Does Voting in Authoritarian Elections Change Political Trust?

Jianjun Yu *

Changxin Xu †

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Abstract

Does voting in an authoritarian election influence political trust? If it does, why? Using data from a Chinese public opinion survey conducted in 2014, we examine the relationship between political trust and grassroots electoral participation in China. We find that there is a positive correlation between voting in grassroots elections and trust in authoritarian governments. Our further causal analysis shows how grassroots voting improves political trust in governments. We argue that electoral participation, although in an authoritarian setting, enables voters to feel more involved in the decision-making process, and such feelings improve their political trust. This research sheds light on the motivations for autocrats' holding elections and how such authoritarian elections, in turn, contribute to autocratic regime survival.

Keywords. political trust; Chinese politics; grassroots election; authoritarian resilience.

*The corresponding author, Ph.D. candidate, Department of Political Science, The University of Iowa, 341 Schaeffer Hall, Iowa City, Iowa 52242-1409, Email: jianjyu@uiowa.edu.

†Ph.D. student, Department of Political Science, Syracuse University, 200 Eggers Hall, Syracuse, NY 13244-1020

Introduction

Most authoritarian regimes hold elections today. Scholars have found that authoritarian elections help dictators co-opt elites and access information to control their people (Anderson 1999; Schedler et al. 2006; Lust-Okar 2009). However, it remains largely unknown whether elections held by authoritarian regimes change how people perceive their governments. In this research, we examine the effect of electoral participation on political trust. Our research argues that even where elections are often interfered by fraud and constrained in various aspects (e.g., hindered enforcement of the right to vote, limited access to the right to be elected, and/or a narrow range of elected positions), participation in such elections still results in promoting political trust in authoritarian regimes.

Scholars have suggested that political participation and attitude mutually affect each other (Finkel 1985; Brehm and Rahn 1997). Previous literature (Verba 1962; Putnam 1992; Blais 2006) also informs that culture, trust, interest, efficacy, and norms also serve as determinants of the formats of political participation. Scholars, however, far less frequently study political participation as an explanatory variable for people's view of society (Blais 2010). Particularly in authoritarian regimes where the access to participation is limited, we have less knowledge on the effects of their restricted participation. In effort to enrich our understanding of authoritarian elections, we study the effects of voting on political trust in China and find that voting participation in community elections is positively associated with political trust in upper governments whose positions are not elective. This finding suggests that even if few seats in state institutions are elected, authoritarian elections play a crucial part in regime survival beyond simply a piece of democracy playacting and deserves more scholarly attention in further investigation.

As we know, the correlation between participation and trust can go both ways: participation improves trust, or trust affects participation. Admittedly, scholars argue that trust affects voter turnout, based on similar regression analyses (Blais 2006; Grönlund and Setälä 2007; Hooghe, Marien, and Pauwels 2011; Hooghe and Stiers 2016). To examine the causal relationship between electoral participation and political trust, we use grassroots elections in China as evidence and conduct a multi-step analysis. First, we create a subset of observations by removing three groups of people, voluntary voters (those who cast their ballots spontaneously), state-

dependent people, and non-voters who distrust electoral systems. Thus, this subset consists of only those who decide whether or not to vote based on considerations other than political trust. Within the subset, we can regress political trust on voting without worrying about the problem of endogeneity. Furthermore, we apply an instrumental variable analysis to examine whether trust affects electoral participation and find that trust negatively affects voter turnout. The above findings together hold that electoral participation in authoritarian settings increases political trust rather than the other way around.

Furthermore, we also explain how electoral participation improves trust by respectively testing three plausible mechanisms: 1) voting experience makes voters feel as if they were able to influence politics; 2) voters may receive material payoffs if their votes go to their sponsor(s); and 3) higher turnout and governmental responsiveness constitute a self-reinforcing cycle where politically concerned residents oblige the local government to deliver quality governance services. Rejecting the second and third mechanisms, our test supports that participation in authoritarian elections makes voters feel as if they were involved in decision-making processes and participating in public affairs, and such democratic feelings result in increased political trust in the authoritarian regime.

This study sheds light on the motivations for autocrats' holding elections and how such authoritarian elections, in turn, contribute to autocratic regime survival. Previous studies indicate that authoritarian elections facilitate the ruler-elite negotiations and inform the distribution of dissidents (Lust-Okar 2005; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Magaloni 2006; Brownlee 2007; Boix and Svolik 2013). We demonstrate that beyond these functions, authoritarian elections enhance trust in authoritarian governments. This finding highlights that even if few seats in state institutions are elective, authoritarian elections play a crucial part in regime survival rather than a mere piece of democracy playacting, and warrants further scholarly attention.

Voting and Political Trust

In the last thirty years, the co-occurrence of low trust and low turnout has attracted scholars to detect the causal relation between them. Early research suggested that low trust and low

turnout had no causal relation (Citrin 1974; Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring 1979; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), holding that low political trust would cause incumbents to lose more votes to the opposing candidates in the next election. Therefore, early works argued that low political trust affected the election result rather than the voter turnout (Hetherington 1999; Bélanger and Nadeau 2005). Unlike early studies, more recent research shows that trust in institutions and voter turnout mutually influence each other. On the one hand, higher trust in political institutions suggests that people accept the legitimacy of these institutions and believe their votes count, which encourages them to vote (Grönlund and Setälä 2007; Hooghe, Marien, and Pauwels 2011; Hooghe and Stiers 2016). On the other hand, a high turnout strengthens the legitimacy of political institutions and thereby improves trust in these institutions (Hooghe and Stiers 2016).

Most, if not all, studies focus on Western democracies, while the effects of authoritarian elections on public opinion are largely overlooked. Authoritarian elections are usually considered as an institutional tool for dictators to co-opt elites actors and societal groups or a platform where they negotiate with the opposition (Magaloni 2006; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Wright 2008; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Boix and Svolik 2013). Authoritarian elections may also serve an informational role as well, helping dictators identify their supporters and opponents (Ames 1970; Magaloni 2006; Brownlee 2007). However, scholars do not think that participation in such elections changes how people perceive their governments. Frye and Borisova (2019) argue that corrupted elections in Russia do not produce any new information about the government and thus have little effect on how people evaluate the government unless the government unexpectedly permits protest. Moreover, when a high level of electoral fraud is detected, participation harms voters' political trust (Berman et al. 2014).

Yet, there are three theses arguing otherwise. First, voting experiences may boost political trust. Studies indicate that dictators use elections to identify their bases of support and opposition strongholds (Ames 1970; Magaloni 2006; Brownlee 2007), and also use elections as a tool to supervise the performance of local officials so that dictators can detect and remove those who may cause social unrest (Birney 2007; Brownlee 2007). To serve this purpose, dictators allow elections to be competitive and partially real, revealing the truer voices of the people.

