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The bases of political trust in six Asian societies: Institutional and cultural explanations compared

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Abstract

Political trust reflects people's evaluative orientation toward the polity and is thus vital to regime stability. Based on data drawn from a cross-national social survey, this article examines the level of political trust in six Asian societies and the possible effects of a series of institutional and cultural factors on political trust. It finds that institutional factors, particularly the economic and political performance of government, are powerful determinants of political trust, whereas the effects of such cultural factors as post-materialism, traditionalism, and authoritarianism are either insignificant or weak. The superiority of the institutional approach over the cultural approach is reconfirmed.

Keywords

political trust, political support, policy performance, cultural orientation, East Asian societies

Political trust can be regarded as an evaluative orientation of citizens toward their political system, or some part of it, based upon their normative expectations (Hetherington, 1998: 791; Miller, 1974: 952). It is 'a summary judgment that the system is responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny' (Miller and Listhaug, 1990: 358). It links ordinary citizens to the political system that is intended to represent them (Mishler and Rose, 2001: 30). It is thus vital to good governance, legitimacy, the sustainability of the political system, and regime stability. In new democracies, a high level of political trust can facilitate democratic consolidation, while a low level of trust may result in democratic breakdown and even a return to authoritarianism. In authoritarian regimes, political trust is also crucial, as it reflects how strongly such regimes are holding on to power (Wang et al., 2006), regardless of whether citizens are so intimidated by the government that they cannot openly express their distrust or whether citizens' attitudes have been shaped by the information and propaganda manipulated by the government. Even in established democracies,

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political trust is not a given. In fact, scholars have found that many established democracies are suffering a long-term crisis of a low level of political trust, and worry that the democratic system could eventually collapse (Blind, 2006: 8–10). Political trust has, in consequence, become an important issue in political and academic circles. Different theoretical approaches and analytical models have been developed to explain it (Catterberg and Moreno, 2005; Mishler and Rose, 2001).

Despite the extensive attention given to political trust, there is no consensus on how to define and measure the underlying concept. Yet there is general agreement on the importance of distinguishing among the objects of trust. For example, the nature and consequences of trust in a political system are different from those of trust in political actors, such as politicians, political parties, and incumbent governments (Grönlund and Setälä, 2007). Thus far, research has focused on trust in government, which was described by Warren Miller as an independent variable in search of a dependent variable. According to Levi and Stoker (2000), the search has been successful – whether citizens judge a government to be trustworthy influences whether they become politically active, how they vote, whether they favor policy or institutional reforms, whether they comply with the political authorities, and whether they trust one another.

The main objective of this study is to examine the level and determinants of political trust in six Asian societies (China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan) by using data from a cross-national survey. In view of the diversity of the political systems of the six societies, our focus is on trust in government. Although the six societies have historically been under the influence of traditional Confucian culture, they differ to varying degrees in their ethnic, historical, socioeconomic, and political situations. For example, although these Asian societies have been classified by the World Bank (1993) as high-performing economies and their economic growth rates are expected to continue at high levels for at least another generation (Fogel, 2004), their levels of economic development still vary widely, with Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong the most advanced, followed by South Korea and Taiwan, while China is still a developing country. China also lags behind the other five societies on the Human Development Index and the A.T. Kearney/Foreign Policy Globalization Index (see Table 1). It is in the area of political systems, however, that the six societies show the greatest diversity. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are classified as democracies, Singapore and Hong Kong have hybrid regimes, and China has an authoritarian regime (*The Economist*, 2008). In a similar vein, although Singapore and Hong Kong rank at the top of the Fraser Institute's Economic Freedom Index and the Globalization Index, their rankings on the Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index are relatively low (see Table 1). Such sociopolitical disparities among these societies should provide the needed variations to test the relative importance of different theoretical explanations of political trust in the context of Asia. Since these high-performing Asian societies have tended to develop from within their own cultural-political framework, rather than adopting western patterns,[1] a study of the similarities and differences in the level and determinants of political trust in Asia would provide us with a reference for comparative studies of political trust.

Theoretical approaches to political trust

There are two broad theoretical approaches that compete to explain political trust: the institutional and the cultural (Mishler and Rose, 2001: 31). The institutional approach is based upon the rational choice perspective.[2] Adherents of this approach argue that political trust is endogenous; that is, that it arises from rational responses by individuals to the performance of political institutions (March, 1988; North, 1990). Institutionalists therefore typically emphasize the importance of policy outcomes

Table 1. Socioeconomic Background, 2008

	Authoritarian/hybrid regime			Democratic regime		
	China	Hong Kong	Singapore	Taiwan	South Korea	Japan
Population (million)[e]	1,327.7	7.0	4.7	23.2	48.6	127.7
GDP (billion US$)[e]	4,222.4	223.8	192.8	424.1	953.5	4,844.4
GDP per capita (US$)[e]	3,180.4	31,849.0	41,291.1	18,306.1	19,638.0	37,940.5
Religious culture[f]	Confucian	Confucian	Confucian	Confucian	Confucian	Japanese
Ranking of Democracy Index[g]	136	84	82	33	28	17
Ranking of Human Development Index[a,h]	81	21	25	23[d]	26	8
Ranking of Economic Freedom Index[b,i]	93	1	2	18	29	27
Ranking of World Press Freedom Index[j]	167	51	144	36	47	29
Ranking of Globalization Index[c,k]	66	2	1	37	35	28

Note:
[a] 2005 data.
[b] 2006 data.
[c] 2007 data.
[d] The Human Development Report did not include data for Taiwan. The Taiwanese government calculated its Human Development Index as of 2005 to be 0.932. If the figures for Taiwan were included in the Human Development Index as of 2005, Taiwan would rank 23rd (Directorate General of Budget, 2007).

