Institutional Trust as a Buffer Against Perceived Immigration Threats

A Comparative Analysis of Four East Asian Societies

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Research Question

How Government Trust Shapes Views on Immigration - Evidence from East Asia

Summary

Using World Values Survey data from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, this study finds that viewing immigrants negatively reduces public support for immigration. At the same time, increased trust in government is associated with more positive attitudes toward immigration. In high-migration areas such as Hong Kong and Singapore, government trust clearly mitigates the negative impact of perceived immigrant harm: individuals who are concerned about immigrants but trust the state nevertheless regard immigration as less harmful. This buffering effect does not exist in mainland China or Taiwan, where daily contact with immigrants is more limited, and sentiments appear to be influenced by broad ideological convictions rather than trust in government administration.

Background

This project investigates the factors influencing public attitudes toward immigrants. As immigrants have become a vital part of developed nations, they deeply affect local economic structures, cultural integration, and community welfare. Consequently, public sentiment toward immigrants can significantly shape immigration policy and influence government responses to global migration. Therefore, understanding the drivers of these attitudes is crucial.

In this research, we will focus on East Asia especially in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, which share similar cultural and positional backgrounds but have different economical and political landscapes. Mainland China has a very small share of long-term foreign residents, and its policies are cautious, so most foreigners are short-term visitors or workers. Hong Kong is a migration city with many new arrivals from mainland China and a very large number of foreign domestic workers from places like the Philippines and Indonesia. Taiwan relies heavily on migrant workers from Southeast Asia and China in factories and long-term care, and also has many "new resident" families formed through cross-border marriage. Singapore is the most migration-dependent: a large share of its population is foreign workers and their families, with strict but well-developed systems that both attract high-skilled professionals and manage large numbers of low-skilled migrant workers.

We aim to investigate how the views about immigration's impact on national development are shaped by both attitudes toward immigrants and the trust toward their Government.

The core premise of our research is that trust in government can moderate (buffer) the negative impact of hostile immigration attitudes on the perceived benefits of immigration. While individuals with negative views toward immigrants are typically more pessimistic about their impact, high levels of institutional trust may lead them to believe that effective governance can mitigate risks and ensure that immigration yields national benefits.

Furthermore, because Hong Kong and Singapore have significantly higher proportions of immigrants compared to Taiwan and Mainland China, their citizens experience more frequent interactions and higher levels of engagement with immigration issues. Consequently, in Hong Kong and Singapore, public evaluations of immigration's impact are likely more sensitive to the level of trust citizens place in their government.

Based on this framework, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Higher levels of institutional trust are positively associated with a more favorable evaluation of immigration's overall impact on the nation.

H2: The positive effect of institutional trust (the estimated coefficient) will be significantly stronger in Hong Kong and Singapore than in Taiwan and Mainland China.

Data

Data for this study come from individual-level responses in the World Values Survey (WVS), collected between 2017 and 2022. The WVS is a cross-national survey of adult populations that asks standardized questions on values, political attitudes, and social views, including items on immigration, government trust, and perceptions of national development. The analysis focuses on four East Asian settings identified by Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, China.

The main outcome variable is Q121, which measures the perceived overall impact of immigrants on the country on a 1–5 scale (1 = very bad, 5 = very good). Institutional trust is measured using four questions on confidence in the police, courts, government, and civil service (Q69, Q70, Q71, Q74), originally coded from 1 ("trust completely") to 4 ("do not trust at all") and then reverse-coded so that higher values indicate greater trust. Education (Q275), income (Q288), and age (Q262) are included as control variables, with higher values indicating higher levels of education, income, and age.

Prior to analysis, the sample is restricted to respondents from the four selected settings, all special missing codes and negative values are recorded as NA, and cases with missing data on key variables are dropped. For models with interaction terms, both the Perceived Harm index and the Institutional Trust index are mean-centered to facilitate interpretation of coefficients.