Informed by such elections, dictators are able to adjust their policies from time to time to avoid possible unrest. Upon learning that electoral results reflect their preferences and/or that government policy has been adjusted, voters may feel engaged in the decision-making processes, leading to increased political trust. Additionally, fake as the elections may be, voting is one of the very few participation channels accessible for citizens in an authoritarian regime, and thus simply the activity of voting itself enhances the relationship between the state and citizens, inducing more support for the government. Based on the observation of elections in the Soviet Union, Swearer 1961 reported that although they were mostly single-candidate elections, they still "raise[d] the consciousness of the masses, heighten[ed] the activity of the people, and attract[ed] millions of workers to participate in state construction and direction." Politicians in authoritarian regimes also suggest that even if they bring no real power to the people, elections can cultivate public support for the governments anyway. Amir Abbas Hoveida (1978), Premier of Iran, once stated that "single-party elections with compulsory voting g[a]ve Iranians a sense of participation and representation in the affairs of the government even if those for whom they vote[d] ha[d] little political power."

Second, voters might trust governments more because they get material benefits from governments. Vote-buying is common in authoritarian elections. Dictators and/or local strongmen use their control of economic resources to mobilize voters, increasing the state-favored candidates' (or their own) chance of winning (Magaloni 2006; McMann 2006; Gervasoni 2010; Greene 2010; Carreras and İrepoğlu 2013; Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi 2019). Even if elections are non-competitive, the state may as well exploit material benefits to lift the turnout, as a low turnout implies regime unpopularity and hence de-legitimizes electoral results (Saikkonen 2017). For instance, local governments in China have been reported to reward citizens for voting (such as a bag of rice, a dozen of eggs, or cooking oil) to increase the turnout within their jurisdictions (Kennedy 2010). Such phenomena may result from the impetus of both career prospects and legal requirements on the part of local governments: 1) a low turnout is seen as proof of local politicians' incompetence and/or unpopularity, and further damages their career development; 2) the election-related laws stipulate that the turnout should exceed a certain rate (the specific number varies by the region), otherwise the election would be ruled as invalid and

must be re-held[1].

Third and finally, local governments' performance and political trust may create a self-reinforcing cycle in higher-turnout constituencies. In communities where the voter turnout is higher, residents are more politically concerned, and thus tend to take action (e.g., petitions or protests). Considering the possibly stronger opposition to unpopular policies and denser distribution of potential activists, authorities may avoid enforcing undesired policies and allocate more administrative resources to such communities. Consequently, better government performance may result in heightened trust, forming a virtuous circle.

The three mechanisms described in this section are also shown in Figure 1. The direction of arrows suggests causal relations. In the next section, we give a brief background about Chinese grassroots elections.

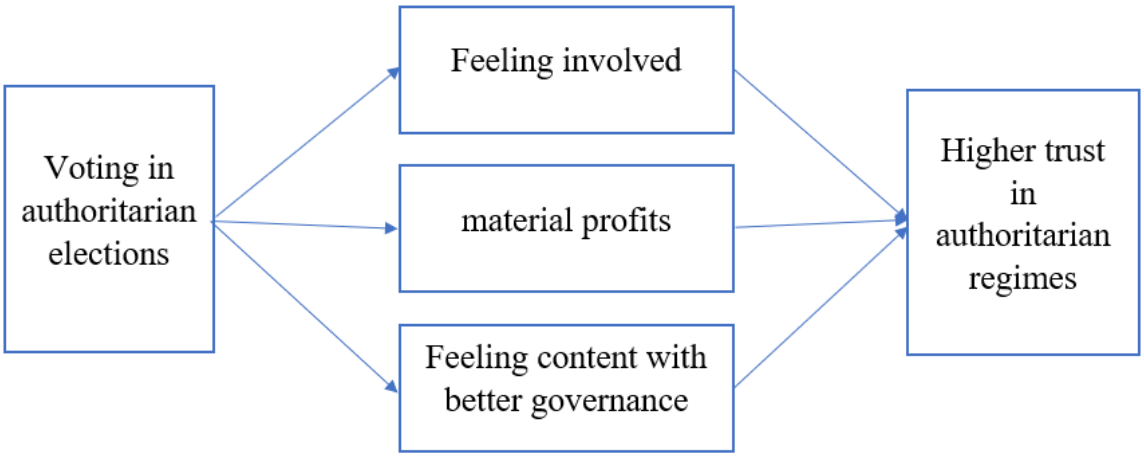

Figure 1 Three Plausible Causal Mechanisms

Authoritarian Elections in China: Background and Concepts

Since the late 1970s, the central state has gradually found itself unable to fully hold grassroots officials accountable (Goldman, MacFarquhar, et al. 1999). Grassroots officials are inclined to exploit information asymmetries, hiding public grievances and harshly enforcing unpopular policies to present a better resume to supervising authorities for their career prospects.

1. Kennedy (2010) represents a vivid landscape of these local practices to encourage voting. Please see more at http:www.gov.cn/jrzg/2010-10/28/content_1732872.htm and http:news.sohu.com/20041222/n223602831.shtml.

Corruption is also one of the principal-agent problems. These governance problems, as well as the resulting social unrest, have threatened the communist regime (Li 2002).

To better discipline grassroots officials and maintain its rule, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the institution of community committees, also known as grassroots self-governance organizations, the members of which were elective (O'brien and Li 2000; Xu and Yao 2015; Martinez-Bravo et al. 2022)[2]. Driven by this reform, the CCP achieved multiple purposes, including the information collection of citizens' grievances and political attitudes, the cuts in public costs of grassroots governance, and grassroots officials' accountability through controlled societal mobilizations.

According to the legislation, community committees and their members are responsible for enforcing governmental policy, assisting in levy collection, and helping deliver public services, while they are legally defined as mass self-governance organizations rather than an integral part of the state bureaucracy[3]. The state is not empowered to directly appoint community committee members, and yet, local state actors seek leverage in elections of community committees by supporting their favored candidates to extend their penetration into grassroots society.

Grassroots elections, held by community electoral committees, take place every five years without term limits[4][5]. Prior to Election Day, a community assembly or all members of a community elect a community electoral committee to organize the election, and the district/county government also dispatches a group of officials to help a community organize its electoral committee, nominate candidates and supervise the whole electoral process. More importantly, as the national law on community elections is merely abstract, the district/county government usually drafts and enforces its own electoral bylaw and rules on election-related conflicts on occasions where practice exceeds the national law and its bylaw (Xiao et al. 2001). In the currently effective legislation, the number of candidates in a community election must exceed that of the committee positions, guaranteeing that grassroots elections are competitive. Addi-

2. Following its mass-line ideology, the CCP has encouraged citizens to assemble self-governance organizations in grassroots society, termed "villagers' committees" in rural areas and "residents' committees" in urban ones. In this article, we refer to such self-governance organizations jointly as "community committees."

3. For the legal interpretation of the relationship between the state and community committees by the Congress, please see more at http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c2161/200011/d2fe4810d7d84cc6b1061893b1e1d9f2.shtml.