Source:
[e] International Monetary Fund (2008).
[f] Norris and Inglehart (2004: 140–1); Khan (2001: 20).
[g] *The Economist* (2008).
[h] United Nations (2008: 229–30); Directorate General of Budget (2007).
[i] Gwartney and Lawson (2008: 8).
[j] Reporters Without Borders (2008).
[k] A.T. Kearney/Foreign Policy (2007).

and political actors' calculations of such outcomes. For them, trust in political institutions is a function of the extent to which these institutions produce desired outcomes (Przeworski et al., 1996). Political trust therefore depends on the ability of the government to deliver good policies in the eyes of the people.

In contrast to the institutional approach, proponents of the cultural approach view political trust as exogenous; that is, as originating not in the political sphere, but outside of it, in the cultural values and beliefs of the people, which have been learned through socialization in early life. For culturalists, rational calculations of policy outcomes are not made on neutral, unmediated ground. Instead, political actors' responses to policy outcomes are shaped by different cultural orientations that assign meanings and values to events (Mishler and Rose, 2001; Shi, 2001). In other words, the effects of people's evaluations of institutional performance are not independent, but conditioned by cultural norms and values, and vary across cultures and societies (Almond and Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1997). People with different cultural orientations may respond to similar policy outcomes in different ways. This does not mean that culturalists deny the effects of institutional performance on people's orientations. What they argue is that changes in cultural orientations may not

catch up with institutional changes. Hence, people's cultural orientations can independently affect their perceptions of political institutions, and these effects cannot be relegated to the effects of institutional performance.

The institutional and cultural approaches have received different degrees of empirical support. With regard to the institutional approach, studies have revealed that policy performance, especially economic performance, is the single major determinant of political trust in various established democracies in the West, where the structure and character of political institutions are basically stable (Hetherington, 2005; Przeworski et al., 1996). The trustworthiness of a government depends largely on the extent to which it produces desired economic outcomes. However, some scholars have pointed out that in new democracies or nondemocratic regimes in which the structure and character of political institutions are still taking shape, political outputs, such as reducing corruption and protecting human rights and freedoms, can matter as much as economic outputs (Diamond, 1999; Wong et al., 2009).

On the other hand, in support of the cultural approach, Christensen and Lægreid (2005) have shown that political culture and such socio-demographic variables as age, education, and occupation also have a role to play in shaping political trust. Many scholars further observe that political trust has been declining in almost all established democracies in recent decades, and they attribute this phenomenon to the materialist–post-materialist value shift or the rising importance of self-expressive values (Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 1999). They argue that long-term economic prosperity and sociopolitical stability will cause people to shift from materialist concerns about physiological sustenance and safety toward a post-materialist emphasis on self-expression, individual autonomy, diversity, aesthetic satisfaction, and so on (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). Such a value shift will in turn give rise to 'critical citizens,' who will evaluate the political authorities using more demanding standards (Catterberg and Moreno, 2005; Inglehart and Norris, 2003), and will be less deferential to authority and increasingly ready to challenge their government (Norris, 2002). However, in a study of 10 post-communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union, Mishler and Rose (2001) found that the results strongly supported the superiority of the institutional approach to political trust, while providing little support for the cultural approach.

In recent years, research into both approaches has also been conducted in Asia. For example, Chen et al. (1997) found that the level of political support in China is not low and that, in line with the institutional argument, evaluations of policy performance are important determinants of political support in that country. Wang (2005) also argued that the legitimacy of the Chinese government largely depends on its economic performance. Economic success has been accompanied by a steady improvement in living standards for the masses; by growing regional and global political influence through the promotion of multilateralism, economic diplomacy, and 'good neighborliness' (Ikegami, 2009); by a significant rise of nationalism (Zhao, 2004); by an increasing emphasis on social stability and social harmony (Wang, 2006); and by the perpetuation of one-party authoritarian rule. However, Wang (2005) observed that self-expressive values are slowly emerging in China and may eventually cause the Chinese people to become more critical of their government. On the other hand, Shi (2001) compared China and Taiwan from the angle of cultural values, examining the influence of traditional culture on political trust. He found that political trust in Taiwan is affected more by the performance of its democratic government than by traditional cultural values. In contrast, political trust in China depends more on traditional cultural values, particularly on the Chinese preference for hierarchical order and on their collective spirit, which is characterized by a willingness to sacrifice personal interests for social harmony. Similarly, in a comparative study of

eight Asian societies (China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Mongolia), Ma (2007) discovered that in those societies in which authoritarianism is strong, political trust is also high. He thus argued that in a traditional culture political leaders and governments occupy an important symbolic authoritative status in society, and that the worship, sensitivity, and dependence of the people toward authority could easily have a profound effect on their political trust. Moreover, other scholars have observed that the transition from materialism to post-materialism seen in many advanced countries in the West is also occurring in such Asian societies as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China and is beginning to have an impact on political trust in these places (Wang and Tan, 2006; Wong and Wan, 2009). Such findings show that improvements in socioeconomic conditions may not necessarily strengthen people's trust in their government and political system. The emergence of post-materialist values could also have a negative impact on the development of political trust.

The above literature review suggests that political trust is shaped by both institutional and cultural factors, but which approach (institutional or cultural) is more powerful is, so far, not totally clear. Our major hypotheses, which have been extracted from the related literature, are as follows.

