

# Neighborhood Effects and Political Trust: A Multi-level Analysis of Chinese Rural-to-Urban Migrants' Trust in County Government

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Massive rural-to-urban migration in China is consequential for political trust: rural-to-urban migrants have been found to hold lower levels of trust in local government than their rural peers who choose to stay in the countryside (mean 4.92 and 6.34 out of 10, respectively,  $p < 0.001$ ). This article explores why migrants have a certain level of political trust in their county-level government. Using data of rural-to-urban migrants from the China Family Panel Survey, this study performs a hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to unpack the multi-level explanatory factors of rural-to-urban migrants' political trust. Findings show that the individual-level socio-economic characteristics and perceptions of government performance (Level-1), the neighborhood-level characteristics—the physical and social status and environment of neighborhoods (Level-2), and the objective macroeconomic performance of county-level government (Level-3), work together to explain migrants' trust levels. These results suggest that considering the effects of neighborhood-level factors on rural-to-urban migrants' political trust merits policy and public management attention in rapidly urbanizing countries.

*Keywords:* rural-to-urban migrants, multi-level analysis, neighborhood effects, political trust, hierarchical linear modeling, China

## Introduction

Political trust is defined as citizen's confidence in the commitment and effectiveness of political entities to act in the best interest of the public (Zmerli & van der Meer, 2017). These entities can be political institutions, agencies, and actors. Political trust serves important function in maintaining the stability, viability, and legitimacy of political systems (Almond & Verba, 1963). A certain level of political trust promotes political participation and engagement among citizens (Hardin, 1999, p. 37), which thereby provides a moral basis for citizens to comply with the laws and norms established by political authorities (Weber, 1958). By fostering participation and enhancing compliance with laws and norms, political trust eventually contributes to a more effective and

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legitimate governance and creates a sense of belonging among citizens.

Conversely, weak or diminishing political trust can lead to negative political and social consequences. Low political trust levels undermine the effectiveness and stability of governments. Political mistrust or distrust discourages individuals from participating in political processes, such as voting (Norris, 2002, p. 83), contacting political agents for help, and campaign involvement (Norris, 2000, p. 127). On the other hand, political distrust is found to be associated with social distrust and disobedience (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Paxton, 2002). For example, generalized political distrust has a negative impact on citizens' willingness to comply with social norms such as paying taxes, volunteering, and supporting neighbors (Van Deth, 2017).

Grounded in the premise that political trust is deemed necessary for a healthy political and social system, there are growing concerns about the sizeable decline in trust levels in many rapidly urbanizing countries. In particular, the substantial decline in political trust levels in People's Republic of China—the location of this study—warrants our attention. China exhibited high average levels of trust in 2000, with 97% in the central government and 95% in the national legislature (Wang, 2005), but by 2010 these figures had declined significantly to 73% and 66% respectively (Park, 2017). Similar downward trends in political trust had been observed in other rapidly urbanizing countries, including India, Thailand, Vietnam, and Mongolia (Chachavalpongpun, 2014).

While the overall population in urbanizing countries had experienced a decline in political trust levels in the past three decades, variations exist among different social groups. It has been found that rural-to-urban migrants, who have left the countryside and migrate into cities, tend to have significantly lower trust levels in local government compared to their rural counterparts who remain living in the rural areas. The average trust level in local government among rural-to-urban migrants is found to be lower (3.53 out of 5) in comparison to the average of rural residents (3.79 out of 5) and that of urbanites (3.64 out of 5) in 2010 in China (Niu & Zhao, 2018).

Migrants' lower levels of political trust in fast urbanizing countries indicate a strained or problematic relationship between migrants and the state (Guy, 2021). It suggests that migrants lack a certain level of confidence in government or other political institutions to act in their best interest. Or they perceive that government is unresponsive or indifferent to their needs and concerns. The lack of trust among migrants can lead to a range of negative consequences for migrants themselves, such as reduced civic engagement, resistance to policies and regulations, and even acts of civil disobedience or violence. Even worse, it can undermine social cohesion and exacerbate existing social and political divides between the countryside and the city. Therefore, it is critical to investigate the factors contributing to the low political trust levels among rural-to-urban migrants in order to address these negative consequences and promote a healthier migrant-state relationship.

However, despite the importance of the lower level of political trust as an indicator reflecting problematic migrants' relationship to the state (Niu & Zhao, 2018), research on this topic has been limited. Previous studies have mainly focused on other aspects of migration, such as its economic implications, social challenges, or the contribution of migrants to their places of origins—the countryside (Iredale & Guo, 2015). The political aspects and implications of rural-to-urban migration had been significantly overlooked, which creates a knowledge gap. Rural-to-urban migration does have significant political implications, both for the migrants themselves and for the urban societies they are moving into. For example, mass rural-to-urban migration can lead to changes in the demographic makeup of urban areas, which potentially alters the power balance and leads to the new policy priorities to integrate migrants' needs. Rural migrants may also encounter difficulties assessing public services

in cities, which can affect their engagement in urban government. At the same time, as newcomers, rural migrants may struggle to participate in urban civic life, leading to political disengagement and potentially exacerbating social divides (Ehmer, 2021). Rural migrants may feel underrepresented in urban politics and institutions, which can lead to a sense of political disempowerment and a sense of lack of belonging. Therefore, it is important to investigate migrants' experiences associated with rural-to-urban migration and their impacts on migrants' trust in government (Wiederkehr, Ide, Seppelt, & Hermans, 2022).

Political trust is a complex construct that can be influenced by a variety of factors. Political scientists have disaggregated these factors into at least two levels: the micro- and macro-level. From a micro perspective, individuals' attributes, such as their socio-economic status, education, cognitive abilities, gender, age, and prior experiences with government, are expected to affect their trust levels. At the macro-level, the characteristics of political entities (e.g., the government) that are being trusted or distrusted, including their accountability, responsiveness, and aggregate economic performance, have been recognized as contributing factors to migrants' trust. Scholars have argued that research that separates the explanations into either micro or macro level features as two distinct alternatives fails to fully comprehend how people's political trust had been developed and a more comprehensive approach that integrates both micro- and macro-level feature is required to understand people's political trust (de Vroome et al., 2013).