A dummy variable based on Q21 (whether immigrants/foreign workers are mentioned as undesirable neighbors) is not included in the main models because it is likely post-treatment and could bias estimates of the relationship between perceived harm, institutional trust, and evaluations of immigration's impact.
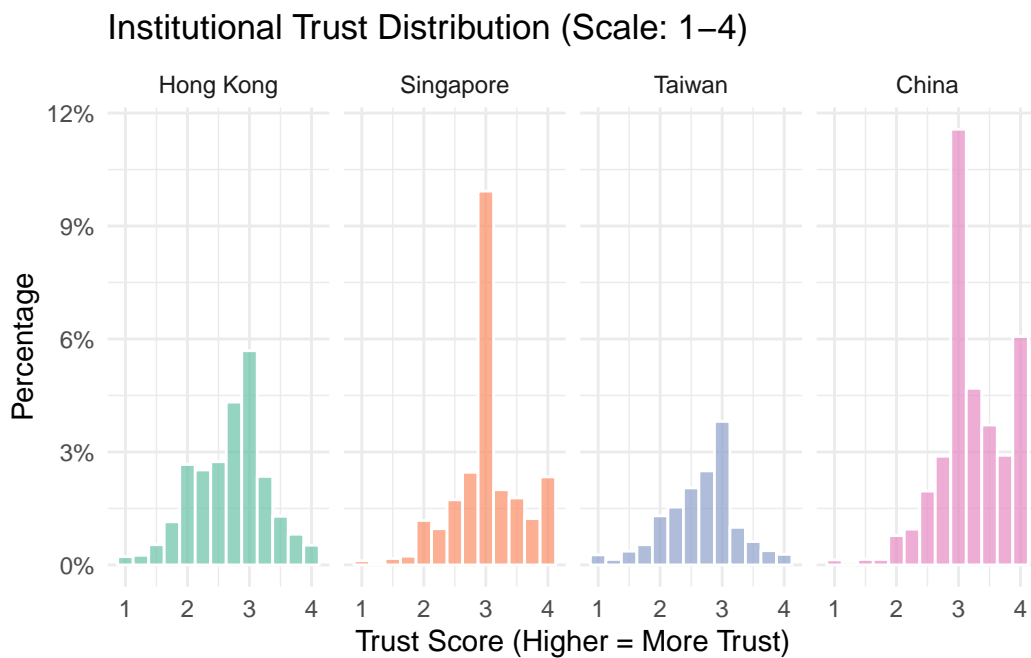

Figure 1: Institutional Trust Distribution by Region (Scale: 1–4)

Methods

We employ a four-stage modeling approach. All models use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression with mean-centered independent variables (Institutional Trust) to ensure the interpretability of coefficients and interaction terms.

The first model establishes a global baseline across all regions. It evaluates the independent effects of perceived harm and institutional trust while controlling for regional "intercept shifts" and individual demographics. This model assumes the impact of harm and trust is identical across all societies.

$$\text{ImmigrantsGood} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{InstitutionTrust}) \\ + \beta_2(\text{Region}) + \beta_3(\text{Edu}) + \beta_4(\text{Income}) + \beta_5(\text{Age}) + \epsilon$$

Model 2 estimates specific region regressions to allow all coefficients to vary freely across societies. This specification relaxes the pooled assumption in Model 1 and provides a descriptive comparison of how institutional trust and demographic factors relate to immigration attitudes within each regional context.

$$\text{ImmigrantsGood}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{InstitutionTrust}_i \\ + \beta_2\text{Edu}_i + \beta_3\text{Income}_i + \beta_4\text{Age}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Model 3 introduces interaction terms between institutional trust and region indicators, allowing the marginal effect of institutional trust on immigration attitudes to vary across societies while retaining region-specific intercepts.

$$\text{ImmigrantsGood}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1\text{InstitutionTrust}_i + \beta_2\,\text{Region}_i \\ + \beta_3\left(\text{InstitutionTrust}_i \times \text{Region}_i\right) + \beta_4\text{Edu}_i + \beta_5\text{Income}_i + \beta_6\text{Age}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Results

Results from the pooled additive model (Table 1) show that institutional trust is positively and statistically significantly associated with more favorable evaluations of immigration's impact across the full sample. On average, a one-unit increase in institutional trust is associated with a 0.25-point increase in the perceived impact score ($p < 0.01$). Relative to the reference region (Hong Kong), respondents in Singapore ($\beta = 0.47$), Taiwan ($\beta = 0.42$), and China ($\beta = 0.69$) report significantly more positive baseline attitudes toward immigration, indicating substantial regional differences in starting points.

