

Silent suffering: Depression, perceived inequality, and political trust

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Abstract

Depression is a growing concern worldwide, yet its impact on political trust remains underexplored. Using a nationally representative panel survey from China, we find a robust negative association between depressive symptoms and political trust. This effect is amplified by perceptions of inequality, as individuals who see society as unfair are more likely to blame the government for their hardship. The effect is pronounced among potentially volatile groups like unemployed young males, whose tendency to externalize stress can translate distrust into social unrest. Crucially, the effect is also significant among groups traditionally considered better off such as public sector employees, who face intense pressures of ideological conformity in the workplace. This widespread “silent suffering” highlights a critical psychological pathway through which poor mental health, an increasingly pressing issue, can intensify social discontent and weaken regime stability.

Keywords

mental health, depression, political trust, inequality, China

Introduction

Depression is a significant global public health challenge, characterized by persistent sadness, hopelessness, and diminished interest in daily activities. Research on mental health in politics finds that individuals with higher depressive symptoms tend to have lower political interest, participation, and internal efficacy (Bernardi et al., 2023; Bernardi, Sala, and Gotlib, 2024; Landwehr and Ojeda, 2021; Landwehr et al., 2025; Ojeda, 2015). However, its relationship with political trust remains underexplored, particularly in authoritarian regimes, where managing mental health and maintaining political trust are crucial for regime stability and legitimacy.

In authoritarian regimes like China, the rising prevalence of depression may stem from the state’s emphasis on uniformity and control, which limits individual emotional expression. Pye (1968) argues that Chinese political culture imposes strict constraints on aggression, with early socialization reinforcing traditional values of authority, order, and emotional restraint. Limited access to mental health care, compounded by cultural stigma and authoritarian norms that equate vulnerability with weakness, exacerbates

the issue. Truex (2022) finds that discontented citizens in China often exhibit traits linked to depression, such as fearfulness, disorganization, and social withdrawal. This prompts a critical question: Do individuals with depressive symptoms exhibit lower political trust?

To address this issue, we examine how depression affects political trust, with heightened perceptions of inequality as a moderating factor. Using a nationally representative panel survey from China, we find a strong negative relationship between depression and political trust. This distrust is partly driven by increased sensitivity to inequality, as depressed individuals are more likely to attribute their struggles to government failures. The effect is most pronounced among

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unemployed young males, making them potential sources of social unrest. It is also significant among public sector employees, who experience silent suffering under the pressure of propaganda and demands for ideological conformity.

Our study contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, we expand the research on mental health and politics by shifting the focus from political participation to political trust, a critical but understudied topic in authoritarian regimes. Second, using nationally representative data, it uncovers significant heterogeneity in this relationship, moving beyond the limitations of previous online surveys. Third, instead of focusing on cognitive mediators such as rumination and cognitive biases, we propose a moderating factor: the perception of inequality, which is a key factor in shaping public opinion in authoritarian regimes.

The policy implications are significant. Building on [Truex's \(2022\)](#) finding that China's most dissatisfied citizens exist at the margins of society, we show that discontent driven by psychological distress is also widespread among traditionally better-off groups. This suggests that dissatisfaction is not confined to marginalized populations but also affects those within the power structure, raising concerns about the broader stability of the regime. Additionally, special attention should be given to unemployed young men, who are particularly vulnerable and may become potential sources of social unrest. Our study enhances understanding of the psychological forces that influence the resilience of authoritarian rule.

Silent suffering: Depression crisis in China

The mental health situation in China is concerning. Approximately 130 million adults suffer from mental disorders, with a lifetime prevalence of 16.6% ([Huang et al., 2019](#); [Xiang et al., 2012](#)). Despite this widespread need, access to treatment remains severely limited—only 9.5% of individuals with depressive disorders receive treatment, and a mere 0.5% receive adequate care ([Lu et al., 2021](#)). Even when diagnosed, most individuals remain silent or discuss it only cautiously, let alone seek full treatment.