Some scholars further argue that even this integrated two-level approach that considers both micro- and macro-level effects is still incomplete because it neglects mediating factors which connect or transform the relationship between micro- or macro- level effects. One example is how exposure to televised uncivility in political debates mediates the micro- and macro-level effects on political trust, negatively impacting individual trust in government and politicians (Mutz & Reeve, 2005). Similarly, community- or neighborhood-based networks act as another critical mediator (Bradford, Topping, Martin, & Jackson, 2019). Brown and Benedict (2002) found that neighborhood context has been found associated with residents' attitudes toward the police. Trust in criminal justice system had been proved to be higher among people whose neighborhoods are perceived as less deprived, more orderly, more cohesive, and better-operated, whereas in situations where the sense of wealth, order, and cohesion of a neighborhood is perceived to be diminished, trust among residents appears to decline (Bradford et al., 2019).

In the context of rural-to-urban migration, there are noticeable differences between migrants and non-migrants in terms of both micro-level factors like income and employment status (de Vroome et al., 2013) and macro-level factors such as the qualities of governance. At the same time, migrants, as newcomers to cities, tend to live in distinguished types of neighborhoods which are different from neighborhoods of urbanites and rural residents. In the literature, migrants' distinguished types of neighborhoods had been termed "migrants' enclaves", "arrival cities" (Saunders, 2010), "Dasakota" (Ginsburg, Koppel, & McGee, 1991), "edgy city" (Harms, 2011), or "urban villages" (Zhang, 2001). The components in these ubiquitous neighborhoods can also be a potentially constitutive aspect of migrants' political trust. We argue that the absence, presence, and quality of government-provided or government-guided infrastructure in neighborhoods where rural-to-urban migrants live—transportation, communication, housing, and other aspects of the built environment—can enable or constrain migrants' actions to the point that affects their perspectives of government.

Besides the physical environment, neighborhoods' socio-economic context (e.g., poverty rate, unemployment rate, average household income), residential stability (e.g., proportion of residents who have

moved out or in the neighborhood in the last decade), as well as racial or ethnical heterogeneity also affect residents' life outcomes and yield a potentially important clue in explaining their perception of local government. Furthermore, the social processes and mechanisms at the neighborhood-level, with which identities and associations are constructed (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Cresswell, 2015), can make residents more or less trusting. Migrants' experience of residential neighborhoods—whether they feel welcomed in their neighborhoods, their access to resources and opportunities, their dependence on government entities, or their legal status—logically would also influence trust in local government.

To sum, this study addresses the gap in the literature on migrants' political trust by examining how multiple levels of factors: individual-level socio-economic, demographic, and perception characteristics (Level-1), neighborhood-level physical and social environment characteristics (Level-2), and county-level macroeconomic characteristics (Level-3), affect the political trust of rural-to-urban migrants. I analyze data from the 2014 Chinese Family Panel Survey (CFPS), a large population study in 25 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions in People's Republic of China, excluding Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Hainan (Xie & Hu, 2014). Rural Hukou<sup>1</sup> holders who migrate to and live in cities currently are identified as rural-to-urban migrants. Utilizing hierarchical linear modeling, the findings indicate that neighborhood-level physical and social environments have an important explanatory ability to migrants' trust levels in local government. These findings are important empirically to explain trust dynamics among Chinese rural-to-urban migrants, and insightful theoretically to identify the importance of neighborhood-level characteristics in explaining people's political attitudes.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the section of *Literature Review and Hypotheses* reviews two bodies of literature, one on how micro-level and macro-level explanatory factors on political trust had been assessed by political scientists, the other on neighborhood effects on residents' life chances and how this literature can be expended to the political trust studies. Drawing from the existing body of research, I propose a set of hypotheses that examine how neighborhood-, individual-, and county-level factors affect migrants' trust levels in their county government. The section of *Data and Methods* introduces the data set used for analysis, the measurement of key independent and dependent variables, and the method of hierarchical linear modeling. The section of *Results* present findings that show how different-level features affect Chinese rural-to-urban migrants' trust in local government. The *Discussion* section then expands upon these findings, integrates them into the wider literature, and highlights their implications for both political trust literature and rural-to-urban migration governance. This paper concludes with a section summarizing the study's scholarly contribution, policy implications, potential limitation, and an agenda for future research.

### **Literature Review and Hypotheses**

To examine rural-to-urban migrants' trust in local government, we begin with a review of scholarly works on how individual-level characteristics of citizens, neighborhood-level characteristics, and macro-level characteristics of the government that are being trusted or distrusted affect individuals' political trust separately. We then evaluate a set of problems in these separate routes of explanations when it comes to the political trust of rural-to-urban migrants. We conclude with a multi-level analytical strategy to address these problems, which

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<sup>1</sup> Hukou is an institutional requirement imposed by China's government to register people in a fixed locale. Rural-born citizens are registered as rural-Hukou (i.e., agriculture-Hukou) holders. Urban-born citizens are registered as urban-hukou (i.e., non-agriculture-Hukou) holders. Rural- and urban-Hukou holders have different accesses and entitlements to social welfare and benefits.

includes neighborhood-level characteristics important explanatory factors.

### **Micro-level Explanatory Factors: Individual Characteristics and Perceptions of Government Performance**

At the micro-level, previous research highlights the relationship between individual traits and political trust (Zmerli & van der Meer, 2017). Scholars have found that different demographic groups have different levels of trust due to their systematically different experiences with government. For example, younger generations are found to have lower levels of trust in political institutions (Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012). Norris (1999; 2000) found that highly educated people and women tend to trust government more. In Confucianism-influenced societies, such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, individuals with a higher level of bonds to various social institutions (e.g., family, marriage, and job) have been found to be more trusting in political institutions. A unique feature in the Chinese political system is the mass participation of ordinary citizens in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and CCP members are recruited based on their party-state loyalty and found to be the core supporters of the party-state government (Dickson, 2016). Stronger political support therefore had been found among CCP members in China.

In addition to the traits or characteristics of citizens themselves, individual citizens' perceptions of government performance also play a crucial role in shaping their levels of political trust. Citizen's perceptions of government performance are multifaceted and complex (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Studies found that political trust is strongly associated with perceived procedural fairness in the formal and informal decision-making process (Mettler & Soss, 2004). Specifically, when citizens perceive their government as honest, ethical, and free from corruption, during the decision-making and policy-implementation processes, they are more likely to trust it. Conversely, if citizens perceive the government as corrupt, and/or lack of integrity or competence, their trust in government can be significantly undermined (Kumlin, 2004). Citizens' perceptions of inclusiveness and representation of their government are also important in shaping their levels of political trust. When citizens perceive that their government is inclusive and representative of diverse interests, they are more likely to trust it. However, if citizens perceive the government as unresponsive to their specific needs and concerns, or if they feel that their voices are not being heard, their trust might be lowered (Soss, 2000).