Table 1: Model 1 - Pooled Additive Model Results

	Dependent variable:
	Impact on Country Full Sample
InstitutionTrust	0.25*** (0.02)
RegionSingapore	0.47*** (0.03)
RegionTaiwan	0.42*** (0.03)
RegionChina	0.69*** (0.03)
Edu	0.04*** (0.01)
Income	0.02*** (0.01)
Age	−0.0004 (0.001)
Constant	2.60*** (0.05)
Observations	8,123
R^2	0.15
Adjusted R^2	0.15

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 2 presents region-specific regressions, allowing all coefficients to vary freely across societies. The results reveal pronounced heterogeneity in the magnitude of the trust effect. The positive association between institutional trust and immigration attitudes is strongest in Hong Kong (β = 0.38) and Singapore (β = 0.35), moderate in Taiwan (β = 0.20), and substantially weaker in China (β = 0.07), though still statistically significant. These estimates suggest that trust in government translates more strongly into positive immigration evaluations in contexts characterized by higher immigration exposure and more frequent daily interaction with immigrants.

Table 3 further formalizes these differences using a pooled interaction model. Institutional trust remains strongly associated with more favorable immigration attitudes in the baseline region (Hong Kong; β = 0.40, p < 0.01). However, the negative and statistically significant interaction terms for Taiwan (β = −0.21) and especially China (β = −0.33) indicate that the marginal effect of institutional trust is significantly weaker in these societies. In contrast, the interaction term for Singapore is small and statistically insignificant, implying that the effect of institutional trust in Singapore is comparable in magnitude to that observed in Hong Kong. Together, these results provide robust evidence of regional heterogeneity in how institutional trust shapes immigration attitudes.

Table 2: Model 2 - Regional Interaction Model Results

	Dependent variable:			
	Impact on Country			
	Hong Kong	Singapore	Taiwan	China
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
InstitutionTrust	0.38*** (0.03)	0.35*** (0.03)	0.20*** (0.04)	0.07*** (0.03)
Edu	0.01 (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)
Income	0.04*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	−0.001 (0.01)
Age	−0.001 (0.001)	−0.0000 (0.001)	−0.004** (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
Constant	2.68*** (0.09)	2.86*** (0.11)	2.95*** (0.14)	3.45*** (0.08)
Observations	2,039	1,936	1,213	2,935
R^2	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.003
Adjusted R^2	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.002

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 3: Model 3 - Full Triple-Interaction Model Results

	Dependent variable:
	Impact on Country Global Interaction
InstitutionTrust	0.40*** (0.03)
RegionSingapore	0.42*** (0.03)
RegionTaiwan	0.36*** (0.03)
RegionChina	0.70*** (0.03)
Edu	0.04*** (0.01)
Income	0.02*** (0.01)
Age	−0.001 (0.001)
InstitutionTrust:RegionSingapore	−0.04 (0.05)
InstitutionTrust:RegionTaiwan	−0.21*** (0.05)
InstitutionTrust:RegionChina	−0.33*** (0.04)
Constant	2.66*** (0.05)
Observations	8,123
R^2	0.16
Adjusted R^2	0.15

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Discussion

The findings of this study provide strong support for the argument that trust in government institutions is a consistent and robust predictor of immigration attitudes across East Asian societies. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, individuals who perceive immigrants as posing greater threats to crime, security, or the economy are less likely to believe that immigration benefits national development, while higher levels of institutional trust—measured through confidence in the police, courts, and civil service—are associated with more favorable evaluations of immigration's impact.

At the same time, the results reveal substantial regional heterogeneity in the magnitude of this relationship. In line with Hypothesis 2, the positive effect of institutional trust is significantly stronger in Hong Kong and Singapore than in Taiwan and mainland China. In high-immigration contexts such as Hong Kong and Singapore, where citizens experience frequent interaction with immigrants and immigration is a salient policy issue, trust in government appears to function as a meaningful buffer against concerns about immigration-related harm. Individuals who hold reservations about immigrants but trust state institutions may believe that effective governance can mitigate risks and ensure positive outcomes.

In contrast, the weaker trust effects observed in Taiwan and especially in mainland China suggest that immigration attitudes in these contexts may be shaped less by confidence in institutional management and more by broader ideological orientations or limited direct exposure to immigrants. In mainland China, where long-term immigration remains relatively rare, the translation of institutional trust into support for immigration appears particularly constrained.

These findings are consistent with evidence from other political contexts. Research on the American mass public demonstrates that individuals with higher levels of political trust are more supportive of pro-immigration policies even after accounting for partisanship and attitudes toward immigrant groups. Taken together, the evidence suggests that the positive association between institutional trust and immigration attitudes is not confined to Western democracies but operates across diverse political and cultural settings, though its strength depends critically on social and policy context.As a result, the findings should be interpreted as correlational rather than strictly causal.

Reference

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