

Broadening the Scope of Trust: How Different Radii of Trust Influence Political Conflict in China

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This study examines the relationship between different radii of trust and political conflict in China. By analyzing the China Family Panel Studies survey (2012-2018) with lagged trust measures, we employ instrumental variable and causal mediation approaches to find that the effects of social trust on political conflict vary with the radius of trust, mediated by experiences of unfair political treatment. Individuals with high levels of specific and generalized trust were less likely to encounter unfair political treatment and therefore less likely to experience conflict with officials. In contrast, those with higher levels of trust in Americans were more likely to experience unfair political treatment, which increased their likelihood of political conflict. Our findings suggest that the conventional notions of the radius of trust need to be expanded to incorporate distinctions between trust in fellow nationals and trust in non-nationals. By examining how the scope of generalized trust can be broadened through an understanding of Chinese traditional culture, our study offers insights into how a radius-sensitive understanding of trust shapes political conflict propensity in China.

Keywords: Social trust; trust radius; political conflict; unfair political treatment; social trust in China

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Introduction

The literature on contentious politics in China has extensively documented the Chinese leadership's preoccupation with maintaining stability (Benney 2016; D. L. Yang 2017; Y. Cai 2008; Lorentzen 2017; Chen 2013; He and Wang 2016; Hwang 2022). This body of research has also identified various sources of sociopolitical conflict that threaten this stability, such as land expropriation and compensation issues (Sha 2023; Hwang 2019; Paik and Lee 2012; D. Zhao 2001; M. Cai 2016), economic restructuring and associated grievances (Giles, Park, and Cai 2006; Lee and Zhang 2013; Chan 2023; Zhuang and Chen 2015; Su and He 2010; Lee 2007), and social welfare concerns (Hurst and O'Brien 2002; Frazier 2004; Wallace 2014; Hwang 2019; 2022). Because stability maintenance (*weiwen*) has been the most prioritized political task for the Chinese Communist Party ever since the Tiananmen Crisis (D. L. Yang 2017), identifying and addressing potential sources of conflict is critical for regime survival.

While the literature has identified various sources of sociopolitical conflict in China, recent studies have focused on the crucial role of social trust in fostering political compliance and maintaining social stability, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These studies have highlighted the importance of trust in institutions as well as social trust and partnership as critical components for civic compliance with regulatory policies (Badman et al. 2022; Bargain and Aminjonov 2020; Blair, Morse, and Tsai 2017; Clark et al. 2020; Ezeibe et al. 2020; Henderson et al. 2020; Lalot et al. 2022; Nivette et al. 2021; Pak, McBryde, and Adegboye 2021). Goldstein and Wiedemann (2022) suggest that people who demonstrate widespread trust in others may be more willing to sacrifice their personal benefit to public interest and well-being, leading to higher compliance with COVID-19 policies that mandated social distancing and limited person-to-person contact.

The relationship between social trust and political compliance is not limited to the pandemic context. Previous studies have consistently found that trusting citizens tended to display greater willingness to concede to government policies (Tyler 1990; Levi and Stoker 2000; Murphy 2004; Levi 2008). Scholz and Lubell (1998) argue that high levels of social trust may enable citizens to act in reciprocity to comply with the law, while Brehm and Rahn (1997) suggest that social trust can ease acceptance of government decisions. Given the established link between social trust and civic compliance, it is plausible that increased social trust may also have a negative

effect on political conflict. Social trust can encourage deference for political authorities (Brehm and Rahn 1997), which may positively affect government effectiveness, performance, and legitimacy (Marien and Hooghe 2011). These factors, in turn, may contribute to a reduction in political conflict.

Despite the growing interest in the relationship between social trust and political conflict, few studies have examined the differential impact of radius-sensitive measures of trust on political conflict in authoritarian regimes. As Fukuyama (2001) notes, social capital has a certain radius of trust: a narrow radius of trust extends only to immediate family or close circle of personal friends, while a wider radius may extend beyond the group itself. Social trust in China presents an intriguing case in this context. Despite having one of the highest levels of generalized social trust worldwide, mainland China has often been considered as an outlier and excluded from studies on social trust (Inglehart 1999; Uslaner 2001; Kenneth Newton 2001; Delhey and Newton 2005). These high levels of generalized social trust challenge conventional expectations that Chinese society would develop a narrow radii of trust, which may lead to a number of political dysfunctions (Fukuyama 2001).

What is the differential impact of trust radius on the likelihood of political conflict in China? Are individuals more or less likely to engage in conflict with the government depending on the width of their trust radius? This paper provides a detailed analysis on the impact of trust on political conflict by focusing on how radius-sensitive trust differentially affects the likelihood of political conflict in China. We argue that the relationship between disparate trust radii and political conflict is mediated by experiences of unfair political treatment. Individuals with a narrower radius of trust may be more strongly influenced by traditional Chinese cultural values that emphasize deference to political authority. This, in turn, may affect their likelihood of experiencing unfair political treatment and consequently, their propensity to engage in political conflict.

By analyzing four waves of China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) survey data from 2012 to 2018, we find that individuals with a wider trust radius are more likely to experience unfair political treatment and engage in political conflict. Our analysis reveals that individuals with high levels of specific and generalized trust were less likely to encounter unfair political treatment, which in turn reduced their likelihood of engaging in conflict with government officials. In contrast, those with higher levels of trust in Americans were more prone to experiencing unfair political treatment, thus increasing their probability of engaging in political conflict with authorities. These findings suggest that the traditional conceptualization of trust radius,

which currently distinguishes between general and specific forms, should be further expanded to incorporate differences in trust toward fellow nationals versus non-nationals. Our research illuminates how the scope of generalized trust can be broadened by considering traditional Chinese culture and political values, providing a more nuanced understanding of how different interpretations of trust may influence individual's propensity for political conflict in China.

The following section presents a theoretical discussion of the radius of trust in China and its impact on political conflict, drawing on previous scholarship in this area. We then introduce hypotheses that explore the mechanisms by which different radii of trust may influence individuals' likelihood of encountering or recognizing experiences of unfair political treatment, which subsequently affects their propensity to engage in political conflict. The remaining sections test these proposed hypotheses using CFPS survey data and conclude the paper by discussing the implications of our findings.

Theoretical Discussions

The Radius of Trust

Existing studies on trust identify two basic attributes: level of trust and radius of trust (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011a; Hu 2017). While the level of trust refers to the intensity of trust in individuals, the radius of trust refers to how wide a person's circle of trusted people is (Hu 2017; Fukuyama 2001). Our study primarily focuses on the radius of trust, which is typically conceptualized along a spectrum from narrow to wide. This spectrum generally encompasses two main forms of trust in others: specific trust and generalized trust (Freitag and Traunmüller 2009; Glanville and Paxton 2007; Sztompka 1999; Welch 2004; Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011b). Specific trust, representing a narrower radius, refers to trust toward a narrow circle of familiar others (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011b) and is usually based on knowledge of and close contact with others (Ken Newton and Zmerli 2011). In contrast, generalized trust, also referred to as thin or diffuse trust, indicates a wider radius and is directed toward a wider circle of unfamiliar others (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011b). Generalized trust serves as the foundation for reciprocity, peaceful collective action, and tolerance (Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Inglehart 1999; Putnam 2000; Uslaner 2002). In essence,

generalized trust is the belief that most people can be trusted, even if you do not know them personally or they differ from you socially (Uslaner 2001).