In terms of outcome-related performance, citizen satisfaction with government performance in general or specific policy outcomes in particular had been found influential for their political trust (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014). These outcome-based performances can be measured by service quality, output, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and customer satisfaction (Poister, 2003). If citizens perceive their government as effective and proficient, delivering high-quality services and achieving desired outcome efficiently, their trust levels are likely to be boosted. For example, perceived performance on public safety had been found associated with higher levels of trust (Mishler & Rose, 2001).

### **Macro-level Explanatory Factors: Objective Performance Indicators of Government**

While citizens' traits and subjective perceptions of government performance significantly influence their levels of political trust, it is important to recognize that people's trust levels are also shaped by the real, objective measures of government performance (Goodsell, 2004). This objective measure of government performance includes macro-economic performance, government inclusiveness and representation, and government responsiveness. Macro-economic performance is measured by various indicators, including per capita GDP, inflation rate, employment rate, poverty rate, and income inequality (Andersen, Pedersen, & Boesen, 2016). A government's ability to effectively manage these indicators and promote economic growth can significantly

impact citizens' trust in their government.

Macro-level procedure-related performance such as government inclusiveness and representation can be measured by indicators such as diversity of elected officials, voter turnout, accessibility of voting, and inclusive policies. A government that encourages diversity and representation and ensures accessible voting can foster a sense of inclusion and trust among citizens. Government responsiveness can be measured by indicators such as citizen engagement, accessibility of government information, transparency, and accountability of government decision-making processes. A government that values citizen input and makes information easily accessible to its citizens can enhance their trust in the government. Furthermore, institutional structures and democratic representation, inclusion, or accountability, such as electoral systems (Marien, 2011), the existence and implementation of nondiscrimination policies (Kumlin & Haugsgjerd, 2017), and the level of corruption (Uslaner, 2002) have also been found to be significant predictors of political trust levels.

### **The Two-Level Model on Trust: A Micro-Macro Integration**

As argued above, understanding one's political trust necessitates a multi-faceted lens, capable of incorporating both individual characteristics and perceptions (i.e., micro-level factors) and broader government performance and characteristics (i.e., macro-level factors) into consideration. In their research on political trust, Rousseau and colleagues (1998) emphasized the need for a multi-level analysis, yet few studies have effectively incorporated both micro- and macro-level factors in their analysis. However, there are some exceptions to this trend. Van de Meer (Kumlin & Haugsgjerd, 2017) employed a multi-level modeling on the survey data from the European Social Survey 2002-2006 and found that both individual-level (i.e., micro-level) features, such as income, level of education, and religion, as well as the country-level (i.e., macro-level) characteristics, such as corruption perception index, GDP, and types of regimes (e.g., longstanding democracy or former communist) influence individual citizens' trust in the parliamentary. Meer and Dekker (2011) developed a model that the micro-level traits of citizens and macro-level economic performance to explain cross-national variations in political trust. Similarly, Hutchison and Gibler (2007) combined individual- and state-level variables to explain people's political trust. Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) analyzed data from 21 European democracies to test the hypothesis that political trust is influenced by the interaction between an individual's education level (i.e., a micro-level factor) and the overall quality of democratic governance (i.e., a macro-level factor).

These two-level studies provide a more holistic and nuanced understanding of political trust. They allow for a deeper understanding of not just what factors shape people's trust in government, but also how these factors interact across different levels. This approach can provide a more accurate picture, acknowledging that political trust is formed both in the individuals' micro-level socialization process and by the objective quality of government performance. However, while this two-level model had taken the complexity of the formation of people's political trust, they often overlooked the middle-level or mediating factors. Next section will be devoted to introducing how mediating factors, especially neighborhood factors, can act as an intermediary bridge and reshape the way in which micro- and macro-level factors affect people's political trust.

### **Neighborhood Effects on Political Trust**

Although an integrated approach that considers both micro- and macro-level factors is essential to understanding political trust, it is incomplete without considering the mediating factors that may transform the relationship between these factors. For instance, exposure to mass media coverage of political controversy can

impact individuals' perceptions of government, leading to changes in their political trust levels. Studies by Chen and Shi (2001) and Mutz and Reeve (2005) have found that exposures to televised political incivility or controversies can decrease political trust. Conversely, a high-profile public event, such as 9/11 Terrorist Attack (Chanley, 2002) and Covid-19 global pandemic, may increase individuals' sense of shared reliance on government and, in turn, increase political trust. This phenomenon had been called "rally around flag" effects (Hutchison & Gibler, 2007).

Notably, middle-level factors often depend on an individual's residential neighborhood. We propose an integrated approach that considers micro-level individual characteristics and perceptions, macro-level objective performance, as well as the mediating effect of people's residential neighborhoods on political trust. Neighborhood-level characteristics had been found to play a critical role in shaping residents' life chances and social outcomes (Sampson et al., 2002). Therefore, we expect that neighborhood characteristics are influential in shaping individuals' trust in local government. Despite the importance of neighborhoods in shaping political trust, the relationship between neighborhood-level characteristics and political trust has not been adequately studied. To investigate this relationship, we draw on prior research on neighborhoods and identify the following three potential connections to political trust that warrant further investigation.

**Neighborhood deprivation and political trust.** Over the past 40 years, sociologists have conducted extensive research on the impact of community context and residential neighborhoods on residents' life chances. This body of literature has highlighted the influence of neighborhood effects, such as concentrated poverty, residential stability, and ethnic heterogeneity, on various outcomes such as delinquency, depression, and school dropout (Sampson et al., 2002). Additionally, neighborhood characteristics such as concentrated disadvantage have been found to impact residents' access to life opportunities and material resources. For example, studies in the U.S. had shown that social isolation in impoverished African American neighborhoods inhibits residents' political access and efficacy (Cohen & Dawson, 1993).

Drawing on this research, we propose that neighborhood deprivation may impact residents' political trust in local government. We expect that individuals living in neighborhoods with relative deprivation, such as concentrated poverty or poor-quality public facilities, may feel not been fairly served, or even abandoned, or victimized by the local government, leading to lower levels of political trust. We hypothesize that this effect may be particularly pronounced for migrants living in deprived urban neighborhoods, who may be less likely to trust local government due to their lack of social connections and networks in their new urban community.