4. The 18th Party Congress amended the term of community committee membership from three to five years.

5. The district/county level is the same rank within the Chinese state, only with a rural-urban distinction.

tionally, the legislation has a "double-majority" requirement where at least half of the eligible voters vote and a candidate receives at least half of the votes to win, otherwise the election should be ruled invalid. While the quality of the elections varies across China, a good number of reasonably free and fair elections have been held (Shi 1999; Chen and Zhong 2002; Zhong and Chen 2002; O'brien and Han 2009; Gilley 2010; Sun 2014). Generally speaking, scholars find that grassroots elections have mitigated the principal-agent problems, improved governance quality, and helped maintain stability and political control (Oi and Rozelle 2000; Pastor and Tan 2000; Alpermann 2001; Zhenglin and Bernstein 2004; Tan and Xin 2007; Manion 2006; He 2006; Kung, Cai, and Sun 2009; Tao et al. 2011; Sun 2014; O'Brien and Li 2017).

Another key concept in this research is political trust. Considering the authoritarian setting where the CCP has founded and embodies the communist regime, citizens' political trust in the regime, state institutions, and individual actors are integral to one another in China. Specifically in our case of community elections, as the district/county government simultaneously acts as the rule-maker and supervisor, people's trust in district/county governments, trust in grassroots electoral processes, and trust in the community's electoral committee influence each other.

In the next section, we describe the data for this research and the measures we use to observe political trust and voter turnout in the Chinese context. And we also lay out our research design to probe into the impacts of voting on political trust.

Data Description, Empirical Strategy, and Measures

As shown above, we plan to answer two questions: does voting in authoritarian elections change voters' political trust, and if yes, through what mechanism(s) does the action of voting exert its influence on political trust? To answer these questions, this section briefly describes the data we use; then, we detail the empirical strategy employed to operationalize the phenomenon in question and specify the measurement.

Data Description

We use the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) data, contributed by the Institute of Social Science Survey at Peking University. The Institute formally launched the CFPS survey in 2010 across 25 provinces in China. The baseline survey recognizes 14,960 households whom the CFPS has interviewed bi-annually since then. It is a nationally representative overarching survey, covering education, migration, household finance, health, politics, and many other themes. The survey uses a multi-stage probability sampling strategy to guarantee its representativeness at each level. It first divides China into six sample frames and then uses the systematic probability proportional method to select 16-20 counties within each frame. Within each selected county as a primary sampling unit, the CFPS continues to sample 4 communities, and randomly selects 64 households to interview within each community. Respondents are surveyed on condition of anonymity, and their responses are credible. Based on confidentiality, the CFPS holds all personal information and addresses information below the provincial level undisclosed by coding individuals, counties, and communities with unique identifiers.

In this research, we use the CFPS 2014 as it is the best for our task. While the CFPS has been initiated since 2010, only the CFPS 2014 inquires about not only respondents' participation in community elections but other plausible factors that may affect political trust, which allows for our investigation into the causal relationship between electoral participation and political trust. We are also well aware that other public opinions surveys, such as the Asian Barometer (AB) and the World Value Survey (WVS), include questions regarding political trust and voting behaviors, but they lack enough information to explore how voting influences political trust[6].

Empirical Strategy: Does voting change political trust?

To examine the causal relationship between political trust and voting, we employ a multi-step strategy: first, we regress political trust on voting to confirm whether the two are somehow associated; then, we create a subset of the 2014 CFPS respondents who decided whether or

6. The CFPS 2020 also inquires whether respondents have voted in the latest community election, and yet, we exclude it from this research to avoid potential impacts by the COVID pandemic.

not to vote based on considerations other than political trust, and if voting and political trust in this subset are still significantly associated, the association may be uni-directional that voting affects trust, not the other way around; third and finally, we introduce an instrumental variable analysis to test whether trust heightens voter turnout. We articulate the detailed procedures and considerations below:

We first simply regress political trust on voting for all the respondents, and the regression result tells whether we can find an association between electoral participation and political trust.

However, the association can be bi-directional. It may be that political trust affects citizens' voting decisions. Therefore, we remove three groups of people, voluntary voters, state-dependent people, and non-voters who distrust electoral processes, thus creating a subset of those who made decisions about whether or not to vote based on considerations other than their political trust.

Based on a set of community elections-related questions in the 2014 CFPS survey[7], we develop a taxonomy of the 2014 respondents and create a subset of observations whose decisions whether or not to vote are independent of their political trust by removing three specific groups of people. First, we remove voluntary voters from the subset, as it is impossible to separate political trust from their decisions to vote. To fulfill the "double-majority" requirement, grass-roots electoral committees often make home visits in person or make repeated phone calls to ensure eligible voters have cast ballots. They also encourage employers to set up ballot stations and mobilize employees to vote at work. Therefore, compulsory voters' voting decisions are independent of their political trust, and due to concerns of potential costs or sanctions for not voting.

The subset also excludes the group of state-dependent people, by which we refer to em-

7. In the second-round survey in 2014, the CFPS added three questions in regard to community elections. The first one asked whether the respondent had voted in the latest community election (coded as 0/1). For those who responded "yes," the CFPS further asked whether the voter voted spontaneously or was asked to vote by her/his employer or a community Party cadre. For those who responded "no," it asked the respondent to choose the reason she/he decided not to vote from a few given options, "being occupied elsewhere on the Election Day," "having no idea there was an election," "being ineligible to vote at the time," or "seeing no point in voting." Based on responses to the three questions, we divide all the 2014 CFPS respondents into non-voters (those who did not vote in the latest community election), voluntary voters (those who cast their ballots spontaneously), and compulsory voters (those who were asked to vote by her/his employer or a community Party cadre).

ployees by state-affiliated organizations, including governments, Party organs, SOEs, and other public bodies. On the one hand, they have more at stake while faced with pressures to vote, and they have more difficulty concealing whether they have voted or not from coworkers. On the other hand, usually benefited from the state and embedded in social networks with local officials, they are very likely to have higher political trust and tend to vote for local government-favored candidates. That is, their higher trust increases the likelihood of them deciding to vote.

We remove the group of non-voters who distrust electoral systems from the subset. Specifically, those non-voters who "see no point in voting" may lack trust in electoral processes and local governments who supervise grassroots elections. In that case, low political trust determines their decisions not to vote.

With the above groups removed from the subset, again, we regress political trust on electoral participation. Since the subset consists of only those whose decisions whether or not to vote are independent of political trust, the regression result is expected to show whether casting a ballot affects the voter's political trust, rather than the other way around.

Third and finally, we employ instrumental variables to further confirm the causality by testing whether political trust influences voting. That is, if we found evidence that trust had a little or negative effect on voting, then the positive association between political trust and voting in the earlier regressions could only be explained with the positive effect of voting on political trust.

The method of instrumental variables is a commonly used approach to pin down causation (Sovey and Green 2011). In this research, we use two instrumental variables for political trust: a) that of having witnessed or experienced procrastination by public officials (hereinafter referred to as "procrastination") and b) that of having witnessed or experienced conflicts with governmental officials (hereinafter referred to as "conflicts"). In doing so, we make two assumptions. First, these two instrumental variables affect people's trust in authoritarian governments, and the effects are significant enough (the assumption of instrument relevance). Second, electoral participation has no effect on these two variables, and they only influence people's electoral participation indirectly by altering political trust (the assumption of instrument exogeneity). We herein provide literature that supports these two assumptions. Supporting

statistical evidence is also given in a later section.