1. People with a more favorable evaluation of their government's policy performance will be more likely to show a higher level of political trust.
2. People with a higher level of life satisfaction will be more likely to show a higher level of political trust. The basic reason for this is that well-being increases confidence in others, while ill-being produces suspicion and mistrust (Catterberg and Moreno, 2005: 41).
3. People who place a stronger emphasis on traditional culture or have a greater respect for traditional authority will be more likely to show a higher level of political trust than those who do not.
4. People in more affluent societies, such as Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, are more likely to have a stronger post-materialist orientation than those in less affluent ones. Although a post-materialist orientation is fundamentally a pro-democracy orientation, it also gives rise to 'critical citizens' who tend to hold challenging views toward established authority. We thus expect that people with a stronger post-materialist orientation are more likely to express a lower level of political trust.

The first two hypotheses are derived from the institutional approach, while the last two are from the cultural approach.

Data and measures

Source of data

The data used in this study came from the fourth AsiaBarometer Survey, conducted in 2006. The project covered seven Asian societies, namely, mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam. Since the Vietnam survey did not ask questions about political trust, this country was excluded from our study. The participants in the surveys of the six societies under study consisted of adults aged 20–69. The sample was a probability sample. The survey employed a structured questionnaire, and data were collected through face-to-face household interviews. Except for the China survey, in which some 2000 people were interviewed, the surveys of the other five societies each had a sample of about 1000 respondents.[3]

Measurement of variables

Political trust. As mentioned above, we followed the mainstream and confined our analysis to trust in the central government. Most measures generally in use have been derived from the 'trust-in-government' questions of the National Election Studies (NES) dating from 1958 and the 'confidence in institutions' questions from the General Social Survey (GSS) dating from 1973. In the bulk of the survey-based research that has been conducted on the subject, a trust index has been used, with no consensus on the number of items or on the objects of trust (Gershtenson and Plane, 2007: 1–2). As observed by Cook and Gronke (2005: 792), one downside of an index that brings together too many institutions is that 'it cannot represent trust in political institutions.' We thus followed their methods and limited the objects of trust to the three branches of government: the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Those surveyed were asked to respond to the following statements: 'Please indicate to what extent you trust [the central government/the parliament or congress/the legal system] to operate in the best interests of society. If you don't know what to reply or have no particular opinion, please say so.' The response categories were coded on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (greatly distrust) to 4 (greatly trust), which can capture a fuller range of trust and distrust in government than the NES and GSS measures that equate lack of trust with distrust. A simple composite index, named the 'political trust index,' was constructed by taking the mean value of the above three indicators.[4] The higher the score, the higher the level of political trust.

Evaluation of policy performance. Policy performance was divided into economic performance and political performance, each consisting of two indicators, to differentiate their respective impact on political trust. The indicators of economic performance include dealing with the economy and dealing with the problem of unemployment,[5] while the two indicators of political performance are dealing with problems of political corruption and dealing with human rights problems. The response categories were coded on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very poor) to 4 (very good). Two respective simple composite indexes, named the 'economic performance index' and the 'political performance index,' were constructed by taking the mean value of the corresponding indicators.[6] The higher the score, the more favorable the evaluation.

Life satisfaction. Since life satisfaction encompasses different facets, we chose six personal domains of life by which to measure the respondents' satisfaction: housing, standard of living, household income, health, education, and job. The response categories were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). A simple composite index, named the 'life satisfaction index,' was constructed by taking the mean value of the above six indicators.[7] The higher the score is, the greater the degree of life satisfaction.

Cultural orientations. This mainly measures the possible influence of three cultural factors on political trust, namely, traditionalism, authoritarianism, and post-materialism. First, we measured traditionalism by asking the respondents for their views on the following statement: 'The traditional culture of our country is superior to that of other countries.' The response categories were coded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The higher the score, the stronger the orientation toward traditionalism. Second, authoritarianism was measured by asking the respondents directly whether greater respect for traditional authority is a good thing or a bad thing.[8] The response categories were coded on a three-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (a bad thing) to 3 (a good thing). The higher the score, the stronger the orientation

toward authoritarianism. Third, post-materialism was measured by using Inglehart's four-choice measure to gauge an individual's value priorities.[9] The respondents were asked the following question: 'If you have to choose, which one of the following would you say is the most important? And which would be the second most important? (1) maintaining order in the nation; (2) giving people more say in important government decisions; (3) fighting rising prices; and (4) protecting freedom of speech.' This question yielded relative rankings for four societal goals that reflect materialist and post-materialist needs. Two of these goals measure materialist needs. Specifically, fighting rising prices involves the need for sustenance and maintaining order in the nation involves the need for safety. The remaining two goals assess post-materialist needs. Specifically, having more say in government involves the need for belonging and esteem, while protecting free speech involves intellectual needs. Based on the results of these value priorities, the respondents were then divided into the following three value types: 1 indicating a materialist, 2 indicating a mixed type, and 3 indicating a post-materialist.[10]

The six societies differ significantly in the way their people evaluate their government's policy performance, their personal life satisfaction, and such cultural orientations as traditionalism, authoritarianism, and post-materialism. These are summarized in the Appendix and Table A1.

