Research on Environmental Pollution and Chinese Government Trust Relationship in Transition Period

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Abstract: Under both fiscal decentralization and GDP-oriented performance evaluation, local governments promote a rapid economic growth while the living environment of residents is being damaged seriously. As a consequence, environmental pollution has become an important social issue. Environmental pollution not only affects the production and the life of residents but also the trust of the residents in their governments. Based on the CFPS 2014 microeconomic survey, this paper examines the impact of environmental pollution on government trust levels. That study highlighted a significant decrease in regard to the level of trust in the governments of residents affected by regional high-pollution enterprises and residents not being affected by high-pollution enterprises. Further analysis shows that the political participation behaviour of residents significantly reduces the negative impact of environmental pollution concerning the level of government trust. As such, this provides some policy advice for improving environmental governance and enhancing the image of the government.

1. Introduction

Although environmental pollution in China has been recently treated to some extent, it still constitutes a very worrying matter, according to ‘2016 China Environmental Status Bulletin’ issued by Ministry of Environmental Protection. In 2016, among 338 prefecture-level cities and above, only 84 cities had reached environmental air quality standards, accounting for 24.9% of the total number of Chinese cities. On the other hand, 254 cities did not reach that standard, occupying 75.1%. What is more, according to the results of the national malodorous water body survey released jointly by both Ministries of Housing and Urban-Rural Development and Environmental Protection, as of March 2016, more than 70% of the 295 prefecture-level cities and above in the country have malodorous water body. Among them, the proportion of heavily polluted water bodies accounts for more than 30%. Not only that, but the problem of soil pollution in China is still grim. In this way, ‘2014 National Soil Pollution Status Survey Announcement’, released by Ministry of Environmental Protection, stated that total soil over-standard rate of the country is 16.1%, cultivated land pollution is the most serious, soil environmental quality is seriously worrying, and soil environment problem of industrial and mining wasteland is very prominent. According to survey data from China Social Survey Centre at Peking University, among the more than 30 000 persons randomly surveyed in 25 provinces and cities nationwide, 17543 of them consider the Chinese environmental pollution problem very serious. Meanwhile, only less than 1000 persons disagree that, as depicted in Figure 1.

Most of studies have highlighted that Chinese environmental pollution is essentially caused by economic development (Cai, Du et al., 2008; Li, Song et al., 2013). Specifically, the fiscal decentralization system provides a strong incentive for local governments to develop their economies, so fierce competition among local governments has led to rapid Chinese economic growth. On the other hand, the combination of fiscal decentralization and political centralization has constrained local governments to pay undeservedly for environmental pollution, simply for the rapid growth of the economy (Wang, Zhang, et al., 2007; Tao et al., 2009). Xu et al. (2012) analysed...
the relationship between fiscal decentralization and environmental pollution from the perspective of income and expenditure and found that fiscal decentralization has a negative significant correlation with pollution emissions. Yan (2012) used the cross term of fiscal decentralization and government competition as explanatory variable. In this way, Yan stated that fiscal decentralization significantly reduced environmental governance through government competition, which aggravated the environmental pollution problem. However, other studies present different conclusions. For instance, Tan et al. (2015) found that based on the provincial panel data from 1994 to 2012, Eastern region has sufficient environmental management funds to effectively control and reduce environmental pollution. During the transfer of the polluting industry from East to Central and Western regions, the emission of environmental pollution has decreased.

Figure 1. Understanding of residents about Chinese environmental pollution.

