The Geography of Political Trust in Urbanizing China:

A Comparative Analysis of Trust in Local Government Among

Rural Villagers, Rural-to-Urban Migrants, and Urban Dwellers

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The legacy of rural-urban developmental imbalance and China's household registration institution (i.e., the hukou system) stratify Chinese citizens into three populations—rural villagers, urban dwellers, and rural-to-urban migrants. These groups differ in values, lifestyles, and socioeconomic status. They have also been assigned to different tiers of government control and services based upon their location and hukou identities. Effective governance of these diverse and divided populations in urbanizing China requires a deeper understanding of their potentially different political orientations and attitudes toward government and why such differences exist. However, despite their demographic significance—by 2014, China's rural-to-urban migrant population had reached to 253 million—rural-to-urban migrants remain unrepresented in studies of Chinese people's political trust, which focus more on either rural villagers or urban dwellers. This study addresses this gap by situating Chinese rural-to-urban migrants at the center of triadic analytical framework and comparing their trust in local (i.e., county-level) government to two reference groups: rural villagers and urban dwellers. We utilize data from the China Family Panel Study (CFPS) in 2014 and employ the propensity score matching (PSM) method to match rural-to-urban migrants and rural villagers with comparable propensities to migrate. This matched comparison found that rural-to-urban migrants are 4.91% less trusting of their county government than their rural villager counterparts. This result reflects a negative "urban effect": The urban society may erode political trust compared to rural environments. Then the method of mechanical matching (MM) is used to compare rural-to-urban migrants and urban dwellers. This matched comparison found that rural-to-urban migrants are 3.2% more trusting than their urban counterparts. This indicates that the migrant identity (i.e., being a rural hukou holders in cities) is associated with higher trust levels. This geography of political trust signals a more complex rural-urban divide in the citizen-government relationship in China. Different populations' various relationship with local government therefore merits additional attention to place-based and population-specific policies to rebuild trust.

Keywords: rural-to-urban migrants, rural-urban divide, political trust, propensity score matching, China

Introduction

Citrin and Stoker (2018) defined political trust as citizens' confidence in the willingness and ability of political institutions and actors to use their power and authority to impartially serve the public interest. Citizens' trust in government has been recognized as an important resource for effective governance. Institutions that are considered trustworthy can secure a higher level of political participation, social integration, and regime legitimacy (Marien & Hooghe, 2011). Conversely, untrustworthy institutions have a difficult time reaching political consent, implementing policies, and securing citizens' abidance with regulations (Dalton, 2005).

Political trust is particularly crucial in societies experiencing large-scale social changes or crises such as urbanization, economic crises, or pandemics (Jennings et al., 2021). High levels of political trust can help institutions respond to these changes more smoothly and efficiently. Political trust can also promote social harmony and inter-group cohesion and lay foundation for social cooperation and solidarity, which is highly necessary to overcome the uncertainties brought by social changes or crises (Marien & Hooghe, 2011).

Different levels of factors that strengthen or erode people's political trust had been discussed in a large body of literature (McKay, Jennings, & Stoker, 2023). Macro factors at the society level, such as economic growth, existence of the representative democracy, and corruption; as well as micro attributes at the individual level, such as socioeconomic status, political ideology, and personal experiences with political institutions, have been analyzed in terms of their influences on people's political trust.

Urban scholars go along a route between and beyond this macro vs. micro dichotomy and explore how the place-related attributes at different levels, such as metropolitan areas, cities, and neighborhoods, might shape people's political trust in different ways. Rahn and Rudolph (2005) built multi-level models in two medium-size American cities and found that residents' trust levels in their city governments are negatively associated with some city-level factors including income inequality, ideological polarization, and racial fragmentation. Levine, Leenman, Gershenson, and Hureau (2018) found that Boston residents living in neighborhoods with higher levels of stability, (i.e., with higher percentages of homeowners and long-term residents) and lower percentages of immigrants are more likely to trust government and engage in various forms of political participation.