Drawing on the concepts of specific and generalized trust, Fukuyama (2001) contends that Chinese society is characterized by a narrow radius of trust and a pervasive distrust in strangers. China is characterized as a strongly familistic society that lacks broader social trust outside the family, which may actively breed distrust, intolerance, or even hatred and violence toward outsiders (Fukuyama 2001). Delhey, Newton, and Welzel (2011) support this view, finding that the radius of trust was substantially narrower in Confucian countries, with the width of the radius connoting in-group rather than out-group in China. Other studies further reinforce the association between specific trust and Chinese society. As Chinese people live in a tightly knit network of Confucian social relations where one's inner circle of family and friends is clearly differentiated from strangers (Tang 2005), the referent group for social trust that people rely on may be limited to acquainted persons (Steinhardt 2012). The concept of *guanxi*, the Chinese term for personal connections and relationships, and its benefits for conducting business have further contributed to the perception of low levels of generalized trust in China (Davies 1995; Davies et al. 1995b; Wong and Chan 1999).

Studies have also attributed a narrower radius of trust in China to the cultures of collectivism and individualism. Because collectivism emphasizes group membership and individuals' loyalty to their groups, followed by in-group favoritism, people generally find collectivism to be more discriminatory and therefore associated with narrower trust radius (Van Hoorn 2015; Gheorghiu, Vignoles, and Smith 2009). Realo and Allik (2009) demonstrated that countries with a higher level of social capital were more individualistic, emphasizing the importance of independence, personal accomplishments, and freedom to choose one's own goals; social capital was found to increase as the radius of trust widens to include a larger number of people and social networks. Societies where trust is limited to the nuclear family or kinship alone were associated with lower levels of social capital (Realo, Allik, and Greenfield 2008). Yamagishi and Yamagishi (1994) found American respondents to be more trusting of other people in general than Japanese respondents, which may be due to the difference between individualistic and collectivist cultures. However, individualism-collectivism orientation and trust can vary depending on cultural contexts. Lim, Im, and Lee (2021) found that, contrary to previous findings, collectivism is associated with a wider trust radius while individualism is associated with a narrower radius.

Given the varied findings on how individualism-collectivism orientation influences trust radius, researchers have sought to develop more precise tools for measuring trust across various social groups. To better understand the radius of generalized trust and distinguish between in-group and out-group trust, surveys have increasingly incorporated a battery of questions asking respondents whether they trust people from “this group” completely, somewhat, not very much, or not at all. “This group” includes categories such as family, neighborhood, people you know personally, people you meet for the first time, people of another religion, and people from another nationality. The first three groups measure particular social trust or in-group trust, whereas the latter three assess out-group trust—generalized trust in unspecified and possibly different others (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011b; Ken Newton and Zmerli 2011).

While these survey methods have provided valuable insights, recent scholarship has aimed to develop more nuanced and contextualized measures of trust radius. For example, Van Hoorn (2014) employed hierarchical linear modeling to explore how personal trust behaviors interact with societal-level cultural norms, highlighting the nested structure of trust. Conceptualizing trust radius as a gradient in the level of trust in specific individuals across social ties of differing strengths, Hu (2017) provided a multidimensional approach that measures trust radius at the individual level by applying multilevel regressions to questions on trust in various in-groups and out-groups. Building on this, Lim, Im, and Lee (2021) further refined individual-level trust radius measurement by focusing on how trust extends within various social circles, employing a network-based approach that measures trust radius by analyzing survey responses on trust levels toward different social circles such as family, friends, colleagues, and broader society.

Despite such recent advancements in the understanding and measurement of trust radius, cross-national studies often characterize China as having a uniformly narrow radius of trust (high levels of specific trust), overlooking potential variations within the country itself. We believe that existing literature on the radius of trust, which primarily focuses on the dichotomy between specific and generalized trust, or in-group versus out-group trust, can be further refined to capture more nuanced variations within the concept of generalized trust itself. In other words, how do different radii of trust, particularly within the realm of generalized trust, influence political behavior in China? In order to fully understand the relationship between trust and political conflict in China, it is crucial to consider how variations in the radius of trust *within* the concept of generalized trust may influence

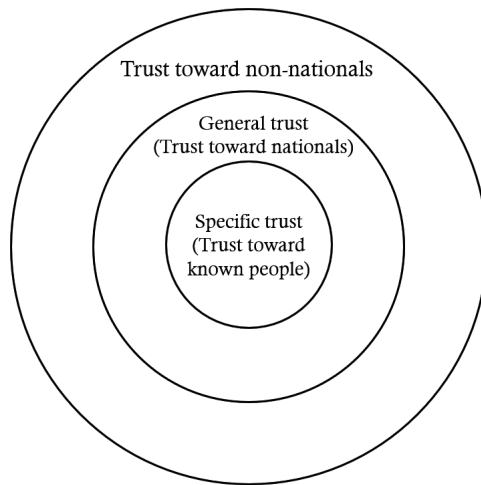


FIG. 1.—WIDENING RADIUS OF TRUST

individuals' propensity to engage in political conflict. In this paper, we argue that a radius-sensitive understanding of trust is necessary to capture the nuances of this relationship.

Existing studies that focus on general versus specific trust tend to overlook the different radii of trust that may exist within generalized trust. Recent research on social trust also suggests that we should be skeptical about whether the trust measures actually measure trust in a generalized other (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011b; Freitag and Bauer 2013; Gundelach 2014; Sturgis and Smith 2010; Torpe and Lolle 2011). Moving beyond the stranger versus non-stranger referent of general and specific trust, the scope of "unspecified and possibly different others" in generalized trust may further connote different groups of people. For example, Binning (2007) found that when asked about general social trust, respondents often thought of their fellow nationals as the referent group. This suggests that generalized trust may reflect trust in "people like us" rather than people around the world (Wals et al. 2015). Furthermore, Wals et al. (2015) find a weak correlation between trust in foreigners and generalized trust, indicating that the two constructs capture different concepts. Accordingly, the concept of social trust has begun to expand to another form of broad trust, manifesting as trust among different countries, including individuals' trust in foreign

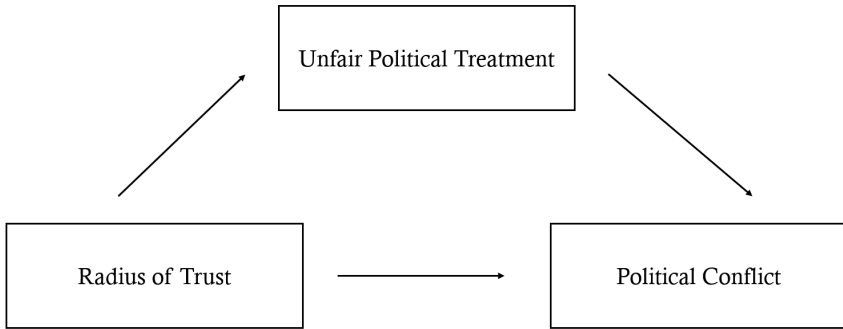


FIG. 2.—THEORETICAL DIAGRAM

governments and foreigners (Brewer et al. 2004).