The roots of China's mental health crisis are more social than medical. Traditionally, the healthcare system directs patients to large hospitals for specialized care rather than primary care providers. As a result, mental health services are concentrated in specialized hospitals, leaving community-level psychological support largely unavailable. In response, the Chinese government launched the 686 Program to expand mental health services. However, these efforts remain ineffective if individuals are unwilling or unable to acknowledge their struggles ([Lu et al., 2021](#)).

A major barrier is the longstanding cultural stigma surrounding mental illness. Rooted in Confucian ideals and reinforced by authoritarian expectations of strength and obedience, Chinese society discourages open discussions of mental illness. Psychological distress is often viewed as a

personal failing that disrupts social harmony, rendering it taboo. The fear of social stigma and reputational damage deters many from seeking help. Moreover, the lack of routine and widespread mental health interventions reinforces misconceptions that mental disorders are rare or abnormal, further isolating those who are struggling. As a result, those affected by mental health issues often suffer in silence, leading to a deepening mental health crisis that remains largely unaddressed.

Theory: Depression and political trust

Depression has significant political consequences, influencing political attitudes and behavior. Existing research consistently shows that individuals with higher levels of depressive symptoms exhibit lower political interest, participation, and internal efficacy ([Bernardi et al., 2023](#); [Bernardi, Sala, and Gotlib, 2024](#); [Landwehr and Ojeda, 2021](#); [Ojeda, 2015](#)). However, much of this literature focuses on developed democracies such as the UK and the US, with an emphasis on political efficacy, voting behavior, the assessment of democracy, and support for political violence ([Baum et al., 2024](#); [Bernardi, Sala, and Gotlib, 2024](#); [Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005](#); [Landwehr et al., 2025](#); [Ojeda, 2015](#)). The relationship between depression and political trust outside developed democracies, however, remains largely understudied.

Existing literature suggests that depression may erode political trust. Depression, characterized by persistent sadness, hopelessness, and apathy, undermines individuals' ability to form positive expectations about government behavior—a core component of political trust ([Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005](#)). Furthermore, depression affects information processing through negative cognitive schemata ([Beck, 1963](#); [LeMoult and Gotlib, 2019](#)), making individuals more likely to interpret government actions negatively. Given that negative emotions are known to reduce trust ([Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005](#); [Webster, 2018](#)), it is reasonable to assume that depression amplifies individuals' tendency to distrust the government. [Truex \(2022\)](#), for instance, finds that discontented citizens in China often exhibit depression-linked traits like fearfulness and social withdrawal. These studies suggest that depression plays a crucial role in shaping political attitudes, particularly in contexts where individuals feel politically marginalized or disenfranchised. While existing work has focused on acute stressors like the COVID-19 pandemic (see [Appendix A5](#) for details), the chronic, everyday impact of depression on political trust in these regimes remains underexplored. Given that trust is crucial for regime stability, this represents a significant gap in our understanding of authoritarian politics.

Prior research, primarily in democracies, identifies several pathways linking depression to lower political trust, including cognitive processes like rumination and cognitive

biases (Baum et al., 2024; Bernardi, Sala, and Gotlib, 2024; Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005). Additionally, depressive realism, a phenomenon where depressed individuals, particularly at mild levels, perceive things more realistically, has been identified as a key factor in why they trust politics less (Bernardi and Gotlib, 2022). However, these individual-level cognitive mechanisms are insufficient in authoritarian regimes. In systems with few formal outlets for dissent, the state is often seen as the primary agent responsible for both economic and social fairness. Consequently, we argue that psychological distress is not just internalized; it is politicized, channeled directly into negative evaluations of the government. This makes political trust a uniquely sensitive barometer of public mood, reflecting not just cognitive biases but a direct attribution of personal hardship to the state.

The relationship between depression and political trust is posited to be heterogeneous. For instance, younger individuals facing greater life uncertainties might exhibit a more pronounced decline in trust when depressed. This effect could be particularly salient among young men, who are often observed to externalize stress, contrasting with women's tendency towards internalizing emotions. Similarly, among regime insiders like public sector employees or CCP members, the cognitive dissonance inherent in publicly mandated loyalty juxtaposed with private disillusionment may generate distinct patterns of political disaffection. This group, specifically, might be more inclined to attribute economic hardship to systemic failures, thereby experiencing a sharper decline in trust silently.