Level of political trust

Table 2 lists the mean value of the trust that the six societies have in the three branches of government as well as the mean value of the overall political trust index. On overall political trust, the highest is found in Singapore, followed by China and Hong Kong. Their respective mean values of the political trust index are 3.16, 2.98, and 2.55, all of which are higher than the scale midpoint of 2.50. In contrast, all of the mean values of the index of the other three societies are below the scale midpoint, with South Korea being the lowest (1.93), followed by Taiwan (2.06) and Japan (2.38).[11] Since South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan belong to the camp of new or established democracies while Singapore, Hong Kong, and China are only partially democratic or even undemocratic, these results suggest that a nondemocratic system does not necessarily inhibit political trust and a democratic system does not necessarily strengthen it.[12] The difference in political trust among these six societies is also apparently not directly related to levels of economic development, because the camp of lower political trust and the camp of higher political trust both include societies with different levels of economic development. In other words, an explanation of the difference in political trust in these six Asian societies must go beyond that of simply regime or economic determinism and be sought elsewhere.

Apart from the different levels of overall political trust in these six societies, in each society people's attitudes toward the executive, legislative, and judicial branches are not necessarily uniform. Discrepancies between levels of trust in the three branches, that is the difference between the highest and the lowest mean values, are most prominent in South Korea, China, and Japan, at .67, .46, and .44, respectively. The corresponding figures for Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are merely .14, .18, and .19, respectively. Except for China, where the judicial branch is least trusted, the general pattern is that the executive and judicial branches enjoy a higher level of trust than the legislature. In South Korea and Japan, the level of trust in the judiciary is also significantly higher than that in the executive branch, while in China the executive branch receives the greatest trust. Such internal variations in political trust should be given more attention in future research.

Table 2. Level of Political Trust (Mean)

	China	Hong Kong	Singapore	Taiwan	South Korea	Japan
Trust in the executive branch	3.24	2.60	3.20	2.13	1.95	2.34
Trust in the legislative branch	2.93	2.42	3.07	1.95	1.58	2.19
Trust in the judicial branch	2.78	2.61	3.21	2.11	2.25	2.63
Political trust index	*2.98*	*2.55*	*3.16*	*2.06*	*1.93*	*2.38*
Ranking of the index	*2*	*3*	*1*	*5*	*6*	*4*

Determinants of political trust

In order to examine the independent effect on political trust of the evaluations of policy performance, life satisfaction, and cultural orientation, we conducted a series of ordinary least square (OLS) regressions by having the political trust index as the dependent variable and the three indexes of political performance, economic performance, and life satisfaction as well as the three selected cultural orientations as independent variables. We also include as control variables four personal socio-demographic attributes (that is, gender, age, educational attainment, and household income) that are thought to have an impact on political trust (Christensen and Lægreid, 2005; Wang et al., 2006). In order to take into account the presence of unobserved country-specific variations, we began with a fixed-effects regression for the pooled sample of societies. South Korea, which has the lowest level of political trust, is taken as the baseline for comparison, and five country dummy variables were included in the regression. We then performed the regression in each country to test whether the results in the pooled analysis are driven by any particular country and whether the results are consistent across the six societies.

Table 3 presents both the results of the fixed-effects and the country-level regressions. As expected, all of the country dummies, which represent the difference in the level of political trust between each society and South Korea, are positive. Several important findings can be observed.

First, in support of our first hypothesis, people who have a more favorable evaluation of policy performance tend to express a higher level of political trust. In the pooled sample, the coefficients of both the economic performance index and the political performance index are significantly positive, as predicted. The effects of both economic and political performance are notably stronger than those of attitudinal variables.[13] In the country-level regressions, the results are basically similar: economic performance has a significant positive effect on political trust (except in Hong Kong); political performance also has an independent impact on political trust (except in China); and the effects of both economic and political performance are stronger than those of attitudinal variables (except in China and Hong Kong). We may further infer that, congruent with previous studies, institutional performance is an important determinant of political trust (Catterberg and Moreno, 2005; Mishler and Rose, 2001), and that such performance is not limited to the economic aspect, but also includes the political aspect (Diamond, 1999; Wang et al., 2006). In fact, as the findings suggest, economic performance and political performance are almost equally important in shaping political trust in these six Asian societies, regardless of the nature of the regimes involved. Political performance does matter. Furthermore, when individual societies are examined, economic performance has the greatest effect on political trust in Japan, followed by South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, whereas its effect on political trust in Hong Kong and China is relatively small. As to political performance, the greatest effect on political trust is seen in Singapore and Japan. In Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea, the effect is smaller, while in China it is insignificant. In other words, although in general terms institutional performance plays an important role in shaping

Table 3. Explaining Political Trust

	Pooled sample	China	Hong Kong	Singapore	Taiwan	South Korea	Japan
Constant	1.017***	2.467***	1.290***	1.168***	.946***	.973***	.565**
	(.066)	(.100)	(.186)	(.202)	(.197)	(.175)	(.192)
Economic performance index	.174***	.080**	.068	.154***	.262***	.282***	.308***
	(.014)	(.026)	(.035)	(.036)	(.039)	(.038)	(.045)
Political performance index	.156***	.048	.159***	.283***	.171***	.177***	.289***
	(.014)	(.024)	(.036)	(.041)	(.042)	(.035)	(.047)
Life satisfaction index	.074***	.075***	.098**	.155***	.059	.043	.069*
	(.012)	(.020)	(.037)	(.031)	(.037)	(.028)	(.032)
Traditionalism	.019*	.025	.034	–.015	.058**	–.001	.046
	(.008)	(.014)	(.020)	(.021)	(.021)	(.019)	(.025)
Authoritarianism	.018*	–.014	.063**	.043	.027	.046*	–.032
	(.009)	(.016)	(.023)	(.028)	(.025)	(.020)	(.027)
Post-materialism	–.019	.009	–.068	–.023	–.036	–.031	–.049
	(.015)	(.025)	(.045)	(.037)	(.039)	(.033)	(.054)
Gender	–.012	–.037	.110**	.030	–.075*	–.071*	.016
	(.013)	(.024)	(.034)	(.036)	(.038)	(.033)	(.040)
Age	.001	.000	.002	.000	–.001	.001	.003*
	(.001)	(.001)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Educational attainment	–.020	–.048**	–.033	.022	–.052	–.022	.041
	(.010)	(.016)	(.029)	(.027)	(.030)	(.030)	(.035)
Household income	–.001	.012	.048	–.035	.011	–.012	–.034
	(.010)	(.017)	(.029)	(.026)	(.032)	(.023)	(.027)
China	.922***						
	(.023)						
Hong Kong	.346***						
	(.029)						
Singapore	.745***						
	(.034)						
Taiwan	.054*						
	(.025)						
Japan	.308***						
	(.030)						
N	5772	1870	799	741	890	871	601
Adjusted R^2	.485	.036	.078	.205	.164	.185	.301