Based on this discussion, we expect that the political impact of trust will vary not only between individuals with high levels of general, interpersonal trust and those with high levels of specific trust, but also among those who rely on different referent groups within the concept of generalized trust. Specifically, we argue that general interpersonal trust should be further differentiated between trust in nationals and trust in non-nationals, as these distinctions can lead to disparate political consequences. In short, we propose that the radius of trust in China widens in the following order: specific trust (trust toward known persons), generalized trust (trust toward nationals), and trust toward foreigners (Figure 1).

Figure 2 is a diagrammatic representation of our theoretical mechanism. Based on the influence of traditional Chinese political culture, this study hypothesizes that different radii of trust, mediated by experiences of unfair political treatment, will explain the likelihood of political conflict with government officials. In the following sections, we theorize how different radii of trust may be associated with varying degrees of influence of Confucian culture, which in turn will shape attitudes toward unfair political treatment and political conflict.

The Culture of Confucianism and Political Conflict

Numerous studies have explored the legacies of Chinese culture on people's attitudes toward government (Shi 2001; Zhai 2018; 2016; 2017). Despite the influence of Taoism, Zen Buddhism, or Legalism, Confucianism has been considered to be the core of Chinese culture that penetrates all levels of social

life and provides a model of civic behavior (Fetzer and Soper 2010; X. Yao 2001; Nathan 1986; Zhai 2017). Traditional Chinese culture can shape people's political attitudes by affecting their orientation toward power and authority, as one of the core tenets of Confucianism is a hierarchical relationship between the state and individuals rather than a reciprocal one (Shi 2001). Because Confucian traditions emphasize hierarchical and deferential social authority relations (Dalton and Ong 2005), Chinese traditional culture has often been considered to sustain non-democratic systems (Inglehart and Baker 2000; Ackerly 2005; K. Xu 2006; Zhai 2018). Shi (2001) argues that Chinese culture also affects people's orientation toward conflict: in contrast to the West, the ideal of social control in China relies on self-discipline, leading the Chinese to prefer non-confrontational approaches to conflict resolution and a willingness to sacrifice their own interests for the harmony of society as a whole. Traditional family values stress respect for authority in family and school, while in the political sphere, they prioritize paternalism, unconditional support, and political harmony (Zhai 2018; 2017). Therefore, when the government fails to respond to demands, people who are influenced by such culture may forgo their private interests for the sake of societal harmony rather than withdraw their support from the government (Shi 2001). Due to the importance of conformity, hierarchical relationships, harmony and group primacy (Chiao 1989; Michael H Bond and King 1985; M.H. Bond and Wang 1981; Fairbank 1966; Zhai 2017), Chinese people are characterized by a relatively ready acceptance of an unresponsive political system and meek submission to authority (Chu 2001). Zhai (2017) further contends that deferential people tend to accept all unfair treatment voluntarily and view themselves as politically incompetent and ignorant, which are indicative of the influence of traditional Chinese culture.

Based on findings that associate Chinese society with a narrow radius of trust due to the legacies of Confucianism that emphasize familism and personal relationships (Fukuyama 2001; Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011b; Steinhardt 2012), we believe that individuals with high levels of specific trust in China are more likely to be influenced by Confucian values compared to those with a wider trust radius. Consequently, we expect that individuals with high levels of specific trust will be more inclined to submit to authority and accept unfair treatment, thereby reducing their likelihood of experiencing or recognizing unfair treatment from the government. Furthermore, we also anticipate that such low levels of unfair treatment experiences will lead to lower probability of experiencing direct conflict with government officials.

Hypothesis 1-1: Individuals with high levels of specific trust are less likely to experience unfair treatment by the government.

Hypothesis 1-2: Individuals with high levels of specific trust are less likely to engage in conflict with government officials.

If people interpret the widely used generalized trust question (“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?”) as referring to their fellow nationals, generalized trust may actually indicate a narrower radius of trust than that toward foreigners. Distinguishing between general social trust and trust in foreigners, Wals et al. (2015) find that the latter is more critical than generalized trust in understanding attitudes on international policy. Research on China also suggest that “most people” should be interpreted as falling somewhere between specific and generalized trust (Li and Liang 2002). Thus, the understanding of generalized trust in China may refer to out-group individuals who are fellow Chinese, implying that individuals with high generalized trust are also likely to hold Confucian values. In contrast, those who trust out-group individuals who are not Chinese may be less influenced by Confucian traditions. The degree of influence from Confucian traditions may, in turn, shape individual political behavior. We therefore hypothesize that the relationship between generalized trust, experience of unfair treatment by government, and experience of conflict with government officials will be similar to that of specific trust.

Hypothesis 2-1: Individuals with high levels of generalized trust are less likely to experience unfair treatment by the government.

Hypothesis 2-2: Individuals with high levels of generalized trust are less likely to engage in conflict with government officials.

If the Chinese interpret “most people” in the generalized trust question as referring to their fellow nationals, we believe that individual trust toward foreigners will reflect a wider trust radius than generalized social trust in China. Yu et al. (2021) found that while Chinese interviewees were generally very distrustful of Americans, those who reported higher trust in Americans tended to be younger, male, more educated, and of higher socioeconomic status. The positive relationship between education, socioeconomic status and trust in Americans could be explained by the desire to have more cultural capital than less-educated persons (Shen and Zhou 2017), or by increased economic income and social status leading to increased access to

foreigners (Pieke 2012; Bruni 2013). This increased access to foreigners and the growing influence of Western culture following modernization may reduce the influence of Confucian culture and increase exposure to liberal democratic values (Zhai 2018).

Zhai (2018) found that liberal democratic values negatively impact trust in government officials in China, as these values are often associated with higher expectations of politics and more critical assessments of political practices. Liberal democratic values promote the emergence of less deferential and more elite-challenging publics in modern societies (Inglehart and Welzel 2005), potentially leading citizens to be more likely to challenge authority and engage in civic protests (Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Moreover, exposure to foreign culture in China has been found to increase discontent with the current level of civil liberties and political rights (Zhai 2016). Higher trust in foreigners—particularly those from liberal democracies—may imply a greater exposure to, or openness to, liberal democratic values, in which case Confucian political culture may have less influence.

Drawing from this discussion, we expect that individuals who have higher trust in foreigners may be less deferential and more elite-challenging, making them more likely to experience or recognize unfair treatment by government officials. Consequently, they will also be more likely to experience conflict with government officials.

Hypothesis 3-1: Individuals with high levels of trust toward foreigners are more likely to experience unfair treatment by the government.

Hypothesis 3-2: Individuals with high levels of trust toward foreigners are more likely to engage in conflict with government officials.