Once the cause of environmental pollution has been identified, a question arising is if environmental pollution will affect the government trust. As an important part of social capital, social trust plays a significant role in promoting social harmony and stability (Shen, 2016). Trust of residents in government not only affects the relationship between government and people but also identification of people with the legitimacy of the state and the government (Gao & Zhai, 2013). Several studies have shown that Chinese trust in the government presents a pattern of “weak local government and strong central government”. Additionally, trust towards the central government is very high, whereas trust towards the grassroots government or local government is deteriorating (Hu, 2007). Arising some major social issues, the study of government trust issues has become a hot topic in many disciplines, such as domestic management and economics. However, research on environmental pollution and government trust is relatively scarce. Zuo et al. (2017) first explored environmental infringements with respect to potential political and social influences, and linked them to political attitudes of residents. They found that the more serious the threat of environmental infringement, the lower the acceptance of government authority by residents, and also the higher the recognition with democratic system and the independence of the judiciary. Thus, they will raise their demands for judicial independence. The academia generally believes that government trust is influenced by both cultural and institutional factors. The former states that government trust is an extension of interpersonal trust and also that government trust has cross-cultural and cross-social differences caused by different cultural psychologies (Putnam, 1995; Inglehart, 1997). The latter believes that trust in government is more a rational and objective evaluation of the government effectiveness (Coleman, 1990), which means that it performs on major public issues whether there are major social problems and lame government. As such, the evaluation of government will be very poor. In addition, there will be certain political demands.

Following the above, this paper focuses on China Family Panel Studies Data (CFPS2014) to examine the relationship between environmental pollution and government trust during the
transition period. The study found that people directly exposed to environmental pollution have a negative significant impact on the level of trust in the local government. Further research shows that direct political participation may significantly reduce the impact of environmental pollution on the trust of the public government.

By analysing the existing literature, the main contributions of this paper are the two following. We adopt accurate data to thoroughly analyse the relationships between environmental pollution and government trust by means of standard econometric methods. In addition, it proves that political participation will weaken its influence effect. Some useful suggestions to palliate social conflicts and environmental governance are also provided. It is worth noting that, since government trust is a crucial social capital, we suggest how to improve the image of the government and its social governance abilities, too.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Section 2, we introduce data and main variables involved in the present study. In Section 3, we estimate the impact of environmental pollution on the level of government trust. Section 4 analyses how political participation reduces the impact of environmental pollution on government trust, and finally, the main conclusions of this paper are provided.

2. Data and variables

The data used in this article derive from China Family Panel Studies (CFPS). CFPS is a nationally representative large-scale family study conducted by China Social Science Research Centre at Peking University. CFPS aims to reflect the overall state of Chinese economic development and social changes throughout a follow-up survey of representative sample villages, families, and family members across the country. Nowadays, the representative sample data of CFPS (2012) involves 25 provincial administrative regions, except Inner Mongolia, Hainan, Tibet, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang, and covers over 30,000 individuals.

The dependent variable in this paper is government trust. Currently, there is no uniform and accepted definition to accurately refer to measurement of government trust. There are two main measurement methods. The first is to directly measure the level of trust in the government of interviewees, or the trust level towards government in different dimensions, such as the ability to govern (Hu, Hu, etc., 2011). The second is to directly measure the level of trust of government officials to replace the level of trust in the government (Mishler & Rose, 2001; Ma, 2007). This paper adopts the latter measurement method. The main reason is that government is only a certain institutional place, and staff in government, especially the leading cadres, have jurisdiction over the jurisdiction and may influence the living environment of residents. In addition, the trust level of government in leading government officials represents the trust level in the local government. This article measures the level of public trust in government based on CFPS (2014) question N10026, “How much do you trust officials (local county/county-level city/district government officials)? A number in the integers represents the trust level (0-10). As such, the larger the number, the higher the level of trust the public has in government.

The key explanatory variable in this paper is environmental pollution. For the measurement of environmental pollution, the current academia mainly uses the total emissions of waste gas, waste water, and waste material (Li, Song, etc., 2013). However, there is no uniform measurement for microscopic measurements. This article uses the condition consisting of the presence of highly polluting enterprises in the area to measure the local environmental pollution level. At the same time, “residential litter disposal site” is used as an auxiliary measurement index. If there is a special public dustbin or dustman to handle that, it indicates that environment in the area is good. If the answer is littering, it indicates that environment in the area is seriously polluted. This paper also controls a rich set of variables to avoid missing variable biases as much as possible. Such control variables are divided into three levels. Personal characteristics control variables include age, gender, urban and rural, years of education received, income, whether party members, etc. Family characteristic variables include neighbourhood relationship, family size, and socializing with relatives. Community characteristic variables include population size, ethnic minority areas or
not, and the proportion of floating population, etc. Table 1 displays some descriptive statistics for the variables involved in the present study.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of main variables

