to the effects of institutional performance.

### A Review of the Study

This paper briefly reviews the present situation of political trust in China and finds out the political trust level of the Chinese people is not a single one, and it may present a non-equilibrium pattern of coexistence. There is a hierarchical order of political trust between central and local governments. In terms of the sources of political trust, the Chinese public's trust in the government is influenced by both Institutional Theory and Cultural Theory. At the same time, compared with the influence of cultural factors on individual political trust, government performance has more explanatory power in influencing individual political trust.

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