Notes: * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 (two-tailed tests).
Cell entries are unstandardized coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses.
Gender: 0 = female; 1 = male. Age: chronological age. Educational attainment: 1 = low; 2 = middle; 3 = high. Household income: 1 = low; 2 = middle; 3 = high. Post-materialism: 0 = materialist; 1 = mixed and post-materialist.

political trust, its effect can vary sharply across societies and should be studied further against the specific context of each society.

Second, the results in the pooled sample support our second hypothesis that people with a higher level of life satisfaction are more likely to show a higher level of political trust. However, the magnitude of the effect of life satisfaction on political trust is considerably lower than that of perceived economic and political performances. In addition, the country-by-country analyses reveal that life satisfaction does exert a positive independent effect on political trust in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Japan, but not in Taiwan and South Korea. This suggests that while our findings lend support to the second hypothesis, that is, that a higher level of life satisfaction is likely to

result in a higher level of political trust, the former is not a strong predictor of the latter, especially at the cross-national level.

Third, with regard to cultural factors, the results in the pooled sample tend to support our third hypothesis: that people who place a stronger emphasis on traditional culture or have a greater respect for traditional authority are more likely to show a higher level of political trust than those who do not. However, the effects of cultural factors on political trust are not only clearly weaker than those of the institutional factors, but also differ in the six societies. Specifically, a positive, but weak relationship is found between traditionalism and political trust only in the pooled sample and in Taiwan, but not in the other five societies. As to authoritarianism, the direction and magnitude of its effect on political trust are approximately the same as those of traditionalism. Its effect is evident in the pooled sample, Hong Kong, and South Korea, but not in China, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan.

Fourth, both the pooled and the country-level analyses do not support our fourth hypothesis. Contradicting the post-materialist hypothesis, no significant relationship was found between a post-materialist orientation and political trust. In other words, in both the pooled sample and the individual societies the three cultural orientations show either no significant effect on political trust at all or only a weak relationship with it. These findings are not entirely consistent with those of previous studies (Catterberg and Moreno, 2005; Ma, 2007; Shi, 2001).

Fifth, when country-specific variations are allowed, the adjusted R^2 of our multivariate model is .485. Judging by the magnitude of the adjusted R^2 of the country-level models, it is not difficult to see that it has the largest explanatory power in Japan (for which the model can explain 30.1 percent of the variance in the political trust index), followed by Singapore (20.5 percent), South Korea (18.5 percent), and Taiwan (16.4 percent). In contrast, the explanatory power of this model in Hong Kong and China is quite weak, at 7.8 percent and 3.6 percent, respectively. This again echoes our earlier observation that while some variables may have a significant impact on political trust, such an impact may not uniformly apply to every society, so that the specific determinants of political trust in each society should be studied further and in relation to the special institutional and cultural contexts of those societies.

Finally, taken as a whole, the institutional approach is undoubtedly much more powerful than the cultural approach in explaining political trust in the six Asian societies under study. This is basically consistent with the findings of Mishler and Rose (2001) concerning 10 post-communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. It also sends an important message to governments worldwide about the important potential of institutional performance for nurturing political trust.

Conclusion and discussion

Political trust is an important cornerstone of regime stability. In the present era, globalization has led to a redefinition of the functions and roles of the state. People now have different and greater expectations of their government. Apart from providing services and protection, the state has to be a strategic planner and a ‘competent state’ (Blind, 2006: 15). The government has to be able to pursue fiscal conservatism, create wealth by offering an open and attractive environment for domestic and global capital, achieve proficiency in governance, ensure that market mechanisms and globalization result in win-win outcomes for all, be endowed with political legitimacy and accountability, and so forth. As stated by Angel Gurría (2007), Secretary-General of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, ‘governments are more important today than ever’

and a certain degree of political trust is a prerequisite for good governance and legitimacy. Both democratic and nondemocratic systems must face up to this social-political-psychological trend.

This article makes use of data from a cross-national social survey to examine the level of political trust in six Asian societies and the possible effect on political trust of a series of institutional factors (policy performance and life satisfaction) and cultural factors (traditionalism, authoritarianism, and post-materialism), with a view to finding out whether the institutional approach or the cultural approach is more powerful in explaining political trust in the six societies. A review of the related literature has shown that these two approaches compete as explanations for the origins of political trust. The six Asian societies have experienced different levels of socioeconomic development in the past several decades, and their political systems are very diverse, ranging from undemocratic to advanced democracy. A comparison of the level of political trust in these six societies and the underlying determining factors should help us to understand how societies with different levels of socioeconomic development and different political systems may differ in their political trust and to examine whether institutional factors or cultural factors are more important in accounting for political trust in the context of Asia.