For the first assumption, procrastination and conflicts largely lower citizens' political trust, because procrastination and conflicts signal low government performance, which in turn decreases political trust. Students of Chinese political trust have found that quality government performance largely explains high trust (Dickson 2016; Tang 2016; Chen 2017; Dong and Kübler 2018; Zhai 2019). Therefore, procrastination and conflicts, as signs of incompetent and/or unresponsive governments, negatively affect political trust in governments. Consequently, people's distrust may lead to skepticism about elections, as the local government guides and supervises the election, thus decreasing their likelihood to vote.

For the second assumption, it is unlikely that procrastination and conflicts have a direct impact on electoral participation because both electoral and community committees are neither a part of the state apparatus nor appointed by the superior government, as stated in the previous section. Therefore, procrastination, conflicts, or other negative experiences with governmental officials are not expected to alter how people perceive the electoral committee directly, and by extension, their decision whether to vote or not.

Furthermore, as some scholars might argue, those who have negative experiences with officials may be more likely to vote to ensure that the elected community committee better represents their interests and check governmental intervention. However, it is people's trust lowered by such negative experiences that drives them to decide to vote. Thus, how procrastination and conflicts affect electoral participation is still mediated by political trust.

Meanwhile, whether citizens participate in an election does not bring about procrastination or conflicts because a) since only community committees are elective, governmental officials as merely electoral supervisors have little motive to retaliate against not voting or voting for the less state-favored candidate, and b) even when officials have impetus to retaliate (e.g., they have close ties and interests in a candidate), they have no access to information by secret ballot[8] (Xiao et al. 2001).

We also control another variable, government performance. As discussed above, voter turnout in grassroots elections may improve government performance. Thus electoral partic-

8. Previous research has confirmed that the ruling elite in authoritarian settings also has incentives to hold relatively fair and free elections (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Gilley 2010).

ipation may be negatively connected to procrastination and conflicts. In communities where voter turnout is higher, and residents are more politically concerned, local governments would avoid conflicts with citizens and tend to treat people fairly, as procrastination and conflicts bring them higher costs and risks. To minimize such potential damage to the validity of our selected instrumental variables, we add government performance as a control variable.

Empirical Strategy: How does voting change political trust?

Our analysis does not stop at whether political trust is causally connected with electoral participation, but extends to how they are connected. Previously provided, there exist three plausible mechanisms through which voting changes voters' trust in authoritarian states. First and foremost, the experience of voting itself changes how people perceive their governments. That is, electoral participation may give voters a feeling of involvement in politics, which results in their heightened political trust. To evaluate this argument, we include a new variable, how many years had passed since the community's latest election in 2014, as an interaction term for voting. We assume that the memory and feeling of the voting experience fade over time, and thus the effect of such memory and feeling on political trust is expected to accordingly decrease (Zaller et al. 1992). Hypothetically, the longer it had passed since the last time the respondent voted, the smaller effect voting had on political trust.

The second thesis argues that the local government pays voters with material benefits, and increases voters' trust. Therefore, material benefits should have stronger effects on the poor (Muñoz 2014; Huijsmans, Rijken, and Gaidyte 2020). In our case, voting is hypothesized to have a greater effect on political trust among lower-income voters, and we test whether voting has the same effect on trust among all income groups.

Third and last, it is argued that higher turnout and better performance of local governments are mutually recursive. More concretely, higher turnout in a community informs the local government that residents are more politically concerned, and the government tends to perform better, which results in the community's higher political trust. To test this thesis, we regress each community's voter turnout on its residents' average perception of government performance. Unlike the aforementioned analyses at the individual level, this test is conducted at the

community level. As the CFPS employs a multi-stage probability sampling strategy as earlier described, its community-level statistics credibly represent a community's conditions.

Measurement

The key variables in this research are political trust and electoral participation. We use "trust in individual cadres within the district/county" in the 2014 CFPS as the indicator of political trust, ranging from 0 (lowest) to 10 (highest)[9]. As for electoral participation, we code 1 if the respondent "has voted in the latest election," and 0 if negative.

We use two instrumental variables, procrastination and conflicts, to filter out the correlation between the error term and the endogenous explanatory variable. For both of the variables, we use "1" to indicate "having witnessed or experienced procrastination of/conflicts with local officials" and "0" otherwise.

To test the first two causal mechanisms, we introduce two individual-level variables, how many years had passed since the last community election took place as an interaction term for voting and the income level. In the 2014 survey, the CFPS asked in which year the last election in the respondent's community took place. Then we calculate how many years had passed since the election year in the year of 2015, the next year of the CFPS survey. As for the income level, given the facts that the absolute value of individual/household incomes does not indicate one's economic status due to various local socio-economic developments and that many respondents appear reluctant to reveal the absolute value of their individual/household annual incomes, we use the respondents' relative perception of their income level instead. Specifically, the survey asked the respondents to place themselves at a relative income level between 1 (lowest) and 5 (highest), compared to the local conditions.

To test the third mechanism, we regress the community turnout on the community's average perceived government performance. Both community-level variables, the community turnout and its perceived government performance, must be acquired by calculation. Considering the possibility that local governments may over-report the voter turnout, we use the percentage of

9. The Chinese state has forbidden any survey to poll on public attitudes toward the central government, individual politicians or the regime in recent years, and data on such public attitudes is hence inaccessible. Research shows that regime trust, institutional trust, and trust in individual politicians are highly correlated in China, as it is a single-party unitary state (Chen 2017).

voters within each community to indicate the community turnout. The 2014 CFPS asked the respondents to rate their local government performance between 1 (lowest) and 5 (highest). Based on the individual responses, we calculate each community's average perceived government performance. As the CFPS is representative at each level described earlier, our calculated turnout and perceived government performance are credible and precise. We also include the community's population, average income, and whether it is an Autonomous Region of Ethnic Minorities as control variables[10].

We also include control variables at the individual level: age, party membership, education, gender, perceived government performance, and Hukou status. Age is the respondent's real age in years divided by 10. We divide the age by 10 to narrow the scale of this variable. Party membership is coded 1 if the respondent is a CCP party member, and 0 if a non-member. Education, the highest degree acquired, is rated from 0 if one is illiterate/semi-illiterate to 8 if one earns a doctorate. We code gender as 0 if female, and 1 if male. Perceived government performance, as described in the previous paragraph, is the respondent's assessment of government performance on a scale from 1 to 5. We code Hukou status as 0 if the respondent is registered as a rural resident, 1 if an urban dweller[11].

We use the Multivariate Imputations by Chained Equations (MICE) to impute the CFPS 2014 data in aggregate and our selected subset prior to running regression analyses. Among the above variables, only less than 2% of values are missing, except for the income level (6.8%) and perceived government performance (4.5%). We conduct all regressions on our imputed data.

