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Crisis Governance and Public Trust:

Revealing the Chain Mediation Effect of Social Fairness and Well-Being

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Abstract: Trust in the government is crucial for crisis management and plays a pivotal role in shaping public compliance. This study explores how public preferences for either a more interventionist or a more limited government during crises influence changes in trust in the government. Using data from the 2021 China General Social Survey, we find that: (1) a positive correlation exists between public perceptions of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government, (2) perceived social fairness and subjective well-being partially mediate this relationship, and (3) perceived social fairness and subjective well-being form a chain mediation pathway linking the public perceptions of government authority during crises with changes in trust in the government. This study provides insights into how perceptions of government authority during crises affect changes in trust in the government and identifies key factors that can allow governments to build and maintain public trust in a crisis context.

Keywords: Government Authority, Trust in the Government, Perceived Social Fairness, Subjective Well-being, Chain Mediation Model

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is widely recognized as one of the most significant creeping crises of the 21st century (Mascio et al., 2020; Nolte & Lindenmeier, 2023). It caused a global disruption that lasted nearly three years (Zaki, 2024). During the peak of the pandemic, the severity of the crisis compelled governments worldwide to implement urgent and, at times, drastic measures including social distancing, nationwide lockdowns, and stay-at-home orders (Haug et al., 2020). These stringent policies led many countries to re-adopt a "big government" approach (O'Flynn, 2021). However, public attitudes toward these measures vary (Rieger & Wang, 2022). Some individuals hope for stronger government action, believing that the current efforts are insufficient (Rieger & Wang, 2022; Kim & Kreps, 2020). Others consider the policies overly strict and restrictive of individual freedoms (Rieger & Wang, 2022).

Trust in the government is a key factor shaping public support for its actions (Chanley et al., 2000). Trust is defined as the congruence between citizens' preferences and the perceived functioning of the government, which means that the government functions in a way preferred by citizens (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Bouckaert & Van De Walle, 2003). During crises, it plays a vital role in re-establishing the governance legitimacy that is derived from citizens' beliefs about the normative appropriateness of governmental structures, officials, and processes (Levi et al., 2009). Furthermore, strong trust in the government boosts public adherence to policies and enhances the trust in and attention to information disseminated by the government (Houston & Harding, 2013; Shanka & Menebo, 2022; Thaker et al., 2017).

The government plays a crucial role in various aspects of modern society. However, global debates on the boundaries of government authority and the scope of its responsibilities remain unresolved (J. Wang, 2018). These debates mainly focus on whether governments should operate as large (oarsman) or small (guardian) governments (Rose, 1993; Rhodes & Wanna, 2007). During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, these debates were primarily manifested as a quest for balance between the various restrictive measures taken by the government for public health and citizens' individual rights (Flood et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, citizens in numerous countries either passively

or actively sacrificed their personal freedoms to control the virus spread (Liu et al., 2022; Harring et al., 2021). Yet, research indicates differences in their levels of support for their governments' response measures, with some countries even showing signs of opposition, including resistance to mandatory physical distancing and riots triggered by lockdowns and other stringent restrictions (Jørgensen et al., 2021). The strictness of government actions during crisis management significantly affects public trust in the government—a previous study showed that excessive government action during crises reduces trust (Yackee & Lowery, 2005). Another study found that citizens will be dissatisfied if they perceive government intervention as excessive or insufficient (Rieger & Wang, 2022). A sluggish government response to crises is more likely to lead to public dissatisfaction and distrust compared to an overly proactive response (Rieger & Wang, 2022). While existing studies have noted the relationship between public perceptions of government authority during crises and trust in the government, research on the mechanisms underlying this relationship is limited and requires further exploration.

To explore the shifts in public attitudes toward and expectations of the government during various phases of a crisis (Yue et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2023; Kyriazi et al., 2023), we considered the peak phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, during the enforcement of its strict Zero-COVID. We addressed the following research question: How do public perceptions of government authority during crises affect trust in the government? Government and public expectations are constantly evolving (Dollery et al., 2006). Government responses and strategies during crises are critical for sustaining public trust (Boin, 2009; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020; Li & Lee, 2024; Mizrahi et al., 2021; Van Der Wal, 2020). In this context, we make the following contributions: First, we uniquely examine the relationship between public perceptions of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government, a topic largely overlooked in the existing literature. This study offers a novel perspective on this relationship. Second, the data used in this study were collected during China's implementation of the dynamic Zero-COVID policy and provided a distinctive contextual dimension. Third, we argue that perceptions of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government are subjective variables reflecting the public's views on governmental power, responsibility, and government legitimacy.

We also explore additional perceived variables such as subjective well-being and perceived social fairness as mediators of the relationship mentioned above, creating a chain mediation model that offers an innovative analytical framework.