We argue that the political impact of depression is significantly amplified by perceived inequality, a potent source of public grievance, particularly in China. Inequality in China has become an increasingly prominent concern, with public opinion shifting towards attributing wealth and poverty to structural inequality issues rather than individual effort (Alisky et al., 2025). Higher social status provides greater autonomy and expanded opportunities for wealth accumulation, as households with CCP members tend to have more wealth than comparable households without party affiliation (Targa and Yang, 2024). Additionally, government positions are viewed as prestigious, which fuels strong enthusiasm for civil service careers (Liu, 2023). This growing awareness is politically consequential, as perceived distributive unfairness consistently erodes regime support (Huang and Zuo, 2023; Jin et al., 2024). Given that the Chinese state is widely viewed as the primary architect of social and economic outcomes, inequality is not merely a social issue; it directly challenges government legitimacy.

Therefore, we hypothesize that perceived inequality plays a crucial moderating role in the relationship between depression and political trust. The psychological foundations for this moderating effect are twofold: First, depression fundamentally alters how individuals process information. Grounded in cognitive theories of depression (Beck, 1963),

extensive research demonstrates that depressive symptoms are associated with negative cognitive biases. These biases heighten an individual's sensitivity to social comparison and perceived unfairness (Beshai et al., 2017). Second, when this heightened psychological sensitivity meets with perceived unfairness, individuals are more likely to engage in external attribution. This means that depressed individuals are not only more likely to notice inequality but are also cognitively primed to interpret it as a systemic failure. Instead of internalizing their distress, they channel their personal disillusionment and hardship into blaming the government. In a political system where the state is seen as the primary architect of social and economic outcomes, this attribution process directly erodes political trust.

To understand why perceived inequality is such a potent moderator, we draw on literature explaining its psychological impact. Research shows that inequality fosters psychological distress not in a vacuum but through powerful mechanisms like social comparison (Van Deurzen et al., 2015) and status anxiety (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2017). This means that when an individual is already experiencing depression—characterized by negative cognitive biases—their perception of an unequal social environment becomes particularly toxic. The psychological “sting” of inequality, when combined with the cognitive burden of depression, is more likely to be channeled into political blame. Therefore, we hypothesize that perceived inequality will significantly amplify the negative effect of depression on political trust.

Data and method

We use panel data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), a nationally representative survey covering 162 counties across 25 provinces (Xie and Hu, 2014). To examine the relationship between mental health and political trust, we focus on the 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018 waves (see Appendix A1 for details). Due to data availability, our analysis is limited to the pre-COVID period.

Our primary dependent variable is political trust, measured by respondents' agreement with the statement: “Overall, I trust local officials,” rated on a scale from 0 (completely disagree) to 10 (completely agree). We prioritize local trust as a more reliable indicator in the Chinese context, given its reduced susceptibility to self-censorship compared to trust in the central government (Nicholson and Huang, 2023; Stockmann et al., 2018). We measure political trust using respondents' trust in local officials. Local officials represent the tangible, human interface of the state for most citizens. The perceived performance, fairness, and behavior of individual officials are often seen as a direct reflection of local governance quality, making this a salient and reliable measure of citizens' trust in the state at the local level. This measure is widely used in studies on political trust (Chen et al., 2024; Sha, 2022). For comparison, we also

analyze attitudinal measures such as trust in doctors, neighbors, parents, strangers, and Americans, along with perceptions of inequality (see [Appendix A2](#) for details).

Our key independent variable is depressive symptoms, measured by the K6 scale ([Kessler et al., 2003](#)), which CFPS applies across all survey waves. This six-item scale assesses psychological distress, producing a composite score from 0 to 24, with higher values indicating greater mental health issues (see [Appendix A3](#)). We standardize K6 scores to represent the predicted probability of mental illness and create dummy variables for severity: mild ($K6 \geq 4$), moderate ($K6 \geq 8$), and severe depression ($K6 \geq 13$).