Results

Correlation between political trust and voting Our first regression analysis suggests that political trust and participation in grassroots elections are correlated, shown in Figure 2[12]. Compared to non-voters, voters show 0.30 points higher political trust on a 0-10 scale. And as described in the previous section, we take into consideration the possibility of political trust

10. For the summary statistics of these variables, please see Table 1 in the Appendix.
11. For the summary statistics of these variables, please see Tables 2 and 3 in the Appendix.
12. For the full result, please see Column 1, Table 4 in the Appendix.

varying by the district/county due to specific local conditions (Chen 2017) and thus include the district/county random intercepts to control other local variances in political trust. Admittedly, we are aware that this coefficient of 0.30 possibly results from the effect of trust on voting. The following two examinations serve to discern such mutual effects between political trust and electoral participation.

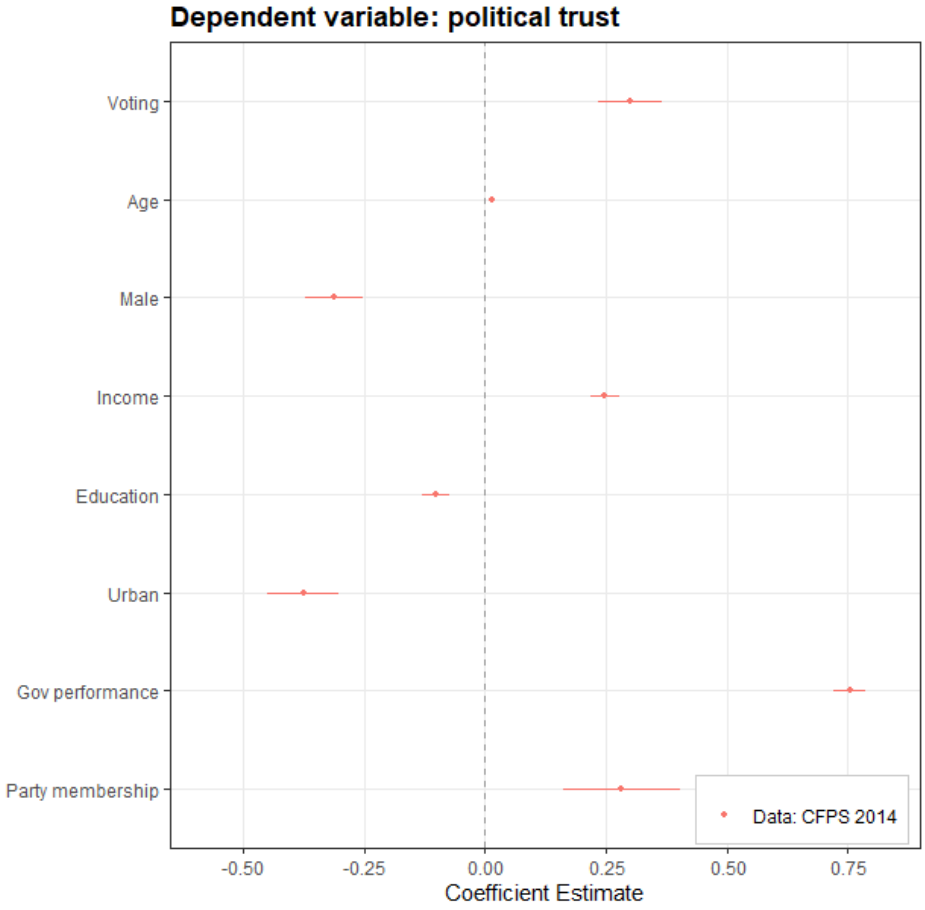

Figure 2 Correlation between Voting and Political Trust

Does voting change political trust? Our second regression with the selected subset also suggests that electoral participation improves voters' political trust, with the effect of trust on voting controlled. As shown in Figure 3[13], voters' political trust is 0.26 points higher than that of non-voters.

Does political trust encourage voting? Our third regression with instrumental variables, procrastination and conflicts, also aims to examine the causal relationship between political trust and electoral participation. As described in the previous section, we find two instrumental

13. For the full result, please see Column 2, Table 4 in the Appendix.

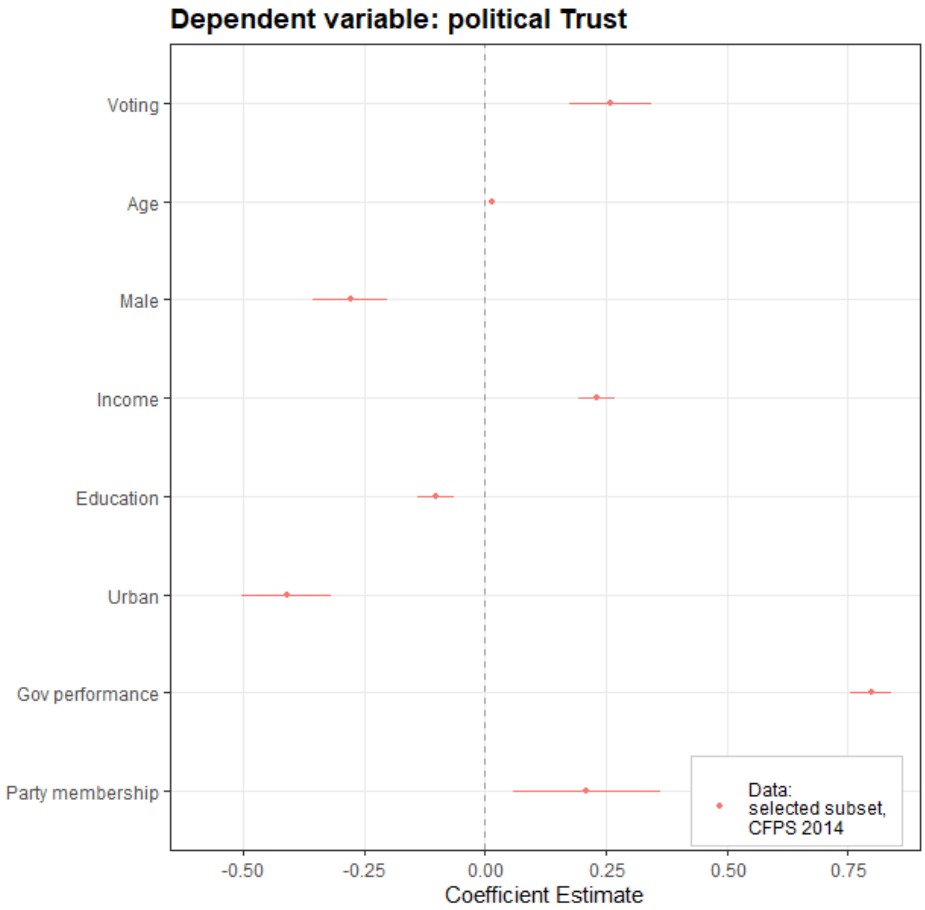

Figure 3 How Voting Affects the Trust of Selected Respondents

variables for political trust, as undisclosed addresses and personal information forbids instruments for voting. If this regression presents that trust has little or negative effect on people's decisions whether or not to vote, then the positive association found in the first two regressions can only be attributed to the effect of electoral participation on political trust.