Literature review and hypotheses

Perception of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government

Trust in the government is based on an implicit social contract in which public expectations are met (Keele, 2007). Trust in the government has been identified as the cornerstone of modern political systems (Rodríguez et al., 2018). During crises, public trust in the government often increases (Kritzinger et al., 2021), as individuals become more likely to rely on external control mechanisms, such as government intervention, to navigate emergencies (Shepherd & Kay, 2012). The higher the level of trust in the government, the more likely people are to comply with government measures and public health policies such as frequent hand washing, avoiding crowded spaces, and social distancing (Blair et al., 2017). Additionally, trust in the government is a crucial indicator for assessing a government's crisis management performance (Christensen et al., 2016; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). Consequently, trust in the government during crises has received considerable scholarly attention.

While trust in the government during crises is shaped by the same fundamental factors that influence trust in the government in normal periods — such as cultural differences (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013), economic development and social order (S. Kim, 2010; L. Li, 2004), the level of government institutions (L. Li, 2016; Su et al., 2016; C. Wu & Wilkes, 2018), government performance (C. Wang, 2016), and political corruption (Zhang & Kim, 2018) — it is also uniquely affected by crisis-specific factors. These include the perceived threat posed by a crisis (Kritzinger et al., 2021), the desire to overcome a common threat (Cai, 2023), perceptions of the performance of central institutions during a crisis (Bol et al. 2021), attributions of crisis responsibility (Chon & Fondren, 2019), and the belief in conspiracy theories related

to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Pummerer et al., 2022). A key determinant of trust is the public's perception of a government's response as inadequate or excessive (Rieger & Wang, 2022). This raises the critical question of how citizens evaluate the scope and legitimacy of government intervention during crises. At the heart of such evaluations lie the public perceptions of government authority. As a relational force that emerges through state–citizen interactions, government authority is reflected in public perceptions of the legitimacy and rationality of governmental directives or influence (Kustermans & Horemans, 2022). That is, citizens' trust in the government during crises is closely linked to how they interpret the appropriateness and justification of governmental control — whether the government is doing too much, too little, or just enough. If the public believes that the government has effectively designed and implemented response measures during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and has clearly communicated information about the same, it is more likely to view the government as proactive and competent (Bavel et al., 2020; Han et al., 2023). However, noteworthily, although the COVID-19 pandemic is a creeping crisis that may continue to simmer long after its "hot phase" has ended (Boin et al., 2020), people often perceive long-lasting restrictions and ongoing strict government measures as unnecessary and harmful (Zeng, 2024). Over time, this risk perception diminishes (Kritzinger et al., 2021).

Based on the above literature, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): A positive correlation exists between public perceptions of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government.

Potential mediators between public perceptions of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government

Perceived social fairness

Perceived social fairness refers to an individual's perception and judgment of social fairness, including distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness (S. Zhang, 2017; Hu et al., 2016). Regarding procedural and interactional fairness, scholars have noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens of some countries had to comply with government mandates even if they disagreed with them (Yanagi et al.,

2023). As government actions became more stringent, some citizens attributed this to a disconnect between government decisions and the public's daily experiences. This disconnect was seen to stem from socioeconomic privileges that set cabinet members apart from ordinary citizens (Ranieri et al., 2024). In this context, the lack of opportunities to participate in decision-making and express opinions is the primary reason people perceive unfairness (Leventhal, 1980; Mazepus & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Concerning distributive fairness, because disasters affect communities differently, citizens closely observe what they receive in comparison to others (X. Wu et al., 2017; Jost & Major, 2001). In such cases, a government must carefully decide how to allocate aid and respond to avoid raising concerns about the fairness of its actions (Mazepus & Van Leeuwen, 2020; Starmans et al., 2017).

Management research indicates that fairness is the strongest predictor of individuals' trust in organizations (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; Jimenez & Iyer, 2016). If citizens experience strong relative deprivation, which refers to perceiving themselves as worse off compared to a certain standard and is accompanied by feelings of anger and resentment (Smith et al., 2012), and are influenced by biased perceptions in their understanding of fairness (Gurr, 2015; Cappelen et al., 2021; Konow, 2000), their likelihood of appreciating the government and granting it legitimacy significantly decreases (Mazepus & Van Leeuwen, 2020). A lack of perceived fairness — that is, being treated equally in society — can precipitate distrust in the government, especially during crises (Meredith et al. 2007; Han et al. 2023). Accordingly, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Perceived social fairness has a mediating effect on the relationship between the perception of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government.