H<sub>1</sub>: Migrants living in neighborhoods with greater level of deprivation tend to trust county government less.

**Social support and diversity in neighborhoods and political trust.** The term "neighborhood" and "community" are often used interchangeably, and their positive connotations suggest that community cohesion at the neighborhood level may be linked to trust of people or institutions outside the community, and in turn lead to higher levels of trust in local government. Previous studies demonstrate that two key features of neighborhood life may impact political trust—social interaction or support and civic participation. The quality of social interaction and relationships between neighbors in a community can influence their social behaviors, such as criminal activity, school dropout rates, and incarceration. Factors like strong neighborhood networks, frequent social interactions, and the presence of local voluntary associations and kinship networks have been found to effectively decrease the violent crime rates in neighborhoods. Besides, social support and cohesion have been shown to significantly improve the psychological and material well-being of African American women (Cutrona,

Russell, & Hessling, 2000).

In the context of rural-to-urban migration, it is crucial to re-examine the existing literature to understand how the proportion of migrants in a neighborhood can affect cohesion and trust. Greater social cohesion among neighborhood residents is associated with higher political trust and civic participation (J. Chan, To, & E. Chan, 2006). However, the literature on this topic is limited and inconsistent, which highlights the importance of considering the specific dynamics of individual neighborhoods. Trust can be significantly influenced by whether migrants are increasing the ethnic or racial diversity of the neighborhoods.

Two main theories discuss how inter-group interactions in neighborhoods with diverse demographic compositions affect their residents' political trust. Contact theory suggests that intergroup contact in a diverse neighborhood can promote residents' trust in local government by reducing inter-group prejudice and tension (Hooghe, 2007; Pettigrew, 1998). On the other hand, conflict theory asserts that increased intergroup interactions in environments with diverse social groups can lead to heightened mistrust and decreased willingness to participate in democratic activities such as voting. Conflict theories found that racial and ethnic diversity in neighborhoods tends to encourage people to support more racist policies and hold lower intergroup and political trust levels, to retreat from social life (Putnam, 1993), to undermine social cohesion (Cheong, Edwards, & Goulbourne, 2007), and to impede community attachment (Rice & Steele, 2001).

We expect an outcome affirming conflict theory, which proposes that homogeneity is associated with higher levels of trust in neighbors. We expect that:

H<sub>2</sub>: Migrants who live in neighborhoods where migrants comprise a higher portion of the total population tend to have higher levels of trust in local government.

H<sub>3</sub>: Migrants who live in neighborhoods with higher levels of mutual support and cooperation are expected to be more likely to trust local government.

**Neighborhood civic participation and political trust.** Some forms of civic participation are expressions of social cohesion, attachment to community, and faith in collective political efficacy at the neighborhood level. Jane Jacobs (1961) emphasized the vital role of urban neighborhood networks as an irreplaceable form of social capital, fostering place-based identity, attachment, and governance capacity. Similarly, Putnam (2000) linked American's disengagement from local social and political organizations to their growing distrust in government.

Studies found that neighborhood-level civic participation can significantly impact a resident's trust in local government through various mechanisms. When residents are actively engaged in their community, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging, social cohesion, and collective efficacy. These factors can contribute to an increase in trust in local government, as residents observe the direct effects of their involvement in decision-making processes and the betterment of their community. For example, as residents collaborate on projects, attend meetings, or participate in community events, they develop stronger social bonds and a shared sense of responsibility for their neighborhood's well-being. This increased sense of responsibility and efficacy can lead to a greater trust in local government, as individuals recognize the importance of working together with local authorities to address collective issues. Civic participation at the neighborhood level can lead to a sense of empowerment and political efficacy among residents. When people are actively involved in the decision-making process, they feel that they have a voice and can influence local government actions. This sense of empowerment can increase trust in local government, as residents believe that their input can make a difference in their community. Thus, we expect:

H<sub>4</sub>: Migrants living in neighborhoods with higher rates of participation in neighborhood-level social and



political association to be more likely to trust local government.

**Micro- and macro-level effects.** Building upon the existing literature addressing the impact of micro- and macro-level factors on people's political trust, this study then incorporates five hypotheses to investigate the key individual- or county-level factors' effects on migrants' trust in county government.

H<sub>5</sub>: Migrants with higher income levels are more likely to trust local government.

H<sub>6</sub>: Migrants having higher ratings of government performance are more likely to trust local government.

H<sub>7</sub>: Migrants having more positive perception of transparency in policy-making process tend to trust local government more.

H<sub>8</sub>: Migrants having more positive perception of procedural fairness are more likely to trust government more.

H<sub>9</sub>: Migrants living in counties with higher GPD per capita tend to trust county-level government more.

Drawing on the literature regarding the micro- and macro-level factors on individual's political trust, I control the following variables when testing the hypotheses of neighborhood effects on trust. At the micro-level, individual traits including age, gender, education levels, employment, CCP membership, and marital status had been controlled.

Table 1

*Hypotheses of Neighborhood-, Individual-, and County-Level Effects on Political Trust*

Neighborhood-level: Characteristics of individuals' neighborhood of residence	
H <sub>1</sub>	Migrants living in neighborhoods with greater deprivation are <i>less</i> likely to trust local government.
H <sub>2</sub>	Migrants living in neighborhoods with high proportion of migrants are <i>more</i> likely to trust local government.
H <sub>3</sub>	Migrants living in neighborhoods with higher levels of mutual support and cooperation are <i>more</i> likely to trust local government.
H <sub>4</sub>	Migrants living in neighborhoods with high levels of participation in community social or political associations are <i>more</i> likely to trust local government.
Micro-level: Individual characteristics as confounding factors	
H <sub>5</sub>	Migrants with higher income are less likely to trust local government.
Micro-level: Individuals' perceptions of government performance as confounding factors	
H <sub>6</sub>	Migrants with positive perception of transparency in policy-making processes are <i>more</i> likely to trust local government.
H <sub>7</sub>	Migrants with positive perception of procedural fairness in policy-making processes are <i>more</i> likely to trust local government.
H <sub>8</sub>	Migrants with positive perception of local government performance are <i>more</i> likely to trust local government.
Macro-level Controlling Factors: Macroeconomic performance of local government	
H <sub>9</sub>	Migrants living in counties with higher GDP per capita trust their county government more.

Table 1 is compiled by the author.