One important place-related factor—the rural-urban divide—had also been scholarly scrutinized in the literature of political trust. McKay, Leenman, Gershenson, and Hureau (2021) found that rural residents in the United Kingdom have lower trust levels in government in a comparison with their urban counterparts. Lago (2022) found a similar pattern across the 27 member states of the European Union and concluded that individuals living in rural areas tend to be more dissatisfied with democratic governance and such a heightened dissatisfaction can be attributed to the population decline and economic stagnation in the rural areas. Kirk (2025) found the same rural-urban divide in political trust in the United States and concluded that rural Americans trust federal government less, compared to their urban counterparts, regardless of the political party of the incumbent president. Similarly, Cramer (2016) showed that residents in the rural areas in Wisconsin have been less trusting in public employees and dissatisfied with how rural areas had been treated by the policy makers. In these studies, the rural-urban divide of political trust in the countries across the Global North depicts a picture in which rural people tend to be less trusting in government than their urban counterparts, mainly because of the population decline, economic stagnation, infrastructure deterioration, and widespread resentment that rural communities have been experiencing.

However, what is unclear in the existing literature is whether the same pattern of the rural-urban divide of political trust can also be found from countries in the Global South, where rapid urbanization and economic reform are underway. Research on the rural-urban divide in political attitudes in southern countries is scarce and empirically inconclusive (McKay et al., 2023). In some southern countries, rural resentment has indeed emerged toward urban areas and urban residents. These rural residents have a similar feeling that they are marginalized in the urbanization process and had been neglected by government (Cui, Tao, Warner, & Yang, 2015) and therefore trust government less. In some other southern countries where traditional social and political systems still play a role (Mengisteab, 2019), rural communities maintain a high level of trust in government,

Further, the rural-urban divide in political trust in urbanizing and developing Southern countries is complicated by the mass rural-to-urban migration—a factor that most studies have overlooked. For instance, by 2017, more than 292 million rural-to-urban migrants live and work in Chinese cities (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018). Rural-to-urban migrants, as a distinct social group that experience different social, political, and economic realities from both rural residents and urban natives, are expected to develop their unique political attitudes. Given this, the landscape of political trust in the Global South should be analyzed beyond the rural-urban binary, but rather through a comparative framework including all three populations—rural natives, rural-to-urban migrants, and urban natives (Sun et al., 2013).

China's hukou institution helps us identify and document these three populations. Hukou is what Potter (1983) called a "birth-ascribed" identity which, in conjunction with one's residential location or location change, divides Chinese citizens into three distinct groups with differentiated access to government services and citizenship. Urban-born people (i.e., urban dwellers) register as urban hukou holders and have comprehensive welfare provisions such as state-subsidized medical care and education and therefore are more privileged in terms of economic opportunities and social security. Rural-born people (i.e., rural villagers) register as rural hukou holders and have land-use rights for farming and housing and are eligible for rural cooperative medical care and other rural welfare programs (Zeng, Li, Yuan, & Fang, 2019), although these benefits are of lower quality compared to those in urban welfare programs. Rural-to-urban migrants, who register as rural hukou holders and choose to leave their countryside hometown and move to cities, usually get access to better employment opportunities and higher income levels compared to their rural non-migrant counterparts. However, as a trade-off, they often lose access to their rural welfare but remain ineligible for urban welfare yet.

Therefore, each group occupied a unique and unequal social position on China's socio-political hierarchy: Rural villagers remain embedded in traditional rural settings and institutions; urban dwellers have full access to urban welfare and are well-integrated into urban institutional structures, while rural-to-urban migrants navigate an in-between status—they are physically present in cities, working and living like urbanites, but institutionally tied to the countryside. These different socio-spatial positions are expected to create distinct experiences and perceptions with government and different levels of political trust (Zhang, 2001).
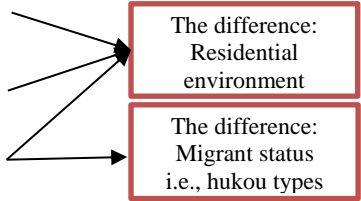
This Study: Research Design

Our comparison among these three populations provides a nuanced understanding about how rural-to-urban migration, the hukou system, and the place-based context interact to shape trust in local government. We use data from the 2014 China Family Panel Survey (CFPS) to examine the political trust of three populations: rural

villagers, rural-to-urban migrants, and urban dwellers. These three populations are distinct in residential environment (rural vs. urban) as well as hukou identities (rural vs. urban). Among these, rural-to-urban migrants and rural villagers share the same institutional identity as rural hukou holders, while urban natives and rural-to-urban migrants share the same geographic context of living in urban areas, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1

