In Government We Trust: Implicit Political Trust and Regime Support in China

Haifeng Huang, Chanita Intawan, and Stephen P. Nicholson

High levels of self-reported trust in government found in China has invited skepticism about the authenticity of survey results. To address this question, we examine implicit political trust, an automatic, intuitive orientation toward government. Using the Single-Target Implicit Association Test, we found that the Chinese public holds an implicit trust in government that is unrelated to self-reported, explicit trust. Whereas early political socialization processes, represented by education and urban residency, increase implicit trust they also decrease explicit trust suggesting that agents of socialization have differential effects. Furthermore, performance evaluations, income, and social desirability affect explicit trust but have no effect on implicit trust. Controlling for explicit trust, we found that implicit trust matters for understanding various types of regime support including system justification, the social credit system, and government's ability to handle crises. Our results have important implications for understanding regime support in the world's largest authoritarian country.

A recurrent finding in the study of political systems is that authoritarian regimes often enjoy high levels of public support (Frye et al. 2017; Guriev and Treisman 2020). This is perhaps most striking in China, where national surveys conducted over the last twenty years have consistently found a high percentage of Chinese people, sometimes exceeding 90%, trust the central government (Cunningham, Saich, and Turiel 2020; Dickson 2016; Tang 2016, 2018). Moreover, Tang (2016) compared authoritarian mainland China and democratic Taiwan, two societies that share the same language and traditional culture, and found that mainland Chinese citizens express higher trust than Taiwanese citizens in their respective political systems, institutions, and leaders. The emerging picture from this research is that political trust may not depend on popular rule.

Nevertheless, a worry in the study of political trust is whether survey responses represent genuine attitudes.

Haifeng Huang 🆔 *is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Merced (hhuang24@ucmerced.edu). He received his PhD from Duke University in 2009 and was a Postdoctoral Research Associate in formal theory and quantitative analysis at Princeton University in 2009–2010 and a National Fellow at the Hoover Institution in 2018–2019. His current research focuses on information flow and opinion formation, particularly in China.*

Chanita Intawan received her PhD from the University of California, Merced, in 2018 (cintawan@ucmerced.edu). Her research interests include American politics, race, ethnicity, and politics, and political psychology. Intawans' dissertation, "The Social Value of Political Tolerance," considers how social desirability bias affects the expression of tolerance towards social groups. She has published her research in the Journal of Politics *and* Political Behavior. *Intawan currently works for a political technology organization as a social scientist.*

Stephen P. Nicholson 🆔 *is the Philip H. Alston Jr. Distinguished Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Georgia (snicholson@uga.edu). He received his PhD from the University of California, Davis, in 1998. He has published numerous peer-reviewed articles on political behavior, public opinion, political psychology, and direct democracy. Nicholson is co-editor of* Advances in Political Psychology, *a journal of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP) and serves on the editorial boards of* Political Behavior *and* Journal of Experimental Political Science.

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Survey respondents in democracies have been argued to underreport trust so as not to appear naïve (Citrin 1974) whereas their counterparts in authoritarian regimes are believed to overreport because they are afraid of retribution (Blair, Coppock, and Moor 2020). Whether studying the low levels of trust in democracies or the high levels of trust in authoritarian countries, scholars have rightly focused on measurement issues, especially political and social desirability biases. We advance this research by looking at implicit trust in government in China, the world's most populous authoritarian regime, and one that is among the most trusted by its people.

Implicit trust, both conceptually and empirically, stems from the large body of research on implicit attitudes. Implicit attitudes are intuitive, spontaneous responses to stimuli that people are unwilling or unable to report (e.g., Banaji and Greenwald 2013; Jost 2019; Kahneman 2011; Pérez 2013, 2016). In contrast to *explicit* trust—the self-reported expressions of political trust found in surveys— *implicit* trust captures a gut-level, automatic expression of political trust (Intawan and Nicholson 2018). To measure implicit trust, we had respondents rapidly match "government" with "trust" and "distrust" words using the Single-Target Implicit Association Test (ST-IAT) to examine whether respondents are more likely to associate government with trust relative to distrust. With this measure, we found that the Chinese people, regardless of their explicit (self-reported) trust, implicitly trust government. Furthermore, we found implicit and explicit trust to be unrelated, indicating that each measure captures a distinct attitude towards government, both largely positive.

We also examined the correlates of implicit and explicit trust. We found that political socialization processes have differential effects on implicit and explicit trust and that only contemporaneous factors are associated with explicit trust. For instance, higher levels of education bolster implicit trust but are negatively related to explicit trust. Although early political socialization experiences shape both types of trust, the effects of higher education in our study amplify implicit trust but reduce explicit trust. We also found that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members have a slightly lower level of implicit trust than non-members, suggesting both that party membership is more instrumental than political in nature and that socialization during adulthood has relatively little effect on implicit trust. To examine susceptibility to social desirability bias we also asked respondents questions about self-monitoring, a personality measure that captures whether individuals alter their behavior to make positive impressions on others (Snyder 1974). We found that high self-monitors were more likely to express explicit trust but not implicit trust, suggesting that social desirability bias plays a role in the former but not the latter. Overall, the results suggest that agents of political socialization affect implicit and explicit

trust differently, and that explicit trust is more likely to be informed by contemporaneous influences (e.g., government performance) or markers of social status (e.g., income).

Does implicit trust matter? To address this question, we examined whether implicit trust helps explain system support, a critical application in the study of political systems, especially for authoritarian regimes. We examined measures consistent with Easton's (1965) concepts of specific and diffuse support, the former capturing evaluations of political officeholders and the latter broad evaluations of the regime and its institutions. In looking at diffuse support, we found that implicit trust helps explain system justification (Jost 2020; Kay and Jost 2003), the legitimacy of a country's social, economic, and political arrangements. We also examined specific support and found that implicit trust engenders support for China's emerging social credit system, a perhaps ideal example of authoritarian social management, but had no effect on support for government surveillance. Similarly, we found that implicit trust had a positive effect on supporting the government in times of crisis such as an international conflict, a critical test of implicit trust since implicit processes are supposed to figure prominently in "fight or flight" responses. Not only do the results show that implicit trust matters, but they also help validate the implicit measure, demonstrating predictive validity.

Our findings have important implications for understanding political support and stability in China. Perhaps most importantly, the Chinese public appears to be of one mind about government: In addition to a high self-reported trust in government, the Chinese public possesses a widely held, implicit trust. Yet despite how implicit and explicit trust are both positive, they are distinct attitudes. The differences we found are unsurprising given that explicit attitudes are the product of more thoughtful, intentional thinking whereas implicit attitudes represent spontaneous, involuntary thoughts. Implicit trust also affects regime support, a finding that may help explain why China has maintained one of the world's longest enduring modern authoritarian regimes. Although we are reluctant to generalize our findings to other authoritarian regimes, they suggest that when people are either unwilling or unable to report an attitude, implicit measures represent a promising avenue for understanding the complexity of public opinion in politically sensitive environments (see also Truex and Tavana 2019; Zhou, Tang, and Lei 2020).

In what follows, we discuss the challenges of studying trust in an authoritarian setting and introduce implicit attitudes, both the theory and measurement behind them. We next introduce our implicit trust measure, paying special attention to measurement issues and its relationship to explicit trust, the self-reported trust found in surveys. In the last set of analyses, we examine the

predictive validity of implicit trust by analyzing whether it is related to various forms of diffuse and specific support, important constructs of interest in the study of political systems. Lastly, we conclude with the limitations of the study, thoughts about future research, and the importance of our findings for understanding public support of authoritarian regimes.

The Meaning and Measurement of Political Trust

The study of public attitudes towards governmental institutions has occupied a central role in survey research. The wealth of research on the topic has provided valuable theoretical and empirical insights into the nature of public trust and confidence in government. David Easton's (1965) conceptualization of specific and diffuse regime support has occupied a central place in the study of political trust. The former embodies attitudes towards political authorities and public policy whereas the latter represents the political system or regime more broadly. Specific support concerns the politics of the day, who is in office, and what they are doing; it is mercurial and apt to change with new leadership and shifting policy priorities. Diffuse support, on the other hand, is a long-standing orientation, what Easton refers to as a "reservoir" of goodwill towards the regime, that is relatively stable and rooted in early political socialization.

