

**EXPLAINING POLITICAL TRUST
IN CHINA: A COMPARISON
WITH TAIWAN**

TANG Wenfang

EAI Background Brief No. 856

Date of Publication: 3 October 2013

Executive Summary

1. Despite repeated predictions by alarmists of the coming collapse of the Chinese authoritarian government, public opinion polls show a continuing high level of popular support for the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP).
2. Critics often argued that respondents “lied” as they were afraid to speak their minds in a repressive society like China. But lively online political discussions, frequent protests and petitions, and chats with people on the streets indicate that citizens are not too worried about expressing their dissatisfaction with the state so long as they do not engage in organized activities.
3. One of the most common explanations for China’s high political support is media censorship. Information is controlled and only positive news is allowed, mobilizing political support for the government.
4. The Internet has made media control much more difficult in the information age. It is no longer easy to cover up. The role of the media in political mobilization has decreased.
5. Another explanation is China’s sustained economic growth and improved living standards, which have increased people’s satisfaction with their current financial conditions and optimistic about their future, resulting in greater satisfaction with the government.
6. The economic explanation however does not answer why China still enjoys higher political trust than other societies at similar high levels of economic growth.
7. The third explanation is Confucianism. Culturally, the Chinese are accustomed to unconditionally accept political authority. Yet China still ranks higher in political trust than other Confucian societies, such as Taiwan. These three

explanations are thus not reflective of the overall variation of political trust in China.

- 8 One of the less noticed political realities in China is government responsiveness to public demand. The CCP claims to represent the interests of “most” Chinese people. Lacking elections as a yardstick to measure such representativeness, it is paranoid to see even a single protestor on the street and is thus compelled to use coercive methods or to respond to public demand.
9. The currently high level of support does not guarantee political stability. Public sentiment is sensitive to major political events, such as a bad policy and the fall of a major leader. Public opinion can quickly turn into public grievance, and regime legitimacy and political stability will be directly threatened.