



# Urbanization, education, and religion: Rationalization and erosion of political trust in Asia

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## Abstract

Secularization, expansion of higher education, and urbanization have led to disenchantment with politics and the erosion of political trust in many societies. Religion may continue to be salient, however, how these forces interact with enduring religious influences to shape political trust is unclear. This paper examines the issue using Asian Barometer Survey (2001–2016) data with hierarchical age–period–cohort (HAPC) models. Our results show supportive evidence for the following findings: in East and Southeast Asia, urbanization is associated with less political trust for most religions except Islam; education is associated with less political trust; education's effect is the most salient for the atheists and Buddhists, but it disappears among the Muslims. The findings suggest the power of modernization and secularization significantly differs across cultures and religions. We should not simply perceive religion as a universally conservative force; instead, we need to understand religions through an integrated macro-micro perspective by situating it in the social contexts.

## KEYWORDS

Asia, education, hierarchical age-period-cohort (HAPC) analysis, political trust, religion, urbanization

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Rationalization and secularization have transformed human society, including political systems and religious beliefs (Höllinger, 2017; Watts & Houtman, 2022; Weber, 2001). In the past centuries, we have seen soaring economic

growth, the expansion of secular education systems, and rising metropolises all over the world (Giddens, 1991; Houtman & Mascini, 2002; Simmel, 2012; Stolz & Jörg, 2009; Watts & Houtman, 2022; Zuckerman, 2015). At the same time, political and religious authorities have been losing their influence in daily life; consequently, people's unconditional trust in governments, politicians and religious leaders has given way to conditional trust (Norris, 1999, 2000). Scholars have provided multiple explanations for the erosion of political trust. One of these, the Inglehartian postmaterialist/self-expression thesis, is based on socioeconomic modernization and lends support to "critical citizen" thesis which argues that informed, educated, and involved citizens will have lower political trust.

While the Inglehartian thesis is widely recognized as powerful in explaining the political cultural changes (Norris, 1999, 2000), there are equally influential alternatives in the field of public opinion research. The competing explanations include the government performance (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017), social inequality (Andersen et al., 2021), cultural traditions (Cao et al., 2015; Shi, 2001), and political systems (Jiang & Zhang, 2021a, 2021b; Lai et al., 2010) in shaping political trust and orientations. For instance, an influential line of research focusing on political trust in China demonstrated that economic development and government performance were moderating factors that largely offset the decline of political trust resulting from the expansion of education and the increase in informed citizenry (Ma & Wang, 2014; Wang, 2005b). In other words, though the modernization process is powerful in eroding political authority, regimes with high performance could still enjoy wide support from their people, which partially explains the limited efficacy of the "third wave" or even a "fourth wave" of democratization (Abushouk, 2016; Haggard & Kaufman, 2016).

In addition to the above macro factors, religion and religiosity have been an important force in shaping political trust. Religion is usually perceived as a conservative force that holds back "critical citizens" and results in higher political trust or even blind confidence in the political authority (Huntington, 1993, 1996; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Individuals who deeply commit to certain religions are often seen as less open-minded than others (Huntington, 1993, 1996); therefore, they are less critical and show higher authoritarian personality. However, several issues remain unsolved in the literature. First, do all religious affiliations discourage critical thinking and encourage political trust in authorities? Or do some religions exert different effects on value change? Second, if there are variations across beliefs, which beliefs are more conservative and authoritarian than others? Third, how much impact does religious belief have on political trust? Who are the most susceptible to religious influence?

We sought to contribute to the growing body of political trust literature by examining the effect of religion and its connection with other social mechanisms, specifically urbanization and education, with a focus on East and Southeast Asian societies. The Asian societies are of interest because of the coexistence of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, rapid economic growth and urbanization, and unequal distribution of educational resources. Considering these unique features in Asia, these societies could provide a good environment to test our hypotheses about the effects of religion, the urban-rural gap, and education on political trust. In the present study, we employed the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) (2001–2016) data and applied hierarchical age-period-cohort models to analyze the determinants of political trust in Asia.

Following the literature on critical citizens, we proposed the following hypotheses. First, forces of religion will be associated with higher authoritarian personality traits, and this will lead to higher political trust. Second, forces of secularization (i.e., economic affluence, urbanization, and education) will be associated with a critical citizen mindset and lower political trust. Third, the urbanization and education effects will be moderated by different religious affiliations. We found supportive evidence for all three hypotheses. Specifically, we found that in most religious categories, urbanization increases open-mindedness, and the only exception is Islam. Furthermore, education's effect is most salient among atheists and Buddhists. We attribute the latter phenomenon to the fact that most atheists and Buddhists come from two countries with communist ruling experience, mainland China and Vietnam, where the public education provided to all younger cohorts of the population is mostly secularized. In what follows, we first review the literature on political trust and the critical citizen thesis. Then, we situate our discussion within Asian societies and highlight the trends of secularization, urbanization, and educational expansion in contemporary Asia. Next, we give our research hypotheses based on the discussion and introduce our research design, data, and methods. After presenting the results from multilevel models, we conclude with implications for the fields of political culture, religion, and Asian studies.

