Anti-Corruption and Political Trust: Evidence from China

Ming Fang Weizheng Lai*

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Abstract

How can anti-corruption influence political trust in government? We investigate this question through the lens of China's recent anti-corruption campaign since 2013, which has unprecedentedly disclosed many corruption investigations to the public. By analyzing a large individual panel dataset, we show that on average, the campaign significantly reduces political trust, and the drop is more pronounced among groups less informed of corruption before. We document strong heterogeneity in trust changes possibly driven by a pro- and anti-government cleavage, captured by unpleasant experiences with the government, pro-government indoctrination, and Confucian norms. Our results fit in a model where polarization is rationalized by differences in priors about the government. We also rule several alternative explanations of our findings.

Keywords: Political Trust; China; Corruption; Anti-Corruption Campaign.
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*Fang: Department of Economics, University of Maryland (email: mfang@umd.edu). Lai: Department of Economics, University of Maryland (email: laiwz@umd.edu).

1 Introduction

Political trust, i.e., people's faith that the government would act in accordance with their interests (Hetherington, 1998; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Zmerli, 2014),[1] has profound implications for regime legitimacy and state capacity.[2] To earn trust, a common approach that the government uses is to (at least professedly) respond to social discontent and use it as a showcase of trustworthiness. Among the most salient discontent and threat to political trust is corruption in government (Seligson, 2002; Chang and Chu, 2006; Gingerich et al., 2009). Evidence from democracies shows that revealing corruption lowers political trust, represented by citizens' weaker confidence in government and implicated politicians' electoral losses (Guriev et al., 2021; Ferraz and Finan, 2008). It is intriguing to further our understanding of how anti-corruption influences political trust in autocracies, given that they often, perhaps surprisingly, make the most successful anti-corruption efforts (Carothers, 2022).

Our investigation builds upon a unique context: China's anti-corruption campaign since 2013, which was initiated shortly after President Xi Jinping rose to power. The campaign was in part a moral mobilization that aims to reassert the Communist Party of China (CPC)'s righteous image and earn public support (Javed, 2022), in the context of rising resentment on corruption since the economic reform (Wederman, 2004).[3] As President Xi's response to the Wall Street Journal's interview put it, *"our Party owes its governing status to the support of the people... our people hate corruption more than anything else and we must act to allay their concerns."*

Indeed, the campaign was arguably China's most massive anti-corruption drive in the post-Mao era, exemplified by a large number of officials subject to corruption investigations and a series of reforms implemented to reshape bureaucratic norms. Importantly, these anti-corruption efforts were publicized extensively, forging an influx of information about corruption to the public. Given the discreet nature of corruption, most Chinese people previously only have limited knowledge about corruption in government, so they may use the information brought by the campaign to re-evaluate the government and update their trust. However, it is not *ex-ante* clear in which direction political trust should change, as different people are likely to read the same piece of information differently.

Therefore, it remains an empirical question to underpin the anti-corruption campaign's effects on political trust. To guide our empirical investigation, we construct a simple model following Dixit and Weibull (2007).

[1] Here, we use the term "government" to refer to the political entity that holds power to influence policy, e.g., political institutions or political leaders. Throughout the paper, we use "political trust" and "trust in government" interchangeably.

[2] For political support, the pioneering work by Putnam et al. (1993) argues that trustful citizens are more law-abiding and engaged in civic affairs. Hetherington (1998) finds that political trust relates to support for the incumbent president. State capacity refers to a government's ability to implement policy. Literature has demonstrated that political trust is highly relevant to state capacity. For instance, Sapienza and Zingales (2013) and Cullen et al. (2021) both find that trust in government affects the implementation of tax policy in the U.S. More recently, scholars contend that political trust or identification with the nation facilitates success in combating the COVID-19 pandemic (Bollyky et al., 2022; Fukuyama, 2020; Rothstein, 2020; Van Bavel et al., 2022).

[3] There is debate on the anti-corruption campaign's true intentions. Some argue that the campaign serves as a tool to consolidate power. However, power consolidation is unlikely the mere goal due to the following observations. First, the campaign investigated millions of officials, most of whom were low-rank officials. It is impractical that a leader has so many opponents even at the bottom of government (Carothers, 2022). Second, the campaign included a range of institutional reforms, trying to straighten used-to-be corrupt bureaucratic norms (Ang, 2020), which was out of the scope of a pure political purge. Third, even if it were power consolidation, dealing with corruption should help as it is welcomed by the populace. That said, the anti-corruption campaign is, to some extent, a real housecleaning.

The model predicts heterogeneity in how the anti-corruption campaign intervenes in political trust. The campaign offers *information* about corruption, from which a person can infer the government's honesty, which is linked to her political trust. However, there is a fundamental challenge in inference. Honest and corrupt governments can be observationally equivalent: a high level of corruption is detected either because an honest government is willing and able to do so, or a corrupt government breeds rampant misdeeds. The ultimate judgment depends on a person's preferred *intepretation* that places different weights on honest and corrupt inferences. Therefore, if a person is pro-government (anti-government), she tends to read the campaign as indicating an honest (a corrupt) government and then enhances (lowers) her trust in government.

To empirically examine these predictions, we assemble a large individual-level panel dataset based on the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). The panel data structure enables us to include individual fixed effects and so track how an individual's trust varies with the anti-corruption campaign. Our sample tracks political trust in 2012, 2014, and 2016, i.e., it covers one pre-campaign period (2012) and two post-campaign periods (2014 and 2016). We merge the sample with city-level corruption investigations disclosed by anti-corruption authorities. Political trust is measured by trust in local government. We also collect rich individual and contextual characteristics to gauge underlying mechanisms. Then, exploiting *temporal* and *regional* variations in corruption investigations, we implement a *difference-in-differences* strategy to estimate the anti-corruption campaign's effects on political trust. We present evidence in favor of the identifying assumption that requires the trends in political trust to be similar between cities in the absence of the campaign (common trends). First, we show that conditional on province fixed effects (embedded in individual fixed effects), corruption investigations are orthogonal to predetermined factors that may drive the evolution of political trust, such as trust levels in 2012 and both levels and growth rates of city characteristics. Second, using another survey dataset, we document a lack of differential pretrends in political trust between high and low investigation cities.[4]

Our main results imply that on average, political trust drops immediately following the anti-corruption campaign. In 2014, a SD (= 38) increase in corruption investigations made an average individual 2.2 percentage points less likely to be trustful of the government, while the effect was not pronounced in 2016. We show that the main results are robust to a battery of checks. First, the results are virtually the same even if controlling for trends related to previous corruption levels or province-by-year fixed effects, suggesting plausibility of the common trends assumption. Second, a permutation test confirms that our findings are unlikely by chance. Third, we conduct a sensitivity test proposed by Oster (2019) to show that our results are not driven by omitted variable bias (due to uncontrolled trends or confounders). Lastly, we show that our results are robust to using the alternative estimator proposed by recent econometric literature on difference-in-differences designs with a continuous treatment variable (Callaway et al., 2021; de Chaisemartin et al., 2022).

Apart from identifying the average change in political trust, we detect slight polarization. Fewer people hold a middle level of trust in government after the campaign. Meanwhile, there are substantially more people with a very low level of political trust and slightly more people with a high level of political trust. These patterns echo our simple model's view that the campaign could have heterogeneous effects on political

[4]We cannot do this pretrends check in the CFPS sample since we only have one pre-campaign period (2012).

trust, since people interpret the same information brought by the campaign differently, depending on their priors about whether the government is honest versus corrupt. To corroborate this view, we first show that the campaign is indeed informative. A testable implication of informativeness is that the campaign's effects on political trust ought to be more pronounced in scenarios where information about corruption was more limited previously. Tellingly, we show that the drop in political trust is greater for those who did not pay attention to corruption news and in provinces where corruption news was more covered up and diluted due to internet censorship and propaganda, supporting the campaign's informativeness.

Furthermore, we provide evidence that the pro- or anti-government cleavage drives different interpretations of information about corruption and changes in political trust. We start by considering unpleasant experiences with officials as direct determinants of individuals' priors: these memories may make people develop anti-government attitudes. We find that people with unpleasant experiences indeed lower their trust to a greater extent after the campaign, indicating that they read corruption investigations as a sign of a corrupt government, confirming their negative impression of the government. What is more, we probe into the role of education as an indirect determinant of attitudes towards the government. It is motivated by the large state-building literature that stresses on education's indoctrination function (e.g., Ramirez and Boli, 1987; Lott, 1999; Aghion et al., 2019). Particularly in an autocracy like China, education tends to foster pro-government sentiments (Lott, 1999; Cantoni et al., 2017; Qi et al., 2022). Tellingly, our results highlight a monotonic relationship between education and changes in political trust: more educated people lower trust to a lesser degree or even enhance it, especially those college-educated. These results are not driven by socioeconomic status that is associated with education, possibly substantiating education's unique role in crafting attitudes. We supplement this interpretation by documenting that education's effects are more pronounced in more Confucian provinces, where pro-government indoctrination could be more successful since Confucianism features similar norms (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2020, 2021b).

In addition, we rule out several alternative explanations. First, political trust may have been lowered because anti-corruption crackdowns have resulted in turmoil, undermining government performance (Wang, 2022). However, we find that the campaign does not influence people's perceived government performance, at least in the period under study. Second, the drop in political trust is likely to be a consequence of changes in general trust resulting from the campaign or other President Xi's reforms that are correlated with the campaign. This appears unlikely as we see the campaign has null effects on trust in other groups (e.g., parents, strangers, and Americans). Third, one may conjecture that it could be mechanical that people report lower trust following the campaign, as they now think it more legitimate than before to criticize the government given that the government itself voluntarily discloses scandals. Though we cannot fully rule out this possibility, we show that it is not the main driver — the results survive and are even more pronounced if excluding those who used to see criticizing the government as a taboo before (due to deference or fears) and so are more likely to lower trust mechanically after the campaign. Taken together, our results are best explained by people's trust updating upon receiving information about corruption provided by the campaign.

Our paper contributes to several strands of literature. First and foremost, it joins the burgeoning literature on trust (Arrow, 1972; Algan and Cahuc, 2010, 2014), on political trust in particular. Due to political trust's importance to a well-functioning government, voluminous studies have been devoted to understanding its

formation, where information about government performance is often considered a key factor (e.g., Chen and Yang, 2019; Saka et al., 2022; Khan et al., 2021; Shi, 2001). Relatedly, the link between corruption and political trust has received attention in this strand of literature. For instance, by analyzing a large cross-country dataset (China included), Guriev et al. (2021) show that increasing revelation of corruption scandals, induced by the expansion of 3G networks, on average reduces citizens' political trust Interestingly, they only find this effect in countries with uncensored internet. A major distinction of our paper from theirs is that the entity disclosing corruption is the government in our context, rather than the people in their case. We show that even *government-disclosed* information about corruption could also lead to a drop in political trust, and the drop is amplified by preexisting internet censorship, which complements their insights.

Another paper closely related to ours is Wang and Dickson (2022). Comparing two surveys before and after the campaign, they similarly find that China's anti-corruption campaign reduces political trust, and they contend that it is because people get shocked by the great amount of corruption in government, and update their beliefs to discredit the government. We advance their insights in two main directions. First, we improve the identification. Wang and Dickson (2022)'s analysis relies on a repeated cross-sectional dataset, so they compare two different groups of individuals over time. Were there are compositional changes in survey respondents after the campaign, their results can be biased. Also, they have to make a strong assumption that political trust measures are comparable between two groups of individuals. By contrast, we use a panel dataset to circumvent these concerns: a fixed group of individuals is studied; and by including individual fixed effects, we trace how one's political trust evolves over time, ensuring better comparability. Second, we provide a more comprehensive view of underlying mechanisms. Wang and Dickson (2022)'s argument embedded in the informativeness channel in our paper: the campaign offers information for people to re-evaluate the government. They implicitly assume that people interpret the information negatively, leading to lower political trust. By contrast, we propose and provide some evidence that interpretations could bifurcate due to the pro- or anti-government cleavage. In this regard, we also offer, to the best of our knowledge, the first evidence of polarization in China.

Besides trust, we also add to the literature on public opinion at large. Existing studies have presented how information influences the electorate (Farzanegan and Hofmann, 2021; Enikolopov et al., 2018; Chong et al., 2015). We investigate the effects of information on public opinion in a non-electoral context, providing casual evidence on accountability in authoritarian regimes.