Populations by Residential Areas, Hukou Types, and Migrant Status

Population groups	Residential areas	Hukou types		
Rural non-migrant residents	Rural	Rural		The difference: Residential environment
Rural-urban migrants	Urban	Rural		
Urban natives	Urban	Urban		The difference: Migrant status i.e., hukou types

We conduct two sets of comparisons in particular: First, we compare rural-to-urban migrants with rural residents using propensity score matching (PSM). A propensity score in our study is defined as the probability of a person migrating to the cities conditioned on other variables (e.g., demographics and socioeconomics). By this propensity score, we can match two people with the same probability of having migrated to the cities but, in fact, one migrated and the other did not, in order to compare the political trust of migrants and non-migrants more accurately. Through this comparison, we answer the first research questions: Do rural-to-urban migrants hold a different level of trust in local government, compared to their rural non-migrant counterparts who never left the countryside? If so, are rural-to-urban migrants relatively more or less trusting? This comparison estimates the effects of residential context—being rural or urban—on individual's trust in local government.

Second, we compare rural-to-urban migrants and urban natives using mechanical matching (MM) (Stuart, 2010). Unlike the first comparison between rural non-migrants and rural-to-urban migrants, where propensity score matching helps control for individual-likelihood to migrate, urban natives, by definition, have no "propensity" to migrate to urban areas. Therefore, a propensity score model would be conceptually inappropriate. Instead, we use mechanical matching (MM) and pair individuals from two groups—rural-to-urban migrants and urban natives—who share similar observable characteristics such as age, gender, educational levels, and income. Through this comparison, we answer the second research questions: Do rural-to-urban migrants hold a different level of trust in local government, compared to their urban non-migrant counterparts who never left cities? If so, are rural-to-urban migrants relatively more or less trusting? This comparison estimates the effects of hukou identities—being rural or urban—on individual's trust in local government. Leveraging both propensity score matching (PSM) and mechanical matching (MM), our methodological approach minimizes selection bias and develops a more refined understanding of the rural-migrant-urban divide of political trust.

We organize the rest of this paper in the following way. First, we review two interrelated bodies of literature on the political attitudes of migrants and on the rural-urban divide in political trust. We then build our analytical approaches and hypotheses based on the literature. Then we introduce data and methods. We present and interpret results, introduce findings and conclude the article by presenting our discussion of results and findings.
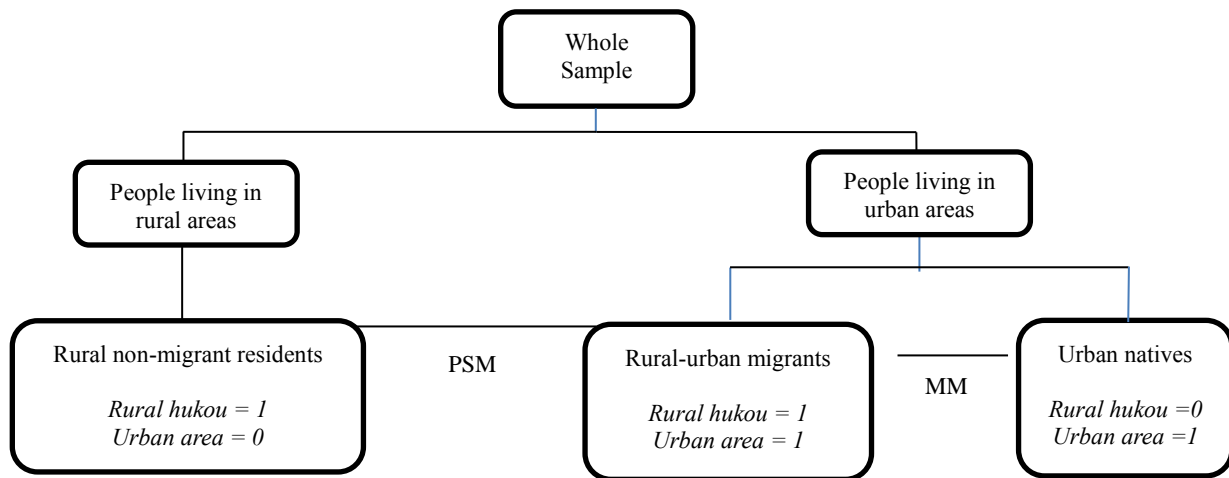
Figure 1. Subpopulation sample sizes.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Our research is built on two bodies of literature. The first is on the rural-urban divide in political attitudes, with a focus on political trust. The second explores international and internal migrants' political trust in their receiving society. Combining these two bodies of literature, we are able to propose hypotheses to understand a landscape of political trust among three populations in urbanizing China.