With regard to political trust, we find that the Singaporean government is the most popular in the eyes of its citizens, followed by the governments of China and Hong Kong, whereas the people of Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea are relatively disappointed with their governments. Since the societies with a relatively high level of political trust and those with a relatively low level of political trust are both comprised of different types of political regime, this suggests that regime type may not directly affect political trust. In addition, as low-trust societies and high-trust societies both consist of societies with different levels of economic development, the difference in political trust among the six societies is also apparently not directly related to their levels of economic development. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that in each society the trust in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches is not necessarily uniform, but may vary significantly. This highlights the internal complexity of political trust, something that should be explored in future research.

Both the pooled and the country-by-country regression analyses further reveal that, in support of our first hypothesis, people with a more favorable evaluation of policy performance are more likely to express a higher level of political trust. Economic performance and political performance are almost equally important in shaping political trust, regardless of regime type and level of economic development, although variations in the importance of the two variables do exist across societies. Our findings also lend support to the second hypothesis, that a higher level of life satisfaction is likely to result in a higher level of political trust. However, life satisfaction is not a strong predictor of political trust, since the strength of the relationship is quite moderate and such a relationship appears in some, but not all the societies under study. As to the third and fourth hypotheses, the effects of cultural factors on political trust were found to be insignificant or weak. Contradicting the post-materialist argument, no significant relationship was found between a post-materialist orientation and political trust; traditionalism and authoritarianism also showed a weak effect on political trust in only the pooled sample and in a few societies. In sum, in line with the study of Mishler and Rose (2001), the institutional approach appears to be much more powerful than the cultural approach in explaining political trust.

Several implications can be derived from the above findings. First, political trust has different aspects. In their study of 56 countries at the aggregate level, Rothstein and Stolle (2008) illustrated the distinction between confidence in political institutions on the representational side (for example, parties and parliaments) and confidence in political institutions on the

implementation side (for example, the courts and the police). The basis for trusting the representational institutions is partisanship and political ideology, and the foundation for trusting the legal and administrative institutions is their evenhandedness and efficiency. Our study reconfirms the varieties of political trust. Even if political trust is simplified into the categories of trust in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, the level as well as the cause of the people's trust in these three branches can differ greatly. Hence, researchers should in future pay more attention to the multidimensionality of political trust and its effect on policy and theoretical formulations.

Second, political trust seems to be relatively independent of regime type and level of economic development, and is more closely related to institutional performance than to cultural orientations. For example, Rothstein and Stolle (2008) also explained how the causal flow from the perception of impartiality and efficiency in political institutions to institutional trust operates at both the micro- and the macro-levels. For supporters of democracy, this may be frustrating, but our findings also indicate that political performance is almost as important as economic performance in shaping political trust. Hence, apart from economic performance, in order to continue to nurture political trust, any government, including nondemocratic regimes, must face up to their people's demands for political cleanliness, the protection of human rights, and even for greater political participation and openness.

Third, the experiences of the six Asian societies clearly demonstrate the superiority of the institutional approach over the cultural approach in explaining political trust. This is certainly consistent with the findings of some previous studies (Mishler and Rose, 2001). It also affirms the importance of institutional performance in strengthening political trust in societies worldwide. Hence, to raise political trust, governments should always respond promptly and effectively to public priorities, namely, by promoting economic development, rooting out political corruption, and protecting human rights and freedoms. Nevertheless, we should not hastily conclude that cultural explanations are irrelevant. First of all, the absence of a significant relationship between a post-materialist orientation and political trust in the six Asian societies may be due to the fact that, driven by the dual forces of globalization and regionalization, which amplify market competition and risks, the people of these societies may be feeling more insecure than before. Therefore, even people with a tendency toward post-materialism may not display the kind of critical attitude toward the government that is characteristic of established democracies in the West (Wong and Wan, 2009). As post-materialist theory argues, the rise of expressive and critical values takes place after a prolonged period of economic prosperity and social stability. In this regard, the socioeconomic challenges that the six Asian societies under study have faced in the past two decades would not seem to be conducive to these developments. In any case, instead of flatly rejecting the post-materialist thesis, our findings should support reflections on its relevance to societies that are still undergoing rapid changes and facing problems of insecurity. More systematic, in-depth research on the topic is definitely needed in the future. Second, the weak, but significant effects of traditionalism and authoritarianism on political trust seen in some Asian societies remind us that cultural explanations, although not as important as institutional explanations, still have a legitimate place in the study of political trust. For one thing, even though political actors' rational calculations of material interests are important to the development of political trust, such calculations are not necessarily fully rational, but may be mediated by different cultural values and orientations (Shi, 2001). Cultural changes usually lag behind institutional changes. Therefore, there is always a need to study political trust from a cultural perspective, not only to examine the effect of cultural factors on political trust, but also to trace the continuity

and change in cultural values in connection with the political process as a society undergoes modernization and post-modernization. In addition, the 'weak' effect of traditionalism and authoritarianism on political trust found in our study may not be that 'weak' in reality, but may be a result of the limitations of our measurement. Since, due to the data that was available, we measured both traditionalism and authoritarianism using a single indicator, this might have weakened the validity of our measure. Hence, a more complex and comprehensive measure may be needed if the effect of traditionalism and authoritarianism on political trust is to be seen more clearly in the six Asian societies as well as in other societies.