In one of the most influential scholarly exchanges about political trust, Miller (1974) and Citrin (1974) offered different interpretations of declining trust in the United States government drawing on Easton's conceptualization. Miller (1974) interpreted the decline as a loss of confidence in the political regime, an erosion of diffuse support, whereas Citrin (1974) interpreted it to be dissatisfaction with incumbent political leaders, the waning of specific support. The emphasis on theory and measurement showcased in the Miller-Citrin exchange was a forerunner to the rich literature addressing these issues in the study of political trust (e.g., Cook and Gronke 2005; Denk and Christensen 2016; Doorenspleet 2012; Fisher, Van Heerde, and Tucker 2010; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Hetherington 2005; Marien 2011; Mishler and Rose 1997; Norris 1999; Schneider 2017).

Despite the wealth of knowledge produced by self-reported measures, they can be limited since people are sometimes unwilling (e.g., social desirability) or unable (lack of self-awareness) to answer survey questions. Although Citrin (1974) focused primarily on how the decline of political trust in the United States represented a loss of confidence in leaders, he also suggested that political distrust might be a relatively harmless form of venting frustration at the political system. In the aftermath of Watergate and Vietnam, admitting that one trusts the United States government might make one appear naïve so responses to questions about political trust may, in part, be biased by social desirability.

Whereas Americans may be reluctant to express trust in government so as not to appear naive, the Chinese people may be reluctant to report distrust because they fear punishment by the government. Many Chinese criticize the government on the Internet (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013), but the extent to which such criticism is allowed varies across time and domain (Gueorguiev and Malesky 2019). In the past decade, the Chinese government has further tightened the scope for expression, banning "improper discussions," insisting "media make the party their surname," and detaining government critics and rights lawyers (Shirk 2018; Yuan 2021; Zhao 2016). The ever present—and in fact increasing—repression in Chinese society thus undermines popular and scholarly perceptions about the high levels of trust in government. To be clear, the skepticism is not due to expectations that trust should be low but rather that it might be artificially high.

The nature of trust in government in China has motivated a good deal of research into whether social desirability bias, particularly fear of retribution, inflates expressed regime support. The findings are somewhat mixed. Many studies have been unable to find evidence of substantial overreporting or the claim that fear is a primary motivation (e.g., Lei and Lu 2017; Shi 2001; Tang 2016). For instance, Shi (2001) found anemic correlations between trust in government and fear of political persecution. Tang (2016) offers a key comparison by reporting that responses given to a question about whether Chinese respondents would support the government even if it is wrong are roughly comparable to the responses found in other countries, including democracies. Another key comparison is between levels of trust in the local and central governments wherein scholars have routinely found lower trust in the local government (Dickson 2016; Li 2016; Tang 2016). Scholars have also used experiments to test whether responses to political trust questions are biased by fear of retribution. Lei and Lu (2017) randomly assigned participants to either a standard face-to-face interview (control) or a treatment wherein participants were told the survey was sponsored by the CCP, the expectation being that people would be less forthcoming in expressing distrust in the latter case. Yet participants in the CCP treatment did not exhibit a significantly higher non-response rate nor report higher trust in China's political system than participants in the (normal interviewer) control condition. Drawing on affect transfer theory, Stockmann, Esarey, and Zhang (2018) found no evidence that priming participants with the central government produced a fearful response in evaluations of a non-political advertisement. Across a variety of studies using different methodologies, a good deal of evidence suggests that the Chinese people are

willing to answer politically sensitive questions in a truthful manner.

Yet there is also evidence that fear and social desirability might play a role in survey responses about the Chinese government. Two list experiments, respectively by Li, Shi, and Zhu (2018) and Robinson and Tannenberg (2019), found that around twenty-five percentage points fewer respondents trust the regime in indirect questioning than in direct questioning. Tang's (2016) list experiment, however, found misreporting affected about only 4% of respondents. While not directly measuring political trust, Jiang and Yang (2016) found that, after a high-profile political purge, responses to politically sensitive and insensitive survey items diverged, which they interpret as evidence of preference falsification. Li (2016) found that people who trust the central government more than local governments have significantly stronger latent doubts about the former. Even though these studies nevertheless find majority trust in government, questions about the amount of regime support and political trust in China persist.

Implicit Trust in Government

Since the literature on political trust in China has been preoccupied with questions of intentional misreporting it has largely neglected another limitation: how people can be insufficiently introspective or self-aware to self-report attitudes. An extensive literature has helped establish dual process theories of the mind (e.g., Banaji and Greenwald 2013; Kahneman 2011; Pérez and Riddle 2020). The intuitive mind makes fast, often pre-conscious, involuntary judgments whereas the reflective mind makes slow, conscious, controlled judgments. Scholars have labeled the automatic attitudes that arise from the intuitive mind as implicit and the purposeful attitudes that arise from the reflective mind as explicit.

Implicit and explicit attitudes are essentially different types of thinking. Implicit cognition involves lower-order, rudimentary associations rooted in past experiences (developmental events) and culture whereas explicit cognition reflects more recent events (Greenwald and Banaji 1995). Although it is possible for implicit attitudes to change, they are much less flexible than explicit attitudes. Implicit attitudes are akin to mental habits whereas explicit attitudes are much more adaptable to new information. Since implicit attitudes are automatically activated by familiar objects, they "facilitate one's explicit thinking by quickly providing working knowledge about previous decisions, judgments, or evaluations that resemble the current context demanding one's more effortful thoughts" (Perez 2016, 27).

Since all attitudes are unobserved, both implicit and explicit attitudes face notable measurement challenges (see Pérez 2013). Although explicit attitudes are measured directly with self-reports, their accuracy can be problematic when people are unwilling to honestly answer some types of questions (due to sensitivity bias), or they may lack self-awareness. Indeed, the use of list experiments to study trust in government in China assumes that participants will not provide honest responses because they fear government retribution (Li, Shi, and Zhu 2018; Robinson and Tannenberg 2019; Tang 2016). However, the cognitive process underlying the list experiment is a reasoned, conscious decision that is markedly different from the automatic, gut-level response assumed to underlie implicit attitudes.

A formidable challenge to the study of implicit attitudes has been how to capture them since they are automatic and may reside outside of conscious awareness. To address this challenge, psychologists have developed tasks that measure attitudes *indirectly* such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998). The IAT requires participants to rapidly match attributes (e.g., good and bad) to contrasting category items (e.g., white and black), akin to playing a fast-paced video game. The faster the match between a category and an attribute, the stronger the association. In our study, respondents faster at matching government with trust than distrust would hold an implicit trust in government. Since the IAT requires an immediate response, respondents are largely unable to censor themselves thus precluding social desirability effects (Rudman 2004). Although the IAT was initially developed to measure racial bias, it has been used on a wide variety of topics in the study of politics including gender and voting behavior (Mo 2015), the nature of party identification (Hye-Yon Lee et al. n.d.; Theodoridis 2017), religion and voting behavior (Albertson 2011), and perceptions of courts (Hansford, Intawan, and Nicholson 2018), to name only a few. In research closest to our own, studies have found that implicit trust in democracies is routinely higher than explicit, self-reported trust (Intawan and Nicholson 2018; Murtin et al. 2018).

Since people hold both implicit and explicit attitudes towards the same (familiar) object it is possible that they may be of two minds. Indeed, the impetus behind the IAT was to examine attitudes on sensitive topics in which people either censor themselves due to social desirability bias or because of a lack of self-awareness. The most prominent implicit attitudes research has focused on racial attitudes, a sensitive topic in the United States. In these studies, there is typically a significant divergence between self-reported or explicit attitudes (people profess racial equality) and implicit attitudes (people also prefer white faces to Black faces) (Banaji and Greenwald 2013). Yet implicit and explicit attitudes need not diverge. For instance, scholars have found that implicit and explicit party identity are strongly related (Theodoridis 2017). In short, the association between implicit and explicit attitudes depends on the concepts under investigation (Kurdi, Ratliff, and Cunningham 2021).

Whether people are of one or two minds about a topic has important consequences for opinion and behavior. Since implicit attitudes are spontaneously expressed, they represent initial judgments. These snap judgments or intuitions may structure opinion and behavior (Kahneman 2011; Perez 2016). Explicit attitudes represent deliberative and controlled thinking, the types of attitudes that are reported in surveys. If implicit and explicit attitudes on a topic converge, they are mutually reinforcing, and the person is of one mind. On the other hand, if implicit and explicit attitudes meaningfully diverge, meaning that the person is of two minds about the topic, responses are conditional on the degree to which people engage in thoughtful, deliberative reasoning. If a person responds effortlessly, with little to no thought, the default response will likely follow implicit attitudes whereas an effortful, thoughtful response is likely to follow explicit attitudes.