We test our hypotheses by examining individual experiences of conflict with government officials, using four waves of the China Family Panel Studies data. Section 3 provides a description of our data and main variables.

Data and Measures

Data

This study uses four waves of the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) survey data from 2012 to 2018 to examine the effects of different radii of social trust

on political compliance. CFPS is a nationally representative, biennial longitudinal survey of Chinese communities, families, and individuals (H. Xu and Xie 2013). CFPS conducted its baseline survey in 2010, covering approximately 16,000 households in 25 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions, representing 95% of the Chinese population (Xie 2012). Collected biennially, the CFPS data provides a wide range of topics from socioeconomic activities to health outcomes. We employ one-period lagged independent variables for our trust measures, which we create using data from all four waves. Due to the use of lagged independent variables, the observations used in our analytical sample are restricted to the years 2014 and 2016.¹ The number of observations in our final analytical sample was 45,769.

Dependent Variable

First, the outcome of interest in this study is political conflict at the individual level. The measure of political conflict was based on a question in the CFPS survey, which has also been used in other studies on the sources and effects of political conflict in China (Sha 2023; X. Zhao and Xie 2022; Zhang and Quick 2024; Y. Yao et al. 2022): “In the past year, have you experienced conflict with government officials?” Based on this question, political conflict was constructed dichotomously wherein “1” denotes that the individual had experienced conflict with local officials, and “0” if otherwise.

Second, experience of unfair political treatment may mediate the relationship between social trust and political conflict. We constructed the measure of unfair political treatment based on the question, “In the past year, did you experience unfair treatment by government officials?” Response categories were binary, coded as no (0) and yes (1).

Independent Variables

In order to examine the effects of different radii of social trust on unfair political treatment and political conflict, we measure for specific trust, generalized trust, and trust toward non-nationals. While recent research has made significant strides in developing more sophisticated methods to

¹ Outcomes for year 2014 are predicted by lagged variables in 2012, and 2016 outcomes by 2014 lagged variables. The 2012 wave contributes only to creating lagged predictors, while the 2018 wave cannot be used as an outcome year due to the lack of subsequent data for lagged predictors.

measure trust radius (Van Hoorn 2015; Lim, Im, and Lee 2021; Hu 2017), our approach differs in both method and objective. Previous studies have focused on measuring trust radius along a narrow-wide spectrum, creating fine-grained, continuous measures of how far each person's trust extends across different social groups. These studies employ sophisticated analytical techniques to assess how trust varies across different relational distances in society, producing a more fluid and gradient-based understanding of trust radius.

In contrast, our study aims to investigate how trust in specific, pre-defined groups affects individual political behavior in China. Rather than utilizing a continuous measure of trust radius, we rely on survey questions from our dataset that directly capture respondents' trust levels toward three distinct groups: neighbors (representing specific trust), other people in general (representing generalized trust), and Americans (representing trust in non-nationals). By focusing on these three discrete categories, we aim to explore not only the traditional dichotomy between specific and generalized trust, but also examine nuances within the concept of generalized trust by introducing the dimension of trust in non-nationals.

First, trust toward neighbors represents the traditional concept of specific trust, and was constructed based on the question, "On a scale of 0 to 10, how much do you trust your neighbors?" We use neighborhood trust not only because it is designed to tap into in-group trust involving known others with whom respondents have close ties (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011b; Ken Newton and Zmerli 2011), but also because trust in one's neighbors, along with generalized trust, is commonly regarded as part of the social glue that holds communities together through producing positive externalities (Uslaner 2012).

Generalized trust is based on the question that is phrased similarly to the question in the World Values Survey: "In general, do you think that most people are trustworthy, or do you think we must be more careful when getting along with others?" The social trust variable is constructed as binary: 0 for "we must be very careful" and 1 for "most people can be trusted." This measure is often referred to as generalized trust, in contrast to particularized trust in which individuals have faith only in their in-group (Barone and Mocetti 2016). This generalized trust question has been used as a reasonably reliable survey instrument for measuring trust; studies find that when tested across 51 countries, respondents imagine a wider circle of people when answering the question (Delhey, Newton, and Welzel 2011b).

Lastly, trust in Americans represents a wider radius than generalized

trust, which extends beyond national boundaries to include foreign nationals. We use trust in Americans to measure for trust toward foreigners, based on the question “On a scale of 0 to 10, how much do you trust Americans?” Trust in Americans is the only survey item that taps into trust toward foreigners. Both specific trust and trust toward Americans were constructed ordinarily in which higher values denote higher trust.

Control Variables

To adjust for potential confounding variables, various individual-level control variables were included in the study. In order to control for the effects of political trust on social trust (Tao et al. 2014; Daskalopoulou 2019), we controlled for individual trust in political institutions (ranging from 0 for “very untrustworthy” to 10 for “very trustworthy”), measured by the question “How much do you trust local cadres?” Gender (0 = women, 1 = men), age, and marital status (0 = not married, divorced, widowed; 1 = married) were controlled for because women may be less trusting than men and the young less trusting than the old (Kenneth Newton 1999; Whiteley 1999). Unmarried men and women may also be associated with lower trust (Dickson et al. 2016; G. Yang and Zeng 2016; Yu et al. 2021). Household registration (labeled as “*hukou*”) was constructed dichotomously to differentiate between rural hukou (0) and urban hukou (1), as levels of trust and trustworthiness may differ depending on local or non-local household registered population (Luo and Wang 2020). We further included residence in urban areas, membership to the Chinese Communist Party, level of education (range of 0 = no education through 5 = post-graduate studies) (Uslaner 2008), employment status (0 = unemployed, 1 = employed), and logged family income for their potential effects on social trust (Dickson et al. 2016; G. Yang and Zeng 2016; Yu et al. 2021).

(1) Model Specifications and the Instrumental Variable

In order to examine the relationship between different radii of trust, unfair political treatment, and political conflict, we employ a causal mediation analysis framework (Imai, Keele, and Tingley 2010). This approach allows us to estimate both the direct and indirect effects of trust on political conflict, mediated through unfair political treatment, while addressing potential endogeneity concerns. We also employ multilevel linear probability models for a more straightforward interpretation of coefficients and direct comparison across different model specifications (Breen, Karlson, and Holm

2018).

We begin with a baseline multilevel model to estimate the direct effects of trust on political conflict:

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_{i,t} + \beta_2 X_{i,t} + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \gamma_p + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

where $Y_{i,t}$ is the binary outcome (experience of political conflict with government officials) for individual i at time t , $T_{i,t}$ is the trust variable (trust in neighbors, generalized trust, trust in Americans), $X_{i,t}$ is a vector of control variables, α_i are individual random effects, δ_t are year fixed effects, and γ_p are province fixed effects.