## 2 | DETERMINANTS OF POLITICAL TRUST AND RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES

Political trust refers to positive attitudes and sentiments that people have toward governments, or more generally speaking, toward political systems and institutions (Levi & Stoker, 2000). In social survey data, political trust is usually measured by asking whether the respondents “trust” or “have confidence in” certain elements of the government or the political systems (Li, 2016). The contexts of trust in government include offices and personnel, such as the central and local governments, the executive system, the legislative system, the judicial system, politicians, and public employees such as police officers (Cao, 2015; Cao et al., 2015; Li, 2016; Tyler, 2005; Zhang et al., 2021). Trust in the political system involves people's faith in principles, such as rule of law and democracy, and their perception of the fairness and effectiveness of elections (Hetherington, 1998; Norris, 1999, 2000).

Political trust has important implications for a society. Societies with high political trust could enjoy a strong connection between governments and citizens, active civic life and public participation, and high citizen compliance and cooperation, thus resulting in good governance and a robust civil society (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Marien & Hooghe, 2011). Political distrust will cause passivity in public life and lead to civil disobedience, crimes, and social unrest (Hetherington, 2005). Political distrust can pose challenges for governments, yet some literature suggests distrust in government is desirable for the good working of democratic politics, at least to some degree (Levi, 1998). While a high level of political distrust may indicate deeper problems in the political system, such as corruption, lack of transparency, poor government performance, or ineffective governance, a healthy level of distrust can prevent abuses of power and promote accountability and transparency.

In fact, healthy skepticism and critical engagement with government can coexist with a general level of trust in political institutions. This may happen as there are different levels of governments, and people may question certain levels, offices, individuals, but still trust the entire system, or vice versa. For instance, literature focusing on political trust in Asia has noticed a complex pattern - paradoxical trust (Li, 2004), which demonstrated that people have different levels of trust in different levels of government. For instance, according to scholars' observations in China, low political trust, or political distrust, is limited to local government; while people's confidence in regimes, institutions, establishments, and trust in central governments and top politicians remains high (Jiang & Zhang, 2021a; Li, 2004; Shi, 2001). Therefore, this low trust condition does not hurt the quality of governance.

Given the importance of political trust for strengthening democratic institutions and improving the quality of governance, political trust is well studied, with researchers identifying several predictors of political trust, including age, gender, and socioeconomic attributes, such as class, occupation, and income (Jiang et al., 2022; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). In addition to these factors, religious variables are commonly considered key determinants of political trust. Religious beliefs and religiosity are argued to be directly related to political attitudes, ideological preferences, and lifestyles (Almond & Verba, 1963). Religion is usually considered a conservative social force associated with authoritarian values (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Lakatos, 2015; Lipset, 1959). Scholars have found that people with religious beliefs, especially those who are committed to their beliefs, usually have higher trust in their governments (Jiang & Zhang, 2021a) and are less likely to express discontentment with the authorities (Flanagan & Lee, 2003). Based on the preceding discussion, we formulate our first research hypothesis as:

**H1.** Religious beliefs are associated with higher political trust.

## 3 | SECULARIZATION FORCES: URBANIZATION AND EXPANSION OF EDUCATION IN ASIA

Although religion has dominated human society for thousands of years, its influence has significantly declined, especially in the past few hundred years. Max Weber uses “secularization” and “disenchantment” to describe the trend of declining religious influence (Jenkins, 2000). Following Weber, theorists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Alex

Inkeles (1975), Ronald Inglehart (1997), Talcott Parsons (1971) and Walt Rostow (1990) probed the causes and consequences of secularization and modernization in the world. The secularization process is marked by the retreat of religious power from politics and society, a shrinking number of highly devoted believers, and the rising influence of science and technology. It is also associated with the expansion of secularized education systems and the spread of urbanization and urban lifestyles (Houtman & Mascini, 2002; Kim, 2010). The secularization process started in Europe and North America and then spread to the developing world during the process of globalization in the 20th and 21st centuries. Although there has been a backlash from religion, especially religious fundamentalism, in certain areas and social categories, no one can deny that the overall trend is in the same direction. After all, the entire world is more secular than it was 50–100 years ago (Pinker, 2018).

The modernization process has led to more radical changes in Asia than elsewhere, and it has occurred at a faster pace. With the exception of Japan, all Asian societies were unindustrialized, agricultural societies at the end of World War Two. Starting in the 1970s, the modernization process accelerated in many East and Southeast Asian societies, and we have seen numerous economic transitions since then. These include the Four Asian Tigers (South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong; 1970s-present) and the Tiger Cub Economies (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam; 1990s-present), not to mention the second largest world economy and rising global superpower - mainland China (1978-present).

Modernization and secularization processes not only result in the decline of religious influence; they also lead to changes in social life and the ideological world (In Inoguchi, 2005). This includes political trust; plenty of empirical evidence indicates that with development, education, urbanization, and upward social mobility, citizens become more aware of their rights and more critical of governments and officials. The association between higher socioeconomic status, well-educated and urban residents, and a critical mindset is explained in the well-established “critical citizen” thesis (Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Wang, 2005a, 2005b; You & Wang, 2020). Thus, the processes of secularization and modernization will lead more people to embrace a critical mindset; this, in turn, may lead to less political trust. Based on the above argumentation, we formulate our second hypothesis as:

## H2. Secularization forces are associated with lower political trust.

Note that we are highlighting the importance of urbanization and education as two primary social forces shaping the development of critical attitudes. Urbanization is a process that accompanies the growth of cities due to industrialization and economic development. It leads to more specialized divisions of labor, freer trade, and increased commercial services; it also leads to policies promoting universal compulsory education and gentrified lifestyles. Urbanization has profound social consequences on behaviors and lifestyles, but there is an important social psychological element as well (Mckenzie, 2008; Othman et al., 2008).