Last but not least, our paper relates to the growing interest in China's anti-corruption campaign. Previous literature predominantly focuses on the campaign's impacts on government officials' behavior, such as renting seeking (Chen and Kung, 2019; Ding et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2020), work incentives (Wang, 2022), and bureaucratic appointment (Wang, 2022). Few have examined citizens' responses — exceptions include Jiang (2016) and (Lai and Li, 2021), who investigate the campaign's impacts on labor supply to bureaucracy. The current paper offers insights into how the campaign affects people's trust in government, which is too important to miss given that the campaign is in part intended to garner support.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 introduces the background and provides a conceptual framework that guides our investigation. Section 3 presents the data. Section 4 introduces the empirical strategy. Section 5 reports the main results, followed by Section 6 discussing underlying mechanisms.

Section 7 concludes.

2 Background and Conceptual Framework

In this section, we introduce the main features of the anti-corruption campaign. Then, we build a conceptual model to illustrate how the campaign may influence political trust.

2.1 The Anti-Corruption Campaign

In 2013, shortly after President Xi Jinping took office, the Chinese government initiated an unprecedented anti-corruption campaign. The onset was marked by President Xi's directive in the Second Plenary Session of the Eighteenth Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, January 2013. This campaign was arguably the greatest anti-corruption drive in the post-Mao era (Chen and Kung, 2019; Ang, 2020; Carothers, 2022) due to the following features. First, it was unusually long and is still proceeding. Past campaigns were dramatic but short. President Xi's anti-corruption campaign is undoubtedly a massive mobilization, but it is prolonged and tends to be a new normal. Second, the campaign has shown strict enforcement. By 2017, there had been over 1.5 million officials being investigated for misdeeds. Notably, many of them were high-rank officials who should have been able to get leniency in the past.[5] For example, the campaign purged Zhou Yongkang, a former member of the Politburo Standing Committee (the most powerful body in the Chinese government). Third, the campaign was influential beyond the political arena. Existing research has documented the campaign's on a wide range of issues, including rent-seeking of local officials (Chen and Kung, 2019), firm performance (Ding et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2020), and labor supply to the bureaucracy (Jiang et al., 2020; Lai and Li, 2021).

Given its high-profile nature, the campaign received a blaze of publicity. All media outlets reported the campaign's achievements (e.g., the number of corruption investigations conducted, improvements in bureaucratic work ethics) and covered significant stories of some corrupt officials (Wang and Dickson, 2022; Zhuang, 2022). Notably, WeChat, China's most popular social media with 1.1 billion users by 2021, established a database that assembled all disclosed information about government corruption, offering easy access to its users. Taken together, for many people, the unprecedented campaign created an influx of information about corruption, enabling them to know more about what used to be secret.

2.2 Conceptual Framework: Anti-Corruption and Political Trust

Political trust is people's belief that the government would act in accordance with their interests (Hetherington, 1998; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Zmerli, 2014). In the evaluative process, people would make judgments using available information about government performance in several aspects. Important among them is corruption, since it could harm public interests severely and people ought to be concerned about whether the government is honest.

[5]The campaign was alleged to punish all corrupt officials regardless of their seniority. In President Xi's own words, the campaign aimed to *"crack down on both tigers [high-rank officials] and flies [low-rank officials]"*.

Therefore, as the anti-corruption campaign makes a great amount of information about corruption available to the public, people may use it to (re-)evaluate the government and update their political trust. However, it is not *ex-ante* clear how political trust responds to the anti-corruption campaign, since different people could interpret the same piece of information in different ways. To fix ideas, we build a simple model in the spirit of Dixit and Weibull (2007) to consider the (heterogeneous) impacts of the anti-corruption campaign on political trust.[6]

Model. Suppose that an individual i's political trust depends on government honesty, s.[7] However, s is not directly observed, and one can infer it from information about corruption, x, which is varied by the anti-corruption campaign. Individual i has her own priors about s and x, denoted by $\bar{s}_i$ and $\bar{x}_i$. Given the anti-corruption campaign's unprecedented nature (see Section 2.1), we assume that it reveals government corruption more than expected, i.e., $x > \bar{x}_i$.

Inferring s from x relies on their functional relationship. We suppose that individual i perceives the following relationship:

$$x = \bar{x}_i + |s - \bar{s}_i|. \tag{1}$$

That said, individual i considers the difference between observed and anticipated levels of corruption, $x - \bar{x}_i$, to be due to the deviation of unobserved government honesty from her anticipated level, $s - \bar{s}_i$, thus, she can extract knowledge about s upon observing x. However, it is worth noting that the relationship between x and s is not monotonic. Specifically, each x is compatible with two opposite narratives: (i) s is high — an honest government is able and willing to combat corruption, or (ii) s is low — a corrupt government breeds rampant misdeeds.

Such non-monotonicity makes it challenging for individual i to identify the underlying s. As illustrated by Figure 1, when an x is observed, individual i can draw two inferences about the level of government honesty, s:

$$s_i^h = \bar{s}_i + (x - \bar{x}_i) \tag{2}$$

$$s_i^c = \bar{s}_i - (x - \bar{x}_i), \tag{3}$$

where s_i^h refers to an honest government, while s_i^c corresponds to a corrupt government. A Bayesian individual would weight s_i^h and s_i^c to draw her ultimate inference of s. The weights depend on an individual's preexisting belief of whether the government is honest or corrupt. Let $p_i \in [0, 1]$ denote individual i's belief of the probability that the government is honest, then $1 - p_i$ denotes the belief of the probability that the government is corrupt. Despite the authoritarian system, such a pro- or anti-government cleavage exists in modern China's ideological spectrum (Pan and Xu, 2018).[8]

[6] Dixit and Weibull (2007)'s original model tries to explain why people's opinions on monetary policy polarize even though they observe the same economic conditions, e.g., inflation. They suggest that people rationally update their beliefs about the real state of the world and form policy opinions in a Bayesian fashion. However, different priors make people weight inferences from the same information differently in the process of belief updating, leading to polarization.

[7] To substantiate our focus on the impact of corruption, we abstract away from the reality that political trust also depends on other factors. Nonetheless, our subsequent empirical analysis will take into account alternative channels through which political trust is influenced (see Section 6.3).

[8] As noted by previous literature, the ideological spectrum may have multiple dimensions (e.g., liberalism, nationalism, market

Therefore, upon receiving information about corruption, x, an individual i renews her perceived government honesty and so political trust in the following way:

$$\tilde{s}_i = p_i s_i^h + (1 - p_i) s_i^c \tag{4}$$

$$\Delta s_i = \tilde{s}_i - \bar{s}_i = \underbrace{(x - \bar{x}_i)}_{\text{informativeness}} \times \underbrace{(2p_i - 1)}_{\text{interpretation}}. \tag{5}$$

Inspecting Equation 5 indicates that the anti-corruption campaign, by increasing x, would influence political trust differently across individuals. How and how much the campaign changes one's political trust, i.e., the sign and magnitude of Δs_i, depends on two factors. The first one is *informativeness* of the anti-corruption campaign, $x - \bar{x}_i$. Political trust would vary more significantly if the campaign offers information about corruption more than what has been anticipated by individual i. However, it is unclear whether such informativeness would increase or decrease political trust, since different people may process the same information differently, which links to a second critical factor — an individual's *interpretation*, $2p_i - 1$. Conditional on informativeness, a relatively pro-government individual ($p_i > 1/2$) would enhance her trust, i.e., $\Delta s_i > 0$, since she overweights s_i^h, the inference aligned with her prior that the government is honest and catches many corrupt bureaucrats. By contrast, a relatively ant-government individual ($p_i < 1/2$) would lower her trust, i.e., $\Delta s_i < 0$, because she overweights s_i^c that considers a high x as confirming her prior that the government is corrupt. The following proposition summarizes the heterogeneous effects of the anti-corruption campaign on political trust.

Proposition 1. *By revealing unanticipated information about corruption, $x > \bar{x}_i$, the anti-corruption campaign increases (decreases) political trust among individuals who hold priors that the government is honest (corrupt), i.e., $p_i > 1/2$ ($p_i < 1/2$), and the increase (decrease) is greater if the campaign is more informative, i.e., $x - \bar{x}_i$ is larger.*

Remarks. In the model, we have made a simplifying assumption: the anti-corruption campaign (x) affects political trust by intervening in perceived government honesty (s). However, it is likely that the campaign or shocks contemporaneous to it operate through other channels, such as government performance and general willingness to trust. Our empirical investigations will take into account alternative explanations of the campaign's impacts on political trust (see Section 6.3).

Proposition 1 underscores the importance of informativeness and interpretation in shaping political trust changes, advancing previous literature (Wang and Dickson, 2022)'s insights in two main directions. First, we allow for flexibility in people's interpretations of information about corruption. Wang and Dickson (2022) similarly contend that people would use information about corruption brought by the campaign to update political trust. However, they hypothesize that the anti-corruption campaign should *suppress* political trust, since people are shocked by many corruption scandals and become pessimistic about officials' integrity (their Hypotheses 1 and 2). Thus, they implicitly assume that people *negatively* interpret corruption disclosed by the

economy, etc.) or reflect socio-economic differences across groups. The pro- or anti-government cleavage may correlate with or result from cleavages in other dimensions and differences in a range of attributes. In this regard, the pro- or anti-government cleavage should be interpreted as a reduced-form representation of underlying factors that make people's slants differ. In Section 5, we probe into several important factors.

campaign, which may not be warranted for the entire population. Second, we provide a more comprehensive view of the role that priors play in shaping the campaign's impacts. In Wang and Dickson (2022), priors govern the campaign's informativeness and then lead to heterogeneity in impacts: they argue that the campaign should have a smaller (larger) effect of reducing political trust if one has had more (less) knowledge of government corruption previously (their Hypothesis 3). Our framework embeds this informativeness channel through the term $x - \bar{x}_i$ in Equation 5. Moreover, with the term $2p_i - 1$ in Equation 5, we consider the possibility that priors can bifurcate opinions regarding the same information. This is not rare in politics, as documented by the massive literature on public opinion and political polarization (Adena et al., 2015; Bullock, 2009; Bisgaard, 2015; Bisgaard and Slothuus, 2018; Spenkuch et al., 2021; Gerber and Green, 1999).[9]

Proposition 1 guides much of our subsequent analysis. We first investigate the anti-corruption campaign's effect on an average individual's political trust. Then, we probe into two underlying mechanisms implied by Proposition 1: informativeness and interpretation.

3 Data

3.1 Local Information about Corruption

We hypothesize that the anti-corruption campaign could affect political trust since it results in an influx of information about government corruption. To empirically examine this hypothesis, we need to measure the amount of information available to people.

We measure the regional variations of information about corruption, using a comprehensive database of virtually *all* corruption investigations disclosed by the anti-corruption authorities between 2011 and 2016 (Wang and Dickson, 2022).[10] The database was developed by China's internet tycoon, Tencent, and it was widely circulated over Tencent's WeChat, the most popular social media in China with over 1.1 billion users by 2021. In the database, people can easily check which officials have been investigated in their cities and related stories. Therefore, people can be well exposed to information brought by the anti-corruption campaign. More importantly, building upon official sources, the database arguably includes the major part of publicly available information about corruption in Chinese society, regardless of possible transmission channels (e.g., news reports, internet, and word of mouth).[11]

We compute the cumulative number of corruption investigations for each city p as of time τ, starting from 2011, denoted by D_p^τ. Due to the campaign's publicity and the database's popularity and coverage, we consider D_p^τ a proxy for the amount of information about corruption received by local people.

Figure 2 presents a monthly series of cumulative corruption investigations at the national level. There were barely any corruption investigations disclosed before President Xi's anti-corruption campaign. Immediately

[9]For instance, Adena et al. (2015) document that Germans with high (low) anti-Semitic predispositions were persuaded (dissuaded) by Nazi propaganda. Gerber and Green (1999) argue that "observers with different preconceptions interpret the same piece of evidence in ways that conform to their *initial views*".

[10]See https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/9QZRAD for greater details about the dataset (last accessed on May 17, 2020).

[11]The information circulated through other channels can be ultimately reflected by official sources and then collected by the database.

after the campaign's onset, corruption investigations sharply increased, and the increase halted in 2016. This trend confirms that the campaign did lead to the disclosure of a great amount of information about corruption.

3.2 China Family Panel Study Sample

3.2.1 Sample Construction

We conduct analysis relying on the China Family Panel Study (CFPS). CFPS is a nationally representative biennial household survey starting from 2010. We construct a *panel dataset* using CFPS data of 2012, 2014, and 2016, as the survey included questions on political attitudes starting from 2012. We elicit some measures in the 2010 survey. Our sample only includes individuals who (i) appeared in all three waves of surveys, (ii) were born between 1950 and 1990, and (iii) never moved between 2012 and 2016. These restrictions allow us to concentrate on a fixed group of individuals who are mature enough to form meaningful political attitudes, and they also enable us to match city-level information about corruption correctly. We end up with a balanced panel dataset with 11,870 individuals from 121 cities, who were consecutively surveyed in 2012, 2014, and 2016. We discuss the main variables below. Summary statistics are reported in Table A1.