| Variable                                      | Observed value | Mean   | Standard deviations | Minimum value | Maximum value |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|--------|---------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Explained variable                            |                |        |                     |               |               |
| Trust towards officials                       | 31,473         | 5.00   | 2.64                | 0             | 10            |
| Government performance evaluation             | 30,118         | 2.37   | 0.92                | 0             | 4             |
| Key explanatory variable                      |                |        |                     |               |               |
| If there are high-polluting enterprises (dummy variable) | 33,135         | 0.18   | 0.38                | 0             | 1             |
| Litter disposal site (dummy variable)         | 37,326         | 0.55   | 0.50                | 0             | 1             |
| Characteristic variable at personal level     |                |        |                     |               |               |
| Age                                           | 35,622         | 45.599 | 17.438              | 16            | 104           |
| Gender                                        | 35,637         | 0.500  | 0.500               | 0             | 1             |
| Years of education received                   | 32,212         | 2.462  | 1.271               | 0             | 8             |
| Marital status                                | 35,637         | 2.076  | 0.894               | 0             | 5             |
| Marital satisfaction                          | 30,378         | 3.549  | 1.963               | 0             | 5             |
| Income level at local                         | 27,817         | 2.518  | 0.998               | 1             | 5             |
| Personal income                               | 35,205         | 4.197  | 4.445               | 0             | 12.999        |
| A member of Communist Party or not (Yes=1)    | 35,637         | 0.042  | 0.609               | 0             | 1             |
| Characteristic variable at family level       |                |        |                     |               |               |
| Family size                                   | 35,388         | 3.628  | 1.732               | 1             | 14            |
| Frequency of socializing with relatives        | 34,732         | 1.607  | 0.855               | 0             | 4             |
| Neighbourhood relationship                    | 34,732         | 1.860  | 0.841               | 0             | 5             |
| Control variable at community level           |                |        |                     |               |               |
| Ethnic minority areas or not (Yes=1)          | 32,895         | 0.099  | 0.299               | 0             | 1             |
| Proportion of vote                            | 33,135         | 77.22  | 22.75               | 0             | 100           |
| Mining area or not (Yes=1)                    | 32,895         | 0.045  | 0.208               | 0             | 1             |
| Population logarithm                          | 32,698         | 7.878  | 0.938               | 4.852         | 11.362        |
| Proportion of floating population             | 32,698         | 0.140  | 0.186               | 0             | 0.933         |
| Property of community (neighbourhood committee=1) | 32,895         | 0.238  | 0.426               | 0             | 1             |

3. The impact of environmental pollution on government trust

Since the dependent variable in this paper is a dummy variable from 0 to 10, we shall adopt the Order Probit model for estimation purposes. Thus, let

\[
\text{prob}(\text{Gov\_trust}_{ij} = 1) = \Phi(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \text{Pollute}_{pij} + \beta_2 \cdot X_{pij} + \varepsilon)
\]  

(1)

where \(\text{Gov\_trust}_{pij}\) denotes the binary variable corresponding to the \(j\) community, the \(i\) family, and the \(p\) personal trust; \(\text{Pollute}_{pij}\) represents Gini coefficient of the county (district) where the \(j\) community, the \(i\) family, and the \(p\) personal trust exist; and \(X_{pij}\) contains a series of control variables. Notice also that \(\varepsilon\) is another factor that may work though has not been considered by the model. Instead, it should be randomly distributed to the explained variables of the model according to the assumptions.
Table 2. Benchmark regression results

|                                 | Trust towards officials | Trust towards officials | Trust towards officials | Government performance evaluation |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|                                 | (1)                    | (2)                    | (3)                    | (4)                               |
| There are polluting enterprises or not | -0.051*               | -0.047*               | -0.071*               |
| Litter disposal site            | (0.029)                | (0.030)                | (0.040)                |
| Personal characteristic variable| Y                      | Y                      | Y                      |
| Family characteristic variable  | Y                      | Y                      | Y                      |
| Community characteristic variable| Y                      | Y                      | Y                      |
| Observed value                  | 27966                  | 26531                  | 26531                  | 25443                             |

Table 2. Results of the estimated regression.