Gentrification and social mobility (i.e., rural-urban migration) change how people live and also how they think (Fischer, 1975; Simmel, 2012). Compared to their rural counterparts, in many countries, urban dwellers earn higher incomes and enjoy better services in education, health care, housing, and public infrastructure (Andres & Looker, 2001; Fong, 2009; Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010; Knight & Li, 1996). They have more exposure to various sources of information, such as mass media and news, and this will foster their tendency to scrutinize the government instead of blindly supporting it. Evidence from the third wave of democratization in East and Southeast Asia specifically points out that urban middle-class citizens are the main driving forces of social movements demanding civil rights (Haggard & Kauffman, 2016). Hence, our next hypothesis is:

### H2A. At the individual level, residing in an urban area is associated with lower political trust.

Similar to the role played by urbanization, education, especially the expansion of higher education, is a contributor to the rise of critical attitudes toward governments. Critical citizen theory posits educational attainment as an important predictor of lower political trust, as findings show people who are well-educated tend to distrust the

government (Norris, 2000, 2012). Education results in a critical citizen mindset and leads to political distrust in two ways. First, education encourages cognitive sophistication, enabling people to be critical of political authorities (Bobo & Licari, 1989). Second, education offers knowledge and helps people access diverse information sources. Being informed, in turn, should make citizens aware of governmental problems such as corruption, indolence, and misconduct. Consequently, we formulate our next hypothesis as:

**H2B.** At the individual level, more educational attainment is associated with lower political trust.

## 4 | RELIGION AND SECULARIZATION: THE INTERACTIVE DYNAMICS IN SHAPING POLITICAL TRUST

Although the effects of religions, urbanization, and education are well studied, how they interact is less well examined. What happens when conservatizing and liberalizing forces collide? Some scholars emphasize the strong influence of secularization; however, others argue traditional cultures are more enduring and long-lasting than optimistic modernization theorists imagine (In Inoguchi, 2005; Kim, 2010; Wright, 2010). In Asia, many researchers have noted the importance of unique cultures and values (such as Confucian legacies in work ethics and family values) to successful development models (Kim & Park, 2003; Wong, 2004). Yet several recent empirical studies have argued Asia is a relatively conservative environment in terms of political trust, a phenomenon partially attributed to the influence of Asian religions (In Inoguchi, 2005). In our view, however, given the diversity in Asia, we cannot assume religion has the same influence on all groups and societies; we need to consider each religion's unique role.

Asia has a highly diverse religious context and rich cultural diversity (Bouma et al., 2009). Religions include Buddhism, Christianity (both Catholicism and Protestantism), Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, and Shintoism, together with hundreds of local folk beliefs and religious groups. In addition to these religious affiliations, many people are atheists or do not identify with a clear belief, especially in societies with Communist ruling experience, such as China and Vietnam. The different religions, of course, are likely to have divergent impacts on political attitudes; the pace of secularization in the context of each religion differs as well, and this further complicates the story. Modernization processes also vary across countries: some societies, such as Japan, Korea, and Singapore, are highly developed; others are struggling with poverty and early industrialization, such as Myanmar and Cambodia. Internal variations appear in large countries such as China. Given these features, we anticipate that in Asia, the secularization impact will be moderated by different religious beliefs. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**H3.** Secularization's impact on political trust is moderated by religious beliefs.

## 5 | DATA AND METHODS

### 5.1 | Asian barometer survey and aggregate-level variables

Focusing on East and Southeast Asia, we examined the influence of religious and secularization forces on political trust and the moderating effects of different religions mainly relying on data from the ABS. The ABS is a cross-national survey project, which conducts nationally representative surveys in East and Southeast Asia. There have been four waves: 2001–2003, 2005–2008, 2010–2012, and 2014–2016. Our merged dataset contains information from the following 14 Asian societies: Cambodia, China (the mainland), Hong Kong SAR, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan (ROC), Thailand, and Vietnam. In Table 1, we list the aggregate-level statistics for the 48 region-year observations. The 48 cases cover a range of societies with varying levels of economic development, social inequalities, and cultural and historical backgrounds.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of aggregate-level observations.

