

Understanding Political Trust in China

Abstract

A long-standing puzzle in the study of political trust is that over 80% of Chinese people trust the central government, though only about 50% trust local government is substantially weaker. Skeptics dismiss such survey findings as invalid, arguing that the high confidence in the central government is likely a response to social pressures and political controls. Professor Li argue that the observed trust in the central government inflates political trust in the country if it is mistaken for trust in the Center. Based on in-depth interviews with petitioners in Beijing, it was find that the target of political trust is the central leadership of the ruling party, commonly known as the Party Center or the Center. In addition, people evaluate the Center's trustworthiness in policy making and implementation. Furthermore, for most people, the Center is ultimately the top leader, whose trustworthiness has a dimension of policy commitment and a distinct aspect of policy implementation capacity. Professor Li argue that the observed trust in the central government reflects public confidence in the Center's policy commitment, while the observed trust in the local government reflects confidence about its policy implementation capacity. Applying the two-dimensional measurement scheme to a national survey in 2011, it turns out that 19.6% of 3,473 respondents have total trust in the Center, 34.2% have partial trust, 32.0% have skepticism, and 14.2% have total distrust.