Subjective well-being

An underestimated consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic was the damage to well-being (Martínez et al., 2022). In Europe, the pandemic's negative impact on well-being was 3.5 times greater than the GDP loss when measured in monetary terms (Allas et al., 2020). In addition to the direct damage caused by the pandemic, measures taken

by governments—such as banning social gatherings, closing schools and workplaces, and restricting travel and movement (Wood et al., 2022; Ganesan et al., 2021)—harmed citizens' well-being by directly hindering the social intimacy crucial for maintaining positive mental health (de Lima et al., 2020; Greyling et al., 2021). This harm could be measured objectively and subjectively. The latter, which refers to individuals' self-reported emotional and psychological state, could be defined as subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1999). Although citizens expected governments to play a larger role during the COVID-19 crisis (Shepherd & Kay, 2012), studies have shown that the implementation of lockdowns led to deteriorations in mental health and well-being (Sibley et al., 2020; S. X. Zhang et al., 2020). While adherence to quarantine orders was essential for controlling the spread of COVID-19, those who were isolated or ill may have faced social exclusion or avoidance by others (Ganesan et al., 2021). Furthermore, these measures may have increased the likelihood of issues threatening well-being, such as domestic violence, anti-restriction protests, depression, and anxiety (Ertan et al., 2020; Ramirez & Wood, 2024; Onyeaka et al., 2021).

Research has identified three relatively independent components of subjective well-being: positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction (Scarpa et al., 2021; Diener, 1984). Scholars have noted that measures such as lockdowns, aimed at combatting a pandemic, can trigger negative emotions such as tension and fear among citizens while reducing opportunities to restore positive emotional resources, These issues affect citizens' trust in the government (Restubog et al., 2020; Vasilopoulos et al., 2023). Additionally, individuals with higher life satisfaction are more likely to trust their government (Ng et al., 2022). However, the COVID-19 pandemic and its response policies significantly limited social contact, reducing individuals' interactions with friends and family and minimizing their contact with colleagues at work (Bittmann, 2022). These had a substantial impact on the social and psychological health of the global human population and were expected to affect its overall life satisfaction (Diener, 2012; Windsteiger et al., 2022).

In numerous studies, subjective well-being has been used as a proxy indicator of quality of life (Haas, 1999; Costanza et al., 2007; Easterlin, 2003). It is influenced by factors positioned higher up in the cognitive hierarchy (Land et al., 2012) such as public perceptions of social policies

(Wong et al., 2006). One empirical study found that when people perceive social policies as fairer, their subjective well-being increases (Sun & Xiao, 2012). This aligns with the view that people are more likely to report lower levels of well-being when they notice higher levels of inequality (Alesina et al., 2004). Thus, a sense of fairness is closely related to subjective well-being (Ugur, 2021). Moreover, perceived social fairness functions as a bridge between inequality and subjective well-being (Shaw & Olson, 2014; Starmans et al., 2017). Living in a highly unequal environment can trigger feelings of unfairness and lead to reductions in subjective well-being (Ugur, 2021). Therefore, perceived social fairness, as a higher-order cognition, influences subjective well-being (Tortia, 2008). Accordingly, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): Subjective well-being has a mediating effect on the relationship between the perception of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): Perceived social fairness is significantly positively correlated with subjective well-being.

Hypothesis 3c (H3c): Perceived social fairness and subjective well-being have a chain mediating effect on the relationship between the perception of government authority and changes in trust in the government during crises.

Method

Data and sampling

This study used data from the 2021 China General Social Survey (CGSS), a comprehensive nationwide project initiated in 2003. The CGSS collects information at the social, community, family, and individual levels to capture a wide range of social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics in China. It is a collaborative effort involving Renmin University of China and other Chinese academic institutions, representing China's first nationwide, comprehensive, and continuous large-scale social survey project. Currently, the CGSS dataset is the primary source of research on Chinese society, with widespread applications in academic research, teaching, and government policymaking. The 2021 CGSS dataset, officially released on March 31, 2023, was collected during

the period when China implemented its strict Zero-COVID policy. It included a thematic module that thoroughly documented the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various aspects of Chinese society, particularly on individual behaviors and attitudes. Using a multi-stage stratified probability sampling method, the 2021 CGSS produced a dataset of 8,148 valid responses from 19 provinces, ensuring scientific rigor and national representation.

Table 1 compares the demographic characteristics of the 2021 CGSS sample with those reported in China's Seventh National Population Census (excluding Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan), focusing on gender, age, ethnicity, and education level. The demographic breakdown of the 2021 CGSS sample is presented below: (1) The gender distribution comprised 45.15% male and 54.85% female participants; (2) The participants were structured into three groups based on age categories: 0%, 64.05%, and 35.95% were 0-14 years old, 15-59 years old, and 60 years of age or older, respectively; (3) Education levels ranged from no formal education to postgraduate studies. The percentages were as follows: 20.51% had a college or higher degree, 18.27% finished high school, 28.36% completed middle school, 21.49% completed primary school, and 11.11% had no formal education. Therefore, based on China's Seventh National Population Census data, the 2021 CGSS sample was highly representative of the overall Chinese population.