Rural-Urban Divide in Political Trust

Rural-urban divide in political trust in the global North. Scholars have found a consistent rural-urban divide in political behavior and attitudes across much of the Global North. In countries like the U.S., Canada, the U.K., France, and Switzerland, urban centers tend to support left-leaning parties while rural and exurban areas vote overwhelmingly for the right (Cramer, 2016; Rodden, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Although electoral outcomes and partisan divides are not synonymous with levels of trust in government, the two are related. The rural-urban divide in party support often reflects differences in people's views of the role, legitimacy, and trustworthiness of government.

Research from the North indicates that rural residents often hold lower levels of trust in governmental institutions compared to their urban counterparts. Cramer (2016) finds that residents in the rural areas in Wisconsin have been less trusting in public employees and dissatisfied with how rural areas had been treated by policy makers. Mitsch, Lee, and Ralph Morrow (2021) find that people in rural areas hold lower levels of trust in multiple forms of political institutions in the EU, compared to their urban and peri-urban counterparts. Hyland, Mascherini, and Lamont (2024) find that rural residents in almost all countries in the EU less likely feel that they are respected and recognized by governments.

Some studies go beyond treating the political attitudes landscape as a simple rural-urban dichotomy but instead seek to display a continuum where citizens' residential locations—from urban cores, inner cities, inner suburbs, exurbs, towns, villages, to open countryside—shape their political attitudes and orientations. For instance, Kirk (2025) shows that Americans from urban areas tend to trust local government the most, while those in rural areas trust local government the least. The trust levels of residents from suburbs and small towns fall in-between.

Various explanations regarding why such a rural-urban divide emerges and persists in the North had been provided. Some studies attribute rural distrust to rural residents' perceived and/or experienced marginalization.

For instance, Cramer (2016) introduces the concept of "rural consciousness" to describe rural residents' perception that urban policy elites overlook, misunderstand, and undervalue rural communities. She argues that such perceptions contribute to a "politics of resentment", wherein rural residents feel marginalized by urban-based local government and therefore express lower levels of trust and satisfaction in government. In a similar vein, Rodden (2019) argues that economic insecurity and anti-elite-sentiment among rural communities in the U.S. lead rural voters to be more skeptical of government because they feel left out of governmental benefits and protection. In contrast, urban voters tend to have more favorable views toward government intervention and redistributive policies. Lago (2022) found that rural decline (e.g., depopulation, economic contraction) in European established democracies cause lower satisfaction with democracy in rural areas. Rural residents perceive that democratic institutions cannot represent their interests and hold lower political trust than urban residents. Instead of emphasizing marginalization or exclusion rural communities perceived and/or experienced, some other studies present alternative explanations for rural low trust. For example, Gimpel and Reeves (2024) argue that rural residents show greater neighborhood attachment compared to their urban counterparts, and they found that such higher levels of place contentment and attachment lead to fewer demands for progressive governance and contribute stronger conservative tendencies and lower trust when government initiates policies change.

Rural-urban divide in political trust in the Global South. Research on the rural-urban divide in political attitudes in southern countries remains limited and inconclusive. A small but growing number of studies have begun to fulfill the gap. McKay et al. (2023) examined rural-urban differences in political trust across various countries. They found that political trust levels are similar between rural and urban areas in highly developed nations, but in less developed countries, rural populations tend to hold higher political trust. Mattes and Moreno (2018) found that rural residents in Sub-Saharan Africa have higher trust levels in both government and the state than urban residents. Lago (2022) drew on data from both established and transitional democracies in the EU and found that individuals in rural areas express lower satisfaction with democracy than their urban counterparts in transitional democracies, particularly in countries experiencing more severe rural decline.