To address potential endogeneity of the experience of political conflict affecting trust levels, we also introduced lagged trust variables, following the approach of Granger (1969). A widely accepted method in econometric analysis for establishing causal relationships (Wooldridge 2010; Stock and Watson 2018), lagged trust variables are utilized to ensure that trust measures temporally precede our outcome of interest and further mitigate concerns of simultaneity bias. Our multilevel linear probability model using lagged trust variables is as follows:

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_{i,t-1} + \beta_2 X_{i,t} + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \gamma_p + \epsilon_{i,t}$$

where $T_{i,t-1}$ denotes the lagged trust variables from the previous period. Our main analysis employs the causal mediation framework to estimate the average causal mediation effect (ACME) and average direct effect (ADE) of different types of trust on political conflict (Imai et al. 2011). The model can be represented as:

$$M_{i,t} = \alpha_0 + aT_{i,t-1} + bX_{i,t} + \epsilon_{i,t}^1$$

$$Y_{i,t} = \alpha_2 + cT_{i,t-1} + d\hat{M}_{i,t} + eX_{i,t} + \epsilon_{i,t}^2$$

where $T_{i,t-1}$ is the lagged trust variable, $\hat{M}_{i,t}$ is the instrumented mediator (experience of unfair political treatment) and $Y_{i,t}$ is experience of political conflict. To address potential endogeneity in our mediator (experience of unfair political treatment), we employ a two-stage least squares (2SLS) approach. We use local government fiscal capacity as an instrument for experience of unfair political treatment. The first and second stages of this 2SLS process can be represented as:

First stage: $M_{i,t} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 Z_{p,t} + \gamma_2 T_{i,t-1} + \gamma_3 X_{i,t} + v_{i,t}$

Second stage: $Y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \hat{M}_{i,t} + \beta_2 T_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 X_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t}$

where $M_{i,t}$ is the mediator (experience of unfair treatment), $Z_{p,t}$ is the instrumental variable (local government fiscal capacity at the province-level), and $\hat{M}_{i,t}$ is the predicted value of the mediator from the first stage.

Instrumental Variable

Our main instrumental variable is local government fiscal capacity, measured by the ratio of budget expenditure to revenue (Lorentzen, Landry, and Yasuda 2014), based on data drawn from statistical yearbooks of 31 provinces in China. Our choice of local government fiscal capacity as an instrument for experiences of unfair treatment is based on previous studies that have demonstrated the relationship between fiscal resources, governance quality, and citizens' experiences or perceptions of government fairness (Rotberg 2004; Besley and Persson 2010; Acemoglu, García-Jimeno, and Robinson 2015; Mattingly 2016; O'Brien and Li 2006). In the Chinese context specifically, fiscal constraints have been linked to practices that citizens often perceive as unfair, such as arbitrary fees and land seizures (O'Brien and Li 2006). Moreover, local governments with greater fiscal capacity have been found to be more likely to successfully implement policies and respond to citizen demands (Mattingly 2016), which may potentially reduce experiences of unfair treatment. Based on this discussion, we expect that respondents living in provinces with higher fiscal capacity will have lower experiences of unfair treatment by local cadres.

Valid instrumental variables need to meet two assumptions: first, they should be exogenous to the dependent variable, affecting the outcome only through their effect on the independent variable; and second, they must be significantly correlated with the endogenous variable after accounting for other exogenous factors (Tao et al. 2014). We argue that local government fiscal capacity meets the exogeneity assumption as it is unlikely to directly affect individual propensity for conflict with officials, except through its impact on governance quality and fairness. Local governments' fiscal capacity is measured at the province level, while our outcome of interest—experience of political conflict—is observed at the individual level. The aggregate nature of fiscal capacity data makes it less likely to directly influence individual experiences of political conflict. Moreover, fiscal capacity at the province-level is largely determined by factors external to individual-level characters or

behaviors, such as broader economic conditions and central government policies. We believe that this province-level aggregation, combined with its exogenous determinants, supports the exclusion restriction condition (Angrist, Imbens, and Rubin 1996).

Furthermore, as can be seen in Table 4a, the strength of our instrument is demonstrated by the F-statistic of 75.90 in the first-stage regression, lending support to the second assumption. This value far exceeds the conventional benchmarks (Staiger and Stock 1997; Stock and Yogo 2005), indicating that our instrument is strong and relevant.

The instrumental variable approach specifically helps address potential endogeneity concerns in our study of trust, unfair political treatment, and political conflict by providing an exogenous source of variation in experiences of unfair treatment. By using province-level fiscal capacity as an instrument, we aim to isolate the effect of unfair treatment on political conflict, which is critical for understanding how different radii of trust influence conflict propensity through this mediating factor.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the main variables for our analysis, with a total sample of 45,769 observations. The average of political conflict is 0.042, indicating that the individuals in our sample have predominantly not experienced conflict. Similarly, the vast majority of people have not encountered unfair political treatment from government officials. The average of specific trust, measured as trust in neighbors on a scale from 0 to 10, is 6.609, suggesting that on average, individuals have higher trust in neighbors. The average level of generalized trust is also high at 0.552, indicating that the majority of people agree with the statement that most people are trustworthy. However, despite the relatively high average of generalized trust, trust in Americans is low, with an average of 2.196 on a scale from 0 to 10. This implies that the vast majority of people report low levels of trust in Americans. The difference between high generalized trust and low trust in Americans suggests that “most people” may connote a distinction between fellow Chinese and foreigners. If generalized trust indicates trust in most people who are nationals, the radius of trust would be narrower compared to trust in Americans.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY STATISTICS OF VARIABLES

Key variables	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
Political conflict	45,769	0.042	0.200	0	1
Unfair political treatment	45,769	0.112	0.316	0	1
Specific trust (trust in neighbors)	45,769	6.609	2.165	0	10
Generalized trust	45,769	0.552	0.497	0	1
Trust in Americans	45,769	2.196	2.434	0	10
Political trust	45,769	4.964	2.630	0	10
Gender	45,769	0.495	0.500	0	1
Age	45,769	47.580	15.811	18	98
<i>Hukou</i>	45,769	0.291	0.454	0	1
Education	45,769	1.570	1.252	0	4
Marital status	45,769	0.831	0.375	0	1
CCP membership	45,769	0.086	0.280	0	1
Employment status	45,769	0.728	0.445	0	1
Family income (log)	45,769	10.627	1.127	1.609	16.248
Urban residence	45,769	0.492	0.500	0	1

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of cross-tabulation between different radii of trust and political conflict. Table 2a shows that among those who have experienced conflict with authorities, 73.3% have also experienced unfair political treatment. In contrast, among those who have not experienced political conflict, only 8.5% have experienced unfair political treatment. This lends support to our expectation that experiences of unfair political treatment and political conflict are closely related: those who encounter unfair political treatment from government officials may be more likely to also recognize or experience political conflict. The latter three subtables (Table 2b, 2c, and 2d) display the descriptive relationship between varying trust radii and political conflict.