In Table 2, column (1) provides an estimation result without involving any control variables. The estimated coefficient is equal to -0.051 which is significant at the 10% level. This indicates that compared with people in village (local) areas, where there are no highly polluting enterprises, the level of trust towards local government officials is 0.051 units lower. Obviously, there may be missing variables in column (1). As such, column (2) includes income, age, Communist Party member or not, and other variables which represent personal characteristics. Family size, frequency of socializing with relatives, and relationship of neighbourhoods were added to represent family characteristics. On the other hand, variables such as size of the population, ethnic minority or not, and proportion of floating population represent characteristics of the community. The regression results still show that the regression coefficient of the key variable is equal to -0.047, which is significant at the 10% level. Since it supports the conclusion that residents have lower levels of trust in government officials if there are high-polluting enterprises, that result is robust. The relationships among other control variables and government trust are basically consistent with existing literature studies. Specifically, the higher the level of personal income, the higher the level of trust in government (Zhu, 2014). In addition, the level of trust of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members in government is significantly higher than that of non-CCP members. Notice also that the older the age, the higher the level of trust in government (Xu, 2014). Moreover, the level of trust in government in ethnic minority areas is significantly higher than in non-ethnic minority areas. It is also worth pointing out that unlike some conclusions appeared in existing literature, some scholars found that the higher the proportion of floating population, the lower the level of trust in government (Gao, 2014). Notwithstanding, the present article analyses that such a coefficient is not significant. A possible reason may lie in the fact that regions with a higher rate of floating population have greatly improved the living conditions of people and hence, the degree of trust in government. To test the robustness of negative impact of environmental pollution on government trust, columns (3) and (4) replace both the dependent variable and the key explanatory variable, resp. Specifically, column (3) replaces “There are polluting enterprises or not” with “litter disposal site” as an indicator for measuring environmental pollution. If there is a special garbage can (dustbin) or a special person to handle that in litter disposal site, the indicator is 0. If there is littering or throwing rubbish into river, then the indicator is 1. The regression results provided an estimated coefficient equal to -0.045, which is significant at the 10% level. As such, we can affirm that the above effects are very robust. At the same time, column (4) uses the answer to “what is your overall evaluation of the work of the county (city) government last year” to measure the level of public trust in government. If the answer is “there are great achievements,” the level of government trust is high; on the other hand, if the answer is “worse than before”, it means that the level of government trust is low. The regression estimation coefficient was found to be equal to -0.071, which is significant at the 10% level, and hence indicates that the above effects are very robust.
4. The weakening effect of political participation

The empirical data above show that environmental pollution has a negative significant impact on the level of government trust. Gao (2014) believes that public political participation will increase the government trust and divide participation into absorbing participation and concern-based participation. In this way, absorbing participation is aimed by absorbing activists and mobilises people who already trust government highly, whereas concern-based participation is driven by public concern issues. Yang (2005) states that political participation increases the level of government trust. Hu (2015), based on CGSS data, found that the foundations of democratic election system have increased the level of trust in the police to a certain extent. Regarding the treatment of environmental pollution, Liu (2015) found that environmental pollution prevention system, characterised by administrative empowerment and “command-obey” under the control mode, presents some drawbacks such as indefinite environmental protection target, system dissimilation, unorganised environmental law enforcement, law-evading colluded by law enforcement, and conspirators. Since democratic election system may inspire people a sense of self-efficacy and thus raise the level of trust in government (Pei, 2014), based on the reasons above, environmental pollution will have a negative significant impact on the level of government trust, so political participation will weaken that effect. To test such a viewpoint, this paper first adds the political participation variable to the basic regression to verify if it affects the level of government trust. Then add the intersection term of political participation and environmental pollution to the basic regression. Thus, the main goal is to verify if political participation may weaken the impact of environmental pollution on the level of government trust. To measure political participation, the academia usually considers the democratic voting ratio (Sun, Xu, etc., 2007; Zheng & Zhu, 2013; Chen & Wei, 2016). As such, the present article also adopts this method with the answer “in the latest election, how many percentages of voters participated in the vote” to measure political participation.