Measures

Dependent variable

Changes in trust in the government were considered the dependent variable. This variable was measured through two distinct aspects: trust in the healthcare system and general trust in the government. China's healthcare system is an integral component of its state governance system and is directly administered by the National Health Commission, which operates under the leadership of the State Council (Central People's Government). In this context, the CGSS respondents were asked, "How have the measures taken by our country in response to the COVID-19 pandemic affected your trust in the healthcare system or government?" Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 denoted "significantly decreased," "decreased slightly," "remained

Table 1. Balance Check of 2021 CGSS with China's Seventh National Population Census

Variable	Item	CGSS (2021)		The seventh National Population Census
		Percent	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Man	45.15	3679	51.24
	Woman	54.85	4469	48.76
Age	0-14 years old	0	0	17.95
	15-59 years old	64.05	5219	63.35
	Age 60 and above	35.95	2929	18.70
Education	College or above	20.51	1671	15.46
	High school	18.27	1489	15.09
	Middle school	28.36	2311	34.51
	Primary school	21.49	1751	24.77
	Illiterate	11.11	905	10.17
	Missing	0.26	21	-
Nationality	Han	92.64	7548	91.11
	Others	7.36	600	8.89
Total		100	8148	100

Note: This study used the data from the 2021 China General Social Survey (CGSS), a project led by the China Survey and Data Center at Renmin University of China. The author greatly acknowledges the valuable support provided by the institution and its team in facilitating access to the data, assuming full responsibility for the content and interpretations presented in this study.

unchanged," "increased slightly," and "significantly increased," respectively. The reliability of these measures was confirmed by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, supporting their combined use as a single factor.

Independent variable

The perception of government authority during crises was considered the independent variable. In this regard, the CGSS respondents were asked the following initial question: "During the severe phase of the

pandemic, do you believe our government had the authority to undertake the following actions?" Subsequently, they were asked to rate their agreement with eight specific measures: closing businesses or workplaces, mandating people to stay at home, utilizing digital tracking for infected individuals, enforcing mask-wearing, and prohibiting public gatherings. Their ratings were based on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (definitely does not have authority) to 4 (definitely has authority). The reliability of these combined scales, indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.78, suggested that these items could be effectively treated as a single factor.

Mediating variable

Our first mediating variable was perceived social fairness. This was obtained by measuring responses to the following question: "Overall, do you think that today's society is fair or unfair?" Responses were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 and 5 indicated "completely unfair" and "completely fair," respectively.

Our second mediating variable was subjective well-being. In the 2021 CGSS, this was measured using the Subjective Well-being Scale for Chinese Citizens (SWBS-CC20) (Xing, 2003). This scale is a validated instrument for studies of urban residents in mainland China and has been widely used by many scholars (B. Wang et al., 2023; J. Zhang et al., 2022; X. Li et al., 2022). Therefore, we adopted it to measure subjective well-being. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 21 statements (details of these statements/items are shown in Appendix 1). Each item was scored using a 6-level scoring system where points 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 corresponded with "strongly disagree," "disagree," "slightly disagree," "slightly agree," "agree," and "strongly agree," respectively; statements 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17, 18, and 20 were scored inversely. After adjusting for reverse-coded items, the statements were combined into a single variable by calculating their average score. A higher average score indicated better well-being. The Cronbach's alpha for these 21 items was 0.83, indicating good reliability and validating their treatment as a single factor in our analysis.

Control variables

Control variables included gender, age, educational attainment, perceived social class, physical health status, vaccine awareness, and

media usage frequency. Research indicates that older individuals having higher educational levels, higher social class, and better health tend to have greater trust in the government and report higher satisfaction with public services (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005; Gozgor, 2022; Zhou et al., 2021). Gender and vaccine awareness are also relevant to understanding an individual's trust in the government (McDermott & Jones, 2022; Moucheraud et al., 2021). Additionally, the frequency of media use is a significant predictor of political disaffection and government efficacy (Pinkleton & Austin, 2002).