Region	Year	Age (18–99)	Years of education	Dominant religious affiliation	GDP in constant USD	Political trust (0–100)	N
Cambodia	2008	38.66	5.35	Buddhist	741.86	60.0	1000
	2012	38.72	5.55	Buddhist	945.70	67.3	1200
	2015	40.68	5.48	Buddhist	1163.41	58.2	1200
China (mainland)	2002	44.26	7.48	Nonreligious	1150.23	83.0	3183
	2008	47.10	7.11	Nonreligious	3467.03	73.4	5098
	2011	45.30	5.82	Nonreligious	5582.89	73.2	3473
	2015	49.24	7.21	Nonreligious	8166.76	66.9	4068
Hong Kong (SAR)	2001	43.87	9.42	Nonreligious	25,166.90	54.8	811
	2007	47.39	9.89	Nonreligious	30,494.55	59.4	849
	2012	51.64	9.72	Nonreligious	36,619.81	59.7	1207
	2016	48.27	9.98	Nonreligious	43,496.30	50.7	1217
Indonesia	2006	39.41	8.53	Islamic	1764.79	56.0	1598
	2011	41.80	8.06	Islamic	3688.53	55.0	1550
	2016	44.69	8.57	Islamic	3605.72	57.2	1550
Japan	2003	50.97	12.31	Nonreligious	34,831.20	43.8	1418
	2007	54.56	12.45	Nonreligious	35,342.87	45.1	1067
	2011	55.73	12.83	Nonreligious	48,168.80	45.6	1880
	2016	56.43	13.12	Nonreligious	38,804.86	48.7	1081
Korea	2003	41.74	11.91	Nonreligious	14,209.34	42.8	1500
	2006	42.66	10.40	Nonreligious	20,888.38	36.2	1212
	2011	45.34	12.30	Nonreligious	24,079.79	39.2	1207
	2015	45.73	12.68	Nonreligious	27,105.08	40.9	1200
Malaysia	2007	38.86	9.97	Islamic	7378.59	60.2	1218
	2011	41.39	9.77	Islamic	10,252.59	65.4	1214
	2014	41.63	10.27	Islamic	11,008.87	63.7	1207
Mongolia	2003	45.94	11.45	Buddhist	747.09	52.0	1144
	2006	39.58	11.20	Buddhist	1321.61	52.0	1211
	2010	40.62	11.53	Buddhist	2602.37	40.6	1210
	2014	40.77	11.78	Buddhist	4081.02	46.0	1228
Myanmar	2015	41.74	6.21	Buddhist	1219.48	49.9	1620
Philippines	2002	39.22	9.12	Christian	1013.42	49.2	1200
	2005	42.61	9.24	Christian	1208.93	45.4	1200
	2010	40.85	9.60	Christian	2155.41	49.9	1200
	2014	43.06	9.25	Christian	2849.27	50.2	1200
Singapore	2006	45.37	10.26	Buddhist	33,579.16	68.6	1012
	2010	41.48	11.45	Buddhist	46,569.40	64.1	1000
	2014	40.84	12.30	Other beliefs	57,271.72	65.1	1039

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Region	Year	Age (18–99)	Years of education	Dominant religious affiliation	GDP in constant USD	Political trust (0–100)	N
Taiwan	2001	43.50	11.07	Other beliefs	13,408.38	47.8	1415
	2006	45.27	11.34	Other beliefs	16,984.54	46.3	1587
	2010	46.07	11.72	Other beliefs	19,261.67	45.1	1592
	2014	47.85	11.87	Other beliefs	22,638.92	42.9	1657
Thailand	2002	45.16	7.25	Buddhist	2133.12	60.2	1546
	2006	43.05	9.24	Buddhist	3442.39	59.3	1546
	2010	46.98	7.86	Buddhist	5174.53	56.3	1512
	2014	45.58	9.34	Buddhist	6079.69	56.8	1200
Vietnam	2006	42.05	8.83	Nonreligious	796.93	83.0	1200
	2010	43.71	9.86	Nonreligious	1297.23	79.7	1191
	2015	36.04	10.91	Nonreligious	2085.71	74.1	1200

Note: Average for numeric variables, modes for categorical variables, sorted in ascending order by region names and survey year.

At the aggregate level, we included control variables for economic development and social inequality. For instance, GDP per capita, which is measured in constant international dollars adjusted for purchase power, was retrieved from the World Bank (2021), and was included in our analysis. The exact GDP per capita of the 14 examined societies ranges from \$741 (Cambodia, 2008) to \$57,271 (Singapore, 2014). We applied a log transformation to the GDP per capita to ensure its normality of distribution. The logged term of GDP per capita ranged from 6.61 to 10.96. In addition to GDP per capita, which denotes the economic development levels, we included a control for social inequality: the Gini coefficient from the standardized world income inequality database project (Solt, 2016). By controlling these macro-level predictors, we hoped to identify individual political trust determinants with higher confidence without omitting important mechanisms.

## 5.2 | Political trust and predictors

Our outcome variable was people's political trust. The ABS data contain a series of variables related to trust in political institutions. We excluded variables for nongovernmental entities (e.g., media, NGOs) and looked at government-related institutions. Nine items in the data tap political trust in a political entity or authority: "trust in central government," "trust in local government," "trust in elections," "trust in congress," "trust in the court system," "trust in political parties," "trust in civil services," "trust in the army," and "trust in police." The wording is consistent across all items. Respondents are asked, "I am going to name a number of institutions. For each one, please tell me how much trust you have in them." They are given four possible responses: "Not at all," "Not very much," "Quite a lot," and "A great deal of trust."

We rescaled these four responses into a continuous scale of 0, 33.33, 66.67, and 100, where a higher value represented more trust in the institution. We then conducted exploratory factor analysis. Exploratory factor analysis showed that one latent factor was sufficient to capture commonality among the nine items. Cronbach's alpha was 0.87, indicating that we could generate one measure (Costello & Osborne, 2005) of political trust. We took the average of all the available items as the political trust index, which also ranged from 0 to 100. We report the dependent variable item scores and the political trust index's mean and standard deviations in Table 2, together with other individual-level predictors.

**TABLE 2** Descriptive statistics of individual-level variables (N/percentage for categorical variables; Mean/SD for continuous ones).