Before we report the result of the instrumental variables analysis, it is crucial to check the validity of the two instruments. We use the Wald test and the Montiel Olea-Pflueger test to evaluate the assumption of instrument relevance. The F statistic of the Wald test is 513, and the F statistic of the Montiel Olea-Pflueger test is 298. Both of the test results show that our instrumental variables are strong enough. For the assumption of instrument exogeneity, we conduct an overidentification test. The null hypothesis of the overidentification test is that both instruments are exogenous. The p-value for the J-statistic is 0.246, which means that we cannot reject the null hypothesis. These tests strongly support our instruments' validity.

We present the instrumental variable regression results in Table 1. Column 1 reports that

Table 1: Higher Political Trust Discourages Voting

	Dependent variable:		
	Political trust	Voting	
	First-stage	Instrumented	Original
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Political trust		-0.226^{***}	0.048^{***}
		(0.046)	(0.006)
Age	0.132^{***}	0.349^{***}	0.306^{***}
	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Male	-0.215^{***}	0.285^{***}	0.360^{***}
	(0.031)	(0.033)	(0.031)
Party member	0.323^{***}	0.717^{***}	0.632^{***}
	(0.061)	(0.066)	(0.064)
Urban	-0.491^{***}	-0.993^{***}	-0.850^{***}
	(0.032)	(0.126)	(0.123)
Education	-0.160^{***}	-0.145^{***}	-0.104^{***}
	(0.014)	(0.018)	(0.016)
Income	0.257^{***}	0.140^{***}	0.067^{***}
	(0.015)	(0.020)	(0.015)
Gov performance	0.740^{***}	0.387^{***}	0.175^{***}
	(0.017)	(0.040)	(0.018)
Conflicts	-0.221^{***}		
	(0.051)		
Procrastination	-0.708^{***}		
	(0.041)		
Constant	2.183^{***}	-2.058^{***}	-2.534^{***}
	(0.096)	(0.155)	(0.133)
Number of Communities		607	607
sd(Community)		1.435	1.431
Wald F-statistic	513.29		
Montiel Olea-Pflueger F-test	297.62		
J-statistic	1.34		
N	26687	26687	26687

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Data: CFPS 2014

both instrumental variables are negatively associated with political trust; respondents who have witnessed or experienced procrastination by government officials or conflicts with local officials show lower political trust.

Column 2 presents the second-stage instrumental variables estimation, and in Column 3, we display the original regression without using instrumental variables. They both employ probit models, controlling for community random effects.

Our instrumental variables analysis shows that political trust has a significantly negative effect on people's decisions whether or not to vote; people who put higher trust in governments are less likely to participate in grassroots elections. The coefficient of political trust in the second-stage instrumental variables estimation is -0.226. That is, every one-unit increase on the 0-10 scale for political trust leads to a 0.80 decrease in the odds ratio of voting. Controlling all the other variables at their means, a one-unit increase in political trust from its mean value leads to a decrease in the probability of one's voting from 52.6% to 48.4%[14]. Hence we can infer that the positive effect of voting on trust, found in the previous two regressions, is reduced by the negative effect of trust on voting. In other words, electoral participation is expected to have greater positive effects on political trust in reality.

Combining the findings of the above three regressions, we, therefore, argue that participation in grassroots elections increases political trust in authoritarian China.

How does voting improve political trust? Provided earlier, there exist three plausible mechanisms, through which voting changes political trust: conveying voters a feeling of involvement in politics, rewarding voters with material benefits, or responding to voters with better government performance. For the feeling-of-involvement mechanism, we add an interaction term, how many years had passed since the last election, in the regression of trust and voting. We present in Figure 4 the margin effect of the passed time[15]. Two findings here are worth noting: 1) for those who voted in their latest election, their political trust significantly decreased over time, and such temporal effects were absent among non-voters; 2) while those who voted within one year showed higher trust than non-voters, those whose grassroots elections took place more than 4 years ago showed political trust similar to non-voters. The two

14. We also control the community random intercept at its mean. For binary variables, we control them at 1.
15. For the full result, please see Column 1, Table 5 in the Appendix.

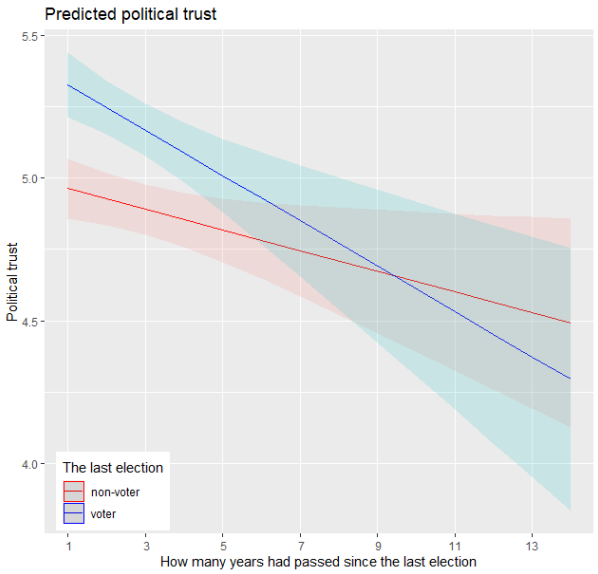

Figure 4: Test of the Feeling-of-involvement Mechanism

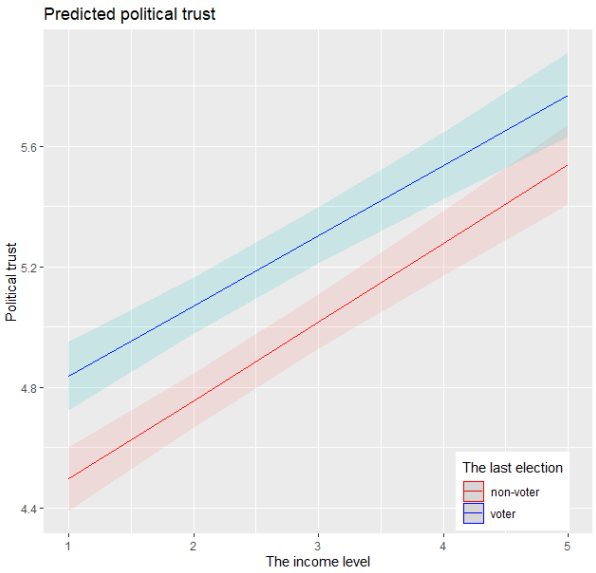

Figure 5: Test of the Material-benefit Mechanism

findings highly conform to our hypothesis that the feeling of involvement peaks right after the election and fades away over time.

For the material-benefits mechanism, we look at the interaction effect of the income level. In Figure 5, we present the margin effect of the income level on political trust[16]. Although we find higher trust among voters, the plots of voters and non-voters in Figure 5 are nearly parallel, suggesting that the effect of electoral participation on political trust barely varies by income group. That is, the evidence does not support the material-benefits thesis. Thirdly, we examine the thesis of higher turnout improving government performance. The result indicates that higher voter turnout at the community level is not associated with higher perceived government performance, as shown in Figure 6[17]. In a community where voter turnout is higher, people tend to assess local government performance lower, and thus, their perception of government performance cannot explain the increase in political trust.