Fourth, our study also shows that while in abstract terms certain factors may have a more important effect on political trust, in reality such an effect may vary sharply across societies. Hence, although social science research has a tendency to aspire to theoretical universalism, we should not forget that the determinants of political trust in each society are always context specific and can only be fully unfolded and understood in relation to the special institutional and cultural contexts of that society. In other words, there is always a need for case studies in order to achieve an understanding of political trust in particular and of sociopolitical phenomena in general.

Finally, apart from the politics-centered theory that focuses on the political and economic performance of governments, the society-centered theory that concentrates on social capital and civil society is most frequently used to explain the decline of political support in many established democracies. The two theories are usually treated in a mutually exclusive way and contain important policy implications (Newton, 2006; Rothstein and Stolle, 2008): if the society-centered theory is correct, governments can blame their citizens for the lack of social capital; if the politics-centered theory is correct, the lack of social capital is caused by dysfunctional government institutions. However, as Newton (2006) argued, the two theories are not necessarily incompatible. It is possible that social capital, political performance, and political support are closely interdependent, and thus neither of the theories is adequate on its own to explain fully the levels of and changes in political trust and support for government. The findings thus far vary significantly on the relationship between political trust and major components of social capital, including associational involvement and social trust (Bäck and Kestilä, 2009; Kaase, 1999; Kim, 2005; Newton, 1999). Clearly, more empirical studies have to be conducted, especially beyond the established democracies, to examine the causal mechanisms among social capital, institutional performance, and political support.

Appendix

Evaluation of policy performance

On economic performance, people's evaluation is most positive in Singapore, with a mean value of 3.03 for its index. The other five societies do not perform very well in the eyes of their people, with South Korea having the lowest mean value (1.61), followed by Taiwan (1.79), Japan (2.19), China (2.25), and Hong Kong (2.41). In terms of the individual indicators of economic performance, the people of the six societies are similarly more satisfied with their government's performance in dealing with the economy than with their government's performance in dealing with the problem of unemployment. This means that economic development may not necessarily ameliorate the problem of unemployment, and this in turn may affect people's evaluation of their government's overall economic performance.

On political performance, Singapore is again ranked the highest for its index (3.18). Hong Kong comes second (2.63). The four remaining societies all have a mean value below the scale

midpoint of 2.50 (South Korea at 1.87, China and Taiwan both at 2.09, and Japan at 2.13). As to the individual indicators, with the exception of Singapore, people are more dissatisfied with their government's performance in fighting political corruption than with their government's performance in protecting human rights, especially in South Korea, Taiwan, China, and Japan. As far as the people of these four Asian countries are concerned, political corruption weighs quite heavily on their government's political performance.

Life satisfaction

The order of ranking in terms of the life satisfaction index is Singapore (3.91), Japan (3.55), Taiwan (3.42), Hong Kong (3.36), China (3.27), and South Korea (3.24). In general, the people of these six societies are quite positive about their current life. Despite variations, the mean values of the six indicators for the six societies are similar to those of the index, indicating that life satisfaction in these societies is positive over a wide range of personal life domains. However, there are substantial differences at both the domain level and the societal level. At the domain level, with the exception of Taiwan, household income is viewed as the least satisfying domain of personal life. The highest degrees of satisfaction are found in the domains of health and housing. At the societal level, there is a tendency for the richer societies (including Singapore and Japan) to report higher levels of life satisfaction than the poorer societies (including China and South Korea). Hong Kong and Taiwan are somewhat exceptional in this regard: people in Hong Kong have a relatively low level of life satisfaction in comparison with the level of economic development in their society, while the opposite is true for Taiwan.

Cultural orientations

The traditionalist orientation is strongest in South Korea, with a mean value of 3.90, followed by China (3.64), Japan (3.54), Taiwan (3.40), Singapore (3.16), and Hong Kong (2.97). It seems that the traditionalist orientation is weaker in highly globalized city-states such as Hong Kong and Singapore, and stronger in less globalized countries with a long history such as China, South Korea, and Japan. A high level of economic development does not necessarily lead to the weakening of traditionalism, and Japan is a case in point.

Singapore ranks the strongest in authoritarian orientation (2.46), followed by South Korea (2.40), Taiwan (2.38), Hong Kong (2.16), China (2.11), and Japan (1.68). Judging from the rankings of the six societies on authoritarianism and traditionalism, it would seem that these two features are not closely related.

As to post-materialist orientation, the people of Japan and Hong Kong are apparently more post-materialist in outlook than those of the other four societies. At one end, 11.8 percent and 10.4 percent of people in Japan and Hong Kong, respectively, belong to the post-materialist type, in comparison with 4.0 percent in China, 3.6 percent in Singapore, 2.6 percent in Taiwan, and 2.5 percent in South Korea. At the other end, South Korea has the greatest proportion of people (57.7 percent) who belong to the materialist type, followed by Taiwan (37.8 percent), China (36.3 percent), Singapore (34.9 percent), Japan (18.9 percent), and Hong Kong (17.9 percent). As expected, people in more affluent societies do show a stronger post-materialist orientation, although it is somewhat puzzling that a slightly stronger post-materialist tendency is seen in China than in more affluent societies such as Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea. This suggests that there is no simple correlation between the development of post-materialism and the level of economic development in a society.