Our models include controls at three levels. City-level controls, drawn from the China City Yearbook, account for time-varying socioeconomic factors like GDP per capita and population size, which are known to influence local government trust ([Rahn and Rudolph, 2005](#); [Van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017](#)). Individual-level controls include demographics indicators: gender, age, residence type (urban/rural), education, work status, marital status, and household income. Additionally, to account for the impact of environmental factors on emotional states ([Zivin et al., 2020](#)), we incorporate monthly city-level weather data (temperature, precipitation, humidity, and wind speed) from the China Meteorological Data Sharing Service System (CMDSSS), converting it to city-level estimates using an inverse-distance weighting algorithm.

We estimate the following model:

$$\text{Trust}_{ict} = \beta \text{depression}_{ict} + \gamma_1 X_{ict} + \gamma_2 W_{ct} + \alpha_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{ict} \quad (1)$$

The outcome variable Trust_{ict} is respondent i 's political trust in city c at year t , while depression_{ict} is the depression score for the same respondent. We control for city-level socio-economic W_{ct} and time-varying individual covariates X_{ict} . We control for individual fixed effects α_i to account for time-invariant unobserved factors. Year-fixed effects λ_t are added to control for shocks common to all observations within a given year. Standard errors are clustered at household level. We mainly focus on β , which measures the association between depression and political trust.

Results

Baseline

We present the estimation results based on equation (1) in [Table 1](#), with full results in [Appendix Table A2](#). Political trust and depression variables are rescaled between 0 and 1 for ease of interpretation. As shown in columns 1 and 3, after controlling for individual- and city-level socioeconomic factors, depression is negatively associated with political trust. Specifically, when depression increases from

Table 1. Baseline results.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Political trust		
Depression	−0.090*** (0.007)	−0.090*** (0.007)	−0.090*** (0.007)
Individual control	×	√	√
City control	×	×	√
Individual FE	√	√	√
Year FE	√	√	√
N	103,957	103,957	103,957
Adj. R2	0.3448	0.3462	0.3462

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, and *** $p < .01$.

its minimum (0) to its maximum (1), political trust decreases by 0.09 units on a 0 to 1 scale, equivalent to a nearly 9 percentage point drop—indicating a substantial effect.

Next, we examine the relationship between varying levels of depression and political trust. [Figure 1](#) presents the coefficient plot, and [Appendix Table A3](#) provides the full regression results. As expected, all levels of depression significantly reduce both political trust. A one-unit increase in mild depression decreases political trust by 0.018 units, moderate depression by 0.024 units, and severe depression by 0.028 units—all significant at the 1% level. The negative effect intensifies with depression severity, indicating that individuals with more severe depression exhibit substantially lower political trust.

We then investigate whether depression influences trust in other entities. [Figure 2](#) presents the results, with full estimates in [Appendix Table A4](#). Consistent with its effect on political trust, depression is negatively associated with general social trust and trust in parents, neighbors, doctors, and strangers. However, we find a positive association between depression and trust in US citizens. This finding is noteworthy, as the US is frequently portrayed as a hostile entity in China and is generally not viewed as a friendly ally. It suggests that depression not only fosters negative attitudes toward various aspects of society but also shapes political orientations, potentially pushing individuals toward a more critical stance on the current regime. These findings suggest that depression may not merely reflect a mechanical, general psychological effect but could also reveal a distinct political phenomenon.

Robustness

We conduct several robustness checks, including (1) ordered logit regression and (2) sample restrictions, such as excluding respondents surveyed during extreme weather, residents living in cities with U.S. embassies or consulates, and those who have migrated (see [Appendix A4](#)). The results remain consistent and robust across these specifications.