In accordance with the above examinations, we only find supportive evidence for the feeling-of-involvement thesis where casting a ballot makes voters feel more involved in politics and leads to their increased political trust (Sun et al. 2013). Such psychology of citizens under authoritarian settings turns grassroots elections into a regularized renewal of regime trust. This

16. For the full result, please see Column 2, Table 5 in the Appendix.
17. For the full result, please see Column 1, Table 6 in the Appendix.

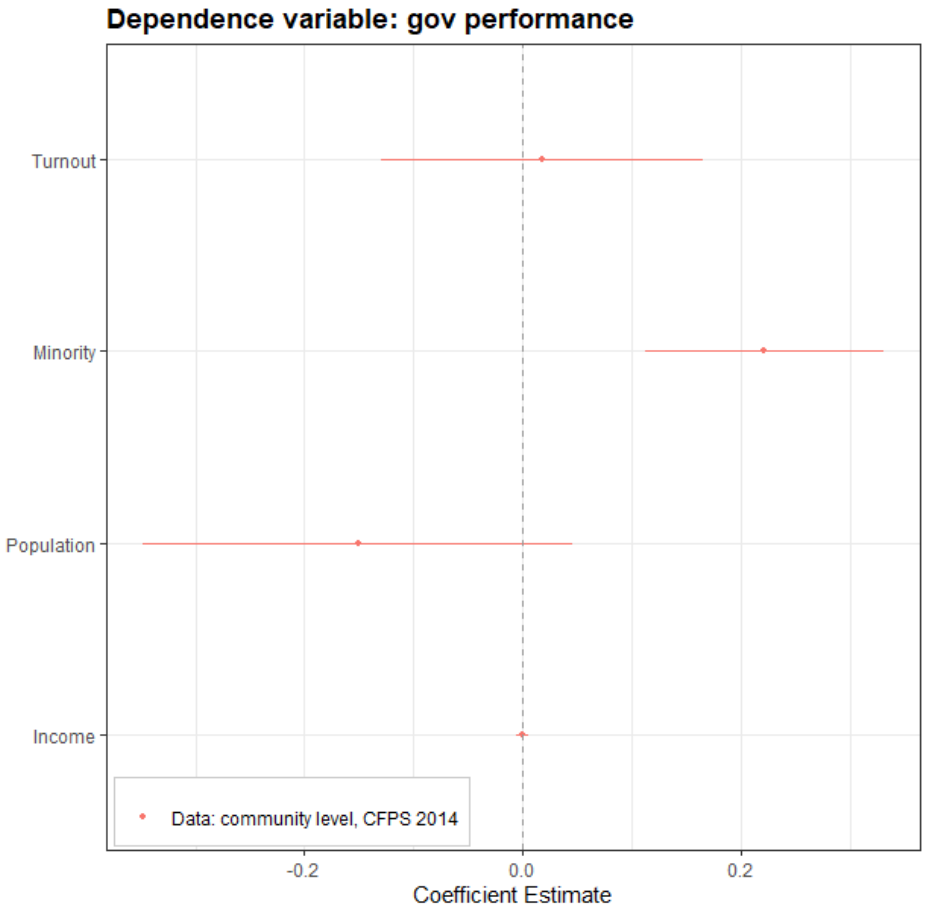

Figure 6 Test of the Better-government-performance Mechanism

finding helps us understand how authoritarian states have cultivated loyalty and demonstrated resilience over recent years.

Robustness Check

Some may wonder whether social-desirability bias causes the positive association we find between electoral participation and political trust (Grimm 2010). As we know, people tend not to express negative attitudes toward the authoritarian state to avoid trouble and are also faced with socializing pressures to show a high degree of civic participation. It is possible that some respondents may falsely express a higher degree of trust in local officials, or profess to have cast a vote while they have not.

Fortunately, the CFPS 2014 data allows for an evaluation of potential social-desirability bias. There are 15 communities that had not ever held grassroots elections in the data, and

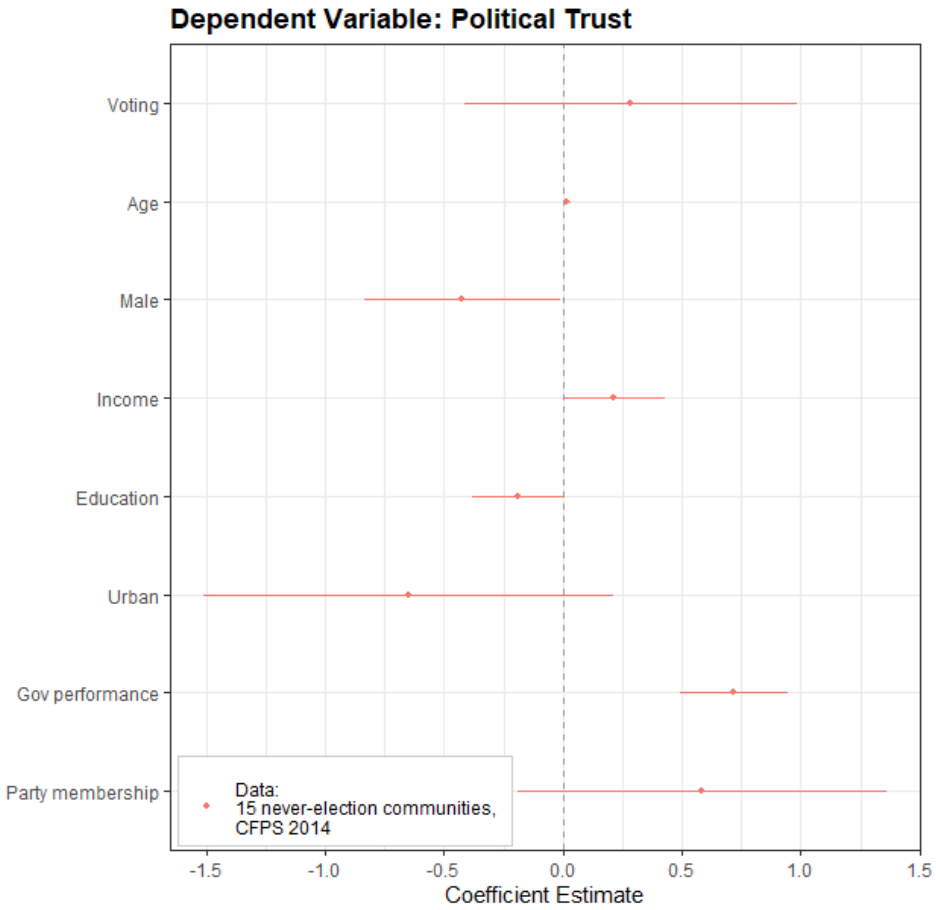

Figure 7 Robustness Check

thus we can discern false responses when people from these communities claim to have voted in the latest election[18]. If those who falsely professed to have voted showed higher trust, then we could say that social-desirability bias did distort the CFPS data. With community-level fix effects controlled, we compare those who gave false responses to other genuine respondents in terms of political trust, shown in Figure 7[19]. As a result, we find little difference in political trust between false respondents and non-voters. Therefore, the positive association between electoral participation and political trust still stands.