In the case of political trust, if a person is of one mind about government, we should expect her to be trusting of the regime. Yet if the person is of two minds about government (e.g., they are implicitly trustful but explicitly distrustful), implicit trust could be undermined by explicit distrust if the person was to give an effortful, considered response. The empirical implication is that the implicit measure is uncontaminated by explicit cognition since it is, by design, a pre-conscious measure. On the other hand, as mentioned, self-reported measures are likely to be informed by implicit attitudes, although ultimately, they reside within the domain of conscious, more thoughtful answers. As discussed in the next section, we offer rival hypotheses on whether implicit trust will converge or diverge from explicit trust.

Given that the IAT measures the association between categories and attributes, one might question whether it is measuring familiarity rather than an attitude. In other words, faster associations between some categories and attributes are taken to mean a stronger preference for one category over another but it might also be indicative of greater category familiarity. Since this is a question of construct validity, early research on the IAT examined the issue carefully. In a variety of tests that accounted for familiarity (either controlling for it or using unfamiliar stimuli), these studies largely ruled out familiarity (see Dasgupta, Greenwald, and Banaji 2003). Furthermore, some studies have even reported participants showing greater favorability toward less familiar stimuli from an ingroup than more familiar stimuli from an outgroup (Rudman et al. 1999).

The Correlates of Implicit Trust

Aside from a recent study about university students' implicit preferences for the central government versus university leaders (Zhou, Tang and Lei 2020), we are unaware of any research on implicit political attitudes among the general public in China. As a first step to measure implicit trust in government, our focus is the general government system, and we leave the potential difference between China's central government and local governments to future research. This seems appropriate given China's unitary and authoritarian political system, particularly since the sweeping centralization and even personalization of power in the past decade (Economy 2018; Shirk 2018). For example, local officials are now judged by how well they uphold the central leadership and General Secretary Xi Jinping's authority (the "Two Upholds" or *liangge weihu*) and are forbidden to have "improper discussions of central policies" (*wangyi Zhongyang*). For these reasons, we focus on political trust in the whole system but recommend that future research examine constituent parts.

Is the Chinese public implicitly trustful or distrustful of government? We offer rival expectations, one anticipating negative implicit trust and the other positive. The basis of negative trust has already been discussed since it shares the same root causes thought to motivate people to overreport trust; namely living under an authoritarian regime that controls, sometimes in cruel fashion, daily political, social, and economic life. Simply put, government repression, even if not directly visited upon the individual, orients the citizen in opposition to government, potentially engendering a deep-seated, visceral distrust.

The expectation that we will find positive implicit political trust is rooted in research on political socialization. Trust in government is an attitude acquired early in life (Easton and Dennis 1969). In the United States, Jennings and Niemi (1968) found high school students to be more trusting in government than their parents, attributing the greater trust to an emphasis on civics education that recedes as political awareness grows across the life span. Yet, as Intawan and Nicholson (2018) show, Americans largely retain an automatic, implicitly held trust in government. Such a process of fostering positive implicit trust in government is likely to be even more pronounced in China. The Chinese educational system provides highly positive and idealized portrayals of the political system, starting with civics lessons in primary and secondary school and continuing with political ideology education in universities (Cantoni et al. 2017; Kennedy 2009). Outside the classroom, long-term exposure to the regime's "thought work" through state-controlled media and socialization in state-sanctioned political participation also make likely that a trustful orientation toward government inhabits the minds of the Chinese people (Repnikova and Fang 2018; Shambaugh 2007).

As a window into the origins of implicit trust, and whether they differ from explicit trust, we examine the correlates of each. The research on (explicit) trust in government suggests factors related to political socialization (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963; Cook and Gronke

2005; Easton and Dennis 1969) may also be correlates of implicit trust. Given their deeper and sustained exposure to these political lessons, we expect those with higher education to have greater implicit trust. Similarly, we expect to find this relationship among urban dwellers since, in communist systems, the state has a deeper penetration in urban areas than in rural areas and individuals living in cities are more heavily exposed to government messages (Jowitt 1992; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2020). This may especially be the case in China after the dismantling of agricultural collectivization since the late 1970s. In line with previous research, we expect Confucian values (Shi 2001; Tang 2016) and perceptions of government performance (Guriev and Treisman 2020; Shi 2001; Tang 2016; Wu, Yang, and Chen 2017) to also play important roles in fostering explicit trust; we do not have expectations about their role in fostering implicit trust.

Finally, since social desirability may affect the willingness to report political trust, both implicit and explicit, we examine self-monitoring, the degree to which individuals alter their behavior to make a positive impression on others (Snyder 1974). Self-monitoring has been used to account for social desirability bias in research on racial attitudes (Berinsky 2004) and party identification (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). Intawan and Nicholson (2018), however, did not find differences in explicit (self-reported) trust between high and low self-monitors suggesting that low trust in government in the United States is not influenced by social desirability. Since the motivation for underreporting political trust in the United States and overreporting trust in China are believed to stem from different sources, the desire to not appear naïve versus fear, respectively, we include self-monitoring in our study. Nevertheless, we only expect self-monitoring to be relevant to explicit trust (high self-monitors are more likely to overreport trust) since implicit attitudes are not easily self-censored.

Study Design and Measures

For our study, a nonprobability internet sample of respondents in China aged 18 or above were recruited by Qualtrics and surveyed from April to June 2018. As online appendix A shows, their demographic breakdown is somewhat comparable to the internet-active adult subsample of the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), a nationally representative survey conducted in the same year.[1] However, there were significantly more respondents with four-year college education or above in our sample, which is typical in online surveys in China.

Before taking the IAT near the end of the survey, we asked about explicit trust in government, system justification, support of the social credit system, acceptance of government surveillance, trust in government during crisis events, other attitudinal and belief questions, and

demographic characteristics (refer to online appendix B for question wording). To measure explicit trust, we used the American National Election Study (ANES) trust in government index and adapted it to the Chinese context. Although this measure is not without critics (e.g., Cook and Gronke 2005; Gershtenson and Plane 2011), the ANES trust items are among the most widely used and provide a valuable basis for comparison. As is customary, we recoded it to range from 0 to 100 with higher numbers indicating greater trust.

We use a variant of the IAT called the Single-Target IAT (ST-IAT) (Karpinski and Steinman 2006) to measure implicit trust in government. Whereas the standard IAT features two contrasting categories (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998), the ST-IAT only includes one category. Although it is valuable to compare the Chinese government to other entities (Zhou, Tang, and Lei 2020) we chose not to so as to ensure that the implicit measure is directly comparable to the explicit trust measure. In addition, the ST-IAT has been found to have sufficient reliability and stability (Bluemke and Friese 2008, 988; also see Karpinski and Steinman 2006) and has been used to study implicit trust in the United States (see Intawan and Nicholson 2018).

The ST-IAT task consists of matching trust and distrust to the target category *government* (政府). Since there are not proper synonyms for *government*,[2] we altered fonts to introduce variability in much the same way that some IATs use pictures instead of text (see Intawan and Nicholson 2018). The "trust" words in our ST-IAT task include trust (信任), trustworthy (值得信赖), dependable (可靠), reliable (靠谱), and honest (诚实) while the "distrust" words are distrust (不信任), untrustworthy (不值得信赖), undependable (不可靠), unreliable (不靠谱), and dishonest (不诚实). We randomize the blocks so that government is initially paired with trust or distrust. If the respondent is initially assigned to the trust block, the instructions require them to match government with trust. In the second block, respondents are instructed to match government with distrust. The initial block (trust) corresponds to a key response on the left side of the keyboard and the second block (distrust) corresponds to a key response on the right side. Respondents faster at matching government with trust relative to distrust possess implicit trust whereas the opposite hold implicit distrust. Figure 1 depicts two separate illustrative screens in the IAT (the actual experiment uses Chinese characters), one matching government with trust and the other matching government with distrust.