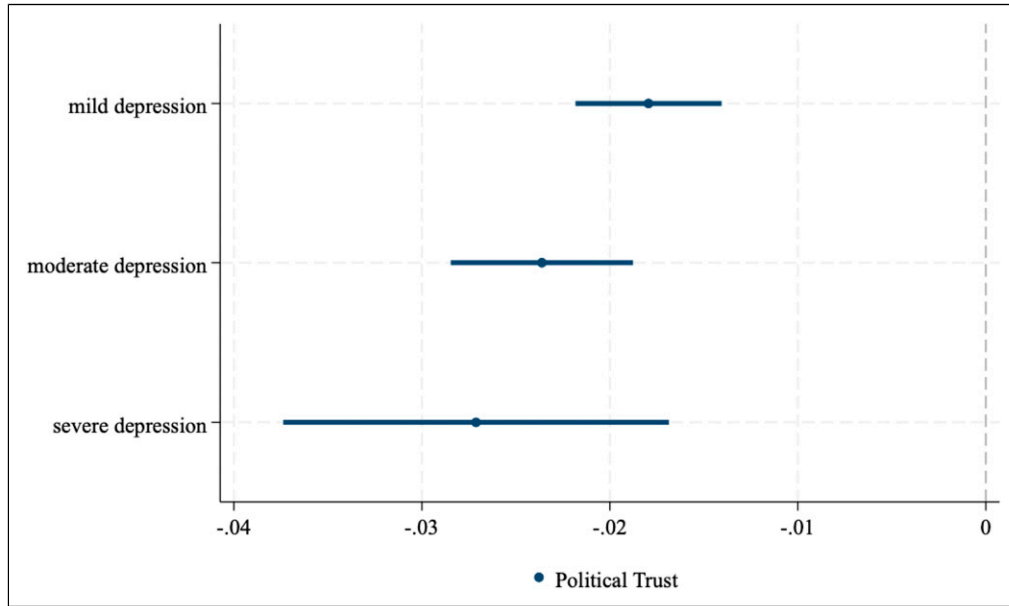


Figure 1. Regression results of depression on political trust.

Note: This figure plots the point estimates of depression’s effects on political trust with 95% confidence intervals computed from our main models. All regressions control for city socio-economic characteristics, personal demographic variables, individual fixed effects, and year-fixed effects.

Heterogeneity

Building on the negative link between depression and political trust, we examine how this relationship varies across demographic groups. Prior research shows that

depression is more prevalent among certain populations. In China, unemployed women who are separated or widowed experience higher depression rates than employed men or those who are married or cohabiting (Lu et al., 2021).

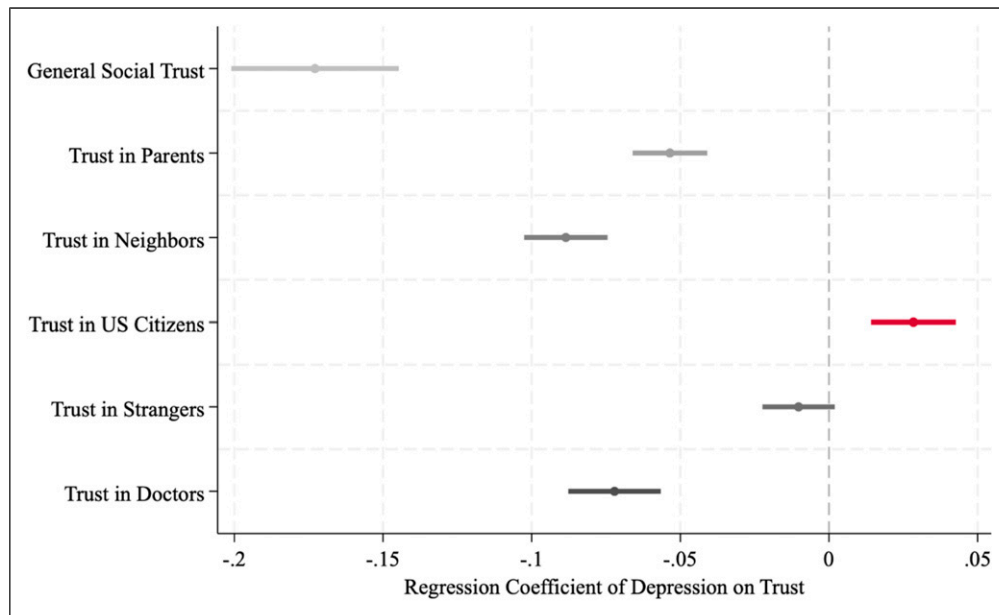


Figure 2. Regression results of depression on trust in other entities.

Note: This figure plots the point estimates of depression’s effects on trust with 95% confidence intervals computed from our main models. All regressions control for city socio-economic characteristics, personal demographic variables, individual fixed effects, and year-fixed effects.