Thus, we considered gender a dummy variable, with values of 1 and 0 representing "male" and "female," respectively. Age was a continuous variable calculated by subtracting a respondent's birth year from the survey year. Educational attainment was deemed a categorical variable; values of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 represented "no formal education," "primary school," "junior high school," "high school," and "college or above," respectively. Perceived social class was an ordinal variable, with values ranging from 1 to 10; scores of 10 and 1 represented the highest and lowest levels of perceived social class, respectively. Physical health status was assessed via a specific inquiry designed to gauge an individual's self-assessed health condition; respondents were asked, "How do you assess your current physical health status?" Their answer choices were provided on a detailed 5-point Likert scale to differentiate the levels of health. The values on this scale were 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, which corresponded to "extremely unhealthy," "slightly unhealthy," "moderately healthy," "very healthy," and "extremely healthy," respectively. Vaccine awareness was quantified using a 5-point Likert scale based on responses to the prompt, "Do you agree with the following statements about vaccines?" The scale included two key statements: "Overall, the disadvantages of vaccination outweigh the benefits," and "Gaining immunity through illness is preferable to vaccination." In the original questionnaire, the measurement of this variable was reverse-coded. After adjustment, a higher score indicated a higher perception of vaccine benefits. Further, media usage frequency reflected how frequently individuals had engaged in various media activities in the past year. In this regard, respondents were asked the following question: "Over the past year, how frequently have you used the following types of media?" The assessed media types included newspapers, magazines, radio, television, internet (including mobile

internet), and subscription-based mobile news services. Each media type was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 signified "never," "rarely," "occasionally," "frequently," and "very frequently," respectively.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for our primary study variables. The mean scores were notably high for the following variables: perception of government authority during crises (mean = 3.916/4, SD = 0.225), perceived social fairness (mean = 3.457/5, SD = 0.972), subjective well-being (mean = 5.116/7, SD=1.008), changes in trust in the government (mean = 4.514/5, SD = 0.691), physical health status (mean = 3.482/5, SD = 1.093), vaccine awareness (mean = 3.912/5, SD = 0.805), and media usage frequency (mean = 2.714/5, SD = 0.905). In contrast, perceived social class (mean = 4.282/10, SD = 1.866) reflected lower public perceptions of their own social standing. The average age of the survey respondents was 51.6 years, with a standard deviation of 17.5. In terms of gender distribution, 45.15% of the respondents were male and 54.85% were female. Their educational levels varied: 11.11%, 21.49%, 28.36%, 18.27%, and 20.51% had no formal education, had completed primary education, had completed middle school, had completed high school, and had completed college education or had a higher educational level, respectively.

Mediating model of perceived social fairness and subjective well-being

We employed the hierarchical multiple regression analysis method proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test the mediating effects of perceived social fairness and subjective well-being on the perception of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government. Additionally, the mediation effects between these variables were tested using a bootstrap analysis using Hayes' (2012) SPSS Macro Model 6 (which is designed for chain mediation models). The results of

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables (N = 8,148)

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Perception of government authority during crises	3.916	0.225	1.375	4
Perceived social fairness	3.457	0.972	1	5
Subjective well-being	5.116	1.008	1	7
Changes in trust in government	4.514	0.691	1	5
Social class	4.282	1.866	1	10
Physical health status	3.482	1.093	1	5
Vaccine awareness	3.912	0.805	1	5
Media usage frequency	2.714	0.905	1	5
Age	51.644	17.574	18	99
Variable	Item		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male		3679	45.15
	Female		4469	54.85
Education	Illiterate		905	11.11
	Primary school		1751	21.49
	Middle school		2311	28.36
	High school		1489	18.27
	College or above		1671	20.51
	Missing		21	0.26
Total			8148	100

Note: The CGSS (2021) dataset included 8,148 valid samples as reported by official sources.

our analysis are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

When controlling for age, gender, education level, perceived social class, physical health status, vaccine awareness, and media usage frequency, Model 7 revealed a significant positive correlation between changes in trust in the government and the perception of government authority during crises ($\beta = 0.587$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. As indicated in Model 2, the path coefficient from the perception

Table 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Concerning the Mediation Variable

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
	Perceived social fairness		Subjective well–being			Changes in trust in government				
	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient	Coefficient
Age	0.004**	0.004**	0.005***	0.005***	0.004***	–0.000	–0.001	–0.001	–0.001	–0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Gender (Male=1)	0.123**	0.119**	0.047*	0.042*	0.028	–0.020	–0.030	–0.040	–0.033	–0.042
	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.021)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.027)
Education	0.003	0.002	0.032**	0.031**	0.032**	0.010	0.010	0.011	0.007	0.009
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Social class	0.079***	0.082***	0.067***	0.068***	0.059***	0.006	0.009	0.002	0.003	–0.001
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Physical health status	0.070***	0.071***	0.178***	0.178***	0.171***	0.012	0.012	0.005	–0.003	–0.005
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Vaccine awareness	0.049*	0.043	0.142***	0.135***	0.131***	0.072***	0.056***	0.052**	0.044*	0.044**
	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.012)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Media usage frequency	–0.007	–0.013	0.040**	0.034*	0.033*	0.065***	0.058**	0.059**	0.055**	0.057**
	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Perception of government authority during crises		0.189*		0.242***	0.223***		0.587***	0.570***	0.565***	0.557***
		(0.080)		(0.043)	(0.042)		(0.057)	(0.057)	(0.058)	(0.057)
Perceived social fairness					0.110***			0.084***		0.078***
					(0.011)			(0.014)		(0.014)
Subjective well–being									0.086**	0.059*
									(0.026)	(0.027)
_cons	2.413***	1.717***	2.380***	1.493***	1.292***	3.983***	1.790***	1.638***	1.664***	1.563***
	(0.164)	(0.343)	(0.089)	(0.185)	(0.182)	(0.120)	(0.245)	(0.245)	(0.247)	(0.247)
N	2556	2550	2568	2562	2549	2550	2546	2533	2546	2533
R^2	0.042	0.045	0.245	0.251	0.284	0.021	0.060	0.073	0.064	0.075
F	16.15	15.05	118.76	106.96	112.06	7.83	20.14	22.07	19.17	20.38