Following convention (Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji 2003), we removed respondents where more than 10% of their trials were less than 300 milliseconds and then converted the remaining 1,543 respondents' trust ST-IAT data into D-scores. The D-score is the mean difference in response times between the blocks where trust is

Figure 1
Illustrative screens in the Implicit Association Test for trust in government
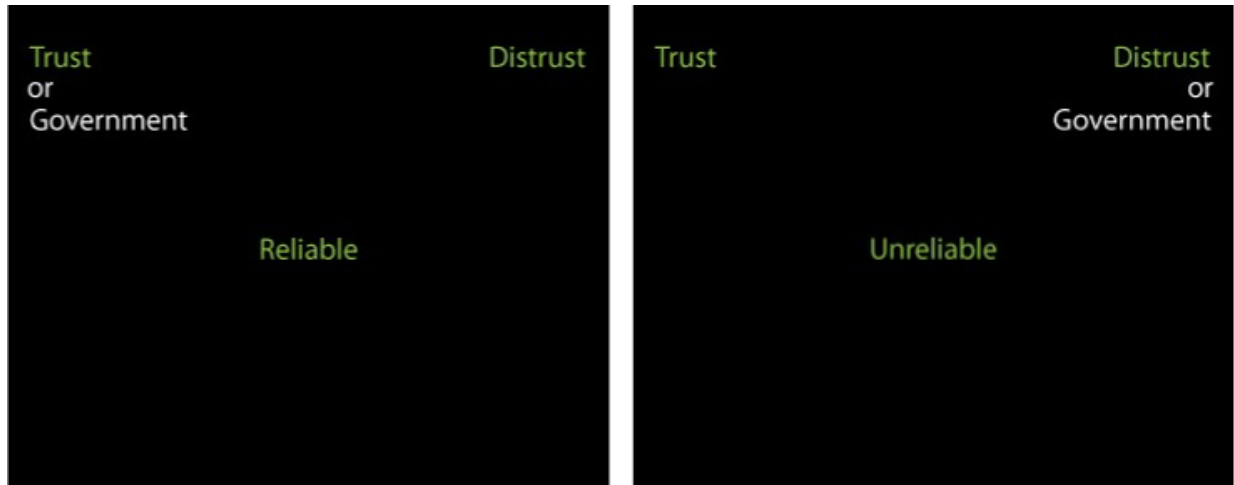
Note: The left screen matches government with trust words and the right screen matches government with distrust words.

Figure 2
**Density of implicit trust in the Chinese government (ST-IAT D-Scores)**
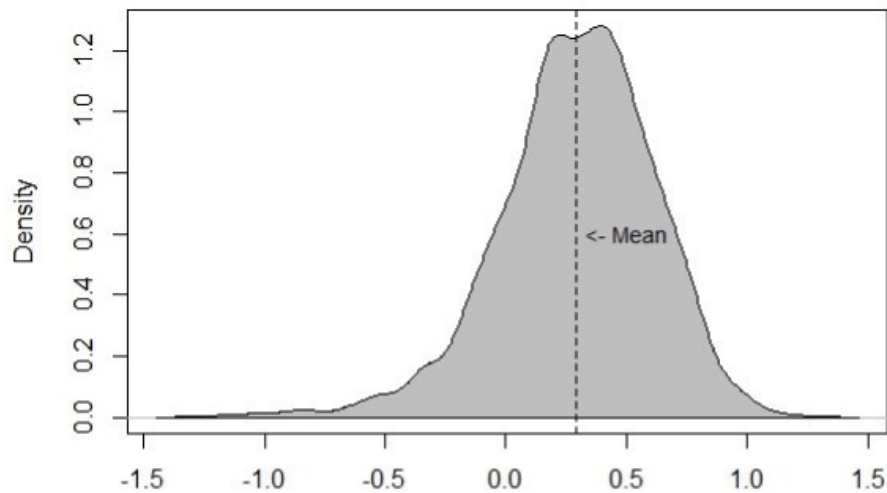
paired with government from the blocks in which distrust is paired with government, divided by the standard deviation in the test blocks; it ranges from -2 to +2 wherein a positive score indicates implicit trust, and a negative score indicates implicit distrust. The D-score thus reveals both the direction and strength of an implicit attitude wherein 2 represents maximum implicit trust and -2 represents maximum implicit distrust. The algorithm also incorporates errors (incorrect matches) and accounts for the variability of response latencies across trials (see Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji 2003).

Understanding Implicit Trust

We begin by looking at implicit trust and its relationship to explicit trust. Figure 3 depicts implicit trust in the Chinese government. About 83.7% of the respondents have positive D-scores, and the mean is .29, $t(1542)=35.5$, $p < .001$ with a standard deviation of .32. Since our sample is not

Figure 3
Density of explicit trust in the Chinese government
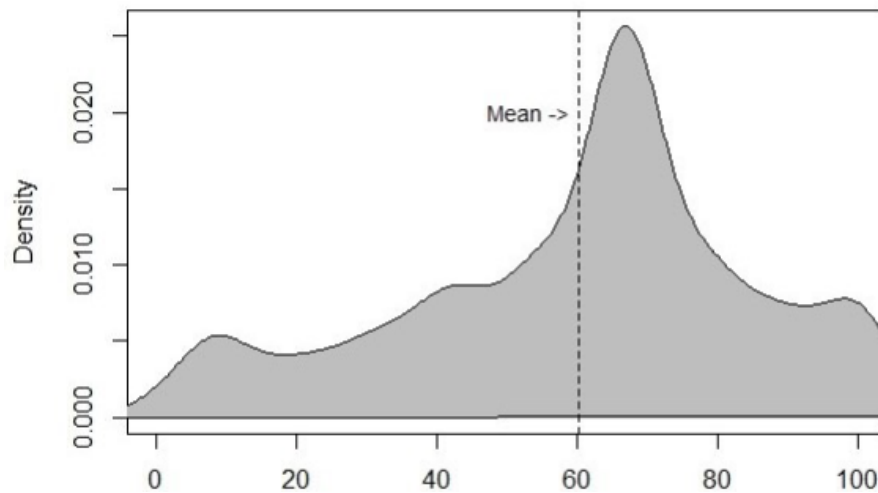
nationally representative, we adjusted the weights on demographic variables to obtain national estimates. Li, Shi, and Zhu (2018) show that samples from crowd-sourcing internet platforms, such as ours, are particularly useful for predicting the attitudes of Chinese internet users. Therefore, we use the internet active adult sample of the nationally representative 2018 CFPS data to reweight gender, age group, education, CCP membership, and urban residency. This exercise yields a national estimate very similar to our sample estimate: 85.8% of the public possesses a positive D-score with a mean of .32.

Recall that explicit trust ranges from 0 to 100 with higher numbers indicating greater trust. As shown in figure 3, about 71% of respondents exhibit explicit trust higher than 50, with a mean of 60.2 (SD=24.9; refer to online appendix C for summary statistics). Re-weighting the demographic variables by 2018 CFPS produces similar estimates: about 70.6% of the Chinese people exhibit positive explicit trust in government and the mean is 60.4.[3] This level of trust is slightly lower than found in many surveys, but we cannot rule out question wording differences. Regardless of weighting, the percentage of respondents with positive implicit trust appears to be higher than the percentage with explicit trust.

Figure 4 depicts the relationship between our measures of implicit and explicit trust. The correlation between implicit and explicit trust is nearly zero ($r = -.0015$) indicating that they are unrelated.[4] How might we explain a weak correlation between two largely positive measures? As seen in figure 4, implicit trust is consistently positive across both high *and* low values of explicit trust, so the absence of a correlation is largely due to respondents who

are implicitly trustful but explicitly distrustful. Using an IAT that pitted trust in university officials against trust in government, Zhou, Tang, and Lei (2020) reported a correlation of approximately .10 between implicit and explicit measures also suggesting little relationship. The disassociation of implicit and explicit trust was also found in the United States (Intawan and Nicholson 2018), but other research has reported stronger, albeit modest, correlations in the United States and other countries (see Murtin et al. 2018). As established later, implicit and explicit trust are different measures with distinct correlates.

To explore the origins of implicit trust, we considered a variety of correlates that previous studies have found to be associated with explicit trust. We start by examining demographic characteristics, including gender, age, education, household residence registration (urban versus rural), family income status, and CCP membership. We then consider two major sources of trust in the Chinese government identified in previous studies: Confucian values and government performance. We use an index of items borrowed from the Asian Barometer Survey for Confucian values and evaluations about China's overall situation as a measure of government performance.