3.2.2 Political Trust

Measurement. CFPS elicits political trust based on the following question:

> *Please rate to what extent you trust the local government cadres. Answers range from 0–10 (0 = lowest trust, 10 = highest trust).*

Figure 3 displays the distribution of the political trust score by year. The distribution is bell-shaped: responses are pooling in the middle of the scale (mean, median ≈ 5), which is not uncommon in the literature on trust or public opinion at large (Gaziano and McGrath, 1986; Petty and Krosnick, 2014; Allen and Birch, 2015).[12] To break ties in judgment and to capture unambiguous political trust, we create a dummy variable for high-level political trust, which equals one if the reported score is greater or equal to 5. Note that this formulation adopts a relatively conservative definition of *distrust* (for a score ≤ 4), constituting a more powerful test for whether the anti-corruption campaign has lowered political trust.

Scope. What does our political trust measure capture? According to the wording of the question, it specifically measures people's trust in local government. CFPS does not ask for people's trust in central government or other (higher-level) sections of the Chinese state (e.g., legislature, the military, or even the ruling party). However, Chen and Yang (2019) find a strong correlation between trust in local and central governments, suggesting that examining how trust in local government changes might inform us of changes in general political trust to some extent. Moreover, even if trust in higher-level sections of the Chinese state were elicited, trust in local government might arguably provide the most useful variations, since it is more tolerated to criticize the local government as opposed to higher-level sections (Lorentzen, 2014; King et al.,

[12] The reasons behind such an "overstuffed middle" problem are several (Allen and Birch, 2015). It could be because respondents are indeed centrist, they do not have the information or knowledge to make a deterministic judgment, or they are ambivalent.

2013; Qin et al., 2017).[13]

Validity. Due to the self-reporting nature, there may be concerns about the validity of our political trust measure. People may still be reluctant to report their political trust truthfully, despite the fact that the trustee is local government and it is legitimate to be more outspoken. Were such misreporting salient and associated with underlying determinants of corruption investigations, our results could pick up a spurious impact of the anti-corruption campaign on political trust. However, our design and results try to alleviate this self-censorship concern in several ways.

First, the response rate for the question on political trust is high (e.g., 96.75% in 2012), indicating that it is unlikely that people get intimidated into silence. In addition, Figure 3 shows that the distribution of political trust is not skewed towards "politically correct" high trust, and many have reported low trust.

Second, our political trust measure exhibits reasonable patterns with high internal consistencies. Figure A1 correlates pre-campaign political trust (measured in 2012) with *predetermined* negative experiences with local governments (measured in 2010). As expected, political trust is lower if one has been unfairly treated by local cadres, had conflicts with cadres, encountered slack cadres, and been asked for bribes. Moreover, Figure A2 shows that higher political trust is strongly associated with more (peaceful) political engagement. Specifically, a trustful individual is more likely to vote in grassroots elections (in line with Tao et al., 2011), and she is more prone to resolve dissent if any via petitions rather than protests. Figure A2 also shows that higher political trust has led to more optimistic evaluations of China's social governance in terms of handling challenges from corruption, environmental issues, inequality, etc.

Third, the panel data structure enables us to include individual fixed effects, which removes any individual-invariant heterogeneity. This would largely purge misreporting if it is relatively stable, which may be plausible given that we have a six-year short panel. In our empirical investigations, we also flexibly control for differential trends in political trust to absorb possible time-varying reporting patterns (see Section 4).

Besides self-censorship, another concern is about the comparability of our political trust measure. This is especially concerning in studies using cross-sectional or repeated cross-sectional data, which have to assume that the trust measures are comparable between different individuals and/or times. However, the panel structure enables us to get around this problem. First, we are able to trace changes in political trust within the *same* individual. Second, we can avoid disturbances of compositional changes. Repeated cross-sectional studies have to contrast different (and likely incomparable) individuals over time. But if people self-select into and out of response because of the anti-corruption campaign, it is unclear how the campaign causes a change in political trust. By contrast, the panel data concentrate on a fixed group of individuals.

[13]One piece of anecdotal evidence is from the China General Social Survey (CGSS), which did elicit trust in both local and central governments between 2010 and 2012. Only 3.71 percent of respondents report distrust in the central government, making a sharp contrast to that 15.53 percent of respondents were distrustful of the local government. In addition, the response rate for trust in central government was 20 percentage points lower than that for trust in local government. Taken together, it is likely that people are more outspoken when judging the local government. However, one needs to take this assertion with caution: perhaps the central government is genuinely more trustworthy. We do not use CGSS our analysis since due to unknown reasons, it stopped eliciting political trust after 2012, i.e., in the anti-corruption times.

3.2.3 Additional Variables

Besides corruption investigations and political trust, Table A1 presents rich variables we collect from CFPS as well as other sources. We briefly describe them below and will introduce them in greater detail when they become pertinent to our analysis.

Attitudinal Variables. As shown in Panel (B), we include trust in other groups (parents, strangers, and Americans) and perceived government performance, which are used to pin down interpretations of our results (Section 6.3).

Experiences with the Government. To investigate underlying mechanisms (Section 6), we collect individual experiences with the government: whether they have been unfairly treated by local cadres, had conflicts with cadres, encountered slack cadres, and been asked for bribes (see Panel (C)).

Covariates. Our sample also contains a range of individual characteristics (see Panel (D)) including birth cohort, gender, han ethnicity, *hukou* status, Communist Party membership, educational attainment, employment in state sectors, parental educational attainment, and parental Communist Party membership. All of them can be conducive to the formation of political trust.

Other Variables. Panel (E) presents several variables we use for robustness checks and for disentangling different mechanisms. We provide a description of them below in order of Panel (E).

Past Corruption. To measure a city's past level of corruption, we use the ETC index proposed by Cai et al. (2011). ETC refers to Chinese firms' spending on entertainment and travel costs, which is commonly used to bribe government officials. Therefore, existing literature has used ETC as a proxy for local corruption in China (e.g., Fang et al., 2019; Jiang, 2016). Cai et al. (2011)'s ETC indices (share of ETC) are between 2002 and 2004, so we take the average as a measure of a city's past level of corruption.

Attention to Corruption News. The CFPS 2010 survey asks individuals if they have ever paid attention to news about corruption. We code people's answers into a dummy variable.

Censorship and Propaganda. The anti-corruption campaign offers information about corruption, which used to be unavailable to the public. To capture to what extent such information has been blocked, we use Qin et al. (2017)'s measures of censorship and propaganda in each province: the share of deleted Weibo posts (Weibo is "Chinese Twitter") and the share of government users on Weibo.

Confucianism. As China's philosophy, Confucianism has enduring influences on China's political traditions (Bell, 2010; Jiang, 2016; Pan and Xu, 2018). To gauge its implications for political trust, we use the number of Confucian temples (in logs) to capture the city-level Confucian norms.

Special Background. Some special backgrounds may have unique impacts on political attitudes and behavior. We take into account three types of background. First, individual military services could foster loyalty to the state, which may spill over to others in the family. So, we code an individual to have such a background if anyone in her family has ever served in the military. Second, people may see criticizing the government as a taboo if they were purged in the Communist Revolution (1950s) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Based on experiences elicited in the CFPS 2010 survey, we create a dummy variable that equals one if one's family was purged in the Revolutions.[14] Third, witnessing intense state violence can also affect

[14]The CFPS 2010 survey directly asks if one's family was assigned a bad class label (landlords, rich peasants, and capitalists), was sent to the May Seventh Cadre School (where intellectuals were re-educated through labor in the Cultural Revolution), and

political attitudes. The Cultural Revolution (CR, 1966–76) was the most violent episode in modern Chinese history. Therefore, we create a dummy variable that equals one if one is from a city with above-median casualties (data from Walder, 2014) or came of age during the CR.[15]

4 Empirical Strategy

4.1 Econometric Model

The combination of regional and temporal variations in corruption investigations motivates a *difference-in-differences* strategy. Thus, to assess the anti-corruption campaign's impact on political trust, we rely on the following specification:

$$y_{ipt} = \alpha + \beta_1 \left(D_p^{14} \times T_t^{14} \right) + \beta_2 \left(D_p^{16} \times T_t^{16} \right) + (X_i' \cdot \mu_t)\gamma + \lambda_i + \mu_t + \varepsilon_{ipt}. \tag{6}$$

Subscript i indexes individuals, p indexes cities, and t indexes years (2012, 2014, and 2016). We include individual fixed effects λ_i and year fixed effects μ_t. y_{ipt} is the political trust measure. D_p^{14} and D_p^{16} are city p's cumulative corruption investigations as of 2014 and 2016. T_t^{14} and T_t^{16} are the dummy variables for years 2014 and 2016. X_i is a set of individual characteristics, including indicators of birth cohort, gender, han ethnicity, *hukou* status, Communist Party membership, educational attainment, employment in state sectors, parental educational attainment, and parental Communist Party membership. As they are mostly invariant over time, we interact them with λ_i to allow for differential impacts on political trust (or reporting of trust, as mentioned in Section 3.2.2) over time. ε_{ipt} is the error term. We subject standard errors to clustering at the city level.

4.2 Identifying Assumption

Equation 6 makes full use of our three-period panel data to trace how an individual's political trust varies with the anti-corruption campaign. β_1 and β_2 are the parameters of interest, capturing how an increase in cumulative investigations is associated with an average individual's political trust in 2014 and 2016, relative to 2012.

The difference-in-differences design compares the trends of political trust between individuals in high- and low-investigation cities. To attribute the trend differences to the gap in corruption investigations, i.e., to casually interpret estimated β_1 and β_2, the common trends assumption needs to be met — were corruption investigations at the same level, individuals share similar trends of political trust between cities, conditional on controls.

The major concern is that if political trust has been already been at a different trend in high-investigation cities than in low-investigation cities, our estimates would be biased. However, the bias may be limited

experienced the Sent-Down Youth Movement. Intentional misreporting is not very likely. Also using CFPS data, Alesina et al. (2020) document that nearly 94.3% of the households have all household members reporting identical class labels.

[15]The impressionable years hypothesis (Alwin and Krosnick, 1991; Giuliano and Spilimbergo, 2014; Cotofan et al., 2020) suggests that the period between the ages of 18 and 25 is a critical period for the formation of political attitudes.

since the trends may not be very distinct depending on corruption investigations. On the one hand, more corruption investigations can be associated with *declining* political trust, as they may reflect the severity of preexisting corruption. On the other hand, to the extent that corruption is a byproduct of economic growth, more investigations may be associated with *rising* political trust as people give credit to the developmental government despite corruption (Ang, 2020).[16] Taken together, the two competing narratives could counteract each other, mitigating differential trends across cities. In the short run, the differences in trends of political trust may be relatively stable and can be absorbed by the individual fixed effects λ_i.

We conduct a battery of checks to ensure that the common trends assumption is plausible. First, in Table A2, we show that once conditioning on province fixed effects (embedded in individual fixed effects), a city's cumulative investigations are not correlated with its pre-campaign (2012) political trust level as well as factors that could affect the evolution of political trust, including the predetermined *levels* and *growth rates* of public sector size, private sector size, GDP per capita, tax revenue per capita, and wage rate. It indicates that the cumulative investigations may be conditionally idiosyncratic, favoring the common trends assumption.[17]

Second, in Equation 6, we flexibly control for possible differential trends by including the interactions of individual covariates and year dummies. As robustness checks, we also include past corruption levels interacted with year dummies and province-by-year fixed effects, and the results survive (see Section 5.2).

Third, although we are unable to test for pretrends using a usual event-study exercise because we have one pre-campaign period (2012) in the CFPS sample, we show evidence in the sample flavor using another survey data, the China Social General Social Survey (CGSS). CGSS elicited political trust (in local government) between 2010 and 2012. We correlate political trust in these years with upcoming corruption investigations in 2014 and 2016.[18] Figure A3 shows a lack of differential trends of political trust prior to the campaign, lending support to the common trends assumption.

Lastly, we perform a sensitivity test to assess the robustness of our results to violations of the common trends assumption. Violations of the assumption could leave unobserved confounds intact, leading to omitted variable bias. We use the approach developed by Oster (2019) to show that the influences of unobserved confounders are limited (see Section 5.2).