Table A1. Evaluation of Policy Performance, Life Satisfaction, and Cultural Orientation

	China	Hong Kong	Singapore	Taiwan	South Korea	Japan
Economic performance (mean)						
Dealing with the economy	2.45	2.58	3.26	1.81	1.65	2.28
Dealing with unemployment	2.04	2.23	2.80	1.78	1.57	2.09
Economic performance index	*2.25*	*2.41*	*3.03*	*1.79*	*1.61*	*2.19*
Ranking of the index	*3*	*2*	*1*	*5*	*6*	*4*
Political performance (mean)						
Dealing with political corruption	1.79	2.57	3.33	1.70	1.63	1.91
Dealing with human rights problems	2.38	2.69	3.02	2.48	2.10	2.36
Political performance index	*2.09*	*2.63*	*3.18*	*2.09*	*1.87*	*2.13*
Ranking of the index	*4*	*2*	*1*	*4*	*6*	*3*
Life satisfaction (mean)						
Housing	3.42	3.48	4.17	3.63	3.44	3.72
Standard of living	3.26	3.30	3.88	3.42	3.13	3.51
Household income	3.04	3.18	3.64	3.27	3.01	3.21
Health	3.67	3.57	4.09	3.62	3.52	3.80
Education	3.15	3.25	3.88	3.34	3.22	3.55
Job	3.05	3.35	3.80	3.21	3.14	3.48
Life satisfaction index	*3.27*	*3.36*	*3.91*	*3.42*	*3.24*	*3.55*
Ranking of the index	*5*	*4*	*1*	*3*	*6*	*2*
Cultural orientation						
Traditionalism (mean)	3.64	2.97	3.16	3.40	3.90	3.54
Ranking	*2*	*6*	*5*	*4*	*1*	*3*
Authoritarianism (mean)	2.11	2.16	2.46	2.38	2.40	1.68
Ranking	*5*	*4*	*1*	*3*	*2*	*6*
Post-materialism (%)						
Materialist	36.3	17.9	34.9	37.8	57.7	18.9
Mixed	59.7	71.7	61.4	59.6	39.8	69.3
Post-materialist	4.0	10.4	3.6	2.6	2.5	11.8
Ranking	*3*	*2*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*1*

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Notes

1. For example, in these Asian societies, social policy has been driven by the imperatives of regime legitimation and nation building, and is strictly subordinated to the overriding policy objective of economic growth (Gough, 2004). With regard to the choice of political institutions, Asians are more willing than people in western democracies to tolerate a paternalist state that provides for and protects its citizens; and they are more tolerant of strong leaders who can deliver good government (Wang and Tan, 2006).
2. It should be noted that some scholars, such as Bo Rothstein, are not adherents of rational choice, but see institutions as key in generating trust.
3. For details on the questionnaire, the sampling method, and the procedure for conducting the survey, see the homepage of AsiaBarometer (https://www.asiabarometer.org/en/surveys/2006).
4. The Cronbach's alphas for China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and the total sample are .398, .501, .826, .638, .649, .771, and .749, respectively. Cases with two or more missing items were excluded.

5. Since the introduction of the Open Door policy in 1978, the reform of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s, and China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, the Chinese government has gradually relinquished its control over the employment system. The problem of unemployment in socialist China is increasingly comparable to that in capitalist countries (Lee and Warner, 2005).
6. For the economic performance index, the Cronbach's alphas of China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and the total sample are .443, .560, .586, .630, .687, .649, and .712, respectively. For the political performance index, the corresponding Cronbach's alphas are .535, .505, .531, .384, .607, .544, and .639. Cases with missing items were excluded.
7. The Cronbach's alphas for China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and the total sample are .757, .752, .810, .793, .819, .782, and .806, respectively. Cases with three or more missing items were excluded.
8. In this article, authoritarianism is regarded as a set of cultural elements (Perrin, 2005), rather than a form of government or an individual trait. Authoritarianism, which is an essential element in traditional societies and is being challenged by the forces of modernization (Germani, 1978), denotes a tendency to submit willingly to strong authority, as opposed to support for individual freedom and responsibility.
9. There are three commonly used versions of the materialist/post-materialist measure. Limited by the availability of data, we used the original four-choice materialist/post-materialist battery. The other two versions include more choices. On the advantages and disadvantages of the four-choice measure and the other two measures, see Inglehart and Abramson (1994).
10. If a respondent's first and second choices were maintaining order and fighting rising prices we classified him or her as the materialist type because his or her top priorities focused exclusively on materialist goals. If a respondent's first and second choices were having more say in government and protecting free speech, we classified him or her as the post-materialist type because his or her top priorities focused exclusively on post-materialist goals. If a respondent's first and second choices were a combination of the two kinds of goals, he or she would be classified as being of a mixed type, that is, a mixture of materialist and post-materialist.
11. It is noteworthy that, according to the findings of the 1981–2001 World Values Surveys, South Korea, as a new democracy, registered a dramatic decline in political trust: confidence in the parliament fell from 67 percent to 10 percent and confidence in the civil service from 86 percent to 64 percent. Japan, an established democracy, also experienced a loss of political trust, but the decline was less severe: confidence in the parliament fell from 27 percent to 20 percent and confidence in the civil service remained at 29 percent. See Catterberg and Moreno, 2005: 36–40.
12. According to Shi (2001) and Wang (2005), the high level of political trust in China cannot be explained by the 'fear' or 'intimidation' hypothesis; that is, the view that respondents may not dare to voice their distrust in surveys for fear of political persecution. For example, the proportion of respondents answering 'don't know' or who gave no answer was lower in China than in democratized Taiwan, and the correlation between political trust and fear of political persecution is weak.
13. Comparisons of the strength of the effects are based on standardized coefficients, which are not reported, but can be obtained from the authors.

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