Given the vexing problem of sensitivity bias concerns in the study of trust in authoritarian settings, we also examined self-monitoring, the degree to which individuals alter their behavior to make positive impressions on others (Snyder 1974). If there is an element of social desirability in self-reported measures of trust, we expect those higher in self-monitoring to be more likely to misreport trust in government. As mentioned, although we include self-monitoring in models of explicit and implicit trust, we

Figure 4
The relationship between implicit and explicit trust in China
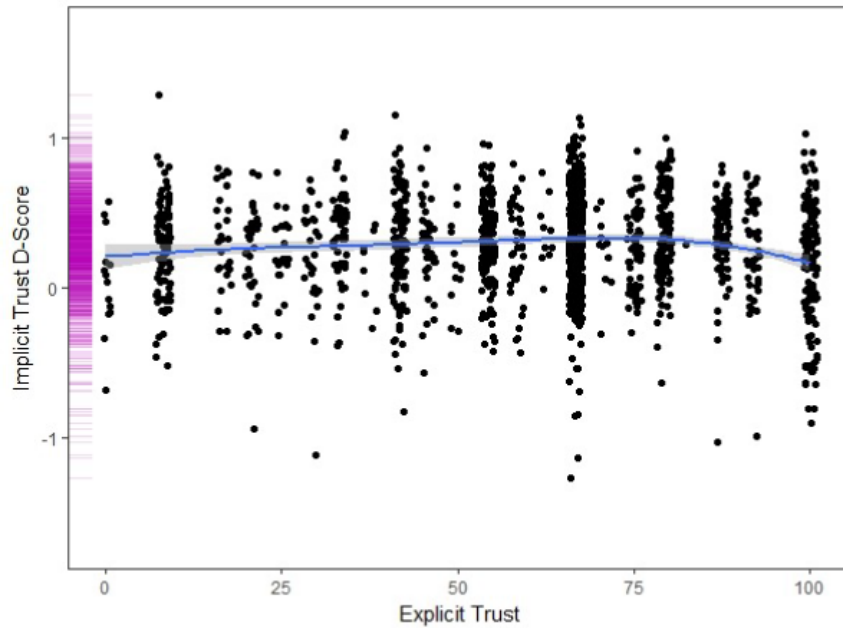
do not expect it to affect implicit trust since implicit measures are pre-conscious and largely immune to social desirability problems.

Figure 5 depicts regression results for the correlates of implicit and explicit trust (refer to table D.1 in the online appendix for the numerical results and table D.2 for the correlation matrix between the independent variables). We ran two models for each type of trust, one with demographics only (coefficients represented by triangles), and the other with demographic and attitudinal and belief variables that previous studies have suggested matter for explicit trust (coefficients represented by circles). The results of the two models are consistent. To aid interpretation, we rescaled all variables to range from 0 (low) to 1 (high). This means each estimate represents the percentage change in the dependent variable when the independent variable is changed from the minimum to the maximum level while all other variables are held constant.

Beginning with demographics, figure 5 shows that education has a positive effect on implicit trust, regardless of model specification. This result suggests that education instills implicit trust via political and civic education beyond primary and junior high school. Based on the full model, increasing education from the minimum (primary school or below) to the maximum (graduate school) level increases implicit trust by 9.1 percentage points (from 54.5% to 63.6%). Equivalently, an additional level of educational attainment increases implicit trust by 1.8

percentage points.[5] Although it has a more modest effect compared to education, residency in urban areas has a positive effect on implicit trust in government. The average marginal effect of urban residency relative to rural residency is 2.4 percentage points (from 59.15% to 61.54%). The positive effects of education and urban residency on implicit trust suggests a critical role for political education and socialization in the fostering of implicit political trust.

Among other demographic characteristics, the results also indicate that CCP members have a slightly lower level of implicit trust than non-members (1.9 percentage points in the full model). More research is needed to understand this result, but it is consistent with the fact that in contemporary China individuals often join the party for instrumental and career reasons and cannot simply be viewed as party loyalists (Dickson 2016). The process of joining the Party does involve some degree of political socialization, but since it occurs in adulthood (either after a person enters the work force or at the late stage of one's education), its role in fostering implicit trust is limited. Figure 5 also shows that none of the attitudinal variables including evaluation of China's current situation and self-monitoring had significant effects on implicit trust at the conventional .05 level.

The correlates of explicit trust are different. In contrast to implicit trust, education has a negative effect on explicit trust: increasing education from the minimum to the

Figure 5
Sources of implicit and explicit trust in government
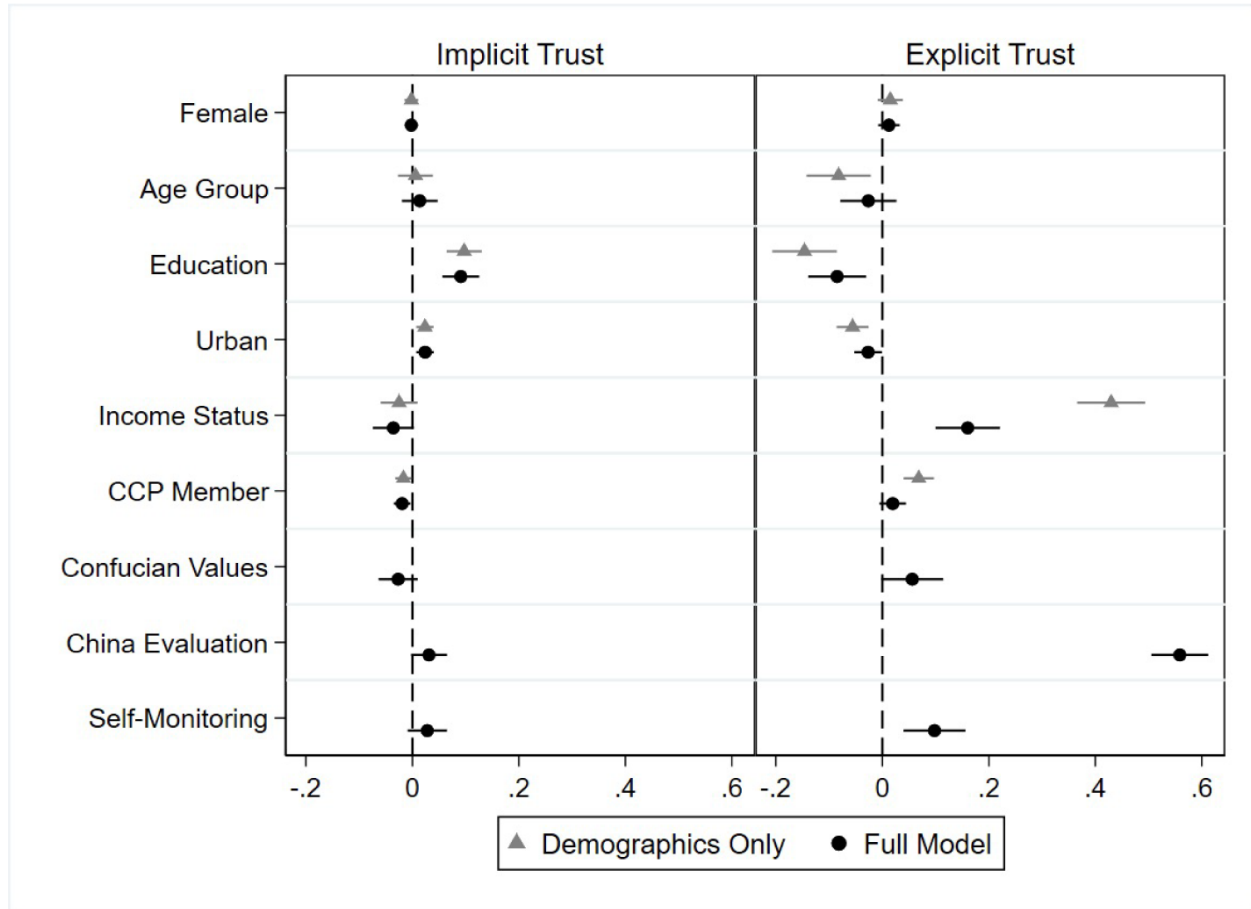
Notes: OLS estimates with 95% confidence intervals. All variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Triangles are coefficients from models with demographic variables only and circles are coefficients from the full models.

maximum level decreases explicit trust by 8.5 percentage points (from 66.5% to 58.0%). This is consistent with Tang's (2016) finding that higher education makes Chinese citizens more critical of government policies. Education's role in cultivating "critical citizens" (Norris 1999) suggests something of a paradox. Despite early political education instilling implicit pro-government orientations, additional education fosters more deliberative and critical thinking about government (as opposed to consisting merely of rote memorization as is often described in the popular press) which decreases explicit trust. At the same time, additional education appears to reinforce early political education through increased implicit trust. Similarly, while urban residence has a positive effect on implicit trust, it has a negative though small effect on explicit trust (effect size = 2.7 percentage points; from 59.8% to 62.5%). That both education and urban residence have opposite effects on implicit and explicit trust in

government underscores how the two types of trust are distinct. These agents of political socialization matter to both types of trust, but in different ways. CCP members do not have higher explicit trust in government (according to the full model), once again suggesting the instrumental rather than political role of party membership.