Table 3. Estimated results for political participation impact effect.

|                                                  | (1)          | (2)          | (3)          | (4)          |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| There are polluting enterprises or not            | -0.046*      | -0.164**     |              |              |
|                                                  | (0.026)      | (0.076)      |              |              |
| Litter disposal site                             |              | -0.054****   |              |              |
|                                                  |              | (0.027)      |              |              |
| Proportion of election                           | 0.001***     | 0.001***     | -0.107**     |              |
|                                                  | (0.000)      | (0.000)      | (0.052)      |              |
| High-polluting X Election proportion             |              | 0.032*       |              | 0.016*       |
|                                                  |              | (0.019)      |              | (0.11)       |
| Littering X Election proportion                  |              |              |              |              |
| Personal characteristic variable                 | Y            | Y            | Y            | Y            |
| Family characteristic variable                   | Y            | Y            | Y            | Y            |
| Community characteristic variable                 | Y            | Y            | Y            | Y            |
| Observed value                                   | 26531        | 26531        | 26531        | 26531        |

Table 3. Results of the econometric regression.

In column (1), the election proportional variable is directly added to the regression as a control variable. Our results show that the coefficient of the election ratio is equal to 0.001, which is significant at the 1% level. Note also that if the coefficient of the high-polluting enterprise variable is changed from the beginning of -0.051 to -0.046, the political participation has significantly improved the level of trust of government officials to a certain extent. In column (2), the “litter disposal site” is used to replace the “high-polluting enterprise” variable. The main purpose is to test whether the conclusion in column (1) is robust. The regression result provided an election proportion coefficient equal to 0.001, which is significant at the 1% level. As such, we can affirm that the conclusion in column (1) is very significant. Moreover, to verify whether the political participation has a weakening effect on the negative impact of environmental pollution, the column
(3) adds the intersection term of "there are high-pollution enterprises or not" and "the election proportion" to the regression. The coefficient of the intersection term was found to be equal to 0.032, which is significant at the 10% level. Therefore, it demonstrates that the impact of environmental pollution on government trust is heterogeneous, i.e., people will reduce the negative impact of environmental pollution on government trust by political participation. It may also explain that environmental governance depends not only on the one-way behaviour of enterprises but also on the government, especially when local residents are involved in political participation. As a consequence, it will weaken the negative impact of environmental pollution. In Column (4), it is examined the robustness of the conclusion in (3) by changing the variables. The results obtained by regression highlight that the conclusion in column (3) is very robust.

5. Conclusions

Since the 1980s reform, Chinese economic development has achieved remarkable results. However, it also caused a serious environmental damage and provoked environmental pollution. Environmental issues arise essentially from the way of economic development. The extensive economic development mode has led to a serious damage to the physical environment needed by humans including water, gas, soil, and so on. It not only affects the production and the living environment of the residents but also the level of trust in the government. Government trust constitutes a key part of the social capital, which plays a major role in stable development of society and social governance.

By analysing experience from empirical data, this article points out that environmental pollution has significantly reduced the level of public trust in government. Further analysis highlights that political participation may significantly reduce the negative impact of environmental pollution on the level of government trust. Certain theoretical suggestions to deal with environmental pollution problems and build a new government image are provided.

The present study empirically analyses the relationship between environmental pollution and government trust. Though the deviations is minimized by a series of tests of robustness, some shortcomings still remain. First of all, subject to the limitations of the sample data, there is a certain irrationality regarding the measure of environmental pollution depending on the presence of high-polluting enterprises in the region. That irrationality is mainly reflected in the inability to measure the degree of environmental pollution and compare specific quantities. Also, to study the weakening effect of the negative impact of political participation on environmental pollution, a major issue is the intrinsic problem of political participation in the level of government trust. Is it the high level of trust in government what leads to political participation? Whenever panel data or other methods more effective may be used, future research could better explain the impact of environmental pollution and government trust, and the impact of political participation, as well.

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