5 Effects of Corruption Investigations on Political Trust

5.1 Main Results

Average Effect. Based on Equation 6, Table 1 presents the impact of corruption investigations on political trust. We scale the estimates such that they reflect how political trust is associated with one standard deviation change in cumulative investigations that people have been exposed to (SD = 38). The dependent variable is the political trust dummy (= 1 if the score $\geq$ 5). As mentioned earlier, such formulation defines distrust

[16] Note that this would attenuate negative estimates (see Section 5.1), suggesting that our results are still informative in the sense of providing a lower bound.

[17] This might not be surprising, as most variations in corruption may come from time-invariant factors, such as resource endowments, culture, social networks, and so on, which are absorbed by province fixed effects. The remaining variations are due to the anti-corruption campaign's idiosyncratic enforcement.

[18] Here we measure corruption investigations at the province level because CGSS only provides a province identifier.

conservatively (score ≤ 4) and so enhances the power of the test for whether the anti-corruption campaign *reduces* political trust. In Table 1, all estimates imply that on average, corruption investigations brought by the anti-corruption campaign have lowered political trust. The decline is only pronounced in 2014 but not in 2016.[19] One potential explanation is that trust has already dropped much in 2014, so there is no room for it to drop further in 2016.

Specifically, Column (1) displays results from a minimum specification, where only individual and year fixed effects are controlled. In the rest columns, we stepwise add covariates. We include birth cohort-by-year fixed effects in Column (2), individual characteristics (gender, education, ethnicity, party membership, state sector employment) interacted with year dummies in Column (3), and family background (parental education and party membership) interacted with year dummies in Column (4). The estimates are remarkably stable with the inclusion of these controls, which indicates that corruption investigations are orthogonal to local conditions, lending support to the identifying assumption that requires the paths of political trust to be similar between cities if corruption investigations were at the same level.

In our preferred specification (Column (4)), the estimate tells that in 2014, an SD increase in corruption investigations on average reduces the likelihood of trusting the government by 2.2 percentage points. Such an effect is sizeable. It is comparable to the association between college education and political trust. According to unreported coefficients, in 2014, individuals with an above college education have a 1.9 percentage points higher chance of trusting in the government than their illiterate fellow citizens. The positive association between education and political trust echoes previous findings that education enhances the Chinese state's legitimacy (Lü 2014; Cantoni et al. 2017).[20] Therefore, one SD more corruption investigations, induced by the anti-corruption campaign, would undo the positive impact of college education on political trust. We will probe into the interplay of education and anti-corruption later (see Section 6.2).

Effects at Different Margins. Apart from identifying the average effect, we zoom into corruption investigations' effects at different margins of political trust. We create dummy variables for each level of political trust scores, ranging from 0 to 10, and use them as the dependent of Equation 6.

Figure 4a presents the changes in 2014. We see that corruption investigations have reduced the size of people who hold a middle level of political trust (score = 4–6). Such an effect is remarkable — these people may have been ambivalent about judging the government, however, the anti-corruption campaign appears to have pushed them to make a more definite judgment. The changes in judgment are slightly *polarized*: most people adjust their political trust to low levels (1–3), but meanwhile, there is a significant increase in the size of people who are highly trustful of the government (score = 9), which render a negative average effect observed in Table 1. Figure 4b shows the effects of corruption investigations on political trust by margin in 2016, where the patterns are similar to those in 2014 but are far less pronounced.

Remarks. Taken together, our results have shown that corruption investigations brought by the anti-corruption campaign lower an average individual's political trust. But this masks important heterogeneity: there are a small group of people actually enhancing their trust, despite the majority reacting negatively upon

[19] Implications are similar if using the political trust scale as the dependent (see Table A3).

[20] Lü (2014) finds that the Chinese citizens give credit to the government for its efforts in expanding access to education. Education *per se* can serve as an indoctrination device. Cantoni et al. (2017) show that elite students exposed to more pro-state textbooks are more supportive of China's politico-economic institutions.

knowing a great deal of corruption in government. In light of our theoretical prediction, Proposition 1, our results suggest that an average individual interprets corruption revelation in the campaign negatively, but there exists a significant cleavage in beliefs about whether the government is honest or corrupt, making the same information about corruption interpreted differently and political trust bifurcated. We will supplement this view with more heterogeneity analyses and discussions of alternative explanations in Section 6. Before that, in the rest of this section, we provide several robustness checks for our results.

5.2 Robustness Checks

Further Controls for Differential Trends. The key assumption to be met for causal interpretations of our estimates is the common trends assumption: were corruption investigations at the same level, the trends of political trust would be similar between cities (see Section 4.2). The assumption is plausible as corruption investigations are conditionally idiosyncratic: they are conditionally orthogonal to a variety of factors of political trust's evolution (see Table A2) and are not associated with pretrends in political trust (see Figure A3).

Even so, to shed more light on the common trends assumption, we explicitly add differential trends of political trust in two ways. First, corruption investigations may relate to past levels of corruption, which shape the long-term trend of political trust, thus, we include interactions of past corruption levels and year dummies in Equation 6 to further purge differential trends if any. Past corruption levels are measured using firms' entertainment and travel costs (ETC), which are often spent on bribing government officials (Cai et al., 2011). Cai et al. (2011)'s ETC indices in 2002–2004 cover half of the cities in our sample (60). We take the three-year average. Columns (1) and (2) of Table 2 display results of controlling for past corruption-related paths. Since ETC data only cover a subset of the cities in our sample, to aid comparison, we re-estimate Equation 6 in Column (1) using the subsample where ETC is available. Reassuringly, corruption investigations reduce political trust. Column (2) shows that the inclusion of average ETC interacted with year dummies does not materially change the estimates. Second, we examine the robustness of our results by including province-by-year fixed effects, as province-invariant factors may result in differential trends of political trust. Columns (3) and (4) of Table 2 show that the estimates with and without including province-by-year fixed effects deliver the same implications. Taken together, our results should not have been confounded by differential trends of political trust.

Permutation Test. We conduct a permutation test to ensure that the results are not simply due to chance. We permute corruption investigations across cities and re-estimate Equation 6 to derive a counterfactual effect of corruption investigations on political trust. Figure A4 displays the distribution of counterfactual effects in 2014 derived from 1,000 permutations. The vertical line is the true effect estimated using the actual sample. Apparently, the counterfactual effects are centered around zero, and the true effect is at the distribution's tail and statistically significant (p-value = 0.066), indicating that the true effect is not coincidental.[21]

Sensitivity Test. One may be worried that our findings are subject to omitted variable bias due to either failure of the common trends assumption or unobserved confounders. Although we are unable to name all of

[21] Put in another way, this test rejects the sharp null that the campaign had no effect on political trust in any city at a significance level of 0.066.

omitted variables and find plausible proxies, we assess the robustness of our results to omitted variable bias. We use the approach developed by Oster (2019) that offers a δ statistic to the results' sensitivity to omitted variable bias: how much more important unobservables need to be than observables so that our results are totally driven by omitted variable bias. Computing the δ statistic requires assuming $R^2_{\max}$, the R-squared that our regression (Equation 6) could reach were unobservables included. Thus, $R^2_{\max}$ captures the size of unobservables (thus omitted). Following Oster (2019)'s recommendation, we set $R^2_{\max}$ to be $1.3\tilde{R}^2$, where $\tilde{R}^2$ is the R-squared of our regression. Namely, were unobservables possibly included, 30 percent more variations in political trust can be explained than what has been currently explained. In this scenario, the δ statistic is 12.820 — the association between unobservables and corruption investigations needs to be 12.820 times stronger than that between observable controls and corruption investigations such that our results are totally due to omitted variable bias. Such a δ statistic is unrealistically high, compared to Oster (2019)'s suggested cutoff of 1.[22] Therefore, our results are not confounded by omitted variable bias.

Aggregation of Heterogeneous Effects. Recent econometric literature on difference-in-differences design with continuous treatment (Callaway et al., 2021; de Chaisemartin et al., 2022) suggests that the two-way fixed effects (TWFE) estimator may place insensible weights when aggregating treatment effects, even if there is no variation in treatment timing.[23] What is concerning is that if treatment effects are highly heterogeneous and there are negative weights, then our estimate probably recovers a causal parameter with a sign opposite to conventional causal parameters of interest (e.g., average treatment effect), leading to interpretation hurdles. To alleviate this concern, we implement de Chaisemartin et al. (2022)'s heterogeneity-robust estimator, which confirms the main findings that corruption investigations reduce political trust in 2014 (see Table A4).[24] That is to say, our results are not due to incorrect aggregation of treatment effects.

6 Mechanisms and Discussions

Thus far, our results have provided robust evidence that on average corruption investigations brought by the anti-corruption campaign lower political trust. When we zoom into the effects at each margin of political trust, we see slight polarization. What has driven these changes? The patterns emerging in Section 5 seem to echo predictions in Proposition 1: the anti-corruption campaign has heterogeneous impacts on political trust, since people interpret information about corruption the campaign brings based upon their distinct priors.

To shed more light on this view, we corroborate Proposition 1's two core mechanisms. First, *informativeness* — the anti-corruption campaign ought to provide information about corruption in government, and then people use the very information in the evaluative process. Second, *interpretation* — conditional on informativeness, how to infer government honesty from the same piece of information depends on an individual's pro- or anti-government slant. We examine these two mechanisms in Section 6.1 and Section 6.2, respectively. Additionally, we discuss other alternative explanations to further ascertain

[22] In Figure A5, we present the δ statistic under more stringent assumptions of $R^2_{\max}$, which are uniformly above 1.

[23] In a difference-in-difference design with binary treatment, the aggregation problem occurs when there are variations in treatment timing (Goodman-Bacon, 2021).

[24] To implement de Chaisemartin et al. (2022), a group consisting of individuals facing low corruption investigations need to be defined for comparison. The low level is chosen by the researcher. We attempt both 25th and 50th percentiles as cutoffs, and the results are qualitatively similar.

Proposition 1's view.

6.1 Informativeness

If informativeness is at work, then a testable implication is that the anti-corruption campaign should have a more pronounced impact on political trust among the group that has had less information about corruption before (low $\bar{x}_i$), *ceteris paribus*. In light of Equation 5, the change in political trust, $\Delta s_i = (2p_i - 1)(x - \bar{x}_i)$, can be amplified by informativeness, $x - \bar{x}_i$.

Our first test is to investigate how the campaign's effects vary with previous exposure to corruption news. For those who have been unmindful of corruption news, the anti-corruption campaign may be relatively more informative, i.e., $x - \bar{x}_i$ is larger. Consequently, we expect the campaign to have a more discernible effect among this group. The CFPS 2010 survey asked whether an individual has paid attention to corruption news. Thus, we estimate Equation 6 separately for individuals with and without attention to corruption news. Figure 5 compares the estimates emerging from this subsample analysis. Tellingly, the drop in political trust appears to be driven by the campaign's influences on those who have attained little knowledge about corruption via media, and a test strongly rejects that the effects are equal between two subsmaples (p-value for the 2014 difference = 0.049, p-value for the 2016 difference < 0.001), which are consistent with our hypothesis.

The first test exploits variations in people's knowledge about corruption from a *demand* perspective. By contrast, our second test leverages variations driven by *supply*-side factors. If not the only, the Internet, especially social media, is a prominent source for many people (not only in China) to learn about corruption in government (Guriev et al., 2021; Qin et al., 2017). However, Internet censorship could suppress the supply of information about corruption. As a result, in highly censored regions, the anti-corruption campaign would ironically be more informative as it reveals corruption that tends to covered up before, enlarging its impact on political trust. To test this hypothesis, we use the share of posts deleted on Weibo ("Chinese Twitter") provided by Qin et al. (2017) to measure the censorship intensity in each province. Then, we divide our sample by quintiles of censorship intensity and estimate Equation 6 separately in each subsample. Figure 6a shows patterns in line with our hypothesis — the campaign induces a distinctive drop in political trust in 2014 in the most censored provinces, which is statistically distinguishable from the impacts in other less censored provinces.[25]

In addition, the Internet's ability to provide information about corruption can be rather restricted due to propaganda. Government users on Weibo can disseminate "neutral or positive" messages to distract the public from scandals (King et al., 2017; Qin et al., 2017), making the anti-corruption campaign more informative and its impact on political trust more pronounced in regions subject to intense propaganda. To examine this hypothesis, we measure propaganda intensity using the share of government users among a province's Weibo users, provided by (Qin et al., 2017), and perform the heterogeneity exercise as before. Reassuringly, Figure 6b shows that the greatest drop in political trust occurs in the top quintile of propaganda intensity.[26]

[25] Testing the respective Q1-Q5, Q2-Q5, Q3-Q5, and Q4-Q5 differences in 2014 estimates yields p-value = 0.039, 0.003, 0.013, and 0.022 (Q means quintile).