Table 2b categorizes specific trust, ranging from 0 to 10, into four quartiles based on the distribution. Individuals with the second-lowest 25% of scores (Q2) for specific trust constitute the largest portion (41.2%) of those who have experienced political conflict, while those with the highest 25% of specific trust scores (Q4) make up the smallest proportion (14.6%). This

TABLE 2
CROSS-TABULATION OF INDEPENDENT VARIABLES AND POLITICAL CONFLICT
(SAMPLE SIZE = 45,769)

		(a) Unfair political treatment		(b) Specific trust (trust in neighbors)				(c) Generalized trust		(d) Trust in Americans			
		No	Yes	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	No	Yes	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Political	No	91.5%	8.5%	9.9%	37.7%	34.5%	17.9%	44.3%	55.7%	38.5%	23.7%	13.7%	24.1%
Conflict	Yes	26.7%	73.3%	17.6%	41.2%	26.6%	14.6%	57.1%	42.9%	43.7%	23.8%	11.8%	20.7%

Note: Q1-Q4 refer to the quartile ranges of specific trust and trust in Americans based on their distribution: Q1 (1st quartile), Q2 (2nd quartile), Q3 (3rd quartile), Q4 (4th quartile)

Specific trust: Q1(0-4), Q2(5-6), Q3(7-8), Q4(9-10). Trust in Americans: Q1(0), Q2(1-2), Q3(3-4), Q4(5-10)

implies that individuals with higher specific trust scores are less associated with the experiences of political conflict compared to those with lower specific trust scores. Subtable 2c also demonstrates a lower proportion of people with high generalized trust among those who have experienced political conflict: 57.1% reported a lack of generalized trust, while 42.9% reported having generalized trust. This lends support to our expectation that high levels of trust with a narrower radius—in this case, specific trust and generalized trust—are be associated with a lower propensity for political conflict. According to Table 2d, among those who experienced political conflict, 43.7% reported the lowest 25% of trust scores in Americans (Q1), while 20.7% reported the highest 25% of trust scores in foreigners (Q4). Although this may not seem to lend support to our expectation that trust in Americans is associated with a higher likelihood of political conflict, this may be due to the heavily skewed distribution of scores on trust in Americans. Approximately 60% of our sample reported trust levels lower than 2, which may distort statistical summaries and make it difficult to observe the relationship between trust in Americans and political conflict descriptively. To address this issue and test our hypotheses more rigorously, we turn to a series of logistic regressions and mediation analyses in the next section.

Multivariate Results

Multilevel linear probability models

Table 3 presents the direct effects of trust radii on political conflict. Models 1-9 show multilevel linear probability model results with non-lagged trust variables, while Models 10-18 show the results with lagged trust variables. Models 1-3 test how specific trust, measured by trust in neighbors, affects political conflict. In our baseline model (Model 1), specific trust has a negative and significant effect on political conflict. This shows that individuals with higher levels of specific trust are less likely to experience political conflict with government officials. Model 2 introduces individual-level control variables, and Model 3 includes province and year fixed effects. The negative effect of specific trust in the probability of political conflict remains significant when including individual-level controls and province, year-fixed effects. According to the full model for specific trust on political conflict (Model 3), a one-unit increase in specific trust decreases the probability of conflict experience by 0.2 percentage points. Moreover, the probability of engaging in conflict with government officials increases for older, male, married, and employed individuals but decreases for those with higher political trust, higher education, and urban household registration. The consistent negative relationship between specific trust and political conflict persists in our lagged models (Models 10-12) as well. According to Model 12, a one-unit increase in lagged specific trust decreases conflict probability by 0.1 percentage points. These findings suggest that individuals with higher levels of specific trust are less likely to experience conflict with local officials.

Models 4-6 display the regression estimates of the effect of generalized trust on the likelihood of political conflict. The results show that generalized trust has the strongest negative association with political conflict among all trust measures. This lends support to our hypothesis that individuals with higher levels of generalized trust, similar to those with high levels of specific trust, may be more influenced by Confucian traditional political culture. This culture emphasizes deference to authority and prioritizes social harmony over private interests, leading to a lower likelihood of experiencing political conflict. According to the fully specified non-lagged model for generalized trust (Model 6), a having generalized trust (versus no trust) decreases the probability of experiencing conflict by 1.0 percentage points. This effect remains robust in our lagged models (Models 13-15): the fully specified

	Lagged IV								
	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)
Specific trust (trust in neighbors)	-0.003*** (0.000)	-0.002** (0.000)	-0.001* (0.000)						
Generalized trust				-0.013*** (0.002)	-0.009*** (0.002)	-0.009*** (0.002)			
Trust in Americans							-0.001* (0.000)	0.001 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Political trust		-0.009*** (0.000)	-0.009*** (0.000)		-0.009*** (0.000)	-0.009*** (0.000)		-0.010*** (0.000)	-0.010*** (0.000)
Gender		0.022*** (0.002)	0.021*** (0.002)		0.022*** (0.002)	0.021*** (0.002)		0.021*** (0.002)	0.021*** (0.002)
Age		0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)		0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)		0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
<i>Hukou</i>		-0.013*** (0.003)	-0.012*** (0.003)		-0.013*** (0.003)	-0.012*** (0.003)		-0.013*** (0.003)	-0.012*** (0.003)
Education		-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)		-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.004*** (0.001)		-0.006*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)
Marital status		0.008** (0.003)	0.008** (0.003)		0.007** (0.003)	0.007** (0.003)		0.008** (0.003)	0.008** (0.003)
CCP membership		0.004 (0.004)	0.002 (0.004)		0.004 (0.004)	0.002 (0.004)		0.003 (0.004)	0.002 (0.004)
Employment status		0.008*** (0.002)	0.007** (0.002)		0.008*** (0.002)	0.007** (0.002)		0.008*** (0.002)	0.007** (0.002)
Family income (log)		-0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)		-0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)		-0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Urban residence		0.002 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)		0.002 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)		0.002 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
Province FE			YES			YES			YES
Year FE			YES			YES			YES
R ²	0.001	0.023	0.026	0.001	0.023	0.027	0.000	0.023	0.026
N	45769	45769	45769	45769	45769	45769	45769	45769	45769

Robust standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

lagged model (Model 15) also shows that having lagged generalized trust decreases conflict probability by 0.9 percentage points.

Lastly, Models 7-9 demonstrate the direct effects of trust in Americans on the possibility of political conflict. Although the baseline non-lagged model presents a negative and significant effect of trust in Americans on political conflict, the direction of the effect changes when we control of individual-level variables and province and year-fixed effects. In our fully specified non-lagged model (Model 9), higher trust in Americans has a significant and positive effect in the probability of experiencing political conflict. According to Model 9, a one-unit increase in trust in Americans increases the probability of conflict by 0.1 percentage points. This finding seems to support our hypothesis that expected an increase in the likelihood of conflict with a widening radius of trust: individuals with higher levels of trust toward Americans may be more likely to experience political conflict. However, this effect becomes insignificant in our lagged models (Models 16-18). When we account for the temporal ordering of our variables by using lagged trust measures, we find that trust in Americans has no significant impact on the probability of experiencing political conflict. This finding is particularly interesting when contrasted with the results from the non-lagged model, which shows a significant positive relationship. The difference between these results underscores the importance of conducting mediation analysis to clarify possible indirect pathways through which trust may influence political conflict. By examining the mediating role of unfair treatment experiences, we can uncover nuanced mechanisms that link trust to political outcomes, even when direct effects are not apparent.