In the context of China—the focus of this study, the literature is also empirically inconclusive. Sun et al. (2013) assess the rural-urban divide in trust in the local police and found that Chinese rural-to-urban migrants, rural peasants, and urbanites express different levels of trust in the local police. They find that rural-to-urban migrants hold the highest level of trust in the police, followed by rural natives and urban natives. Zhai (2022) shows that people living in rural areas hold a lower level of trust in local government but a higher level of trust in central government, compared to people living in urban areas. Zhang and Sun (2024) examine how China's anti-corruption campaign influenced political trust and found a rural-urban divide: While the campaign increased overall trust, the effect was significantly stronger among rural residents. The authors suggest that transparency and procedure-fairness can narrow the rural-urban gap in political trust.

Explanations of the rural-urban divide in political trust in the Southern countries are different from those of the North. McKay et al. (2021) attribute rural residents' higher political trust to their less exposure to critical media and more personalized, clientelist relationship with local officials. Mattes and Moreno (2018) find that rural residents in Africa and Latin America have higher level of social trust, which spill over into their higher levels of political trust. Sun et al. (2013) found that different patterns of contact and perceived fairness differ across rural residents, rural-to-urban migrants, and urban residents. These differences further shape their different trust levels. Huang (2020) attributes rural-origin people's lower trust to their perceived and experienced exclusion from public service and points out that China's hukou system institutionalizes the inequality between rural and

urban residents. Overall, rural-urban differences in political trust in the South had been explained as a result of institutional inequality (e.g., resulted from different hukou identities), differential treatment by authorities, and the differences in rural and urban residential environment.

Migrants' Political Trust

Rural-to-urban migrants' political trust. The geography of political trust in southern countries is further complicated by the mass rural-to-urban migration in many of urbanizing societies. In two fastest urbanizing continents—Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, rural-to-urban migration accounted for 30 percent and 60 percent of urban population growth respectively (World Resources Institute, 2023). Rural-to-urban migrants occupy a liminal position in geographical, social, and institutional aspects. From a geographical perspective, they are detached from the rural areas and live in cities. However, from a sociopolitical perspective, they may still retain rural identities and have not been integrated into urban society and politics. Such an in-between status generates two distinct layers of impact on migrants' political trust. First, there are shaped by their "urban" residential environment in the host cities. Second, they experience the social and institutional consequences of being "newcomers" or "temporary outsiders" to these urban settings. These two layers of effects are expected to produce distinct perceptions of government trustworthiness which are shaped by their unique experiences with government. Thus, understanding political attitude geography in the Global South requires moving beyond a rural-urban binary and should consider the dynamic experiences of migrant populations.

To date, only a few studies have directly addressed rural-to-urban migrants' political trust. Zhang and Quick (2024) find that Chinese rural-to-urban migrants have lower political trust than their rural non-migrant counterparts. Migrants' hukou identity, their patterns of interaction with local government, and their dissatisfaction with government performance contribute to their lower trust levels. Zhang and Li (2023) employ hierarchical linear modeling to examine multi-level factors that affect rural-to-urban migrants' political trust and find that migrants' neighborhood attachment can influence their trust in local government. Niu and Zhao (2018) assess how hukou identity affects individuals' political trust and find that rural-to-urban migrants hold a lower level of trust in local government but a higher level of trust in central government, compared to urban locals. Huang (2020) finds that the hukou system and its embedded institutional inequality contribute to lower trust among rural-origin individuals, including both rural residents and rural-to-urban migrants, toward local government. And after rural-origin migrants convert their hukou to urban status, their trust increases.

International migrants' political trust. Since the literature on the political trust of rural-to-urban migrants remains limited, we turn to the richer literature on the political trust of international, cross-border migrants and consider how this type of migration shapes individuals' political trust (Abrajano & Alvarez, 2010). Conceptual frameworks and empirical comparisons from this body of literature will be drawn to inform our analysis of internal, rural-to-urban migrants in China.