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 4. Mediating Effect of Perceived Social Fairness and Subjective Well-Being on Perception of Government Authority during Crises and Changes in Trust in the Government

	Effect value	Boot SE	Boot CI lower	Boot CI upper
Total effect	0.5947	0.0654	0.4664	0.7230
Total indirect effect	0.0338	0.0121	0.0120	0.0599
Indirect path 1	0.0165	0.0080	0.0026	0.0336
Indirect path 2	0.0158	0.0081	0.0013	0.0329
Indirect path 3	0.0016	0.0011	0.0000	0.0041

Notes:
Indirect Path 1: Indirect effects of the perception of government authority during crises on changes in trust in the government through perceived social fairness.
Indirect Path 2: Indirect effects of the perception of government authority during crises on changes in trust in the government through subjective well-being.
Indirect Path 3: Indirect effects of the perception of government authority during crises on changes in trust in the government through perceived social fairness and subjective well-being.

of government authority during crises to perceived social fairness was 0.189 ($\beta = 0.189$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that perceptions of government authority significantly predict perceived social fairness. In Model 8, the path coefficient from perceived social fairness to changes in trust in the government was 0.084 ($\beta = 0.084$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that perceived social fairness significantly predicts changes in trust in the government. The partial mediation effect of perceived social fairness was significant, with an effect size of $\beta = 0.0165$ and a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [0.0026, 0.0336], excluding zero. Thus, H2 was supported.

According to Model 4, the path coefficient from the perception of government authority during crises to subjective well-being was 0.242 ($\beta = 0.242$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that perception of government authority significantly predicts subjective well-being. In Model 9, the path coefficient from subjective well-being to changes in trust in the government was 0.086 ($\beta = 0.086$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that subjective well-being significantly predicts changes in trust in the government. The partial mediation effect of subjective well-being was also significant, with

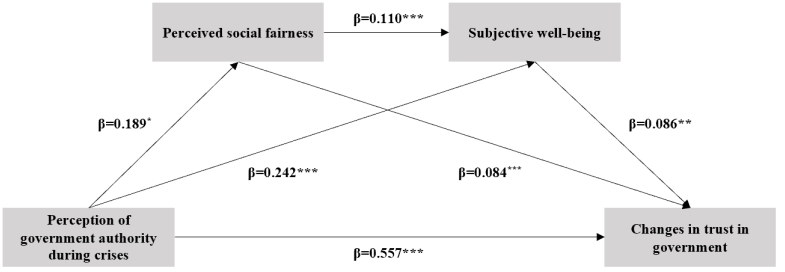
an effect size of β = 0.0158 and a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [0.0013, 0.0329], excluding zero. Thus, H3a was supported.

In Model 5, the path coefficient from perceived social fairness to subjective well-being was 0.110 (β = 0.110, $p < 0.001$), which indicated that perception of higher social fairness significantly enhance subjective well-being, thus supporting H3b. Additionally, we found a significant serial mediation effect of perceived social fairness and subjective well-being on the relationship between the perception of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government, with an effect size of β = 0.0016 and a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [0.0000, 0.0041], excluding zero. Thus, H3c was supported.

Discussion

Trust in the government is a core issue in political science and public administration research (Chanley et al., 2000; Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2017). This study used representative data from the 2021 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) to explore the relationship between the perception of government authority during crises and changes in trust in the government. We discovered that subjective well-being and perceived social fairness had chain mediation effects on this relationship (as shown in Figure 1). These findings provide valuable empirical insights into how public trust in the government is shaped by the perception of government authority during crises. Importantly, we focused on the attitudinal and perceptual dimensions of trust, rather than making claims about actual government responsiveness or institutional performance. Thus, this study expands the current understanding of government-public interactions during crisis management and suggest potential pathways to enhance government satisfaction and trust in the context of a crisis.