## Data and Methods

### Data

This study draws on data from the 2014 Chinese Family Panel Survey (CFPS), a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of individuals, families, and neighborhoods. The survey interviewed 32,254 individuals from 674 neighborhoods in 434 counties. Since the focus of this study is rural-to-urban migrants, we only include people whose hukou locales are rural areas but currently work and live in urban areas. The sample size is reduced to 8,788 individuals living in 334 neighborhoods within 149 counties. The inclusion of individual-, neighborhood-, and county-level data makes this survey an exceptional resource to understand the interaction of micro-, neighborhood-,

and macro-level characteristics and how they affect rural-to-urban migrants' political trust levels.

**Dependent variable: Political trust in county-level government.** This study focuses on citizen's political trust in the county-level government<sup>2</sup>. The trust levels are assessed through the following question in CFPS: On a scale of 0 to 10, what level of trust do you have in the local government? Please assign a rating of 0 if you have no trust at all and a rating of 10 if you have complete trust.

**Independent variables: Neighborhood-level factors.**

**Neighborhood-level deprivation.** To make the test of hypotheses more stringent, we use a deprivation scale (1-10) to capture all components of neighborhood-level deprivation. This scale is created by using five variables from the CFPS dataset to produce a single indicator. These include objective measures (i.e., median income of the neighborhood) and subjective data gathered from interviews with staffs in neighborhoods, for example, the ratio of households below the poverty line in each neighborhood, average level of education attainment, and access to basic facilities including medical facilities, physical exercise facilities, and playgrounds.

**Proportion of migrants in the neighborhoods.** The Hukou system was established in China in 1950s as an institutionalized way to manage the movement of people and to allocate resources based on the population in different areas. Under the Hukou system, every Chinese citizen is registered as a member of a particular household in a particular location. If an individual is born in rural areas, the Hukou type would be agricultural Hukou even he/she migrates to cities. Rural Hukou holders are only entitled to access to social welfare services such as education, healthcare, and housing in rural areas. In this study, rural-to-urban migrants are defined as Chinese citizens who hold a rural Hukou and live in cities. The proportion of migrants in the neighborhood is measured by the ratio of migrants living in the neighborhood to the total residential population of the neighborhood.

**Neighborhood-level social support and interaction.** The measure of neighborhood mutual support and cooperation is a composite of individuals' responses to the following three questions regarding the number of times the respondent reaches out for help in the preceding three months and their ranking of their relationship with neighbors (scale 1-5, from very strained to very harmonious).

**Participation in neighborhood social associations.** The levels of participation in neighborhood-levels social and political associations are measured by composing the ratio of residents who participated in the most recent community meeting and the ratio of residents who voted in the most recent community committee elections. These data were gathered through surveys conducted with the neighborhood association staffs in the CFPS data set.

### **Method: Hierarchical Linear Modeling**

Individuals are often grouped within organizational structures. For instance, students are grouped within schools, residents within neighborhoods, and neighborhoods within counties. Conventional regression analyses presume that responses are independent of one another. However, this may not hold true in many situations. For instance, trust levels from individuals within the same group, such as a neighborhood or a county, may be related or dependent, leading to a violation of the independence assumption.

This violation has significant implications, leading to a higher probability of committing type I errors. In the

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<sup>2</sup> The county-level government is the third tier of the administrative hierarchy in China, following the province- and prefectural-level government. County-level governments serve as the local administrative bodies responsible for making and implementing a series of policies and regulations. Due to the disparities in development and land areas in different provinces, county-level governments in China can be divided into following types: counties, autonomous counties, county-level cities, districts, and banners.

context of this current study, trust levels reported by residents aren't randomly distributed among respondents. Instead, they're likely to be interconnected, particularly among residents from the same neighborhood or county. This interconnection can cause heteroscedasticity, where the variance of the error term is not constant across all observations. This heteroscedasticity, in turn, inflates the sum of squared errors (SSE) in the model, which is a measure of the total variance in trust levels not explained by the included individual-level variables. As the SSE is used in the calculation of standard errors of the regression coefficients, an inflated SSE can lead to underestimated standard errors. When standard errors are underestimated, it gives a false impression of the precision and reliability of the estimated coefficients. Consequently, we may overestimate the effects of individual characteristics on trust levels, increasing the risk of falsely rejecting the null hypothesis (i.e., Type I error), or in other words, incorrectly concluding that individual characteristics significantly influence trust levels.

To address this challenge, we employ a hierarchical linear model (HLM), a method that accounts for the dependency of observations within groups and the presence of heteroscedasticity (Turner, 2015). By structuring the data at multiple levels—individuals within neighborhoods, and neighborhoods within counties—HLM enable us to integrate data on personal attributes, neighborhood features, and macro-level characteristics of county government to explain the variations in trust. At level-1, we include both respondents' individual-level socioeconomic variables (e.g., gender) and the respondent's perceptions of salient characteristics of government (e.g., perception of government transparency) as controlling variables; these factors are indicated by *INDIVIDUAL* in the equation below. At level-2, neighborhoods serve as clusters; four predictors at level 2 are included in the model: (1) neighborhood-level deprivation scale (i.e., *DEPRIVATION*); (2) proportion of migrants (i.e., *%MIGRANTS*); (3) mutual support and cooperation among neighbors (i.e., *SUPPORT*), and (4) civic participation (i.e., *PARTICIPATION*). For the purpose of parsimony, these predictors are presented as *NEIGHBORHOOD*. At level-3, counties serve as clusters. The macroeconomic indicator: GDP per capita is involved in the model.