18. In order not to wrong anyone for false responses, we also consider the possibility that someone may move into a never-election community after voting elsewhere, and exclude those who had immigrated in the last five years.

19. For the full result, please see Table 7 in the Appendix.

Conclusion and Further Discussion

Our research argues that even in authoritarian regimes where most governmental offices are not subject to elections, electoral participation still improves people's trust in the government. Using data from the 2014 Chinese Family Panel Studies, we find that those who participated in the latest community election reported higher levels of trust than non-voters. Furthermore, our causal analysis demonstrates that electoral participation changes political trust.

To explain why voting heightens political trust, we propose that authoritarian elections not only help rulers to co-opt local strongmen and detect potential dissidents, but also convey a feeling of involvement in public affairs to voters, which strengthens voters' political trust. Our analysis finds that the longer the time span between the last election and 2014, the smaller the effect voting has on political trust. This declining effect suggests that the feeling of involvement diminishes over time. This explanation enriches our understanding of why an authoritarian state holds elections and invests heavily in voter mobilization.

To be noted, the positive effect of voting on trust in autocracies builds on a condition: elections must be relatively free and fair so that people view such elections as an avenue to public participation and find them meaningful. Therefore, we expect to see similar findings in other authoritarian states that conduct relatively free and fair elections. For instance, Vietnam makes a good case, as many studies suggest that this authoritarian regime holds relatively free and fair elections (Malesky, Todd, and Tran 2022; Trinh 2022). Moreover, we also anticipate a fall in how voting improves trust in China, as the state takes over grassroots governance and elections. In recent years, there have emerged practices of double office holding and assigning First Secretaries, which not only firm state control over community committees but introduce other state agents into grassroots society[20]. In this way, citizens may view elections as increasingly pointless.

20. The central state issued the "Master Plan for Rural Revitalization, 2018-2022" in September 2018, in which it stressed how the grassroots Party branches should dominate governance through concurrent office-holding. See more at http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-09/26/content_5325534.htm.

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Appendix

Table 1: Summary statistics of community-level variables

	n	mean	sd	median	min	max
Gov performance	607.00	3.38	0.33	3.38	2.00	5.00
Chairperson Party memebership	616.00	0.87	0.33	1.00	0.00	1.00
Turnout	607.00	0.41	0.26	0.42	0.00	0.98
Minority	621.00	0.09	0.28	0.00	0.00	1.00
Population	611.00	0.38	0.45	0.25	0.01	6.60
Income	389.00	6.53	6.16	4.30	0.15	45.00

Table 2: Summary statistics of individual-level variables

	n	mean	sd	median	min	max
Political trust	26572.00	5.05	2.66	5.00	0.00	10.00
Age	26686.00	47.54	16.20	48.00	18.00	102.00
Income	24867.00	2.53	1.00	3.00	1.00	5.00
Party membership	26683.00	0.07	0.26	0.00	0.00	1.00
Education	26668.00	2.49	1.31	2.00	1.00	8.00
Male	26687.00	0.49	0.50	0.00	0.00	1.00
Government performance	25390.00	3.38	0.92	4.00	1.00	5.00
Urban	26687.00	0.45	0.50	0.00	0.00	1.00
Procrastination	26350.00	0.24	0.43	0.00	0.00	1.00
Conflicts with officials	26458.00	0.13	0.34	0.00	0.00	1.00

Table 3: Summary statistics of individual-level variables in selected subset

	n	mean	sd	median	min	max
Political trust	16298.00	5.11	2.65	5.00	0.00	10.00
Age	16365.00	47.44	16.21	48.00	18.00	102.00
Income	15225.00	2.53	0.99	3.00	1.00	5.00
Party membership	16362.00	0.07	0.26	0.00	0.00	1.00
Education	16354.00	2.49	1.31	2.00	1.00	8.00
Male	16366.00	0.49	0.50	0.00	0.00	1.00
Government performance	15571.00	3.40	0.91	4.00	1.00	5.00
Urban	16366.00	0.45	0.50	0.00	0.00	1.00
Procrastination	16154.00	0.24	0.42	0.00	0.00	1.00
Conflicts with officials	16215.00	0.13	0.34	0.00	0.00	1.00

Table 4: Correlation between political trust and voting

	Dependent variable:	
	Political trust	
	Full dataset	Subset
Voting	0.299***	0.261***
	(0.034)	(0.043)
Age	0.016***	0.015***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Male	−0.311***	−0.278***
	(0.031)	(0.039)
Party membership	0.283***	0.211***
	(0.061)	(0.078)
Urban	−0.376***	−0.409***
	(0.038)	(0.048)
Education	−0.101***	−0.101***
	(0.015)	(0.019)
Income	0.248***	0.231***
	(0.015)	(0.020)
Government performance	0.755***	0.798***
	(0.017)	(0.022)
Constant	1.485***	1.491***
	(0.106)	(0.133)
Number of Counties	164	163
sd(County)	0.492	0.497
N	26687	16366
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	
	Data: CFPS 2014	

Table 5: How does voting improve political trust?

	Dependent variable:	
	Political trust	
Voting	0.407***	0.370***
	(0.069)	(0.084)
Years from the last election	−0.036**	
	(0.016)	
Income	0.248***	0.261***
	(0.015)	(0.020)
Government performance	0.755***	0.755***
	(0.017)	(0.017)
Age	0.017***	0.016***
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Male	−0.310***	−0.311***
	(0.031)	(0.031)
Party membership	0.276***	0.282***
	(0.062)	(0.061)
Urban	−0.372***	−0.376***
	(0.038)	(0.038)
Education	−0.096***	−0.101***
	(0.015)	(0.015)
Voting*Years from the last election	−0.043*	
	(0.022)	
Voting*Income		−0.028
		(0.030)
Constant	1.568***	1.454***
	(0.117)	(0.111)
Number of counties	164	164
sd(County)	0.491	0.492
N	25971	26687
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	
	Data: CFPS 2014	

Table 6: Community-level analysis

	Dependent variable:	
	Gov performance	Chairperson Party membership
	OLS	*Probit*
	(1)	(2)
Turnout	0.018	-0.191^{**}
	(0.075)	(0.082)
Minority	0.222^{***}	-0.079
	(0.056)	(0.061)
Population	-0.151	0.270^{**}
	(0.100)	(0.110)
Income	-0.0002	0.0005
	(0.003)	(0.003)
Constant	3.391^{***}	0.879^{***}
	(0.048)	(0.052)
Observations	380	377

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Data: CFPS 2014

Table 7: Robustness Check

	Dependent variable:
	Trust in local government
Voting	0.285
	(0.356)
Income	0.214**
	(0.109)
Gov performance	0.718***
	(0.116)
Age	0.164**
	(0.074)
Male	−0.423**
	(0.210)
Party membership	0.584
	(0.395)
Urban	−0.646
	(0.439)
Education	−0.188*
	(0.097)
Constant	1.967***
	(0.702)
Number of counties	13
sd(County)	0.635
N	566

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
Data: Residents of 15 never-elected communities, CFPS2014