Contemporaneous judgments and considerations also play a role in explaining explicit trust but not implicit trust. Consistent with previous research, respondents more satisfied with China's performance are more likely to hold explicit trust, and the effect size is the largest among all covariates. Based on the full model, moving from the lowest to the highest value of performance produces a 55.9 percentage points increase in explicit trust (from 19.1% to 75.0%). Income is also positive, with explicit trust increasing 16.1 percentage points (from 50.5% to 66.6%) from the lowest to the highest levels of income. Confucian values are positively correlated with

explicit trust, but the relationship is not significant at the conventional level. Lastly, figure 5 shows that high self-monitors are more likely to hold explicit trust, novel evidence that social desirability bias affects self-reported political trust. Moving from the lowest to highest value of self-monitoring produces a 9.8 percentage points increase in explicit trust (from 56.1% to 65.9%). This result suggests that explicit trust is somewhat inflated by social desirability bias. As expected, however, self-monitoring does not affect implicit trust, which is consistent with research showing that people are largely unable to censor implicit biases.

In sum, implicit trust and explicit trust in government are distinct. Not only are they unrelated to each other but our analysis suggests that implicit trust appears to be rooted in (political) education and socialization but detached from the sources that inform explicit trust such as government performance, social desirability, and family income. Such differences suggest that implicit trust is primarily rooted in early socialization whereas explicit trust is heavily informed by current circumstances. These results are consistent with research on implicit and explicit cognition that show that the former is largely shaped by early experiences and culture and the latter are more adaptable to new information. As such, our results also suggest that the factors that predict implicit trust appear to be consistent with Easton's (1965) description of diffuse support (a reservoir of goodwill) and the factors that predict explicit trust are more consistent with specific support (evaluations of political authorities). Furthermore, the correlates of political socialization that matter to both, including education and urban (versus rural) residence, affect implicit and explicit trust differently. For instance, whereas higher education appears to heighten implicit trust through reinforcement of early formative lessons, it diminishes explicit trust by promoting more deliberative, thoughtful evaluations.

A final difference between the two models worth mentioning is that the model goodness-of-fit measure for explicit trust is considerably larger than for implicit trust. The R-squared for the former is .381 and .031 for the latter. Although some of the difference is likely attributable to the fact that implicit measures are noisier than explicit measures, another possibility is that there is a great deal more we need to learn about the origins of implicit trust. In the following section, we investigate whether implicit trust affects different types of support for the regime.

Does Implicit Trust Matter?

The second major objective of our study is to examine whether implicit trust matters for understanding diffuse and specific regime support (Easton 1965). As mentioned, we expect implicit trust to affect diffuse support. Since implicit trust is deep-seated, its effects are likely to shape broad orientations toward government and society. To examine diffuse support, we chose system justification, the tendency

of individuals to endorse the social, economic, and political status quo (Jost 2020; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004; Kay and Jost 2003). Items in the system justification scale, for instance, ask respondents to agree or disagree with statements such as "In general, our country's political system operates as it should" (refer to online appendix B for items in the scale). Research on system justification theory has found that implicit attitudes about social groups play an important role in understanding system justification (Jost 2020; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004). In research similar to our own, Intawan and Nicholson (2018) found that implicit trust was a significant predictor of system justification in the United States. Accordingly, we expect respondents high in implicit trust to express greater system justification whereas we expect low implicit trust to diminish it.

We also expect implicit trust to predict attitudes towards various types of government policy that involve *specific* support including attitudes toward social control and trust in the government during crisis events. China's emerging social credit system is a major initiative of social management and control, and an exemplary case to study the relationship between implicit trust and specific support. The social credit system was first proposed in 2014, and currently exists in the form of local pilots and experiments. The government's stated goal for the program is to boost social trust and fight corruption and fraud by tracking the creditworthiness of individuals, businesses, and government agencies (Chorzempa et al. 2018; Kostka 2019). Many Western observers, however, regard it as a sweeping Orwellian surveillance apparatus for social control and privacy infringement (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson 2019). Given the vast reach of the social credit system, we found it an ideal policy for studying implicit trust and expect those with higher implicit trust to be more likely to accept the program.

Since evaluations of government are strongly informed by emotion during times of crises (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009), they also represent an ideal test of whether implicit trust matters. Given the danger involved in times of crises, Kahneman (2011, 35) argues that implicit attitudes are likely to dominate since they are central to "fight or flight" responses. Following Intawan and Nicholson (2018), we examined trust in government during "imagined" crisis events. As they discuss, times of crisis are likely to draw on automatic, gut-level processes given the inherent danger involved. In times of crisis then, citizens are likely to fall back on implicit trust, looking to government for safety and protection. On the other hand, implicit distrust should do the opposite since a lack of confidence in government is likely to make people desire that it not be involved.

Although our hypotheses address substantive questions central to the study of authoritarian politics, they also address a critical methodological consideration about the implicit trust measure, namely validity. Since implicit

attitudes often diverge from explicit attitudes, there is little guidance on how to examine construct validity. However, the analyses of the various forms of diffuse and specific support provide a reassuring breadth of tests of the predictive validity of implicit trust. Therefore, these analyses not only help us better understand the effects of implicit trust but also validate an implicit measure that is novel in the study of trust in an authoritarian setting.

### *Analysis of Diffuse and Specific Support*

All governments desire legitimacy, including authoritarian regimes (Zhao 2009). Easton's (1965) notion of diffuse support is especially important here since it concerns a commitment to the structures and norms of a regime regardless of its current incumbents or performance. To measure broad system support, we look at how likely respondents are to agree with justifications about the social, economic, and political order using the system justification scale (Kay and Jost 2003). Since the eight items that make up the scale were originally created to examine system justification in the United States, we made simple modifications to make them suitable for the Chinese context. The response scale (nine point) for each item

ranges from strongly disagree to strongly agree and is coded such that higher scores indicate higher system justification. Combining the eight items, we created an index ranging from 1 to 9. For the sample, the mean for system justification is 6.46 (SD=1.34).

In the following statistical analyses, we use both OLS regression, with all variables including the dependent variables rescaled to range between 0 and 1 (to facilitate interpretation), and ordered probit regression with the dependent variables in their original scales. Although we expect explicit trust to be endogenous to system justification, it is primarily included as a control variable. As shown in regressions reported in online appendix D (table D5), results with or without controlling for explicit trust are consistent. Because the Chinese public's political attitudes are often influenced by their life satisfaction and political interest (Huang 2015a; Zhong 2014), we also include these variables as controls in addition to standard demographic variables. As found in online appendix D (table D6), the results of the OLS and ordered probit regressions are consistent.