	Summary
Independent variables	
Wave (%)	
ABS1	12,217 (16.94%)
ABS2	19,798 (27.45%)
ABS3	19,436 (26.95%)
ABS4	20,667 (28.66%)
Country (%)	
Japan	5446 (7.55%)
HK	4084 (5.66%)
Korea	5119 (7.10%)
Mainland China	15,822 (21.94%)
Mongolia	4793 (6.65%)
Philippines	4800 (6.66%)
Taiwan	6251 (8.67%)
Thailand	5804 (8.05%)
Indonesia	4698 (6.51%)
Singapore	3051 (4.23%)
Vietnam	3591 (4.98%)
Cambodia	3400 (4.71%)
Malaysia	3639 (5.05%)
Myanmar	1620 (2.25%)
Male = 1 (%)	35,501 (49.3%)
Cohort (%)	
1900-39	5244 (7.41%)
1940-49	7636 (10.79%)
1950-59	12,726 (17.98%)
1960-69	15,889 (22.45%)
1970-79	14,596 (20.62%)
1980-89	11,320 (16.00%)
1990-now	3358 (4.75%)
Religion	
None	26,042 (36.11%)
Buddhist	22,613 (31.36%)
Christian	9266 (12.85%)
Islamic	7364 (10.21%)
Other	6833 (9.47%)
Urban = 1 (%)	40,459 (56.15%)
Age (mean (SD))	44.68 (15.66)
Years of education (mean (SD))	9.35 (4.59)

(Continues)



TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Summary
Dependent variables (rescale to 0–100)	
Trust in central gov't	59.46 (30.20)
Trust in local gov't	57.72 (27.11)
Trust in elections	56.61 (28.82)
Trust in congress	55.95 (31.59)
Trust in court system	57.29 (28.82)
Trust in political parties	52.14 (32.35)
Trust in civil services	56.50 (26.54)
Trust in army	67.48 (27.53)
Trust in police	59.20 (28.42)
Summed political trust (rescale to 0–100)	58.04 (20.59)
Num. of total observations	72,118

As Table 2 shows, each of the four waves of data comprises approximately a quarter of the full sample; only Wave 1 has relatively fewer respondents, as it covers only 8 countries; the remaining waves include 13–14 countries and regions, and each country/region contains approximately 1000–1500 observations per survey. Among the surveyed societies, mainland China has the largest number of cases. The smallest national sample is from Myanmar, as it was only surveyed in the 2016 wave. Table 2 also displays our other predictors. We converted the categorical variables to dummy variables before analysis: gender (female = 0, male = 1), cohorts (1900–1939 as the reference group), religious beliefs (not religious as the reference group; the other groups are Buddhist, Christian, Islamic, and other beliefs), and urban residence (rural area = 0). Age and education were both continuous variables measured in years. Since very few individuals were below 18 or above 99 years, we rounded them up to 18 or down to 99 to avoid the impact of outliers on the estimation. Education was measured in years, ranging from 0 to 20. Very few individuals claimed to have more than 20 years of education; we rounded them down to 20 years to exclude the effects of outliers.

### 5.3 | Model specification

We hoped to control for the effects of temporal factors, including age, period, and cohort effects, while predicting the roles of urbanization, education, and religion. Therefore, we opted for the hierarchical age-period-cohort (HAPC) model, as it could solve the identification problem (Yang & Land, 2006). Following Yang and Land's (2008) recommendations, we recentered age and used both its linear and its quadric terms. We also set the period and cohort to unequal width intervals (each wave/period of the survey covered approximately 3 years, while each cohort covered 10 years). Then, we generated the period by cohort cells and treated these as Level 2 units in multilevel modeling, as Table 3 indicates. The seven cohorts and four waves of the survey eventually generated 27 cells at Level 2 (there was one empty cell for the youngest cohort in ABS Wave 1). Therefore, we cross-classified the data by both period and cohort. The frequency of the cohort-period categories is shown in Table 3.

We treated the respondents as Level 1 (individual level) and the cross-classified groups as Level 2 (aggregate level) in our multilevel modeling. Individual respondents were nested within the period-cohort cells. We had a total of 72,118 observations at the individual level and 27 observations at the period-cohort level. We fitted the models with random intercepts and fixed effects of predictors. As discussed, the individual-level predictors included the wave of the survey, cohort, gender, religion, location of residence (urban/rural), and our focal variables: age and years of education. At the national level, we introduced logged GDP per capita (with purchase power parity adjusted) as

TABLE 3 Frequency distribution of cross-classified cohort and period (waves of survey) groups.

		Cohort						
		1900–39	1940–49	1950–59	1960–69	1970–79	1980–89	1990–now
Period (wave of survey)	ABS1	1787	1684	2607	3071	2396	672	0
	ABS2	1746	2453	3655	4599	4253	3017	75
	ABS3	1316	2078	3393	4139	3943	3599	968
	ABS4	646	1637	3311	4338	4249	4166	2320

a control variable. We built the regression models in the following sequence, giving us two models to test the three hypotheses.

At the individual level, all models included the random intercepts of Level 2 and the fixed effects at Level 1. The predictors included gender, age (both linear and quadratic terms for non-linear effects), religious beliefs, location of residence, and years of education. To examine each research hypothesis, we fitted the HAPC models in the following sequence. Model 1 served as the baseline model with all individual- and contextual-level covariates and our focal variables (religious belief, urban residence, educational attainment) to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 (H2, H2A, and H2B). Model 2 and Model three included two interaction effects (religion and urban residence, religion, and educational attainment) to test Hypothesis 3. Thus, the three models were:

**Model 1.** Main effects of all predictors with random intercepts.

**Model 2.** Model 1 + the interaction effects of religion and urban residence.

**Model 3.** Model 1 + the interaction effects of religion and years of education.

## 5.4 | Robustness

We adopted the following practices to ensure the robustness of our findings. First, for variables that could be alternatively coded, we tried the alternatives and compared their results with the final models. For instance, for the effects of age, in addition to the age's quadratic terms, we tried age's linear term only, together with multi-level models with age as an ordinal cohort variable. For the effects of GDP per capita, instead of the logged term, we refit the models with other transformations of GDP, such as the standardized and categorized terms. Second, for variables that may have a self-selection bias, such as educational attainment, we used propensity score matching to focus on the comparable individuals only to identify the exact effects of education. Third, we tried both conventional multilevel models and HAPC models and found no significantly different patterns of results. Lastly, for both the individual and aggregate level observations, we tested for inclusion and exclusion of outliers (e.g., Cambodia for economic development). No alerts appeared, adding to our confidence in the reported findings.