Studies on immigrants' political trust are largely organized around four theoretical traditions (Mishler & Rose, 2001)—culturalist school, institutionalist school, acculturation model, and hybrid framework. Culturalists argue that political trust and attitudes are formed early in life and remain relatively stable and reflect the norms in migrants' countries/places of origin (Uslaner, 2002). Intuitionalists, in contrast, contend that migrants' political trust is not influenced by cultural contexts in their societies of origin and destination, but changes based on their experience with host societies and institutions (Nannestad, Svendsen, Dinesen, & Sønderskov, 2014). Acculturation model contends that if migrants have enough exposure to the cultural influences in the host

society, they gradually acculturate to the local level of political trust and move from origin-based to host-based patterns of political trust development. Empirical studies on immigrants' political trust provide evidence for both the culturalists and institutionalists perspectives and many studies find that immigrants develop a unique pattern of political trust and attitudes that are shaped by factors in both places of origin and destination. Therefore, the fourth approach—a hybrid/dual framework argues that migrants' trust pattern is complex and context dependent.

Some findings support the culturalist perspective. For example, Superti and Gidron (2022) show that immigrants' trust in host-country institutions is shaped by lasting political memories from their country of origin, especially among those who migrated at an older age and have a strong home-country point of reference. Beker, Boeckh, Hainz, and Woessmann (2016) find that residents who formerly live in areas historically governed by the Habsburg Empire have higher levels of trust in local courts and police compared to those in regions outside the former empire. The authors argue that the Habsburg Empire's well-respected local administration cultivates a culture of trust in government and such a trusting deposition remains for immigrants.

Some other findings support the institutionalist perspective. These studies focus on how the institutional design, quality, and performance in both original and host societies shape migrants' trust in government and political system in the receiving society. For example, Tyrberg (2024) found that the perception of *not* being discriminated by public and/or institutional actors in the receiving societies is associated with higher political trust among non-western immigrants in Sweden and Germany.

Hypotheses

We therefore form the following two hypotheses:

H_1: The trust level among rural-to-urban migrants differs from those of their rural non-migrant counterparts.

H_2: The trust level among rural-to-urban migrants differs from those of their urban non-migrant counterparts.

Data and Methods

Data and Sample

This study draws on data from the 2014 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), conducted by Peking University. This survey is conducted biennially since 2010 and collects data about a wide range of social topics—including family structure, migration history, and political attitudes (Xie & Hu, 2014). This survey is nationally representative and covers the three populations this study focuses on, i.e., rural non-migrants (n = 11,257), rural-to-urban migrants (n = 5,301), and urban dwellers (n = 6,308).

Methods

Propensity score matching (PSM). When assessing the trust levels of migrants, previous studies usually regress the levels of trust on the dichotomous variable of migrant status when controlling for confounding factors such as gender, age, and education. These models fail to satisfy the independence assumption required by the regression methods. That is, if using a regression model to assess the difference between the trust level of migrants and that of non-migrants, individuals must be randomly assigned to the treatment group (in this case, migrant group) and the control group (in this case, non-migrant group) to ensure there is no dependency between the group identification (in this case, migrant status) and the selection process. For migration, however, we cannot think of people as being randomly allocated across the migrant or non-migrant groups. Rather, individual choices of migration are subject to constraints such as personal educational attainment, age, gender, and personality traits

such as ambition. If one ignores the self-selection problem of migration in estimation, spurious difference in trust levels between migrants and non-migrant might be produced. For example, if better-educated rural people are more likely to migrate to the cities and if the levels of educational attainments affect people's trust levels, the failure to account for this self-selection effect could lead to the false conclusion that migrants, rather than people with higher educational attainments, hold a higher or lower level of trust.

The most ideal approach to avoid this problem would be to simultaneously observe one person's political trust under two conditions: one in which this person migrated to the cities and another in which this same person stayed in the countryside. The difference in the same person's trust levels under these two conditions would be due to the migration experience alone. However, it is not possible to simultaneously observe the person's trust under both conditions because the person either migrates or does not.