The left panel of figure 6 shows the predicted values of system justification when implicit trust in government changed from low to high levels (with both variables

Figure 6
Implicit trust in government, system justification, and forms of specific support
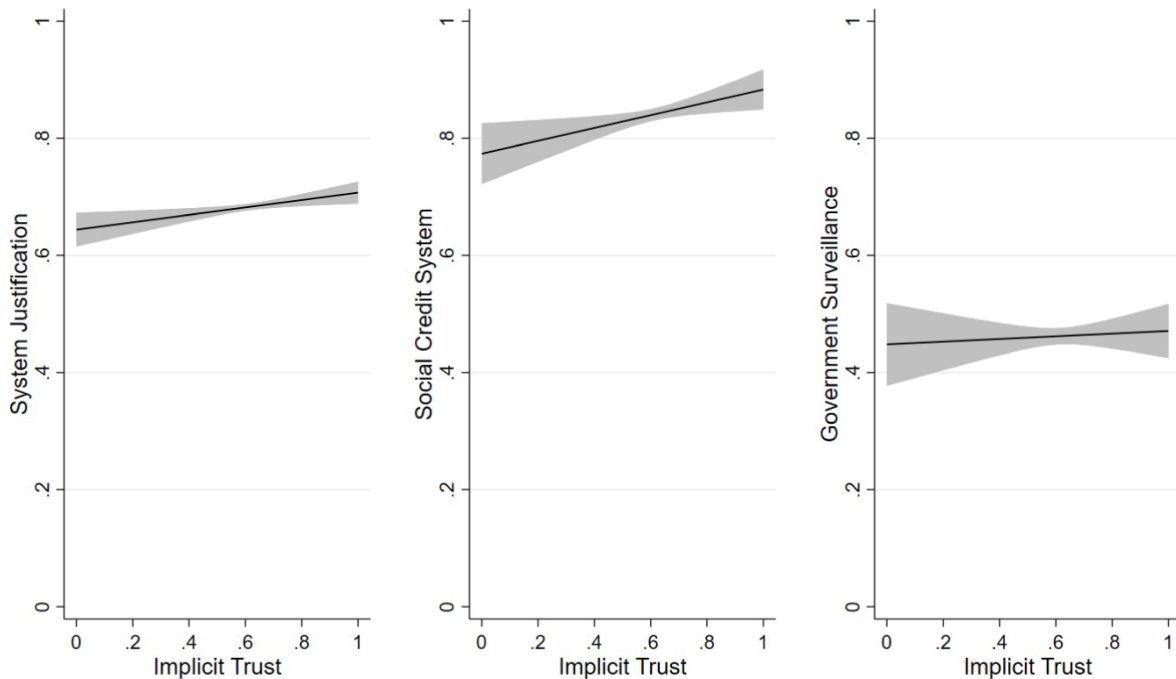
Notes: These are predictive margins with 95% confidence intervals based on OLS regressions controlling for demographic variables, explicit trust, and other attitudinal covariates. Variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

rescaled to range from 0 to 1), based on an OLS regression controlling for explicit trust and other covariates. As hypothesized, implicit trust is a positive and significant predictor of system justification. In other words, as implicit trust increases so does agreement with statements justifying China's political, social, and economic systems. Moving across the range of implicit trust from its minimum to maximum value in the data while holding all else constant increases system justification by 6.3 percentage points (from 64.4% to 70.7%).

Next, we examine whether implicit trust affects specific support in the guise of support for the state's social credit system, perhaps an ideal example of authoritarian policy as discussed earlier. Since the social credit system is often regarded outside of China as a type of surveillance, we asked a related question about general attitudes toward government surveillance and the collection of personal information. In our sample, 87.2% "support" or "somewhat support" the social credit system on a five-point scale ranging from "oppose" to "support" (mean=4.37, SD=0.84). In contrast, on the question of government surveillance, 57.2% said they were "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned." This variable uses a four-point scale and we recoded it so that higher numbers indicate less concern about (or more support for) government surveillance, with a mean of 2.39 (SD=0.91).

The middle and right panels of figure 6 show the relationship between implicit trust and opinion towards the social credit system and government surveillance. As hypothesized, implicit trust is a significant and positive predictor of support for the social credit system. Moving from the minimum to maximum value of implicit trust increased support for the social credit system by 10.9 percentage points (from 77.4% to 88.3%). In contrast, implicit trust is not a significant predictor of attitudes toward government surveillance. This result suggests that the Chinese public does not equate the social credit system with government surveillance. While the social credit system bundles prosocial behavior with political compliance (Tirole 2021), the Chinese people, particularly those trusting the government, accept the government's justification of the program. Consistent with this interpretation, tables D5 and D6 in the online appendix show that people with higher education and higher life satisfaction are more supportive of the social credit system (see also Kostka 2019), indicating that they are more likely to interpret the social credit system through frames of promoting honest dealings in society and the economy rather than privacy encroachment.

Analysis of Crisis Events
Lastly, we examine trust in the Chinese government during crisis events. We borrowed crisis items on a natural disaster and a foreign military attack from Intawan and Nicholson (2018) and created a new item on a trade war. While the questions are framed as hypotheticals, they are highly relevant to Chinese society. In particular, the survey was conducted amid the U.S.–China trade war, so the trade war question was related to a real and on-going event (even though its wording is about a generic foreign country rather than specifically the United States). Natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes are recurrent phenomena in China. Tensions have also been increasing in China's foreign relations in recent years, and a military conflict with a foreign power is not unimaginable. The response scale (seven point) for each item ranges from low to high trust such that higher values indicate greater trust to successfully address the crisis. Overall, respondents expressed relatively high political trust for each crisis (trade war $M = 5.69$, SD=1.25; natural disaster $M = 5.97$, SD=1.21; foreign attack $M = 5.97$, SD=1.20).

Figure 7 presents the predicted values of trust in government during crisis events. The results indicate that higher implicit trust predicts trust in government in all three crisis settings. In terms of effect sizes, increasing implicit trust from the minimum to the maximum increased trust of the government in addressing a trade war by 14.9 percentage points (from 69.1% to 84.0%), a natural disaster by 8.2 percentage points (from 77.8% to 86.0%), and a foreign military attack by 19.2 percentage points (from 71.2% to 90.4%). Each result not only suggests how implicit trust is likely to matter in explaining public response to crises, and the upswell of support given to government, but also helps validate the implicit trust measure apart from the more traditional inquiries of system support. These results are also consistent with China's experience during the 2020 coronavirus outbreak, with a trusting society exhibiting high policy compliance. In early 2020 when the government put most of the country under perhaps the strictest quarantine in the world (Shih 2021), Chinese society generally accepted the rule with order and little unrest, even though at the time the measure had not been adopted by any other country (Stasavage 2020).

Discussion and Conclusion
Our results have important implications for understanding authoritarian resilience and regime support in the world's largest authoritarian country. A long-standing debate in the study of Chinese politics is whether the public's high expressed trust in government is genuine. Using a variant of the IAT, a common method for measuring attitudes that people are either unwilling or unable to report, we found that the Chinese public holds an intuitive, unspoken trust in government. This trust represents a spontaneously expressed attitude, deeply ingrained in the public mind. We also found that the majority express trust in government (explicit trust) that is modestly affected by contemporaneous judgements of

Figure 7
Implicit trust in government during crisis events
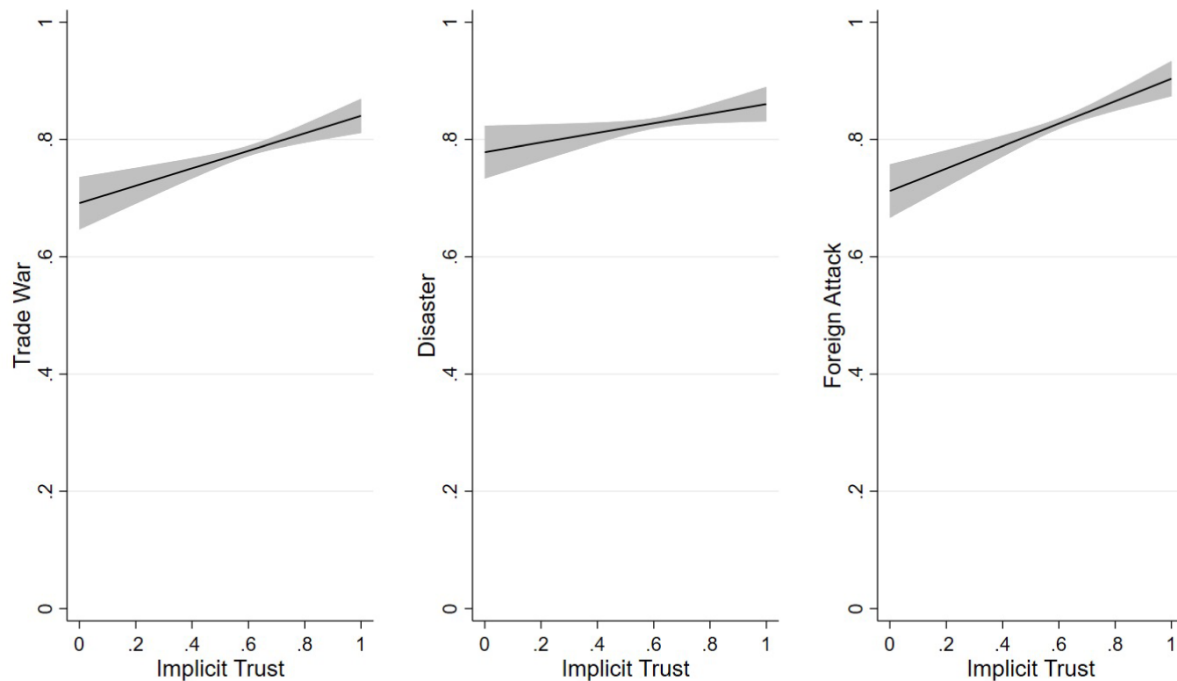
Notes: These are predictive margins with 95% confidence intervals based on OLS regressions controlling demographic variables, explicit trust, and other attitudinal covariates. Variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