The 2SLS model

Before discussing the results of our mediation analysis, it is crucial to address the potential endogeneity in our mediator variable, unfair political treatment. To this end, we employed a two-stage least squares (2SLS) approach, using local government fiscal capacity as an instrumental variable for our mediator, unfair treatment from local cadres. Tables 4a and 4b present the results of this analysis.

Table 4a presents the first-stage and second-stage results of our 2SLS model. In the first stage, local government fiscal capacity is a strong and significant predictor of unfair political treatment. The F-statistic for the instrument (75.90) far exceeds the conventional threshold of 10 (Staiger and Stock 1997) as well as critical benchmarks proposed by Stock and Yogo

TABLE 4A
UNFAIR POLITICAL TREATMENT: FIXED EFFECTS PANEL LOGISTIC REGRESSION
MODEL AND FIRST STAGE RESULTS OF 2SLS

	First-stage results of OLS Unfair political treatment (1)	Second-stage results of 2SLS Political conflict (2)
Unfair political treatment		0.421*** (0.070)
Local government fiscal capacity	0.016*** (0.002)	
Political trust	-0.023*** (0.001)	-0.000 (0.002)
Gender	0.032*** (0.003)	0.008** (0.003)
Age	0.001*** (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
<i>Hukou</i>	-0.025*** (0.004)	-0.002 (0.003)
Education	-0.016*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Marital status	0.012** (0.004)	0.001 (0.003)
CCP membership	0.007 (0.005)	-0.000 (0.003)
Employment status	0.029*** (0.004)	-0.004 (0.003)
Family income (log)	-0.007*** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)
Urban residence	0.000 (0.003)	0.003 (0.002)
R^2	0.051	0.105
F-value in Wald test of instrumental variables	75.90	75.90
N	45,769	45,769

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

TABLE 4B
EFFECT OF UNFAIR POLITICAL TREATMENT ON POLITICAL CONFLICT

Political conflict	Single equation logit model	Second-stage results of 2SLS
Unfair political treatment	0.249*** (0.003)	0.421*** (0.070)
Individual control variables	YES	YES

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

(2005), confirming the instrument's strength. In the second stage (Model 2), we find that the instrumented unfair political treatment has a statistically significant and positive effect on political conflict. This suggests that, even after accounting for potential endogeneity, experiences of unfair political treatment significantly increase the likelihood of experiencing political conflict.

Table 4b compares the effect of unfair treatment on political conflict between a single-equation logit model and our 2SLS model. The single-equation model shows a smaller coefficient compared to the 2SLS model, which further highlights the importance of addressing endogeneity in our analysis. The larger coefficient in the 2SLS model suggests that failing to account for endogeneity may lead to an underestimation of the effect of unfair treatment on political conflict. Building on this foundation, we now turn to the discussion of our mediation results using lagged trust variables and instrumented mediator.

Causal mediation analysis

Tables 5 to 7 present the results of our causal mediation analyses using an instrumental variable for the mediator and lagged variables for specific trust, generalized trust, and trust in Americans.

As shown in Table 5, specific trust (trust in neighbors) demonstrates a significant negative indirect effect on political conflict, mediated through unfair political treatment. A one-unit increase in specific trust is associated with a 0.13 percentage point decrease in the probability of experiencing political conflict through its effect on unfair political treatment. The insignificant direct effect of specific trust on political conflict suggests that trust in neighbors does not directly influence conflict with officials when experiences of unfair political treatment are held constant. However, the total

TABLE 5
SPECIFIC TRUST (TRUST IN NEIGHBORS): CAUSAL MEDIATION ANALYSIS WITH LAGGED PREDICTOR AND INSTRUMENTAL VARIABLE APPROACH

	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Specific trust: trust in neighbors (lagged)	-0.0003 (0.0004)	-0.0013*** (0.0002)	-0.0017*** (0.0004)
Unfair political treatment (instrumented)	0.596*** (0.007)		
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Political trust	-0.004*** (0.0003)		
Gender	0.009*** (0.002)		
Age	0.0001 (0.0001)		
<i>Hukou</i>	-0.0054* (0.002)		
Education	-0.002** (0.001)		
Marital status	0.003 (0.002)		
CCP membership	0.002 (0.003)		
Employment status	0.004 (0.002)		
Family income (log)	-0.004 (0.002)		
Urban residence	0.001 (0.002)		
<i>R</i> ²		0.173	
<i>F</i> -statistic		797.97	
<i>N</i>		45,769	

Notes: Coefficients are shown with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Neighbor trust is lagged by one year. Unfair political treatment is instrumented by local government fiscal capacity. Direct, indirect, and total effects are from causal mediation analysis: 78.72% of the total effect is mediated through experiences of unfair treatment.

effect is negative and significant, with a one-unit increase in specific trust associated with a 0.17 percentage point decrease in conflict experience probability, which indicates that the overall relationship between specific trust and political conflict (both direct and indirect effects combined) is meaningful. This implies that trust in neighbors significantly influences political conflict primarily through reducing experiences of unfair treatment. Individuals with higher specific trust (trust in neighbors) are less likely to experience unfair political treatment, which in turn decreases their likelihood of engaging in conflict with government officials. The mediation results show that approximately 78.72% of the total effect of specific trust on political conflict is mediated through experiences of unfair political treatment.

We find that generalized trust significantly reduces political conflict both directly and indirectly through the mediation of unfair political treatment. According to Table 6, having generalized trust (versus no trust) reduces conflict probability by 0.9 percentage points in

total: this consists of a 0.5 percentage point reduction through the direct path, and a 0.4 percentage point reduction through decreased experiences of unfair political treatment.

Approximately 45.84% of this total effect is mediated through experiences of unfair political treatment. The negative and significant direct, indirect, and total effects of generalized trust suggest that generalized trust reduces political conflict both directly and by decreasing experiences of unfair political treatment. Individuals with high levels of generalized trust are not only less likely to experience unfair political treatment, but also less likely to engage in conflict with political officials regardless of unfair treatment experiences. While generalized trust operates partly through influencing experiences of unfair political treatment, it also has a substantial direct impact on reducing political conflict.

Lastly, Table 7 shows the causal mediation analysis results of the effect of trust in Americans on political conflict. The results reveal a more complex relationship: while the total and direct effects are insignificant, we find a positive and significant indirect effect on political conflict through unfair political treatment. Specifically, a one-unit increase in trust in Americans is associated with a 0.04 percentage point increase in conflict probability through increased experiences of unfair political treatment. This indirect effect accounts for approximately 56.03% of the total effect. These results are substantively meaningful given that only 4.2% of our sample experienced political conflict with government officials during the study period. A 0.04 percentage point increase in conflict probability through the indirect path of

TABLE 6
GENERALIZED TRUST: CAUSAL MEDIATION ANALYSIS WITH LAGGED PREDICTOR
AND INSTRUMENTAL VARIABLE APPROACH

	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Generalized trust (lagged)	-0.005*** (0.002)	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.009*** (0.002)
Unfair political treatment (instrumented)	0.596*** (0.007)		
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Political trust	-0.004*** (0.0003)		
Gender	0.009*** (0.002)		
Age	0.0001 (0.0001)		
<i>Hukou</i>	-0.005* (0.002)		
Education	-0.002** (0.001)		
Marital status	0.002 (0.002)		
CCP membership	0.002 (0.003)		
Employment status	0.004 (0.002)		
Family income (log)	-0.0003 (0.001)		
Urban residence	0.001 (0.002)		
R^2	0.173		
F -statistic	798.76		
N	45,769		

Notes: Coefficients are shown with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Generalized trust is lagged by one year. Unfair political treatment is instrumented by local government fiscal capacity. Direct, indirect, and total effects are from causal mediation analysis: 45.84% of the total effect is mediated through experiences of unfair treatment.