## 6 | FINDINGS

### 6.1 | Descriptive findings

We begin with the descriptive findings from the ABS data. Table 1 shows the aggregate level descriptive statistics. As the table indicates, the countries and regions included in the ABS data are highly diverse in terms of economic development levels and demographic characteristics. Developed societies such as Japan and Hong Kong SAR are relatively older, on average (approximately 50 years old or older); less developed countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam are relatively younger, on average (approximately in their 30s or early 40s). Educational attainment shows

similar patterns: citizens in Japan, Korea and Taiwan are among the highest educated, while citizens of Cambodia and Myanmar are less educated; on average, they report approximately 5–6 years of formal education. Our focal variable, religious beliefs, shows diverse patterns at both the macro and micro levels. All categories, including Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and nonreligious backgrounds include quite many respondents. These beliefs are also the dominant beliefs, with the only two exceptional cases - Taiwan and the latest wave of Singapore - indicate that their dominant belief is “other”—and this is likely to be local folk religions, such as Taoism and Matsu. The rich diversity ensures a wide range of distributions on all variables, and this, in turn, promises robust estimates for regression analyses.

Table 1 indicates several temporal trends in the countries surveyed in multiple waves. Overall, the countries all experience economic growth over the period 2001–2016; growth is the most prominent in Indonesia, Mongolia, Thailand, and Vietnam, with the GDP per capita either tripling or nearly quadrupling. The increasing years of education suggest a spillover effect from the economic development. Political trust, however, shows either stagnation or decline in most societies. This is not surprising; critical citizen theory expects that economic growth, education, and urbanization will result in the erosion of trust in political authority. Overall, the descriptive statistics at the aggregate level lend moderate support to our hypotheses.

## 6.2 | Results from HAPC models

We now turn to the results from the HAPC models. Table 4 displays the three models we constructed for the three research hypotheses. Model 1 includes the random intercepts and fixed effects of the predictors and control variables. Gender shows no significant effect on political trust; males and females do not differ in their confidence in the government. The interpretation of the aging effect is less intuitive, as the quadric and linear terms are both in the model as recommended by Yang and Land (2008); their combined effect can be described as a U-shaped curve, with people having the lowest trust in the government around the early 1940s. After the 1940s, trust in the government increases as one ages; this result confirms the “ageing–conservatization” link suggested in previous literature (Jiang et al., 2022). Finally, social inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, leads to higher political trust; this is counterintuitive yet still reasonable. In an unequal environment, both upper- and lower-class individuals have to be more dependent on political authority to gain patronage and protection. In such a scenario, both classes would have higher, rather than lower, political trust.

As predicted, education, urbanization, and economic development all result in lower confidence. Each additional year of education is associated with  $-0.48$  points ( $p < 0.001$ ) of change in political trust; in other words, a person with 6 years of education (equivalent to completion of elementary school) and a person with 16 years of education (equivalent to a bachelor's degree) differ by approximately 4.8 points on a 0–100 scale. Urban residents' political trust is 4.18 points lower than rural residents' trust ( $p < 0.001$ ). These findings support the critical citizen thesis and the secularization thesis proposed by Hypothesis 2.

Religion's influence on political trust is more complex than previous literature has noted. The nonreligious group (the reference group) has higher political confidence than all other groups, which seems to contradict the conventional wisdom of religion associating with authoritarian support. This paradoxical finding can be partially explained by the fact that the two major sources of atheists in Asia, namely China and Vietnam. They are both countries with Communist ruling experience, where citizens are encouraged or pressured to count on the political authority. Moreover, in these societies, we often observe that critiques of political authorities are prohibited. Therefore, people in those environments often hold a performance-based legitimacy (Yang & Zhao, 2015). With Vietnam and China have been experiencing rapid socio-economic development over the past few decades, their performance-based legitimacy is high, which leading to high political trust in these two societies (Tan & Tambyah, 2011; Wong et al., 2011).