The hierarchy now becomes individuals (i) within neighborhoods (j) within counties (k). Accordingly, the model can be written as:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y_{ijk} &= \beta_{0jk} + \beta_{1jk}(\text{INDIVIDUAL})_{ijk} + r_{ijk} && \text{(Individual level)} \\
 \beta_{0jk} &= \gamma_{00k} + \gamma_{01}(\text{NEIGHBORHOOD})_{jk} + u_{0jk} && \text{(Neighborhood level)} \\
 \beta_{1jk} &= \gamma_{10k} + \gamma_{11}(\text{NEIGHBORHOOD})_{jk} + u_{1jk} \\
 \gamma_{00k} &= \partial_{000} + \partial_{001}(\text{COUNTY})_k + v_{00k} && \text{(County Level)} \\
 \gamma_{10k} &= \partial_{100} + \partial_{101}(\text{COUNTY})_k + v_{10k}
 \end{aligned}$$

Combined model:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y_{ijk} &= [\partial_{000} + \partial_{001}(\text{COUNTY})_k + \gamma_{01}(\text{NEIGHBORHOOD})_{jk} + \gamma_{10k}(\text{INDIVIDUAL})_{ijk} + u_{0jk} + r_{ijk}] \\
 &\quad + [\partial_{100} + \partial_{101}(\text{COUNTY})_k + \gamma_{11}(\text{NEIGHBORHOOD})_{jk} + u_{1jk}](\text{INDIVIDUAL})_{ijk} \\
 &\quad + v_{00k} + v_{10k}
 \end{aligned}$$

In this model,  $\partial_{001}$  shows the separate effect of a one-unit change in the county-level factors on one's trust, assuming that we are only considering the county-level factors.  $\gamma_{01}$  represents the effect of a one-unit change in the neighborhood-level factors (e.g., one-unit change in deprivation scales) on one's trust, when we only consider the neighborhood-level factors.  $\partial_{100} + \gamma_{10k}$  collectively represent the separate effects of one-unit changes in the individual-level factors on one's trust, considering both individual- and higher-level factors.  $\partial_{101}$  is the cross-level interaction term for the effect of individual-level variables (e.g., migrant status) interacting with

county-level variables (i.e., GDP per capita).  $\gamma_{11}$  is the cross-level interaction term for the effect of individual-level variables (e.g., income levels) interacting with neighborhood-level variables (i.e., deprivation scales). The STATA command ‘xtmixed’ is used to estimate the parameters in the combined model above.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

On the micro- or individual-level, rural-to-urban migrants have unique characteristics that differentiate them from non-migrants, including both pre- and post-migratory features. For instance, migrants are more likely to be male, higher educated, and married. Migrants tend to earn higher income and be employed. The result of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) in Table 2 shows systematic difference between rural-to-urban migrants and their rural non-migrant counterparts in terms of socioeconomic, demographic, and government-perception characteristics. Rural-to-urban migrants have lower trust level on average (4.92 out of 10) than rural residents (6.34 out of 10). The ANOVA results also show that the migrant population is statistically different from non-migrants in terms of gender, employment status, educational levels, age, marital status, income, and Chinese Community Party membership. We include these features as individual-level confounding factors.

Table 2

*ANOVA Analysis of Level-1 Factors: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Rural-to-Urban Migrants and Rural Residents*

Characteristics	Rural-to-urban migrants	Rural residents	<i>p</i> -value
Political trust (scale 0-10)	4.92	6.34	0.000
% Male	45.7	48.4	0.000
% Employed	80.7	80.3	0.000
% High school or above	48.8	35.7	0.000
% Married	80.7	80.3	0.000
Age	44.5	45.3	0.000
Annual income (Yuan)	9,394	5,004	0.000
% Communist Party Member	33	40	0.000
Perception of transparency (scale 1-5)	3.1	3.4	0.001
Perception of procedural fairness (scale 1-10)	5.2	6.3	0.001
Satisfaction with performance (scale 1-5)	3.7	4.1	0.001

Table 3

*ANOVA Analysis of Level-2 Factors: Characteristics of Neighborhoods of Rural-to-Urban Migrants and Rural Residents*

Neighborhood-level characteristics	Rural-to-urban migrants' neighborhoods ( <i>N</i> = 340)	Rural neighborhoods ( <i>N</i> = 334)	<i>p</i> -value
Average political trust in neighborhoods (scale 1-10)	5.1	6.34	0.000
Average scale of neighborhood deprivation (scale 1-10)	6.9	5.9	0.000
% Residents who are not locally registered	38	1.7	0.000
Mutual support and cooperation	3.4	7.7	0.012
% Residents who participate in neighborhood-level civic activities	40	46	0.005

On the neighborhood-level, the average trust level among migrants' neighborhoods (5.1 out of 10) is lower than the average trust level (6.34 out of 10) among rural residents' neighborhoods. The ANOVA results in Table

3 also shows that migrants' neighborhoods are significantly more deprived than rural residents' neighborhoods (6.9 and 5.9 out of 10, respectively), have very significantly higher proportion of non-locally registered people in terms of Hukou (38% vs. 1.7%), have significantly lower levels of mutual support and cooperation among residents (3.4 and 7.7 out of 10, respectively), and have a significant lower proportion of residents who voluntarily participate in community meetings or elections (40% and 46%, respectively). These statistically significant differences properly justify the hypotheses testing on how neighborhood-level difference may contribute to the trust levels among migrants.

### **HLM Analysis Results**

**Neighborhood-level effects on migrants' trust in county government.** The results in Table 4 support the overarching hypothesis that neighborhoods where migrants live do affect their trust levels in local government. Living in deprived neighborhoods adversely affects migrants' trust levels: migrants' trust in local government is diminished by 0.042 on a 0-10 scale if the deprivation scale of their neighborhood increases by one unit. This result implies that when migrants live in a neighborhood with a higher level of economic disadvantage (e.g., lower median income and higher ratios of households living under the poverty line), physical disadvantages (e.g., limited access to basic facilities and infrastructure, and/or poor housing conditions), as well as social disadvantage (e.g., low levels of average educational attainment), they tend to trust county government less.

Higher levels of neighborhood-level participation increase migrants' trust levels. Migrants living in neighborhoods with more people actively engaged in community-level social and political associations tend to trust local government more than migrants living in a more cynical neighborhood. This result confirms our expectation that neighborhood-level political and social participation holds a positive relationship with general political trust in local government. This result is also consistent with some findings from the Western context regarding the positive relationship between participation in associational activities and political trust. Migrants living in a neighborhood with higher proportion of migrant population tend to trust local government more. This result means that migrants who live with other rural-to-urban migrants who have shared experiences and identities tend to perceive local government as more trustworthy. Social trust at the neighborhood level (e.g., mutual support and cooperation among neighbors) does not emerge as a significant influential factor for migrants' political trust.

**Individual-level factors on migrants' trust in county government.** At the individual-level, migrants who are male, married, and/or higher-educated tend to trust county government less. Migrants who have full-time employment, and/or are Chinese Communist Party members tend to trust county government more. Migrants' annual income appears to be not associated with their trust levels in county government. This result runs against our expectation and previous studies' findings on the positive association between income and political trust in Western context. Turning to the effects of perception on government performance, results show that migrants' satisfaction with government performance in general is positively associated with their trust levels. We will discuss the implication of this result in the part of discussion. Migrants' evaluations of procedure-oriented government performance appear not to affect their trust levels. Migrants' evaluation of government performance in general is influential to their trust in local government.