[26] Testing the respective Q1-Q5, Q2-Q5, Q3-Q5, and Q4-Q5 differences in 2014 estimates yields p-value = 0.050, 0.034, 0.033, and 0.038. Though the 2016 estimate in Q5 has a large magnitude, it is not statistically distinguishable from its counterparts in other

Taken together, exploiting variations in people's knowledge about corruption from both the demand and supply sides, our results support the informativeness nature of the anti-corruption campaign.[27] However, little is known about how different people process such information. In the following subsection, we probe into this issue by investigating the role of priors.

6.2 Interpretation

As we highlight in Proposition 1, the same piece of information is compatible with different interpretations, and one would overweight the interpretation more aligned with her priors, either pro- or anti-government, resulting in different impacts of the anti-corruption campaign on political trust. To shed light on the role of prior-driven interpretations, we first concentrate on factors that shape priors directly: unpleasant experiences with the government. Then, we examine a more indirect determinant: education. It is motivated by three reasons. First, education has important influences on political behavior and political attitudes, as well documented by a large body of literature (Almond and Verba, 1963; Putnam et al., 1993; Dee, 2004; Sondheimer and Green, 2010; Campante and Chor, 2012; Croke et al., 2016). Second, education has been an important component in state building — a regime devises their education policy to cultivate citizens that are supportive for the very regime. (Weber, 1976; Ramirez and Boli, 1987; Lott, 1999; Aghion et al., 2019; Alesina et al., 2021; Bandiera et al., 2019; Cantoni et al., 2017). Third, there has been some evidence and observations showing that educated Chinese exhibit stronger pro-government or nationalistic sentiments (Cantoni et al., 2017; Qi et al., 2022). For instance, Cantoni et al. (2017) show that China's textbook reform enhances elite students' support for Chinese institutions. Qi et al. (2022) find that education is positively associated with support for the armed unification of Taiwan.

6.2.1 Role of Experiences with the Government

People may have formed their priors about the government in the course of interactions with government officials. Unpleasant experiences can damage the government's image, making people interpret corruption investigations in a way that discredits the government. Based on the CFPS 2012 survey, we examine four types of unpleasant experiences: (i) being unfairly treated by officials, (ii) having conflicts with officials, (iii) encountering slack officials, and (iv) being asked for bribes. Table 4 compares the anti-corruption campaign's effects on political trust between people with and without these experiences. We see that people who have unpleasant experiences incur a larger decline in trust, suggesting that the campaign may have provoked more negative sentiments among these groups due to their negative priors.

quintiles due to the wide confidence interval.

[27] We notice a caveat of doing *ceteris paribus* heterogeneity exercises: apart from capturing the campaign's high informativeness (high $x - \bar{x}_i$ due to low $\bar{x}_i$), the measurements we use may relate to relevant groups' negative interpretation (negative $2p_i - 1$ due to low p_i). For instance, one may be interested in corruption news since she is suspicious about government honesty, and a region has more intense censorship and propaganda due to concerns of political instability as people there tend to be more rebellious. However, this should not influence concluding that the anti-corruption campaign is informative. As interpretations only operate when there is some information provided by the campaign, the results of heterogeneity exercises indicate the existence of the campaign's informativeness, though we may not be able to disentangle how much heterogeneous effect is purely due to informativeness and how much is due to interpretations.

6.2.2 Role of Education

Table 3 takes a first look at how the anti-corruption campaign influences political trust differently by education. As Column (1) shows, the decline in political trust is mitigated by educational attainment. To be more specific, if one has completed high school, i.e., 12 years of schooling, the campaign virtually has a null effect on political trust (e.g., $-0.062 + 12 \times 0.005 = 0.002$ in 2014); and if one has had some college education, then the campaign turns out to enhance political trust. Figure 7 uses a non-parametric approach to examine the heterogeneity by education, confirming that education mitigates the drop in political trust and college education as a turning point.

These patterns are intriguing. They suggest that education may have shaped pro-government priors, making the educated interpret the anti-corruption campaign in a positive way. It is worth noting that educated people tend to be better informed about corruption in government, making the anti-corruption campaign less informative to them. The increase in political trust among the college-educated underscores the distinctive interpretation associated with education: if the college-educated have the same interpretation as the average person, then they would have a weaker decrease or even no change in political trust rather than an increase.

We further confirm that our results reflect a unique education-induced pro-government prior. In Table A5, we horse race education and individual attributes that are associated with education and may also foster pro-government, such as urban *hukou*, communist party membership, and state sector employment. The results show that education's impacts are remarkably stable.

Then, what enables more education to shape stronger pro-government attitudes? We suggest China's Confucianism as a driving force. The motivations are twofold. First of all, as China's traditional political philosophy, Confucianism heavily influences China's political traditions (Pan and Xu, 2018; Bell, 2010; Perry, 2008; Jiang, 2016; Economist, 2021; Page, 2015).[28] Importantly, it features a "benevolent dictator model" that advocates people to be faithful to the ruling body and discourages critiques (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson, 2020). As Confucius himself put it: *"commoners do not debate matters of government."* In this vein, some scholars even invoke Confucianism as an explanation of the long and proceeding autocratic history of China (Huntington, 1991; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2020, 2021a). Second, Confucian doctrines are well integrated into China's education system (Jiang, 2016). For instance, they are taught in Chinese literature and history classes and even tested in the college entrance exam in some regions. That is to say, it could be easier for people to accept the pro-government doctrines embedded in education in highly Confucian provinces, where the local norms have been historically more pro-government.

Therefore, we expect an interplay between education and Confucianism in fostering a pro-government prior and then enhancing political trust. To test this hypothesis, we measure Confucianism using Confucian temples (Chen et al., 2020), which are historical sites for Confucian teachings and so capture the spread of Confucianism.[29] Relying on this measurement, a further heterogeneity exercise in Column (2) of Table 3

[28] Though in its reign of the first three decades, the Communist Party tried to extirpate Confucianism that it saw as feudal and backward, its many practices nonetheless were implicitly shaped by Confucian values (Bell, 2010; Perry, 2008). Moreover, in the post-Mao era, the Party rehabilitated and promoted Confucianism, labeling it as China's homegrown political philosophy (Jiang, 2016; Economist, 2021).

[29] Using the same measure, previous literature has provided evidence that Confucianism may lead to conformity to the government. For instance, Kung and Ma (2014) find that peasant rebellions were less likely to occur in areas where Confucian culture was stronger. Alm et al. (2022) find that people were more likely to conform to housing market regulations in cities with stronger Confucian

favors our hypothesis: education's heterogeneous effect is completely driven by Confucianism.

To take a granular look at the interplay between education and Confucianism, we partition our sample by college completion (below versus above college) and Confucianism levels (below versus above median) and conduct subsample analysis based on Equation 6. Figure 8 presents the gap in the anti-corruption campaign's effects on political trust between high and low Confucianism provinces by college completion, which delivers two messages. First, all the gaps are positive, implying that regardless of attaining a college education or not, the drop in political trust induced by the campaign is attenuated or even reverted to an increase in more Confucian provinces. This suggests that Confucianism carries, as it advocates, pro-government attitudes. Second, the positive gaps are much larger for the college-educated, suggesting that Confucianism facilitates pro-government indoctrination inherent in China's education system.

Taken together, we find that the campaign's effect on political trust varies dramatically with educational attainment, and the interplay between education and Confucianism drives it. These findings shed light on the behavioral mechanism through education: education shapes a pro-government prior, which leads to different interpretations of corruption information and political trusting behavior.

6.3 Discussions: Alternative Explanations

We read our results as the anti-corruption campaign affecting political trust by intervening in people's perception of underlying government honesty. However, as we have noted in Section 2.2, changes in political trust may be rendered through other channels related to the anti-corruption campaign. To pin down the interpretations, we consider two possibilities below. We do not find strong evidence that they may threaten our interpretations.

Government Performance. Besides offering information about corruption for people to infer underlying government honesty, the anti-corruption campaign may affect political trust by influencing government performance. We do not think this would threaten our results much, since if anything, stricter monitoring is expected to deter misconduct and improve government performance, making the findings of a negative effect on political trust even more astonishing. However, the campaign could result in a backlash. The performance deteriorates due to a chilling effect: officials shirk to avoid unconsciously making mistakes that would be targeted by the campaign (Wang, 2022).

To address this concern, we investigate the role of government performance in Columns (1)–(3) of Table 5. Column (1) shows that corruption investigations do not significantly affect people's assessment of government performance (measured on a scale from 1–5, the higher the better). This may be reasonable since it is not practical for government performance to improve much in the short run. As expected, Columns (2) and (3) show that controlling government performance does not markedly change the effects of corruption investigations on political trust. Therefore, our findings cannot be explained by the campaign's impacts on government performance.

General Trust. The Chinese society has witnessed various changes under President Xi's Administration, and the anti-corruption campaign was just a tip of the iceberg. One may be concerned that instead of speaking to people's updated views on the government, the negative relationship between political trust and corruption

culture.

investigations we uncover merely reflects changes in general trust (in any subjects, not just in government) due to the anti-corruption campaign or other contemporaneous shocks that correlated with it.

To examine if our findings are just a manifestation of changes in general trust, we conduct a couple of placebo tests that investigate if trust in other groups is affected by the anti-corruption campaign (or shocks correlated with it). We expect to see null effects in these tests if changes in political trust are not driven by changes in general trust. Tellingly, Columns (4)–(6) of Table 5 show that corruption investigations have no impact on trust in parents, strangers, and Americans. That said, our results are specific about changes in people's perceptions about the government rather than about changes in overall willingness to trust.

Signaling. Another alternative interpretation is that by voluntarily disclosing corruption, the government may send out a (credible) signal to people through the anti-corruption campaign: it is now legitimate to criticize the government and lower political trust, which used to be politically incorrect or prohibited as the government portrays itself as impeccable.[30]

We cannot completely rule out this possibility, which requires knowledge about each individual's take on the campaign's nature. Nonetheless, we provide some evidence to show that the signaling story is unable to fully drive our findings. First of all, were signaling the only mechanism at play, the anti-corruption campaign should have universally reduced political trust. However, there are some groups enhancing their political trust following the campaign (see Figure 4a and Section 6.2).

Second, we show that our findings survive excluding those who have been reticent due to deference or fears, so are most prone to lower trust after the campaign's signaling. Table 6 presents this exercise. In Column (1), we exclude members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and those from military families. Party disciplines and indoctrination may cultivate their loyalty to the state, making them see criticizing or reporting distrust in government as a taboo. In Column (2), we exclude those from families that were persecuted in the Communist Revolution in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Persecutions are measured by government-assigned bad class labels (e.g., landlords, rich peasants, and capitalists) and experiences of the Sent-Down Youth Movement and the May Seventh Cadre School, which are elicited in the CFPS 2010 survey. State repression can credibly make them frightened of criticizing the government unless they are allowed to do so (in fact, they can be highly motivated to do so). In the same avenue, Column (3) further excludes those who witnessed the most violent Cultural Revolution — they came of age (reached impressionable years, 18–25) in cities with a large share of the population afflicted (above median) (Alwin and Krosnick, 1991; Walder, 2014). In Column (4), all three groups are excluded.

As Table 6 shows patterns suggesting the signaling story may be minor. We see that after excluding a respective group, the mean pre-campaign trust is not dramatically lower than the full sample mean (0.633), thus, the excluded individuals, who are supposedly reticent, in fact do not report significantly lower trust. In addition, notwithstanding the exclusion of these groups, Table 6 shows that corruption investigations reduce political trust, implying that our results are not entirely driven by the signaling story. Notably, the subsample estimates reported in Columns (3) and (4) are larger than the full sample estimates (cf. Table 1), suggesting the role of signaling may not be the most prominent.

[30] Newman et al. (2021) tells a story in a similar flavor by investigating the effects of the Trump campaigns on demonstrations of racial prejudices. Prejudiced citizens usually tend to constrain the expression of their prejudice. However, they would be emboldened to express and act upon their prejudices if there are political elites (e.g., Trump) doing so.

7 Conclusion

This paper studies the impacts of China's recent anti-corruption campaign on political trust. Using individual panel data to trace the evolution of political trust, we find that the campaign, on average, has reduced political trust. We provide suggestive evidence for two (interrelated) mechanisms. First, the campaign may have worked as an information treatment by improving people's limited knowledge about corruption. Indeed, the drop in political trust is more pronounced among the less informed groups. Moreover, we uncover strong heterogeneity driven by the pro- and anti-government cleavage. Political trust is reduced to a greater extent for those who have unpleasant experiences with the government. Education mitigates this reduction and even reverses it to an increase possibly by forging pro-government sentiments, as exemplified by the strong interplay between education and Confucianism.