TABLE 7
TRUST IN AMERICANS: CAUSAL MEDIATION ANALYSIS WITH LAGGED PREDICTOR
AND INSTRUMENTAL VARIABLE APPROACH

	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Trust in Americans (lagged)	0.0002 (0.0004)	0.0004*** (0.0001)	0.001 (0.0004)
Unfair political treatment (instrumented)	0.596*** (0.007)		
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Political trust	-0.004*** (0.0003)		
Gender	0.009*** (0.002)		
Age	0.0001 (0.0001)		
<i>Hukou</i>	-0.005* (0.002)		
Education	-0.002** (0.001)		
Marital status	0.003 (0.002)		
CCP membership	0.002 (0.003)		
Employment status	0.004 (0.002)		
Family income (log)	-0.0003 (0.001)		
Urban residence	0.001 (0.002)		
R^2		0.173	
F -statistic		797.93	
N		45,769	

Notes: Coefficients are shown with standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Trust in Americans is lagged by one year. Unfair political treatment is instrumented by local government fiscal capacity. Direct, indirect, and total effects are from causal mediation analysis: 56.03% of the total effect is mediated through experiences of unfair treatment.

unfair political treatment represents an approximately 1% relative increase in the baseline probability of conflict. These results suggest that individuals with higher trust in Americans are more likely to experience unfair political treatment, and consequently, more likely to experience political conflict with local cadres. While trust in Americans may not have a significant overall effect on political conflict, it does have a significant and consistent indirect effect through experiences of unfair political treatment. The positive and significant indirect effect of trust in Americans lends support to our hypothesis that individuals with higher trust in foreigners may be less deferential and more elite-challenging, making them more likely to experience or recognize unfair treatment by government officials, which in turn, will increase their likelihood of experiencing political conflict.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on social trust and political conflict by examining the differential impact of radius-sensitive measures of trust on the likelihood of political conflict in China. Our findings demonstrate that the relationship between social trust and political conflict is not uniform, but rather depends on the radius of trust. By distinguishing between specific trust, generalized trust in fellow nationals, and trust in foreigners, we show that varying radii of trust has a disparate impact on individuals' experiences of unfair political treatment and consequently, their propensity to engage in political conflict with government authorities.

Our analyses demonstrate that individuals with high levels of specific and generalized trust are less likely to experience unfair political treatment and, as a result, are less prone to conflict with government officials. Generalized trust shows the strongest effect, reducing conflict both directly and indirectly through decreased experiences of unfair treatment. These findings suggest that individuals with higher trust in their immediate community and broader society may be more influenced by traditional Chinese values that emphasize social harmony and deference to authority. In contrast, those with higher trust in Americans, while not showing a significant overall effect on conflict propensity, demonstrate a significant indirect effect of increased conflict through greater sensitivity to unfair treatment. This pattern suggests that individuals with higher trust in Americans may be more attuned to recognizing unfair political treatment,

possibly due to the influence of Western culture and liberal democratic values that encourage challenging authorities. In short, we observe that as the radius of trust widens from specific to generalized, its effect on reducing conflict strengthens. However, when trust extends beyond national boundaries to foreigners, this trend reverses, highlighting the complex nature of the influence of social trust on political behavior. These findings support the need to expand our understanding of trust radius beyond the conventional specific-generalized trust dichotomy. In the case of China, the trust radius may widen in the following order: specific trust (trust in known persons), generalized trust toward fellow nationals, and trust toward foreigners.

Our study on the relationship between trust radii, unfair political treatment, and political conflict suggests several avenues for future research. While we used trust in Americans as a proxy for trust in foreigners, we acknowledge that this may not be representative of Chinese citizens' trust in all foreign nationalities. As previous studies have demonstrated, trust toward various foreign groups can be distinctly influenced by different historical, political, and economic factors (Wang 2014; Yu et al. 2021; Reilly 2012). Given that our data only provides a measure for trust in Americans, future studies could examine trust in a broader range of foreign nationalities to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how trust in foreigners influences political behavior in China. Comparing trust levels and their effects across different foreign nationalities (e.g., Americans, Japanese, South Koreans) could offer valuable insights into the nuances of trust in non-nationals and its implications for political behavior. Such research could help uncover whether the patterns we observe with trust in Americans hold true for other nationalities, or if there are significant variations based on China's specific relationships with different countries. Additionally, future studies could explore how historical relationships, geopolitical dynamics, and cultural similarities or differences shape trust in various foreign groups, potentially revealing a spectrum of trust levels toward different foreign nationalities rather than a single, uniform "foreign" category. Furthermore, while our study suggests a link between trust radii and traditional Chinese values, we did not directly test for the cultural effects of Confucianism due to data limitations. Although our empirical evidence may currently be insufficient to clearly demonstrate causal relationship between trust radii, unfair political treatment, and political conflict, more refined data or cross-national comparisons of varying levels of trust radii may provide new insight into the influence of Confucianism on political behavior in China.

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of adopting a

nuanced approach to understanding the relationship between social trust and political conflict in China. By investigating the differential effects of radius-sensitive measures of trust and the mediating role of unfair political treatment, we aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how trust shapes individuals' propensity to engage in political conflict. Our findings reveal a complex relationship between trust radius and conflict propensity: as the radius of trust widens from specific to generalized, we observe stronger effects in reducing political conflict, both directly and indirectly through decreased experiences of unfair political treatment. However, when trust extends beyond national boundaries, this trend reverses, with a small but significant increase in conflict propensity through increased sensitivity to unfair political treatment. Our findings suggest that the conventional understanding of trust radius needs to be expanded, particularly in the Chinese context, to account for the distinction between trust in fellow nationals and trust in non-nationals. As individuals with narrower radii of trust pertaining to immediate neighbors or fellow Chinese are less likely to experience unfair political treatment and political conflict, generating and maintaining high levels of trust with narrower radius may be of particular interest to the regime in securing social stability and political survival. However, the complex effects of trust in foreigners suggest that increased international engagement may inadvertently heighten citizens' receptivity or sensitivity to unfair treatment, potentially leading to increased political conflict. This underscores the need for policymakers to carefully consider how international relations and exposure to foreign cultures may influence domestic political dynamics and citizens' expectations of governance in China.

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