Research indicates that public trust in the government generally increases when the government effectively manages crises (Rieger & Wang, 2022). We further confirmed that public perceptions of government authority during crises are significantly and positively correlated with changes in trust in the government. Thus, in times of crisis, citizens who expect increased government intervention tend to have higher levels of trust in the government. When an important issue is perceived



Note: Values on the paths are path coefficients. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1. Chain Mediation Effect of Perceived Social Fairness and Subjective Well-Being on the Relationship between Perception of Government Authority during Crises and Changes in Trust in the Government

as increasingly complex, the public is more likely to psychologically transfer the responsibility of addressing it to the government (Shepherd & Kay, 2012; Kay et al., 2008). Crises bring significant threats and distress to the public, leading them to be more willing to trust the government to handle the concomitant challenges (Peterson, 2000).

In addition to the direct effects mentioned above, this study explored the indirect effects of perceived social fairness and subjective well-being on the relationship mentioned above. Three specific mediation paths were identified: the first used perceived social fairness as a mediator, the second used subjective well-being as a mediator, and the third used a chain mediation pathway involving both perceived social fairness and subjective well-being as mediators. The first pathway indicated that perceived social fairness partially mediates the relationship mentioned above. Specifically, as the government often acts as a provider of aid during crises, the affected public tends to rely on it, heightening their expectations of fairness and justice within the given social system (Mazepus & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Hence, they are more likely to trust the government when they believe they are being treated equally with respect to others in society (Han et al., 2023).

The second pathway found that subjective well-being partially mediates the relationship mentioned above. Subjective well-being is

typically stable and not significantly influenced by environmental factors (Lucas & Donnellan, 2007). However, unlike "fast-burning" crises, the COVID-19 pandemic, as a creeping crisis (Zaki, 2024), could persist and develop over an extended period (Rosenthal et al., 2001), leading people's values to shift toward a greater emphasis on security (Boin et al., 2020; Bojanowska et al., 2021). Such a shift could further impact subjective well-being (Bojanowska et al., 2021). Clearly, if the public believes that the government's restrictive measures effectively meet its safety-related needs, its subjective well-being will significantly improve. Additionally, we found a positive correlation between the public's subjective well-being and changes in their trust in the government. Considering that the relationship between citizens and the government is typically viewed as contractual (Rubin, 2012), this finding can be interpreted using the happiness contract model (Esaiasson et al., 2020). Specifically, since the government is responsible for ensuring a satisfactory level of well-being for its citizens (Esaiasson et al., 2020), citizens perceive the government's action as a breach of its contract when their subjective well-being falls below expectations (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Esaiasson et al., 2020). This results in the citizens' reluctance to support and follow government directives (Esaiasson et al., 2020), further undermining the government's legitimacy (Mizrahi et al., 2023; Levi et al., 2009).

The third pathway indicated that the chain relationship between perceived social fairness and subjective well-being mediates the relationship mentioned above. In this regard, scholars have pointed to a fundamental connection between fairness and well-being (Scarpa et al., 2021). Research has demonstrated that this connection is primarily mediated by perceived fairness (Ugur, 2021). Building on prior research, we found that citizens who support government intervention during crises tend to perceive greater social fairness. This enhances subjective well-being, which subsequently increases public trust in the government.

This study has several limitations. First, while our chain mediation model, developed through data analysis, offers new insights into how public perceptions of government authority during crises influence changes in trust in the government, its explanatory power remains unstable. Although the model is theoretically supported by the literature, it is largely data-driven and requires validation in different cultural and environmental contexts. Second, since this study relied on secondary data

collected by other researchers, the measurement of key variables may not have fully aligned with our research design. Future studies can address this limitation by utilizing customized data collection methods.

Third, the statistical approach used to test the mediating effects has certain limitations. For the test, we relied primarily on the traditional procedure of Baron and Kenny (1986), supplemented by Hayes' bootstrapping method designed for chain mediation analysis. Although these methods are widely used in applied social science research, they are not without criticisms. As noted by Imai et al. (2010), Baron and Kenny's (1986) framework is grounded in a linear structural equation modeling (LSEM) tradition that requires strong identification assumptions, including sequential ignitability, which may not always hold at the level of observational data and are rarely testable in practice. Future research could address this limitation by adopting more rigorous causal inference techniques, such as causal mediation analysis and sensitivity analysis, which offer greater flexibility in modeling both mediators and outcomes, accommodate nonlinear relationships, and explicitly assess the robustness of the mediation effects.

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Appendix 1

Subjective Well-being Scale for Chinese Citizens (SWBS-CC20)

The following items are related to something you have encountered in life or your attitudes toward life. Please read each question carefully and give an answer to it as soon as possible according to your intuition. Six options (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") are provided.