China, their own life circumstances, and social desirability. Coupled with the large body of research that finds explicit trust does not appear to be dominated by political fear or social desirability, we advance the position that the Chinese public's trust in its government is largely genuine. In making this claim, we are not asserting that the implicit measure means that the explicit measure is genuine. Rather, coupled with the vast research on explicit trust, including our own results, we are claiming that the Chinese people are of one mind about government; both their implicit and explicit responses about government are largely trustful.

The roots of implicit and explicit trust appear to be similar. Each type is cultivated by a long and thorough process sustained by the state's domination of the education, media, and propaganda systems as well as social organizations and political participation. Early exposure to political teachings favorably predisposes children towards the regime, creating both implicit and explicit trust. In this way, trust in the regime is manufactured at an early age. The largely positive responses our participants revealed for implicit trust, and provided for explicit trust, suggest that political socialization processes in China are successful in cultivating trust in government.

Although implicit and explicit trust are both rooted in the same political socialization processes, they are nevertheless distinct. Empirically, our results show that they are uncorrelated. The scores for implicit trust are homogenous, largely positive even among those who report explicit distrust. Similar patterns were found in the United States (Intawan and Nicholson 2018). We also found the correlates of implicit and explicit trust to be distinct and the differences to be consistent with how each represents different types of thinking. Since implicit attitudes are snap judgments, they precede the controlled, more effortful thinking that characterizes explicit attitudes. In evaluating government, then, the initial, intuitive response is to be trusting. Yet, if engaged, explicit cognition may override implicit responses, providing other, more thoughtful, considerations (e.g., Banaji and Greenwald 2013). Therefore, whereas the correlates of implicit trust appear to be rooted uniquely in variables that capture political socialization processes, explicit trust is also shaped by contemporaneous considerations such as government performance, family income, and social desirability. Furthermore, we found that political socialization processes mattered in different ways. Whereas higher education augmented implicit trust, it reduced

explicit trust through more thoughtful, deliberative reasoning.

These results speak to a long-standing puzzle about authoritarianism in China: if the Chinese people have such a high trust in government, why does the regime often feel so insecure and threatened (Shirk 2008; Tang 2016), as evidenced by its pervasive media censorship and propaganda, repression, extraordinary spending on domestic stability, and sometimes hyper-responsiveness (Gueorguiev and Malesky 2019; Huang 2015b; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Shambaugh 2007; Tang 2016; Wang and Minzner 2015)? This is because, even though the regime's legitimacy appears to rest on a trust willingly granted (explicit trust) and secured by a gut-level feeling (implicit trust), public support is not immutable. Implicit attitudes are an initial judgment but can be overridden by explicit trust if circumstances dictate. Accordingly, during "normal" times the regime has little to worry about but in hard times the reservoir of goodwill could be drained, and it is precisely these circumstances that the regime is vigilantly planning against. Moreover, with socioeconomic modernization, citizens may develop an appreciation of liberal democratic values and political empowerment may become increasingly important (Norris 1999; Wang and You 2016). The government is also preparing for the potential arrival of such "critical citizens" with lower (explicit) trust.

Scholars have typically focused on institutional design (e.g., Nathan 2003) or performance legitimacy (e.g., Zhao 2009) to explain the CCP's ability to maintain rule. Our findings suggest one more vital reason for authoritarian resilience in China: a large majority of Chinese people have an implicit, automatic trust in the regime, which translates into both diffuse and specific support. Using system justification as a window into diffuse support, we found that respondents higher in implicit trust were more likely to express system justification for the Chinese political, economic, and social order. As for specific support, implicit trust helps explain support for China's emerging social credit system, a key authoritarian policy aimed at social management and control. However, implicit trust was not significantly related to support for government surveillance suggesting that the two policies are viewed differently. Lastly, we found that implicit trust helps explain political trust during times of crisis. Higher implicit trust was associated with higher trust in the Chinese government to address a trade war, a natural disaster, and a foreign attack. Taken together, the results for the different types of system and crisis support serve as important validation of our implicit trust measure and its relevance to understanding regime support.

As a point of comparison, Intawan and Nicholson (2018) conducted a similar study of implicit trust in the United States. Despite the many differences between China and the United States, there are important similarities. Using nearly identical instrumentation, large majorities in both countries are implicitly trustful of government, and implicit and explicit trust are also unrelated to each other in both countries. In addition, using the same questions, higher implicit trust increases system justification and political trust during crises in both countries. Although democracies and authoritarian governments are different in important ways, these similarities suggest that political socialization processes may operate similarly.

We have many suggestions for future research. One idea is to explore variations in how we measure political trust, both implicitly and explicitly. Following convention, we had used words that were direct opposites to capture a single dimension. For instance, we had used distrust words like "untrustworthy" and its opposite "trustworthy." However, had we used near antonyms such as "cunning" or "sly" for distrust we might have obtained different results since these words carry slightly different, negative meanings. Future research might also consider looking at different types of explicit trust such as Cooke and Gronke's (2005) trust-distrust measure since it probes deeper in revealing whether people expect the government to "do the wrong thing." Another idea for future research would be to use alternative measures of diffuse and specific support since our results suggest that implicit trust appears to be associated with diffuse support and explicit trust appears to be more associated with specific support. For instance, although the system justification scale is intended to measure support for the status quo and political system, additional measures of diffuse support (e.g., Iyengar 1980) are needed to bolster this interpretation.

Given the breadth of variables analyzed, we feel confident recommending that others use implicit measures in looking at trust in China and other authoritarian settings. There has been very little research on implicit political attitudes in non-democratic settings, but some evidence indicates that the Chinese people's positive implicit trust toward their government is not unique and exists in other authoritarian regimes too (Truex and Tavana 2019). Given that implicit trust can be a powerful predictor of both diffuse and specific support, and given that the public's explicit trust can be influenced by social desirability issues in the authoritarian context, studying implicit trust in a wide variety of societies is likely to enrich our understanding of comparative public opinion and authoritarian regime stability.

Supplementary Materials

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592722001037.

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Notes

1 Another potential benchmark is China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC)'s semi-annual aggregate demographic statistics of Chinese internet users, but CNNIC statistics include both adults and children and are thus not comparable to our adult survey.

2 In Chinese official discourses and propaganda, the government is often paired with the ruling party, as in "the Party and the government," but they are nevertheless distinct concepts. Further, in the Chinese context asking about the Party is likely more politically sensitive for our respondents, potentially making them less willing to complete the task.

3 We found similar results weighted by the entire 2018 CFPS adult sample including non-internet users. Here, 71.4% of respondents had positive explicit trust (mean of 60.1) whereas for implicit trust about 84.5% have positive D-scores with a mean of .3.

4 Implicit measures can be noisy, so a low correlation is not entirely unexpected. Nevertheless, some studies have found implicit and explicit measures to be modestly correlated. For instance, Theodoridis (2017) reports a correlation of .61 between implicit and explicit measures of party identification in the United States.

5 We also explored whether the introduction of patriotic education in the early 1990s influenced implicit trust for respondents of this cohort. Using people who entered senior high school in 1994, the year the campaign began in full scale, as the cut point table D3 in the online appendix shows there is no interaction effect between age cohort and education. Table D4 shows a similar result using five-year age groups. This suggests a ceiling effect; the pre-1990s education system had sufficiently imprinted implicit trust; there is not much the patriotic education campaign can add on this front. The result also helps explain the nearly uniform implicit trust of respondents regardless of their explicit trust.

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