We first assess how depression's effect on political trust varies by age. Figure 3 shows the marginal effect across age groups for males (left) and females (right), indicating that younger individuals—particularly males—are most affected. Appendix Table A5 presents the regression results across four age groups. The coefficient for those aged 18–25 is 0.157, 1.6 times larger than for those aged 41–55 (0.096) and three times larger than for those 56 and older (0.044), suggesting that younger individuals are most susceptible to depression's impact on political trust. Young males warrant particular attention, as they are more likely to externalize stress, unlike females, who tend to internalize it. This group's vulnerability, coupled with mental immaturity, may heighten the risk of translating distrust into misbehavior or social unrest.

Beyond age, we examine how depression's effect on political trust differs in magnitude across demographic groups. As shown in Figure 4, the effect is strongest among males and those with at least a high school education. Notably, the unemployed are most affected, raising concerns about the potential erosion of political trust during economic downturns. This pattern is concerning, as recent mass killings in China have often been carried out by unemployed men. The combination of economic hardship, psychological strain, and declining political trust may heighten the risk of social unrest Appendix A6.

Surprisingly, depression's negative effect on political trust is stronger among public sector employees despite

their higher social status. This suggests that depression's impact is more pronounced among groups traditionally seen as better off. Government employees often suppress emotional expression in the workplace, aligning with evidence that the anti-corruption campaign heightened depression among officials (Fu and Zhou, 2024). Additionally, individuals who rely on the Internet as their primary information source are more affected, consistent with research linking social media use to poorer mental health outcomes (Braghieri et al., 2022; Yao and Dong, 2025). This suggests that indulgence in online life may amplify depression's effect on political trust.

We also examine how past experiences with the government shape the effect of depression on political trust. As shown in Figure 5, individuals who have not encountered unfair treatment, conflicts, delays, or unreasonable charges from the government exhibit a significantly stronger effect compared to those who have faced such issues. One possible explanation is that individuals with negative past experiences already have lower political trust, leaving less room for depression to further erode their perceptions Appendix Table A6.

Moderating factors

As discussed, we propose that depression amplifies individuals' tendency to attribute their struggles to governance failures, particularly when coupled with perceptions of