Our results suggest that a ruler has to face a dilemma when attempting to advertise a seemingly popular reform. Such a reform inevitably reveals the government's downsides, and its influence, at least in the short run, depends on people's priors about whether the government is good or not, providing land for polarization and backlash should the cleavage in priors be significant. Moreover, it could be hard to alter these effects in the short run. As we have shown, they are rooted in the long-term practices of the government (e.g., censorship, propaganda, governance) as well as cultural norms (e.g., Confucianism).

We close this paper by noting one limitation of our results. We, at best, speak to the short-run effects of the anti-corruption campaign. However, people may update political trust in the long term, making the implications of the anti-corruption campaign on political trust differ. In addition, although we do not find evidence that the effect was operated through the channel of government performance, we conjecture that in the long run, it could matter since the anti-corruption campaign has tremendous economic effects (e.g., Kong et al., 2020; Kong and Qin, 2021; Chen and Kung, 2019; Xu and Yano, 2017; Xu et al., 2021). It may also be interesting for future research to understand the long-run effect, given that the campaign is still proceeding and tends to be an institutional routine.

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Figures

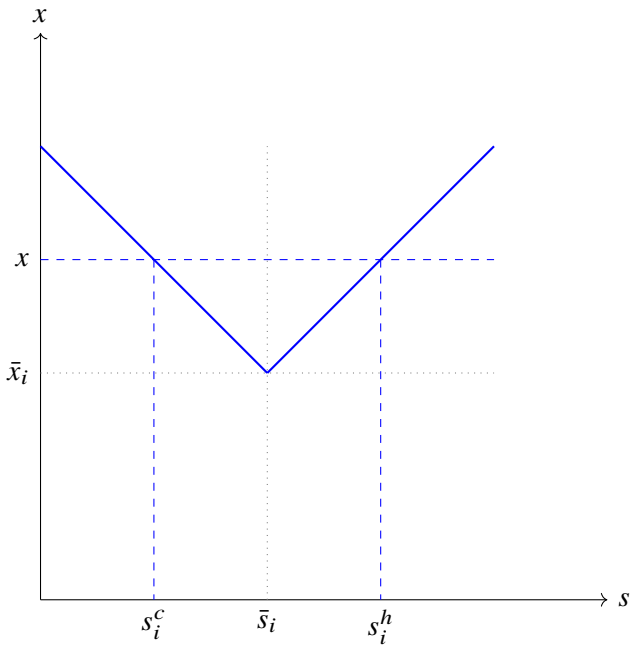


Figure 1: Relationship Between x and s

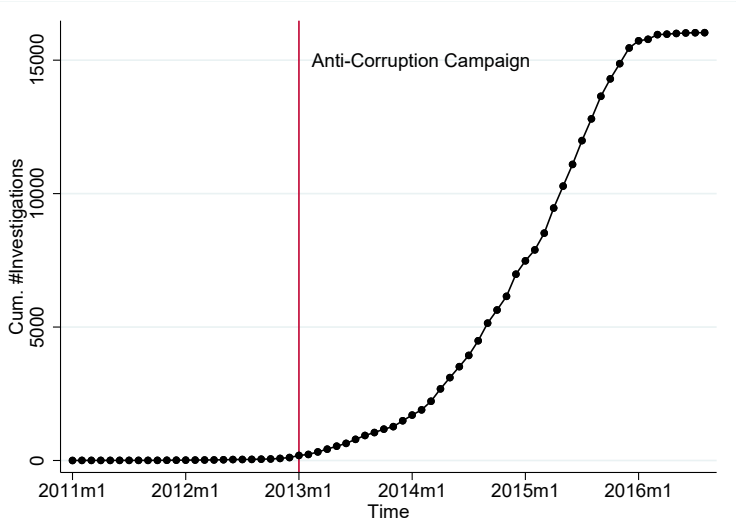


Figure 2: Time Series of Cumulative Investigations

Note: Data from the Tencent database (Wang and Dickson, 2022). The vertical line marks the onset of the anti-corruption campaign started (January 2013).

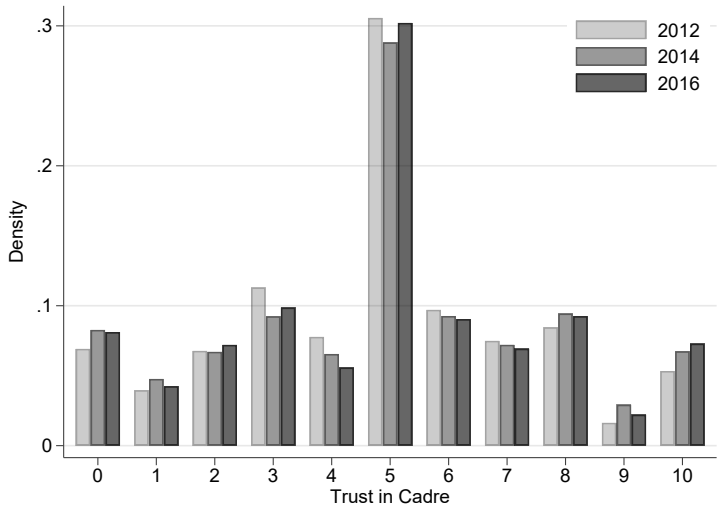
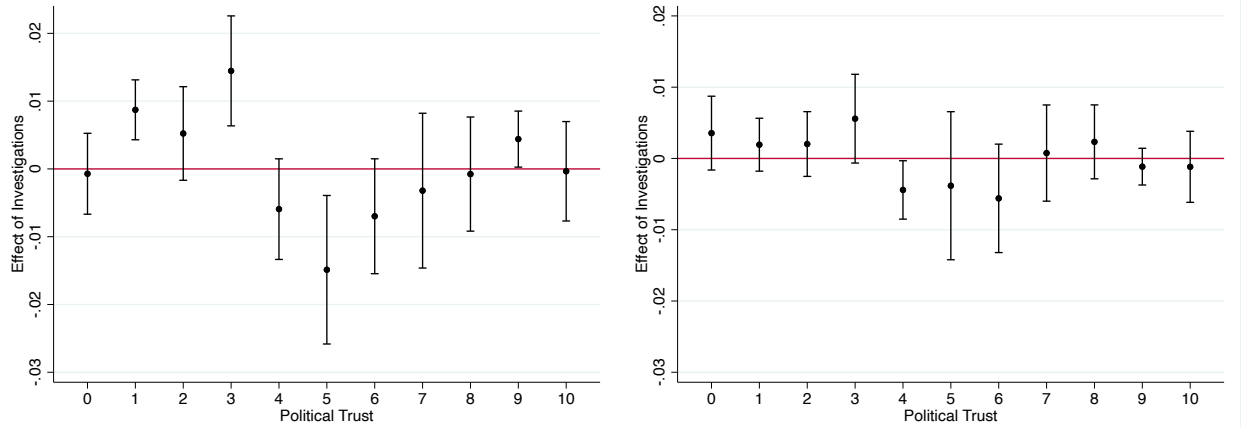


Figure 3: Distribution of Political Trust

Note: Data from CFPS of 2012, 2014, and 2016.



(a) Effects in 2014

(b) Effects in 2016

Figure 4: Effects at Different Margins of Political Trust

Note: We estimate Equation 6 using the dummy variable for each level of political trust as the independent. The estimated coefficients on 2014 investigations are plotted in (a), and the estimated coefficients on 2014 investigations are plotted in (b). The solid points are point estimates, and the caps are 90 percent confidence intervals.

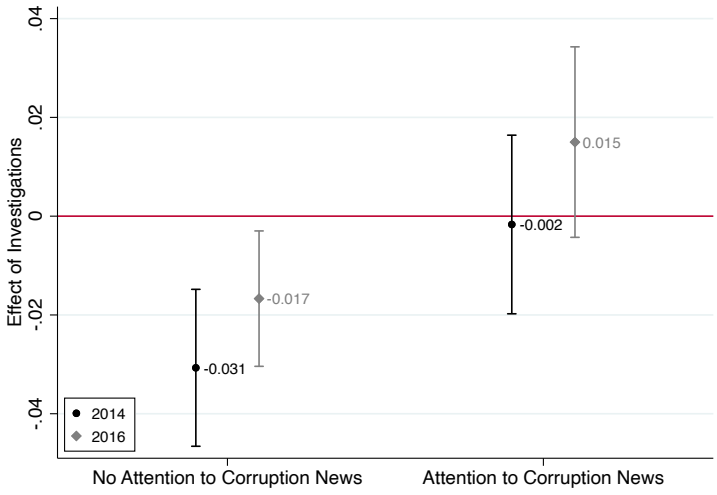
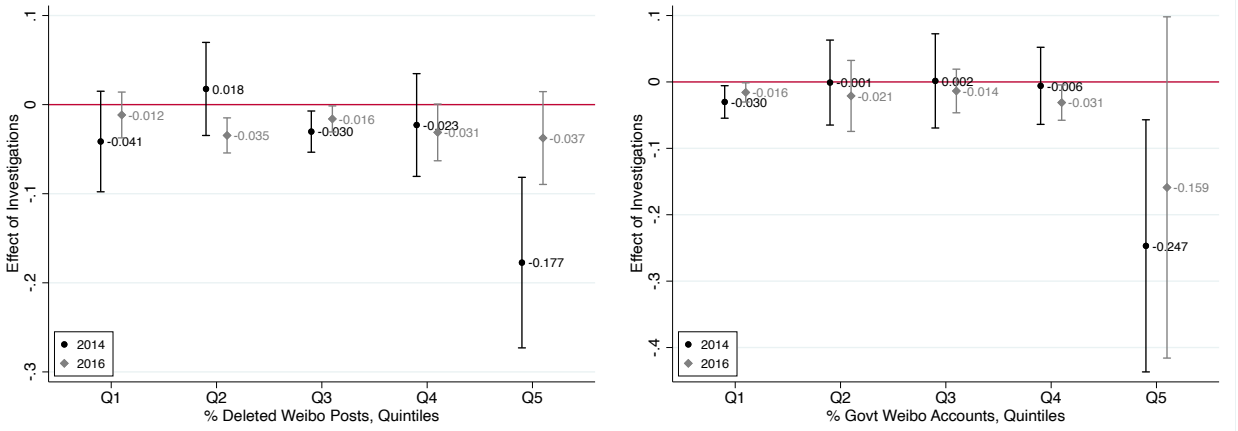


Figure 5: Effects by Attention to Corruption News

Note: The sample is divided into subsamples by individual attention of corruption news (elicited in the CFPS 2012 survey), and Equation 6 is estimated separately in each subsample. The solid points are point estimates, and the caps are 90 percent confidence intervals.



(a) Share of Deleted Weibo Posts

(b) Share of Government Accounts on Weibo

Figure 6: Effects by Censorship and Propaganda

Note: In (a) and (b), the sample is divided into five subsamples by quintiles of deleted Weibo posts or government Weibo users, and Equation 6 is estimated separately in each subsample. The solid points are point estimates, and the caps are 90 percent confidence intervals.

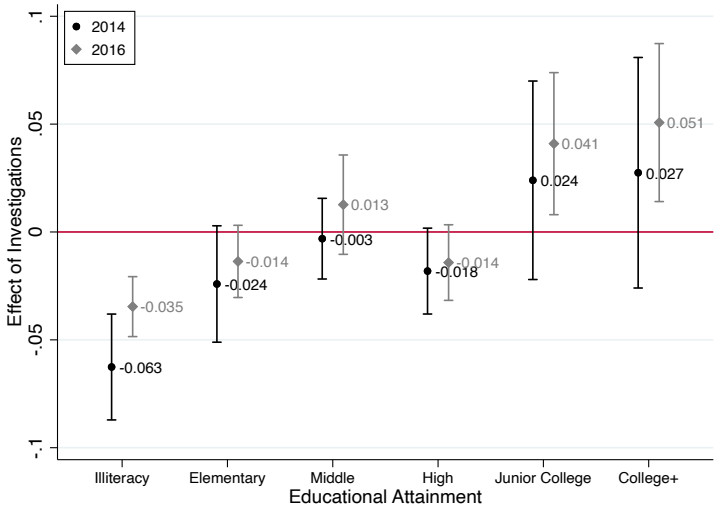


Figure 7: Effects by Educational Attainment

Note: The sample is divided into subsamples by individual educational attainment, and Equation 6 is estimated separately in each subsample. The solid points are point estimates, and the caps are 90 percent confidence intervals.