Overall, being a member of a religious majority reduces political trust ( $-5.69$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In other words, religious minorities have higher confidence in the political system. On the one hand, the vulnerable groups may count on the protection of political authorities, which may explain their higher political trust in the authority (especially under autocracy or theocracy). On the other hand, the influence of secular Confucian philosophy and *Min-Ben*<sup>1</sup>

TABLE 4 HAPC models predicting political trust (standard errors in parentheses).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
(Intercept)	44.89 (1.09)***	46.62 (1.10)***	49.34 (1.13)***
Predictors			
Male = 1 (female = 0)	-0.20 (0.14)	-0.19 (0.14)	-0.20 (0.14)
Age in years (18–99)	136.10 (37.82)***	122.80 (39.36)**	131.87 (37.43)***
Age square	173.48 (30.78)***	176.00 (31.54)***	168.20 (30.56)***
Religion (none as reference)			
Buddhist	-8.18 (0.18)***	-10.66 (0.25)***	-11.01 (0.38)***
Christian	-13.87 (0.24)***	-14.74 (0.38)***	-18.49 (0.56)***
Islamic	-10.48 (0.25)***	-13.91 (0.34)***	-16.97 (0.55)***
Other	-1.25 (0.26)***	-1.80 (0.44)***	-5.88 (0.60)***
Religious majority (minority = 0)	-5.69 (0.17)***	-5.30 (0.18)***	-5.72 (0.18)***
Education in years	-0.48 (0.02)***	-0.48 (0.02)***	-0.76 (0.03)***
Urban (rural = 0)	-4.18 (0.16)***	-6.91 (0.24)***	-4.13 (0.16)***
GDPPC (in \$1000 USD, logged)	-2.13 (0.07)***	-2.07 (0.07)***	-2.16 (0.07)***
Gini coefficient	1.26 (0.02)***	1.23 (0.02)***	1.22 (0.02)***
Interaction Effects			
Urban × Buddhist		4.78 (0.34)***	
Urban × Christian		2.02 (0.46)***	
Urban × Islamic		7.17 (0.49)***	
Urban × Other		1.30 (0.53)*	
Eduyear × Buddhist			0.30 (0.04)***
Eduyear × Christian			0.48 (0.05)***
Eduyear × Islamic			0.75 (0.06)***
Eduyear × Other			0.47 (0.05)***
AIC	622,691.86	622,371.00	622,470.93
BIC	622,829.65	622,545.54	622,645.47
Log likelihood	-3111330.93	-311166.50	-311216.47
Num. obs.	72,118	72,118	72,118
Num. groups:	27	27	27
Var: Level-2 groups (intercept)	0.61	0.69	0.59
Var: Residual	328.80	327.31	327.70

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

thought in Asian societies, especially East Asian societies, may moderate the eroding effect of urbanization and education on political trust (Wang & Pavličević, 2012). Some scholars have even noted that the prevailing public discourse on democracy in China reflects a guardianship model of governance under the influence of traditional *Min-Ben* thought in the Confucian ideological system (Shi & Lu, 2010; Wang & Titunik, 2014). The impact of *Min-Ben* ideas on Asian residents' (especially in Vietnam and China, and to some extent Singapore/Korea/Japan) political trust can be observed in several ways. For instance, the *Minben* doctrine requires the governing elite to care for people's welfare and listen to their voices. This not only improves the quality of governance; it also boosts citizens' confidence in government and encourages political participation. Some empirical research also suggests the *Min-Ben* conception of democracy strengthens people's institutional trust (Chu, 2013).

Model 2 and Model 3 introduce the interaction terms to test Hypotheses 2 and 3. Model 2 focuses on the interaction between urban residence and religion, and Model 3 focuses on the relationship between education and religion. Since discussing their combined effects is difficult, we visualize the interaction effects in Figure 1. In Figure 1A (plot on the left), we can see that overall, rural residence means higher confidence in the government; urban residents have less confidence in political establishment and systems, which confirms the critical citizen thesis. This gap is the most significant in nonreligious, Christian, and other belief groups; for Buddhists, the urban-rural gap is small; for Muslims, there is no noticeable urban-rural gap. In other words, urbanization's secularizing effect is limited and can only influence certain groups of people but not others. For Buddhists and Muslims, urbanization is much less influential than previous works assume.

Figure 1B (plot on the right) shows the interaction between years of education and religion. Although more education generally means lower political trust and more critical thinking, this is not applicable to the Muslims either. Among the Muslims, more education does not affect their political confidence at all, as suggested by the almost flat long-dashed fitted line. For other religious affiliations, education's secularization effects also differ greatly. For the nonreligious group, education's effect is the most prominent; a person with 20 years of education (approx. political trust = 53) and a person without formal education (approx. political trust = 68) differ by 15 points on a 0–100 scale. In other words, non-believers are the most susceptible to education's influence. For Christian, Buddhist, and other belief groups, education's influence is weaker. Evidence from Model 2 and Model 3 supports Hypothesis 3 that religion moderates the effect of secularization on political trust.

## 7 | CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Weber argued that after the rise of capitalism in Europe, we have been observing the trend of modernization and the “disenchantment of the world” (Weber, 2001). Relevant changes include the secularization of religion, the decline of authority, and the erosion of political trust. In previous literature, religion, and secularizing forces such as economic development, education, and urbanization are all covariates with political trust, yet their joint effects are understudied. To probe the interacting effects of urbanization and macro contexts on people's trust in government, we examined 14 Asian countries. Asian countries are diverse in a number of important aspects, including the ethnic and linguistic composition of their populations, economic development levels, religious beliefs, and political institutions. These variations make Asia a promising source for comparative research on values change across societies. Asia is also less examined than developed countries in North America and Europe.

Therefore, focusing on Asian societies can deepen our understanding of political culture in non-Western contexts. This study fills the research gap by probing Asian societies' political trust. We applied hierarchical age-period-cohort models to the four waves of the ABS data (2001–2016) and found supporting evidence of the modernization thesis—urbanization and expansion of education all contribute to the decreasing political trust. We also examined the joint effects of urbanization and education and religion. Our findings suggest the secularization associated with urbanization may be constrained by religious forces; more specifically, among the Islamic societies and the Muslims, the modernization influence is the most limited, when compared to other beliefs such as Buddhism and Christianity.