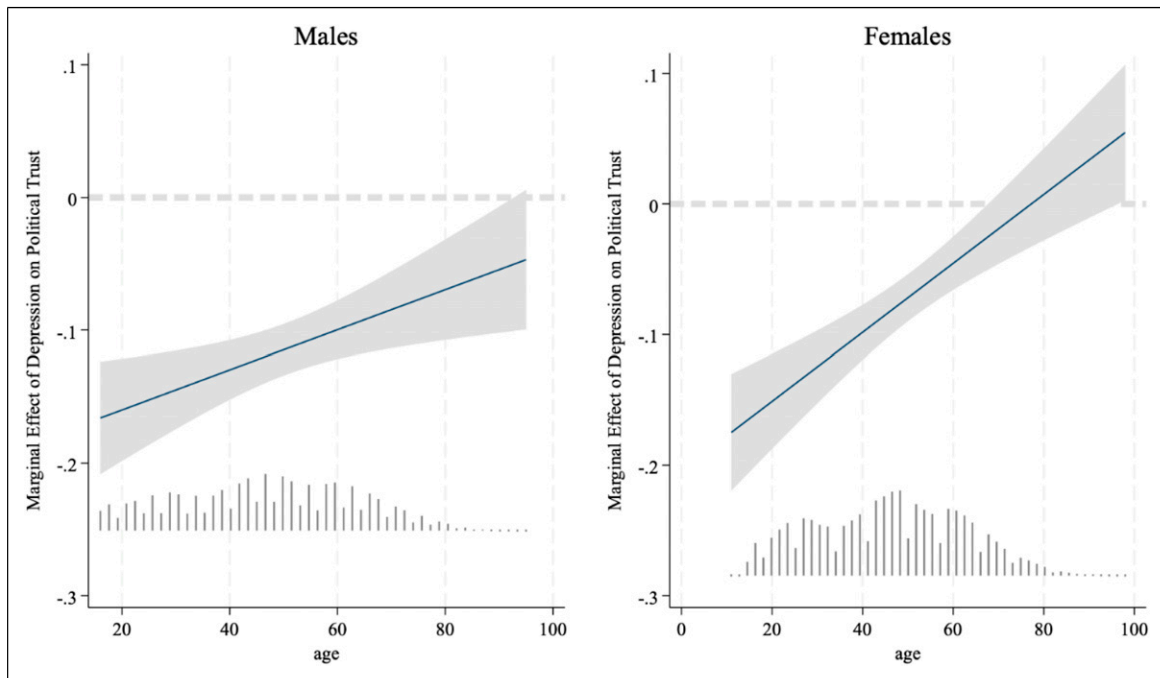


Figure 3. Heterogeneity: The effect of depression on political trust varies by age.

Note: The line represents the estimated coefficient, with shadow indicating the confidence intervals (95%). The histograms at the bottom show the distribution of age in the sample. Appendix Table A5 presents full regression results. All regressions control for city socio-economic characteristics, personal demographic variables, individual fixed effects, and year-fixed effects.

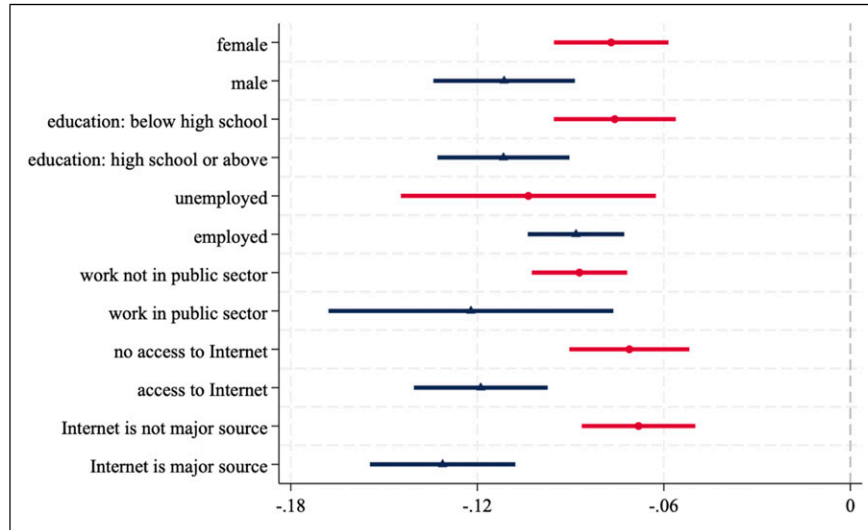


Figure 4. Heterogeneity: other characteristics.

Note: Each point represents the estimated coefficient, with horizontal lines indicating the confidence intervals (95%). All regressions control for city socio-economic characteristics, personal demographic variables, individual fixed effects, and year-fixed effects.

inequality. We test this by examining whether the negative effect of depression on trust is moderated by perceptions of inequality. We present the results in Table 2, adding interaction terms between depression and perceptions of various forms of inequality—income, hukou,¹ and gender. While depression alone negatively reduces political trust, perceptions of inequality further negatively moderate this effect. Depressed individuals who perceive greater income or

hukou inequality exhibit even lower political trust, with *hukou* inequality having the largest negative impact. However, gender inequality shows no significant effect, likely because it remains less salient in public discourse. Additionally, perceived social status positively moderates the relationship between depression and political trust. Individuals with higher depression who also see themselves as lower in the social hierarchy report even lower trust,