**County-level confounding factors on trust.** At the county-level, government macroeconomic performance, indicated by its average per capita GDP in pervious year (i.e., 2013), has positive effects on migrants' trust levels.

Specifically, one-unit (i.e., 10,000 RMB) increase in the per capita GDP in the county is associated with 0.0032-unit increase in migrants' trust levels.

Table 4

*Multiple-Level Effects on Rural-to-Urban Migrants' Trust*

Individual-level socio-economic and demographic factors		
Age	0.024***	0.000
Married	-0.271***	0.000
Annual income (10,000 RMB)	-0.0176	0.109
Male	-0.249***	0.000
Education level (Years)	-0.029***	0.000
Full-time employed	0.195***	0.000
Communist Party Member	0.660***	0.000
Individuals' perceptions of government performance		
Perception of transparency	0.033	0.091
Perception of procedural fairness	0.231	0.154
Perception of performance	0.045**	0.009
Neighborhood-level effects		
Neighborhood deprivation (H <sub>1</sub> )	-0.042**	0.002
Proportion of migrants (H <sub>2</sub> )	0.0072***	0.000
Mutual support and cooperation (H <sub>3</sub> )	-0.09	0.14
Community participation (H <sub>4</sub> )	0.13**	0.005
County-level macroeconomic performance		
GDP per capita (10,000RMB)	0.0032**	0.002
Intercept 1	0.534	
Intercept 2	2.231	
Intercept 3	3.369	
		$R^2 = 0.0476$
		Level 1 $N = 8,788$
		Level 2 $N = 334$
		Level 3 $N = 149$

\*\*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ . Analysis is performed in Hierarchical Linear and Nonlinear Modeling (HLM) 7 software.

## Discussion

### Individual-Level Factors on Migrants' Trust in Local Government

Rural-to-urban migration is a multi-dimensional process, influencing various aspects of migrants' lives. At the individual-level, migrants usually can have broader employment opportunities and more economic benefits in cities, compared to their non-migrant rural counterparts who choose to stay in the countryside (Iredale & Guo, 2015). However, the level-1 HLM results reveal that migrants' political trust levels in local government are not associated with their income. This finding is inconsistent with the findings from the international migrant population in the Western countries. For example, in their 2013 studies, De Vroome and colleagues (2013) found that the Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands, who occupy lower economic positions, indicated by their less prestigious occupation and lower income, generally hold lower levels of trust in the country's political institutions.

This lack of association might be understood from two directions. First, with the introduction of market reform and the proliferation of neoliberal culture in China in the past four decades, people's perception of income

and personal wealth has undergone a transformation. Migrants may increasingly view these aspects as payoffs to their personal skills and efforts, less tied to government policies and welfare but mainly reflect personal efforts and skills. Under this perception, migrants' level of trust in local government may not correlate with their income levels. Secondly, despite having higher income compared to their rural non-migrant counterparts, rural-to-urban migrants may choose to compare their earnings with urbanites in their new living environment. This comparison with this specific reference group can lead to feelings of relative deprivation, where migrants may perceive themselves as disadvantaged or less well-off. Such feelings can in turn ignite negative perceptions of local government, irrespective of their actual income levels.

In terms of individual-level perception of government performance and its effects on trust, our level-1 HLM results show that the outcomes and outputs of government action, rather than procedures of government, are more consequential for migrants' political trust. In other words, the more tangible outcome or outputs of government action appear to have a greater influence on migrants' trust levels than the procedural fairness or transparency of government decision-making process. The lack of link between perceived procedural fairness and trust is inconsistent with findings from the Western context (Grimes, 2017). For example, de Blok and Kumlin (2022) found that perceived procedural fairness is an important factor in building political trust, particularly among those who are dissatisfied with the outcomes or outputs of welfare state institutions. Why don't rural-to-urban migrants assess the trustworthiness of government through procedure-related performance? The first potential explanation is that this lies in the tangible and immediate nature of outcome or output of government performance. These elements directly affect migrants' quality of life, economic opportunities, and overall well-being in their new urban environment. They are more likely to trust government that can effectively deliver these concrete benefits. The second explanation is that formal procedures in decision-making settings of county-level government are far from the migrants' interest and not observable to them. The transparency and fairness in such decision-making settings therefore have less impact on migrants' trust in local government. Instead, it can be expected that the procedural fairness and transparency in the implementation and enforcement stages of policy process, which are more immediate or relevant to migrants' daily experiences, can be more related to migrants' trust levels.

### **Neighborhood-Level Factors on Migrants' Trust in Local Government**

Beyond the changes at the individual-level, rural-to-urban migration is also an act of moving to a new physical environment, and this involves several shifts in neighborhood-level circumstances. Rural to urban migration means relocating from relatively homogeneous villages to more heterogeneous neighborhoods, and potentially also to social environments involving some kinds of hardship (e.g., poverty, segregation of migrants, or poorer facilities). The material disadvantage and nonmaterial discrimination of living in more deprived neighborhoods are hypothesized to shape migrants' perception of local government, make them feel abandoned, and lower their trust. In this study, we considered whether the effects of those changes in neighborhood environments affect migrants' trust.

Our level-2 HLM results support the hypothesis that a high concentration of rural-to-urban migrants in neighborhoods tends to enhance migrants' trust in local government. Interesting, these findings contradict the contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998) that argues exposure to diverse population fosters more positive attitudes toward the local government. In contrast, our findings align more with conflict theory which proposes a greater likelihood of intergroup connection (Pettigrew, 1998) when individual resides in areas with larger population similar to their own.