The present study contributes to the fields of public opinion and political culture in the following ways. First, our findings echo the modernization theory and critical citizen theory by confirming that the forces of modernization and secularization could erode public political trust (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Jiang & Zhang, 2021b; Zhang et al., 2021). Second, our study also lends support to the argument that cultural traditions would leave an enduring impact (Huntington, 1993; 1996; Shi & Lu, 2010; Wang & Pavličević, 2012). Third, our study reveals the complex roles played by religions when interacting with other secularization forces. We observed that some religions have been compatible with the modern lifestyles, and they do not offset the effects of urbanization and education; we also notice that the Muslim-dominant societies perform differently, and secularization forces are highly limited there. In other words, the present study adds to the once hot topic of Asian exceptionalism with another addition: the Islam exceptionalism. Of course, this is only suggestive evidence, and we invite further studies to probe the same matter.

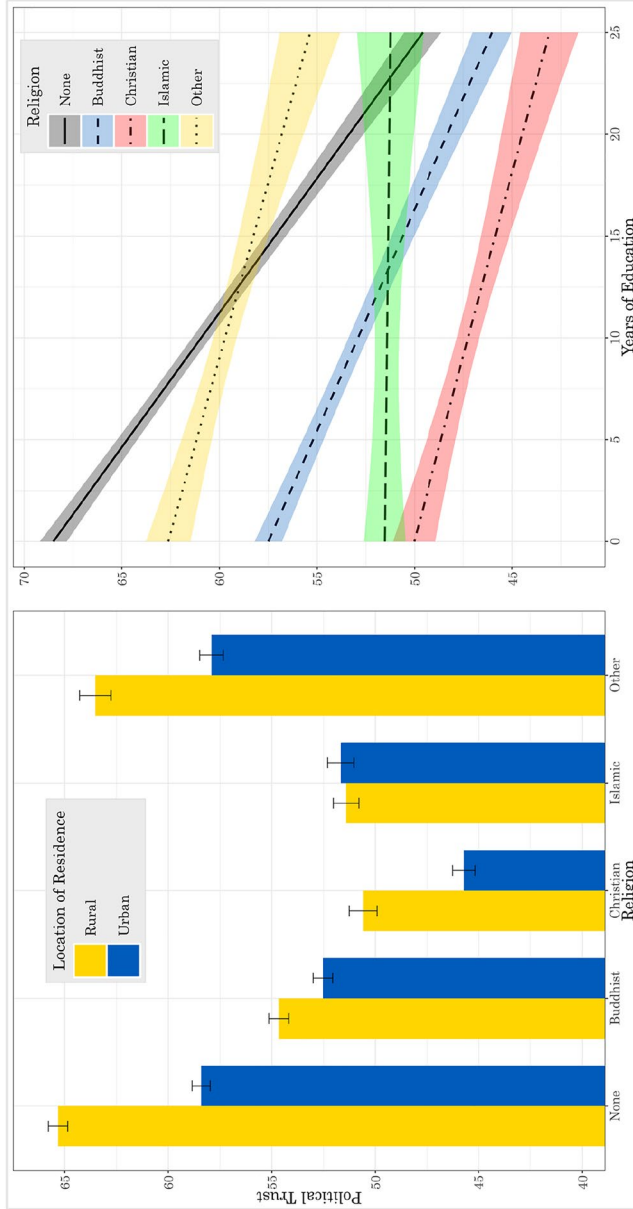


FIGURE 1 The interaction effects of religion and urbanization/education in predicting political trust.

There are some limitations in our paper to be noted, and we would discuss how they could be solved with future research agenda. First, this study employs repeated cross-sectional data only and therefore we cannot draw conclusions of causality. There are still concerns of endogeneity remaining. For example, it could be the case that societies with certain religious backgrounds tend to associate with high or low levels of urbanization or educational development. Future works could employ experiment methods or panel data to see the exact effects of religion, education, and urbanization on value changes, and see which one or ones drive the other predictors.

Second, we did not go into detail with the intersecting effects of secularization and Communist rule. As we know, societies such as Cambodia, China, Mongolia, and Vietnam experienced a secularization campaign under the Communist rule. How would such artificially designed secularization effort make these societies different from countries where gradual modernization took place, in terms of political culture and political trust? Is this the key to explain China and Vietnam's exceptionally high political trust? Finally, our findings of Islam exceptionalism invite future works to have a wider scope to compare Muslim countries in not only East and Southeast Asia, but also the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia. We hope the present study inspires more works to contribute to a better understanding of how religion and modernization jointly shape political trust in the world.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Tony Huiquan Zhang contributed to the first draft writing, data collection and analysis, results report and visualization. Anli Jiang contributed to the theorization, literature review, data collection and analysis, and editing.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We declare no conflict of interests in this project.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This project is based on publicly available dataset—the Asian Barometer Survey. Scholars can access the database via: [www.asianbarometer.org](http://www.asianbarometer.org).

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### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Min-Ben (民本) thought refers to the idea raised by the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius. Min-Ben thought believes that the rulers should treat people as the “root” or the “foundation” of society and should prioritize people's need in governance. It is sometimes translated as the “people-oriented thought.” Wang and Titunik (2014) and Zhao (2014) have a more detailed discussion with respect to this concept and its implications to Chinese politics.

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