We use the propensity score matching (PSM) method, first introduced by Rosenbaum and Rubin (1983) to construct a counterfactual situation of speculation about what might have happened had the migrant (or non-migrant) made the opposite choice. This method has been used in urban studies settings previously. A propensity score in our study is defined as the probability of a person migrating to the cities conditioned on other variables (e.g., demographics and socioeconomics). By this propensity score, we can match two people with the same probability of having migrated to the cities but, in fact, one migrated and the other did not. The matching process therefore addresses the selection bias: It ensures that two matched people are exchangeable and any observed difference in the political trust between these two matched people can be inferred to be due to the act of migration alone. This counterfactual, quasi-experimental approach allows us to observe what one *migrant*'s trust would be if she/he had *not* chosen to migrate to the cities and estimate differences in trust between migrants and non-migrants and help us assess migrants' trust levels more accurately.

Three steps are taken to employ the PSM method. First, each respondent's propensity score is estimated. This propensity score is the conditional probability that a person migrates to cities based on the observed predictors (e.g., demographics and socioeconomics) of migration. Studies have shown that people who are male, better educated, younger than the age of 45 years old, identified as Han ethnic group, unmarried, and having relatively better-educated parents tend to migrate to cities (Zhao, 1999). We therefore select the following variables to estimate respondents' propensity scores: *gender, age, schooling years, marital status, family size, paternal schooling years, Han ethnicity, and the province of the hukou registration* (Table 2). Personal income, employment status, and occupational prestige scores are intentionally excluded from the list of matching variables because these variables are not predictors of—but rather changes often resulting from—rural-to-urban migration.

Table 2

Differences in Socioeconomic and Demographic Characteristics Between Migrants and Non-migrants

Matching variables	Rural-to-urban migrants N = 5,301	Rural non-migrants N = 11,275	p-value
Gender (% female)	52.19	54.27	0.012
Ethnicity (% Han)	93.31	89.18	0.000
Age	48.8	50.7	0.000
Schooling years	6.51	5.23	0.000
Marital status (% married)	86.82	87.55	0.018
Family size (No. of people)	4.19	4.47	0.000
Paternal schooling years	4.85	3.78	0.000

Second, we use the *nearest neighbor (NN) matching* approach to match the *non-migrant* individual whose propensity score is nearest to the *migrant* individual. Through this matching approach, 3,803 non-migrants and 2,048 migrants were matched for analysis. Third, the estimated *average treatment effects for the treated* (ATT), i.e., the average migration effects for the people who migrated, is calculated by:

$$ATT = \frac{1}{N^T} \left(\Sigma(Y_i^T - Y_i^C) \right) = \frac{\Sigma\Delta_T}{N^T}$$

where N^T is the sample size of the pair-matches; Y_i^T is the political trust of a migrant i. Y_i^C is the political trust of the matched non-migrant (counterfactual substitute), and Δ_T is the pair-matched difference in political trust. ATT represents the average difference in trust between migrants and non-migrants.

Mechanical matching (MM). Following traditional migration studies, mechanical matching is used to compare the trust levels between migrants and urban dwellers. Since it is natural that urban dwellers have no "propensity" to move from cities to the countryside, the method of propensity score matching cannot be applied. Mechanical matching, compared to propensity score matching, skips the modeling step, and directly compares observe variables and matches people from the group of migrants and those from the group of urban dwellers.

Results

The PSM results (Table 3) show the differences in the trust level for a person who chose to migrate to the cities (mean = 4.625) compared with what it would have been had this person instead chosen to stay in the countryside (mean = 4.95), in a counterfactual situation. It suggests migrants are 6.7% less trusting (difference = -0.325) (p < 0.001) than their rural non-migrant counterparts. This result confirmed our hypothesis: Rural-to-urban migrants do have a lower trust level in local government, compared to their stayer counterparts in rural areas.

Table 3

The ATT of Urban Residential Environment on People's Trust Levels in Local Government

Variable	Sample	Rural-to-urban migrants (treated)	Rural non-migrants (controlled)	Differences	S.E.
Political trust (0 = very distrusting, 10 = very trusting)	Unmatched	4.625	5.077	-0.452	0.07
	Matched	4.625	4.95	-0.325***	0.11

Notes. SE = Bootstrap standard errors, ***P < 0.001.