The finding also contradicts prior studies in Western contexts that identify residential segregation of immigrants as key sources of inter-group conflicts and integration challenges which in turn diminish the trust these geographically isolated immigrants place in local government (Anderson, 2010). Following this line of reasoning, one would expect to observe lower political trust in Chinese urban neighborhoods with a concentration of rural-to-urban migrant population, especially when rural-to-urban migrants are often perceived as outsiders, newcomers, and minorities in urban society. Why do migrants living in neighborhoods with a higher concentration of migrants tend to trust local government more? One possible explanation could be that a higher proportion of individuals sharing similar background can bolster social capital, which in turn enhances trust in local government (Putnam, 2000). Similarly, the positive association between the participation in neighborhood-level associational activities and migrants' trust in local government aligns with the argument on the importance of civic culture on political trust (Almond & Verba, 1963; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Meer & Dekker, 2011). High community involvement for migrants can translate into a greater sense of solidarity, shared identity, sense of belonging to the community, and collective responsibility, which in turn can foster a more favorable perception of local government and a higher level of trust in local government. Another revelation from the HLM level-2 result is that social support at the neighborhood level, exemplified by mutual support and cooperation among neighbors, does not significantly influence migrants' trust in local government. This finding aligns with Mishler and Rose's (2001) studies on the relationship between social and political trust in post-communist countries, yet it contrasts with the conclusion drawn by Bradford et al. (2019) regarding the impacts of social support at neighborhood level on people's trust in the police in the Netherlands. This finding further suggests that different societal structures and context may influence the link between social support or trust and trust in political institutions.

### **County-Level Factors: Objective Macroeconomic Performance**

The level-3 result from the HLM analysis reveals the positive impact of county-level GDP per capita on migrants' political trust. Migrants who live in wealthier counties tend to trust their government more. This positive link between the objective performance indicators and migrants' trust emphasizes how various performance types can influence migrants' trust levels. Objective, macro-level performance measures, like county-level GDP per capita, employment rate, and/or lower level of corruption, indeed shape migrants' trust. It's therefore essential to consider multiple performance measurements that are simultaneously at play. Migrants' subjective evaluation of performance and the objective performance of county government simultaneously affect their trust levels (Zhang, Li, & Yang, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

In the context of China's massive urbanization—with 287 million rural-to-urban migrants currently working in cities, an understanding of migrants' trust levels has important implications for the improvement of migrant-state relationship and migration governance. This study integrates analysis of individuals' micro-level characteristics, their perceptions of local government's performance, neighborhood-level factors, and macro-level, objective government performance to understand how migrants' trust in local government has been developed.

### **Empirical, Theoretical, and Practical Implications**

This study offers valuable empirical insights and theoretical advancements to two bodies of literature: one on the political trust among rural-to-urban migrants, the other on the neighborhood effects. In terms of empirical



findings, we identify determinants that shape migrants' trust in local government at three levels: individual-, neighborhood-, and county-level. At the individual-level, migrants' socioeconomic status, such as employment status and educational attainment; and their demographic features, such as gender and age, affect their trust levels. Moreover, their positive perception of local government performance in general enhances trust, although perceptions regarding procedural fairness and transparency of local government do not seem to affect their trust levels. Simultaneously, this study underscores the role of neighborhood-level factors in shaping migrants' trust. We discover that rural-to-urban migrants tend to exhibit greater trust in local government when residing in neighborhoods densely populated with fellow migrants. This finding contradicts established assumptions in Western studies that associate isolations of migrants with their increased distrust toward government. Additionally, the results suggest that migrants living in socioeconomically deprived neighborhoods are likely to exhibit lower trust in local government. On the other hand, migrants dwelling in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of engagement in community political and social associations demonstrate higher degrees of trust in local government. Migrants who live in counties with higher GDP per capita tend to trust the county government more. These findings underscore the complex interplay of micro-, macro-, and neighborhood-level factors in shaping political trust among rural-to-urban migrants.

In terms of theoretical advancement, this study argues for the relevance of neighborhood-effects in political trust. Our hypotheses and variable selection were derived by synthesizing two areas of research: political trust and neighborhood effects. By doing so, we have enriched both fields by offering a blended perspective. This blended approach made contribution to political trust studies by emphasizing the significance of people's immediate residential context on their political orientation and attitudes. Simultaneously, this blended approach contributes to neighborhood effects by illuminating how the socioeconomic status and socio-political interactions in a neighborhood can broadly influence its residents' political orientations. This perspective expands the traditional scope of neighborhood effects research, which focus more on the consequences for residents' economic and social wellbeing.

Besides the empirical and theoretical contribution, the findings of this study provide valuable insights for migrant governance in fast urbanizing countries. Acknowledging the profound influence of individual, neighborhood, and macro-level factors on migrants' political trust can guide policymakers in crafting more effective, holistic, and context-sensitive strategies to boost migrants' trust and integrate migrants into urban society. Given the positive association between employment status and educational attainment and trust, policies aimed at improving employment opportunities and education for migrants should be promoted to foster their trust. The positive impact of higher GDP per capita at the county level on migrants' trust also underscores the necessity of broader economic development strategies. Investment in local economies could be a means to not only enhance economic prosperity but also foster trust among migrants.

The neighborhood-level findings shed light on the importance of creating more inclusive and active communities for migrants. Policymakers need to consider facilitating the establishment of more neighborhood associations or local bodies to promote migrants' social and political engagement in neighborhoods, which can, in turn, enhance migrants' trust in the local government. Furthermore, efforts to reduce socio-economic deprivation in neighborhoods, through targeted infrastructure development or social welfare programs for migrants, will be beneficial. One of findings shows that neighborhoods with higher proportion of migrants can increase migrants' trust in local government. This finding calls on policymakers to reconsider conventional assumptions that only mixed or diverse neighborhoods, which have a similar proportion of migrants and non-

migrants, can positively impact the relationship between migrants and the government in the host society. The beneficial effects of homogenous migrant neighborhoods on political trust should not be underestimated in policy decisions.

### Limitation and Future Research Agenda

Despite the noteworthy contributions of this study, there are some limitations. First, while this study considers a range of individual-, neighborhood-, and county-level factors, there might be other unexamined factors that could potentially influence migrants' political trust, for instance, the cultural factors, migrants' experiences with government officials, or the influence of family or other social networks. Second, we only focus on the group of rural-to-urban migrants in China. A comparative analysis across different groups within a fast-urbanizing country, such as urbanites and rural non-migrants can deepen our understanding on whether and how the multi-level factors identified in this study could also affect political trust of other non-migrant populations. Third, this analysis is based on cross-sectional data, which limits the ability to make causal inferences and understand the temporal dynamics of trust development. Future research could exploit the longitudinal feature of CFPS and examine how trust levels of migrants change over time. Fourth, this analysis is quantitative, which provides an understanding of statistical patterns and mechanism of migrants' trust. However, to understand the nuance-ness of migrants' perceptions, experiences, and dynamics of trust-building in their local government, future research could benefit from adopting a qualitative approach. Such studies could shed light on the underlying motives, beliefs, and consideration that drive the observed statistic patterns in this current study.

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