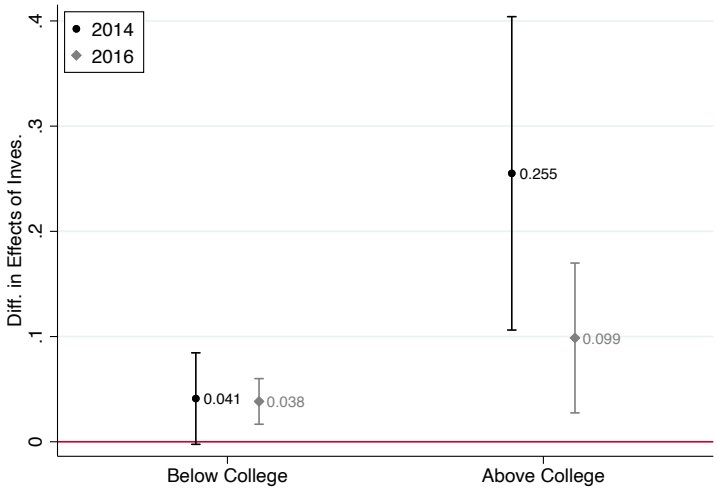


Figure 8: Effects of Education Compared: High Confucianism versus Low Confucianism

Note: The sample is divided into two groups: the below-college-educated and the above-college-educated. Within each group, we further divide individuals by being from high and low Confucianism cities (Confucian temples above or below the median). Then, we estimate Equation 6 in each subsample. The solid points are the differences in effects between high and low Confucianism cities, and the caps are 90 percent confidence intervals.

Tables

Table 1: Effect of Anti-Corruption on Political Trust

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$D^{14} \times T^{14}$	-0.025***	-0.025***	-0.022***	-0.022***
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)
$D^{16} \times T^{16}$	-0.006	-0.006	-0.009	-0.009
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.009)
D.V. mean, pre-campaign	0.633	0.633	0.633	0.633
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cohort × year FE		✓	✓	✓
Indiv. char. × year FE			✓	✓
Fam. bkgd. × year FE				✓
Obs.	35610	35610	35610	35610
R^2	0.505	0.507	0.508	0.509

Note: The dependent variable is the political trust dummy. The number of investigations (D's) is standardized. Individual characteristics include gender, indicators of educational attainment, *hukou* status, han ethnicity, Communist Party membership, and state sector employment. Family background includes parents' educational attainment and their Communist Party membership. Robust standard errors clustered at the city level are reported in parentheses.
* $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

Table 2: Robustness Checks: Further Controls for Differential Trends

	+ ETC × Year FE		+ Province × Year FE	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$D^{14} \times T^{14}$	-0.027***	-0.026***	-0.022***	-0.026**
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.012)
$D^{16} \times T^{16}$	-0.005	-0.004	-0.009	-0.019**
	(0.011)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.008)
D.V. mean, pre-campaign	0.624	0.624	0.633	0.633
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Covariates	✓	✓	✓	✓
ETC × year FE		✓		
Province × year FE				✓
Obs.	18810	18810	35610	35610
R^2	0.523	0.524	0.509	0.511

Note: The dependent variable is the political trust dummy. The number of investigations (D's) is standardized. Covariates include gender, educational attainment, *hukou* status, han ethnicity, Communist Party membership, state sector employment, parental educational attainment, and parental Communist Party membership, all of which are interacted with year dummies. The ETC index is from Cai et al. (2011). Robust standard errors clustered at the city level are reported in parentheses.
$p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

Table 3: Education, Confucianism, and Political Trust

	(1)	(2)
$D^{14} \times T^{14}$	-0.062***	-0.066***
	(0.015)	(0.015)
$D^{16} \times T^{16}$	-0.041***	-0.039***
	(0.008)	(0.009)
$D^{14} \times T^{14} \times$ Schooling	0.005***	-0.001
	(0.001)	(0.004)
$D^{16} \times T^{16} \times$ Schooling	0.004***	-0.000
	(0.001)	(0.002)
$D^{14} \times T^{14} \times$ Schooling $\times$ ln(Conf. temples)		0.001*
		(0.001)
$D^{16} \times T^{16} \times$ Schooling $\times$ ln(Conf. temples)		0.001**
		(0.000)
Schooling mean	6.976	6.822
Confucianism mean	4.584	4.584
Individual FE	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓
Covariates	✓	✓
Obs.	35610	29910
R^2	0.509	0.509

Note: The dependent variable is the political trust dummy. The number of investigations (D's) is standardized. Covariates include gender, educational attainment, *hukou* status, han ethnicity, Communist Party membership, state sector employment, parental educational attainment, and parental Communist Party membership, all of which are interacted with year dummies. Robust standard errors clustered at the city level are reported in parentheses.
$p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

Table 4: Experiences with the Government and Political Trust

	Unfarily Treated		Having Conflicts		Slack Cadres		Asked for Bribes	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
$D^{14} \times T^{14}$	-0.015*	-0.073***	-0.021**	-0.074*	-0.015*	-0.060**	-0.017**	-0.113***
	(0.009)	(0.020)	(0.008)	(0.043)	(0.009)	(0.023)	(0.008)	(0.026)
$D^{16} \times T^{16}$	-0.007	-0.016	-0.008	-0.042	-0.007	-0.013	-0.006	-0.041*
	(0.009)	(0.015)	(0.009)	(0.028)	(0.010)	(0.013)	(0.009)	(0.021)
D.V. mean, pre-campaign	0.657	0.465	0.647	0.456	0.663	0.485	0.653	0.470
p-value, 2014 diff.		0.012		0.182		0.069		0.000
p-value, 2016 diff.		0.547		0.170		0.705		0.057
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Covariates	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs.	32307	3159	34269	1251	31017	4446	33129	2349
R^2	0.497	0.580	0.506	0.577	0.497	0.554	0.501	0.580

Note: The dependent variable is the political trust dummy. The number of investigations (D's) is standardized. Covariates include gender, educational attainment, *hukou* status, han ethnicity, Communist Party membership, state sector employment, parental educational attainment, and parental Communist Party membership, all of which are interacted with year dummies. Robust standard errors clustered at the city level are reported in parentheses.
$p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

Table 5: Alternative Interpretations: Government Performance and General Trust

	Govt. Performance			Trust in Other Groups		
	(1) Performance	(2) Political Trust	(3) Political Trust	(4) Parents	(5) Strangers	(6) Americans
$D^{14} \times T^{14}$	0.035	-0.018**	-0.020***	-0.003	0.009	-0.000
	(0.028)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.002)	(0.010)	(0.016)
$D^{16} \times T^{16}$	0.019	-0.008	-0.009	-0.000	0.003	0.006
	(0.020)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.001)	(0.005)	(0.006)
Performance			0.062***			
			(0.004)			
D.V. mean, pre-campaign	3.412	0.632	0.632	0.981	0.183	0.260
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Covariates	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs.	33078	33078	33078	33017	33020	32524
R^2	0.511	0.510	0.516	0.400	0.469	0.488

Note: The number of investigations (D's) is standardized. Covariates include gender, educational attainment, *hukou* status, han ethnicity, Communist Party membership, state sector employment, parental educational attainment, and parental Communist Party membership, all of which are interacted with year dummies. Robust standard errors clustered at the city level are reported in parentheses.
$p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

Table 6: Alternative Interpretations: Signaling

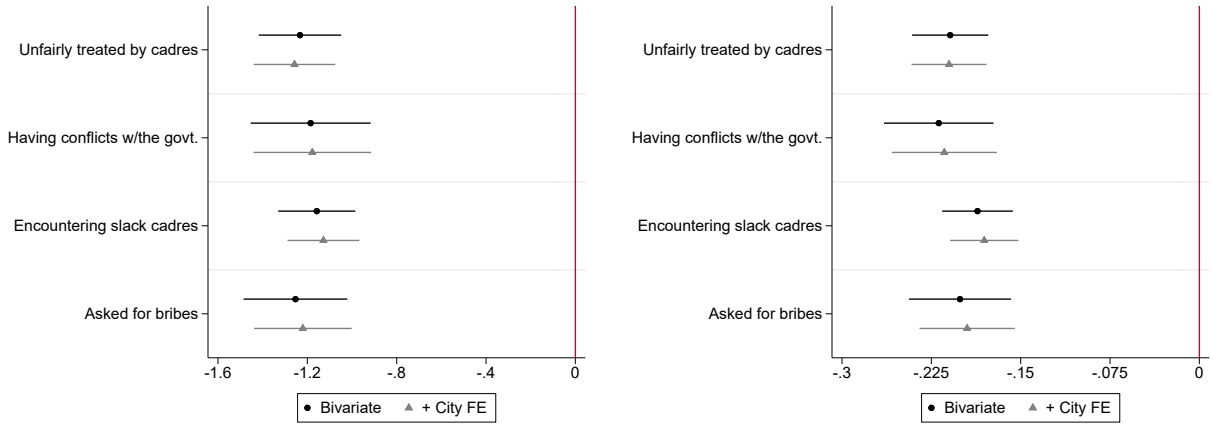
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$D^{14} \times T^{14}$	-0.019**	-0.018**	-0.054**	-0.045*
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.026)	(0.026)
$D^{16} \times T^{16}$	-0.010	-0.008	-0.044***	-0.042***
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.010)
Excluded	CPC & Military	Hit by Revolutions	Witnessed Violent CR	All 3 Groups
D.V. mean, pre-campaign	0.628	0.640	0.627	0.630
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Covariates	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs.	31242	31098	13122	10551
R^2	0.506	0.504	0.510	0.505

Note: The dependent variable is the political trust dummy. The number of investigations (D's) is standardized. Covariates include gender, educational attainment, *hukou* status, han ethnicity, Communist Party membership, state sector employment, parental educational attainment, and parental Communist Party membership, all of which are interacted with year dummies. Robust standard errors clustered at the city level are reported in parentheses.
$p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

Online Appendix

(Not for Publication)

A Additional Figures

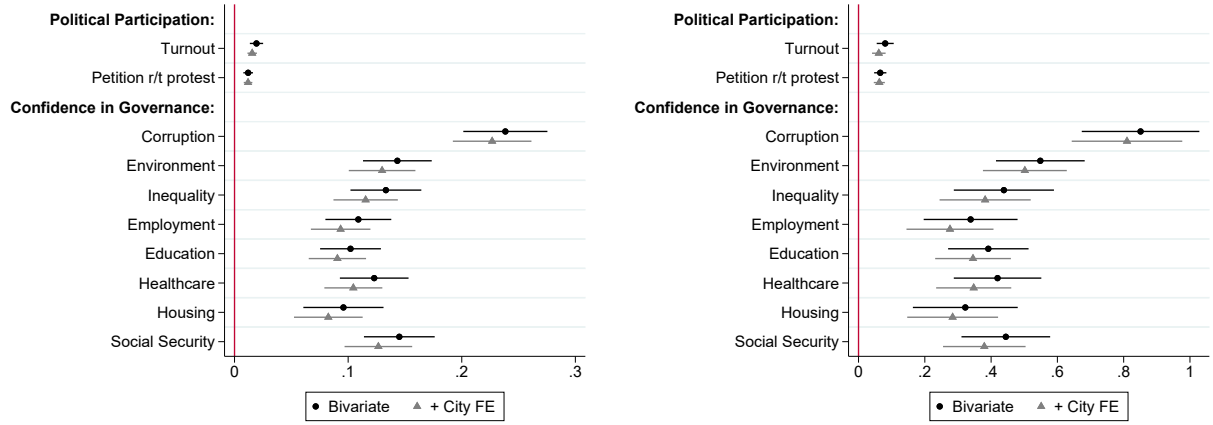


(a) Trust Scores (0-10)

(b) Trust Dummy

Figure A1: Correlates of Political Trust

Note: In this figure, political trust is regressed on unpleasant experiences with the government. The solid dots are point estimates of coefficients on experiences, and the caps are 90 percent confidence intervals. Robust standard errors are clustered at the city level.



(a) Trust Scores (0-10)

(b) Trust Dummy

Figure A2: Outcomes of Political Trust

Note: In this figure, political outcomes are regressed political trust (measured on a 0–10 scale or using a dummy). There are two categories of behavioral outcomes: (1) political participation (voting in grassroots elections, petitioning rather than protesting if there is dissent); (2) confidence in the governance of several issues. The solid dots are point estimates of coefficients on political trust, and the caps are 90 percent confidence intervals. Robust standard errors are clustered at the city level.