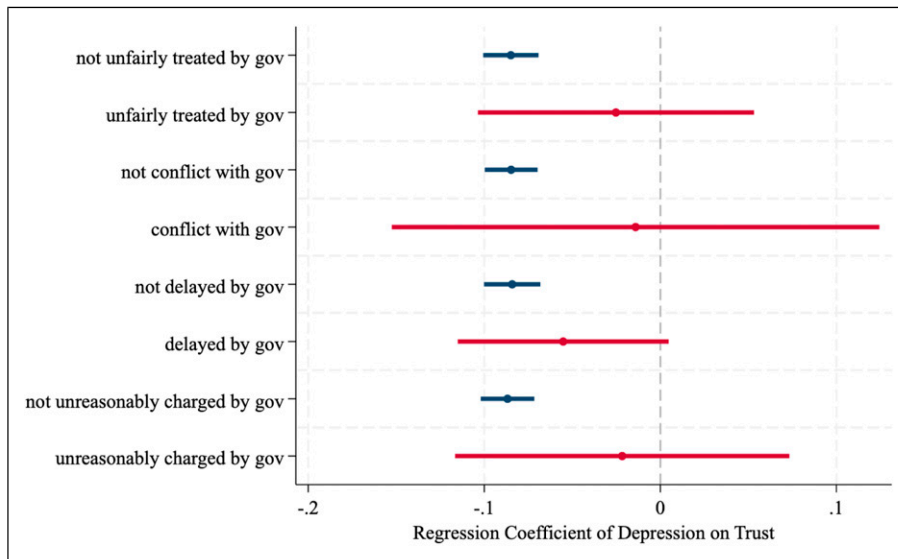


Figure 5. Heterogeneity: Experience with government.

Note: Each point represents the estimated coefficient, with horizontal lines indicating the confidence intervals (95%). All regressions control for city socio-economic characteristics, personal demographic variables, individual fixed effects, and year-fixed effects.

Table 2. Moderating factors: Awareness on inequality.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Political trust			
Depression*income inequality	−0.039*** (0.010)			
Depression * hukou inequality		−0.054*** (0.013)		
Depression * gender inequality			−0.006 (0.017)	
Depression * perceived social status				0.061*** (0.007)
Depression	−0.083*** (0.008)	−0.085*** (0.008)	−0.090*** (0.008)	−0.245*** (0.024)
N	103,957	103,957	103,957	45,358
Adj. R2	0.3464	0.3464	0.3462	0.3664

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; * $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, and *** $p < .01$. All regressions control for city socio-economic characteristics, personal demographic variables, individual fixed effects, and year-fixed effects.

reflecting the broader psychosocial effects of depression on self-perceived societal standing.

Conclusion and discussion

Using a nationally representative panel dataset from China, we find that individuals with higher levels of depression report lower political trust. This effect is particularly pronounced among males, the unemployed, public sector employees, and heavy Internet users. Our analysis suggests that perceptions of inequality are a key moderating factor driving this relationship. These findings have broader implications for authoritarian regimes, as they suggest that depression weakens political stability by amplifying sensitivity to social and economic disparities [Appendix Table A7](#).

While we acknowledge that our findings capture associations rather than causal relationships, they carry important implications. Our results align with [Pye's \(1968\)](#) argument that Chinese political culture imposes strict restraints on emotional expression, fostering a cultural repression of aggression that results in deep ambivalence toward political authority. Our study suggests this creates a “silent suffering” with profound political costs. This suffering is not merely a private mental health issue for citizens; it is also a public political problem that erodes regime support. While our findings are associational, they highlight this critical link between psychological well-being and political stability [Appendix Table A8](#).

Our findings reveal a crucial vulnerability in authoritarian regimes: the erosion of political trust stemming from the interaction of depression and perceived inequality. Our findings also suggest that the “silence” of psychological suffering is a double-edged sword. On one hand, the internalized nature of depression-fueled discontent prevents immediate, organized challenges to authority. On the other hand, it represents a slow-

burning erosion of both political capital (trust) and human capital (mental well-being and productivity). This accumulated discontent, once it reaches a critical threshold, can transform from private suffering into social unrest. Understanding this dynamic is therefore essential for assessing the long-term resilience of authoritarian rule [Appendix Table A9 and A10](#).

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Ethical considerations

We confirm that the manuscript has been read and approved by all named authors and that there are no other persons who satisfied the criteria for authorship but are not listed. We further confirm that the order of authors listed in the manuscript has been approved by all of us.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

The replication files are available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/WRMD49>.

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Note

1. China's *hukou* system classifies citizens as rural or urban, creating significant inequality by dictating access to key public services such as education, healthcare, and social welfare.

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