1. The society is providing us with more and more opportunities.
2. My wisdom grows with age, making me stronger and more capable.
3. Most life goals keep me feeling refreshed instead of making me depressed.
4. I often feel that I am just being alive, not living a life.
5. I don't know the meaning of my life.
6. I often feel that there must be something wrong with some of my physical organs.
7. I feel contented with my life when I compare myself with those around me.
8. I am satisfied with my family income.
9. I am often annoyed by trifling matters.
10. I am greatly worried about my health.
11. I often find it very difficult for me to make friends with someone else.
12. I like myself.
13. I think that most people have more friends than I do.
14. I really enjoy being with my family.
15. I am not as lucky as the people around me.
16. I have great confidence in the development of the society.
17. I feel that I do not receive what I deserve when compared to those around me.
18. It takes me a long time to get over unhappy experiences.

19. I am happy to find that I'm becoming more and more mature.
20. Sometimes, I find it very hard to communicate with other family members.
21. I am satisfied with the natural environment around me.

危机治理与公众信任:
揭示社会公平感和幸福感的链式中介效应

摘要: 公众对政府的信任对于危机管理至关重要，并在塑造公众遵从性方面发挥关键作用。本研究探讨了公众在危机期间对政府干预程度的偏好(是倾向于更积极的干预还是更有限的干预)如何影响对政府信任的变化。利用2021年中国综合社会调查的数据，我们发现： (1) 公众对危机期间政府权威的感知与对政府信任的变化之间存在正相关关系；(2) 感知到的社会公平感和主观幸福感在这一关系中起到部分中介作用；(3) 感知到的社会公平感和主观幸福感形成了一个链式中介路径，将公众对危机期间政府权威的感知与对政府信任的变化联系起来。本研究揭示了危机期间对政府权威的感知是如何影响对政府信任的变化的，并识别了在危机情境下能够帮助政府建立和维持公众信任的关键因素。

关键词: 政府权威、对政府的信任、感知社会公平感、主观幸福感、链式中介模型

위기 거버넌스와 공공 신뢰: 사회 공정성과 복지의 연쇄 매개 효과 밝히기

초록: 정부에 대한 신뢰는 위기 관리에서 매우 중요하며, 시민 협력을 형성하는 데 중심적인 역할을 한다. 본 연구는 위기 동안 개입주의적이거나 제한적인 정부를 더 선호하는 공중의 선호가 정부에 대한 신뢰 변화에 어떤 영향을 미치는지 탐구한다. 2021년 중국 일반 사회 조사 데이터를 사용한 결과를 통해 다음과 같은 사실을 발견했다. (1) 시민이 위기 동안 정부의 권위에 대한 인식과 정부에 대한 신뢰 변화 사이에는 정적 상관관계가 존재하며, (2) 인지된 사회 공정성과 주관적 복지는 이 관계를 부분적으로 매개하고 있으며, (3) 인지된 사회 공정성과 주관적 복지는 공중이 위기 동안 정부의 권위에 대한 인식과 정부에 대한 신뢰 변화를 연결하는 연쇄 매개 경로를 형성한다. 본 연구는 위기 동안 정부의 권위에 대한 인식이 정부에 대한 신뢰 변화에 어떤 영향을 미치는지에 대한 통찰력을 제공하며, 위기 상황에서 정부가 공공 신뢰를 구축하고 유지할 수 있도록 하는 주요 요인을 식별한다.

핵심어: 정부 권위, 정부에 대한 신뢰, 인지된 사회 공정성, 주관적 복지, 연쇄 매개 모델

危機統治と公衆の信頼:
社会的公平と幸福の連鎖媒介効果を明らかにする

要旨: アブストラクト：政府への信頼は危機管理において極めて重要であり、公衆の遵守を形づける上で枢要な役割を果たします。本研究では、危機時により介入的な政府か、より限定的な政府かを公衆が好むことが、政府への信頼の変化にどのように影響するかを探ります。2021年中国総合社会調査のデータを使用したところ、以下のことがわかりました。(1) 危機時の政府の権威に対する公衆の認識と政府への信頼の変化との間に正の相関関係が存在する、(2) 社会的公平の認識と主観的幸福感がこの関係を部分的に仲介している、(3) 社会的公平の認識と主観的幸福感は、危機時の政府の権威に対する公衆の認識と政府への信頼の変化を結ぶ連鎖仲介の経路を形成している。本研究は、危機時の政府の権威の認識が政府への信頼の変化にどのように影響するかについての洞察を提供し、政府が危機状況で公衆の信頼を築き、維持するのに役立つ主要な要因を特定します。

キーワード: 政府の権威、政府への信頼、社会的公平の認識、主観的幸福感、連鎖仲介モデル

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