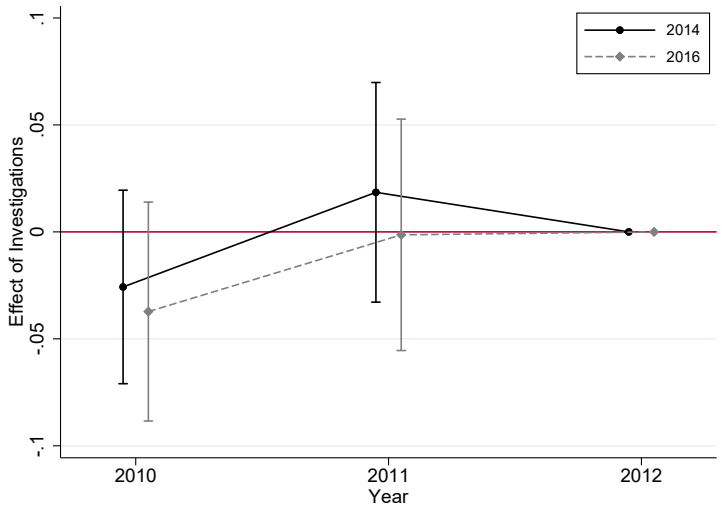


Figure A3: Effects of Investigations on Political Trust Before 2012

Note: China General Social Survey (CGSS) elicited political trust (in local government) in 2010, 2011, and 2012 (before the campaign). In this figure, we regress political trust on upcoming investigations in 2014 and 2016 (province level, as CGSS only provides a province identifier) interacted dummies of 2010, 2011, and 2012, controlling for province and year fixed effects. The number of investigations (D) is standardized. The solid dots are point estimates of coefficients on investigations, and the caps are 90 percent confidence intervals. Robust standard errors are clustered at the province level.

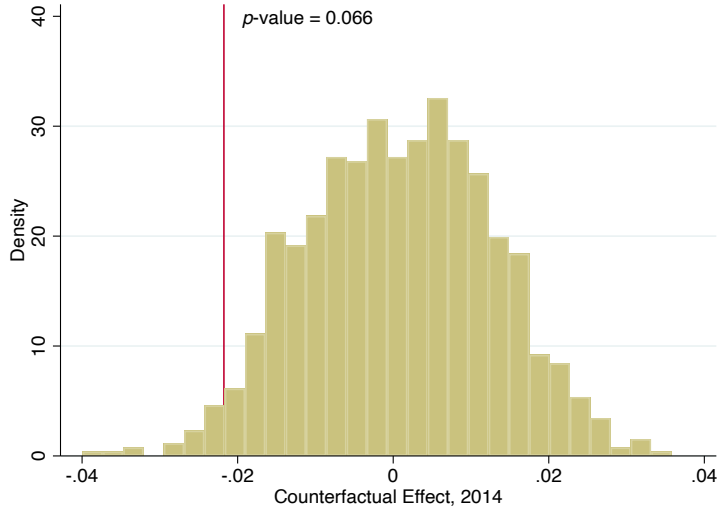


Figure A4: Placebo Test

Note: This figure is derived from 1,000 permutations. The bars display the distribution of counterfactual estimates. The vertical line marks the true estimate.

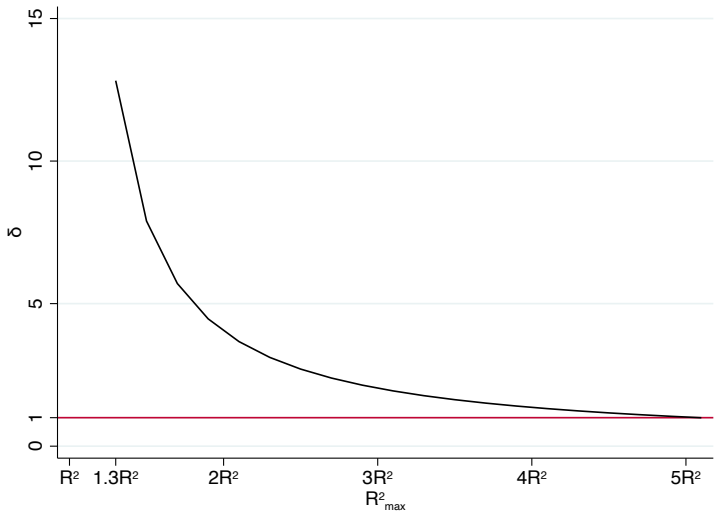


Figure A5: Oster's δ

Note: The figure plots the δ statistic against different choices of $R^2_{\max}$. For details, see (Oster, 2019).

B Additional Tables

Table A1: Summary Statistics

	Measuring Time	Source	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Panel (A): Anti-Corruption							
# Corruption investigations	2012, 14, 16	0	35610	28.652	37.857	0	262
Panel (B): Attitudes							
Trust: cadres	2012, 14, 16	1	35610	4.879	2.623	0	10
Trust: parents	2012, 14, 16	1	35536	9.313	1.475	0	10
Trust: strangers	2012, 14, 16	1	35528	1.902	2.066	0	10
Trust: Americans	2012, 14, 16	1	34858	2.126	2.402	0	10
Government performance	2012, 14, 16	1	34628	3.411	0.909	1	5
Panel (C): Experiences							
Experience: unfairly teated by cadres	2012	1	35466	0.089	0.285	0	1
Experience: having conflicts w/cadres	2012	1	35520	0.035	0.184	0	1
Experience: slack cadres	2012	1	35463	0.125	0.331	0	1
Experience: asked for bribes	2012	1	35478	0.066	0.249	0	1
Panel (D): Covariates							
Birth cohort	2012	1	35610	1967.386	10.539	1950	1990
Male	2012	1	35610	0.467	0.499	0	1
Han ethnicity	2012	1	35610	0.925	0.263	0	1
Urban	2012	1	35610	0.463	0.499	0	1
Degree completed	2012	1	35610	2.540	1.288	1	6
Communist Party member	2012	1	35610	0.075	0.263	0	1
State sector employee	2012	1	35610	0.080	0.272	0	1
Degree completed, father	2010	1	35610	1.874	1.055	1	6
Degree completed, mother	2010	1	35610	1.440	0.799	1	6
Communist Party member, father	2010	1	35610	0.161	0.367	0	1
Communist Party member, mother	2010	1	35610	0.023	0.149	0	1
Panel (E): Other Variables							
ETC index	2002–04	2	18810	0.012	0.005	0.003	0.025
Attention to corruption news	2010	1	35610	0.231	0.422	0	1
% Delted Weibo posts	2009–13	3	33525	0.182	0.048	0.120	0.285
% Govt. Weibo users	2009–13	3	33525	0.041	0.010	0.025	0.061
ln(# Confucian temples)	Ming-Qing	4	29910	4.584	1.526	0	8.677
Military Family	2010	1	35610	0.063	0.243	0	1
Family purged in Revolutions	2010	1	35610	0.127	0.333	0	1
Witnessed violent CR	2010	5	35610	0.626	0.484	0	1

Source: 0 = Wang and Dickson (2022), 1 = CFPS, 2 = Cai et al. (2011), 3 = Qin et al. (2017), 4 = Chen and Kung (2019), 5 = defined by authors based on Walder (2014).

Table A2: Correlates of Cumulative Investigations

	Cum. Investigations 2014		Cum. Investigations 2016	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Political trust dummy (2012)	0.130*	0.023	0.156**	0.026
	(0.069)	(0.074)	(0.071)	(0.065)
% Public employment	-0.076**	-0.011	-0.108***	-0.016
	(0.033)	(0.042)	(0.033)	(0.037)
% Private employment	-0.313***	-0.009	-0.317***	-0.101
	(0.107)	(0.213)	(0.100)	(0.228)
ln(GDP p.c.)	0.163	0.131	-0.098	-0.058
	(0.195)	(0.245)	(0.190)	(0.201)
ln(tax p.c.)	-0.286	-0.479*	-0.128	-0.340*
	(0.213)	(0.247)	(0.181)	(0.191)
ln(wage rate)	0.575***	0.832**	0.614***	0.821***
	(0.193)	(0.410)	(0.170)	(0.296)
GR. % public employment	-0.059	-0.081	-0.116*	-0.127*
	(0.061)	(0.084)	(0.064)	(0.076)
GR. % private employment	-0.195**	-0.248	-0.236**	-0.302
	(0.095)	(0.205)	(0.112)	(0.204)
GR. ln(GDP p.c.)	-0.010	-0.038	-0.017	-0.050
	(0.041)	(0.073)	(0.050)	(0.069)
GR. ln(tax p.c.)	0.167	0.228*	0.092	0.189*
	(0.110)	(0.134)	(0.088)	(0.099)
GR. ln(wage rate)	-0.112***	-0.076	-0.131***	-0.070
	(0.033)	(0.061)	(0.036)	(0.049)
Province FE		✓		✓
F stat.	7.865	0.797	8.779	1.020
F-test p-value	0.000	0.643	0.000	0.438
Obs.	113	113	113	113
R^2	0.351	0.562	0.310	0.637

Note: All dependents and independents are standardized. "GR." = growth rate. Economic variables are an average of values from 2000 to 2010. Robust standard errors are reported in the parentheses. The null for the F test is that coefficients on all independents are zero.
* $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

Table A3: Effect of Anti-Corruption on Political Trust (Scale 0–10)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
$D^{14} \times T^{14}$	-0.095**	-0.093**	-0.073*	-0.070*
	(0.041)	(0.042)	(0.040)	(0.039)
$D^{16} \times T^{16}$	-0.031	-0.031	-0.045	-0.046
	(0.042)	(0.041)	(0.040)	(0.040)
D.V. mean, pre-campaign	4.828	4.828	4.828	4.828
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cohort × year FE		✓	✓	✓
Indiv. char. × year FE			✓	✓
Fam. bkgd. × year FE				✓
Obs.	35610	35610	35610	35610
R^2	0.568	0.570	0.571	0.572

Note: The dependent variable is the political trust scale (0–10). The number of investigations (D's) is standardized. Individual characteristics include gender, indicators of educational attainment, *hukou* status, han ethnicity, Communist Party membership, and state sector employment. Family background includes parents' educational attainment and their Communist Party membership. Robust standard errors clustered at the city level are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$

Table A4: Robustness Check: Heterogeneity-Robust Estimator

	β	SE	p-value
2014, 25%	-0.040	0.023	0.079
2014, 50%	-0.036	0.019	0.061
2016, 25%	-0.015	0.014	0.283
2016, 50%	-0.008	0.012	0.485

Note: The dependent variable is the political trust dummy. de Chaisemartin et al. (2022)'s heterogeneity-robust estimator is implemented. For implementation, a low-intensity group needs to be defined for comparison. I define it as being below the first quartile or the median.

Table A5: Education, Socioeconomic Status, and Political Trust

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
$D^{14} \times T^{14}$	-0.062***	-0.057***	-0.063***	-0.063***	-0.059***
	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.017)
$D^{16} \times T^{16}$	-0.041***	-0.047***	-0.042***	-0.042***	-0.048***
	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.009)
$D^{14} \times T^{14} \times$ Schooling	0.005***	0.005***	0.006***	0.006***	0.006***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
$D^{16} \times T^{16} \times$ Schooling	0.004***	0.004***	0.005***	0.005***	0.004***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
$D^{14} \times T^{14} \times$ Urban *hukou*		-0.007			-0.006
		(0.017)			(0.017)
$D^{16} \times T^{16} \times$ Urban *hukou*		0.017			0.017
		(0.011)			(0.012)
$D^{14} \times T^{14} \times$ CPC member			-0.042**		-0.039**
			(0.019)		(0.020)
$D^{16} \times T^{16} \times$ CPC member			-0.011		-0.010
			(0.014)		(0.014)
$D^{14} \times T^{14} \times$ State employee				-0.022	-0.018
				(0.015)	(0.015)
$D^{16} \times T^{16} \times$ State employee				-0.007	-0.008
				(0.013)	(0.013)
D.V. mean, pre-campaign	0.633	0.633	0.633	0.633	0.633
Individual FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Covariates	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs.	35610	35610	35610	35610	35610
R^2	0.509	0.509	0.509	0.509	0.509

Note: The dependent variable is the political trust dummy. The number of investigations (D's) is standardized. Individual characteristics include gender, indicators of educational attainment, *hukou* status, han ethnicity, Communist Party membership, and state sector employment. Family background includes parents' educational attainment and their Communist Party membership. Robust standard errors clustered at the city level are reported in parentheses.
$p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$