The MM results (Table 4) show the differences in the trust level for a person who migrated from the countryside to the cities (mean = 4.625) compared with the trust level of a person who was an urban hukou holder and lived in cities (mean = 4.477).

Table 4

The ATT of Hukou Status on People's Trust Levels in Local Government

Variable	Sample	Rural-to-urban migrants (treated)	Urban dwellers (controlled)	Differences	S.E.
Political trust (0 = very distrusting, 10 = very trusting)	Unmatched	4.625	4.899	-0.452	0.03
	Matched	4.625	4.477	0.148***	0.22

Notes. SE = Bootstrap standard errors, ***P < 0.001.

Findings and Discussion

Urban Effects on Rural-to-Urban Migrants' Political Trust

The difference in trust levels between migrants and rural non-migrants, after controlling for self-selection effects, suggests that Chinese rural-originated people's political trust is not a culturally rooted, unchangeable orientation, but rather can be affected by new institutional experiences and evaluations. Although migrants and rural non-migrants come from the same cultural origin in the countryside, the differences in terms of experiences in urban areas alter migrants' trust levels. Our results demonstrate the malleability of political trust, suggesting people's tendency to adjust their trust levels in response to new institutional settings in a different residential environment. This result is consistent with the micro-level institutionalist findings where international migrants, as newcomers and minorities to a new country, tend to display different attitudes toward the host-country government institutions, compared to the attitudes towards their government of their counterparts who stay in their country of origin (Maxwell, 2010).

Through employing a counterfactual statistical framework, we identify a lower level of trust among Chinese rural-to-urban migrants as compared with their counterparts who stay in rural areas, after controlling for pre-migratory factors which affect migration choices.

Hukou Effects on Rural-to-Urban Migrants' Political Trust

The difference in trust levels between migrants and urban non-migrants suggests that migrants experience urban residential and institutional environment in a different way compared to their urban dweller counterparts. Although rural-to-urban migrants and urban non-migrant residents live in the same urban settlements, their expectations of and interactions with local government are expected to be different because they have different household registration (i.e., hukou) identities. The MM result shows that rural-to-urban migrants are 3.2% more trusting of local government than their urban dweller counterparts. This looks counterintuitive at the first glance. Rural-to-urban migrants holding rural Hukou are expected to experience more discrimination and injustice when interacting with local government, and therefore should have trusted government less. Why do they, in China's case, hold higher levels of trust compared to urban Hukou holders?

We offer one possible explanation as to why rural-to-urban migrants are more trusting in local government than non-migrant urban dwellers. As the literature on politics of immigration suggests, first-generation immigrants, especially if they immigrate to the host society as adults, tend to have more optimistic and favourable view of the host society government (Superti & Gidron, 2022). When immigrants' time in cities accumulates, they then gradually "adopt levels of trust that resemble those of native population" (Superti & Gidron, 2022, p. 624). Since most migrants in our sample are first-generation, adult migrants, we can expect that their attitudes toward urban local government might be more positive than urban natives.

Urban Effects, Hukou Effects, and Migrants' Political Trust

The comparison of political trust levels among the three population warns us against a few oversimplified understandings regarding the migrants' relationship with local government in urbanizing countries. One oversimplified understanding asserts that rural-to-urban migrants are less disciplined in cities than they would have been in the countryside and therefore their interaction with urban local government can be considered as more constructive and positive. However, living in cities does not boost rural-originated people's trust according to our in-depth analysis. Another oversimplified understanding is about the effects of rural hukou. As rural hukou holders, migrants have higher probability to be discriminated against and/or treated unequally, compared to urban

non-migrant dwellers who hold urban hukou. This perspective therefore tends to describe migrants' urban way of life as experience of exclusion and injustice.

Instead of taking sides with either of these two oversimplified perspectives, our analysis is able to offer a more accurate picture of migrants' political attitudes. Migrants are indeed marginalized and alienated because of their rural hukou status. But at the same time, they have higher autonomy from local government and therefore hold more optimistic and favourable views. Future studies should deconstruct migrants' political attitudes even in a more detailed way.

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