

Oppose Autocracy Without Support for Democracy: A Study of Non-democratic Critics in China

September 1, 2022

Abstract

Previous research on public opinion in authoritarian regimes generally assume that opponents of the status quo autocracy also support democracy. This paper challenges this assumption by identifying a key bloc within regime opponents: “non-democratic critics” (NDCs) or those who are dissatisfied with the current autocratic regime but resist adopting democracy. We develop the concept of NDCs, theorize why they exist, and test implications of this framework using interviews and an original survey across China. We find that nearly half of respondents who oppose the current Chinese regime are non-democratic critics who also do not support democracy. Compared to democracy supporters, NDCs have a distinct set of political and socio-economic demands from government and higher uncertainty about the performance of democratic systems along these demands. We also find that NDCs are economically better-off than democracy supporters, suggesting that unequal access to the benefits of economic development in China may motivate differing attitudes toward democracy among regime opponents.

Keywords: public opinion, autocracy, regime support, China, democracy, interviews, survey

1 Introduction

Historically, autocracy, rather than democracy, has been the predominant political order around the world. Today, authoritarian regimes still rule in 94 countries, govern nearly 60 percent of the world's population, and occupy geo-politically critical regions of Asia and the Middle East.¹ In explaining the resilience of these regimes, political scientists generally focus on regime supporters (Bleck and Michelitch 2017; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Linz 2000). Regime critics, on the other hand, are portrayed as threats to regime stability because they are generally assumed to desire democracy in place of the status quo.² Previous research often assumes that leaders of uprisings, insurgencies, or opposition parties in authoritarian regimes must promise democratization in order to attract mass support (Geddes et al. 2018; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994).

Yet, while dissidents may harshly criticize the status quo authoritarian regime, this criticism does not necessarily indicate a support for democracy. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, interviews with Soviet citizens revealed that the public was already disillusioned with the current communist system but did not want to build a Western-style democracy (Bauer and Gleicher 1959; Lukin 2009; Millar 1987). Recent surveys in Jordan show that opposition to current monarchy rule has no significant association with respondents' support for democracy (Bush and Jamal 2015). In China, researchers find that most private entrepreneurs desire changes to the current political system but do not think adopting democracy is the solution. (Chen and Dickson 2008; Tsai 2007).

Heterogeneous attitudes towards democracy among regime dissidents have broad implications for authoritarian durability. While prior research of authoritarian survival focuses on factions within the pro-regime bloc (Przeworski 1991), this study focuses on differing preferences within the *anti-regime* bloc. This merits investigation because dif-

¹See Geddes et al. (2018); Magaloni and Kricheli (2010).

²Exceptions are Beissinger 2013; Rosenfeld 2017. While these studies note an important phenomenon that protesters against authoritarian leaders hold different attitudes towards democracy, it is unclear yet whether this finding generalizes to the general public in authoritarian regimes, the majority of which may hide their attitudes and choose not to protest most of the time. There is also a large body of work studying elites within the authoritarian leadership who want to replace the current regime with a different form of autocracy, such as through military coups (Geddes 1999; Singh 2014; Svolik 2009). Our study differs from these works by focusing on mass political preferences in authoritarian regimes.

ferring opinions regarding democracy among dissidents may contribute to sustained authoritarian rule by dampening prospects for collective action. For regime critics who are democrats,³ coordination is easier to achieve since they all envision a specific alternative political system—democracy—in place of the status quo. Non-democratic critics, on the other hand, may have little interest in joining a movement for democracy. Even if these two blocs of dissidents form a coalition to overthrow the status quo autocracy, their disagreement over whether to adopt democracy can be detrimental to the stability of this coalition, leading to post-revolutionary conflicts and even authoritarian backsliding (Beissinger 2013). If non-democratic critics do exist and constitute a substantial portion of mass dissidents in an authoritarian regime, prospects for a unified and broad democracy movement among dissidents become less likely and in turn, indirectly increase the stability of the status quo regime.

In this paper, we examine the existence, size, and characteristics of “non-democratic critics” (NDCs) – people who are dissatisfied with the status quo autocracy but resist adopting democracy. We develop a theoretical framework to explain why authoritarian critics can be reluctant to support democracy and test its implications through qualitative interviews and a nation-wide online survey in China.

We find that among respondents who report opposing the current regime in China, nearly half (40%) are NDCs—dissidents who also reject adopting a multi-party democratic system in China. We identify two sources for NDCs’ simultaneous dissatisfaction with democracy and the current Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime: first, NDCs have a fundamentally different set of political and socio-economic demands compared to democracy (and CCP) supporters. Compared to democrats, NDCs have lower demand for individual freedom and higher demand for economic growth. Compared to status quo supporters,⁴ NDCs desire less social stability and desire more inclusive political institutions. Second, compared to democrats and status quo supporters, NDCs also report higher uncertainty about whether a multi-party democratic system would outperform the current regime in meeting their demands. Evidence from qualitative interviews further suggests

³This paper uses “democrats” and “democracy supporters” interchangeably. Also, it uses “critics”, “opponents”, and “dissidents” interchangeably.

⁴This paper uses “status quo supporter”, “CCP supporter”, and “regime supporter” interchangeably.

that unlike democrats, many NDCs in China have no clear vision about what alternative regime China should adopt if the current regime ends, partly because they approve of some institutional elements of both democracies and the current CCP regime. Finally, we find that different experiences of China's economic development are most likely to explain the differing attitudes toward democracy among CCP opponents. Compared to democrats, non-democratic critics of the regime are economically better-off, whereas the two groups do not differ in foreign media consumption or exposure to the CCP propaganda.

These results shed new lights on the diversity of political preferences among dissidents of authoritarian regimes. More broadly, our findings suggest that an authoritarian regime endures not only because of mass support, but also because its opponents within the public have divergent and unclear visions of what should replace the current system. We show that non-democratic critics disagree with democrats not only on whether to adopt democracy in China, but also more fundamentally on what a regime should deliver to its citizens. These disagreements between NDCs and democrats, as well as the inability of NDCs to envision other alternatives they would support, can elongate the current authoritarian rule in China, despite shared opposition to the current regime among NDCs and democrats.

Methodologically, the survey component of this study adds to recent attempts to use the randomized response (RR) design⁵ in eliciting truthful answers to sensitive questions by introducing a new variant of the RR design. Traditional indirect questioning methods are generally unable to measure individual-level attitudes on sensitive questions.⁶ In our survey, respondents were presented with sensitive statements in a crosswise model, which merges the person's response to a sensitive statement with the person's response to a non-sensitive statement posed in the same question. Later on in the survey, respondents were asked the non-sensitive statement directly. Using respondents' answers to the crosswise model and to the non-sensitive statement, we were able to calculate individual-level attitudes regarding the sensitive statement. This approach enables researchers to conduct more fine-grained research, such as examining the socio-demographic characteristics of

⁵See Blair, Imai and Zhou 2015; Rosenfeld, Imai and Shapiro 2016.

⁶The exception is the implicit association test (IAT). The IAT measure may be easily influenced by distracting factors at the time and place of the survey (Blanton et al. 2009). Compared to IAT, our approach is less demanding of respondents' time and concentration.

subgroups who differ in their answers to politically sensitive questions.

Our paper proceeds in five sections. Section 2 lays out our theoretical framework of why people living in autocracy may become simultaneously disillusioned with the current regime and democracy. Section 3 describes the features of NDC in China using qualitative interview data. Section 4 details our survey design and sample. Section 5 presents our main results, showing the size and profile of NDCs as well as sources of their political attitude. Section 6 concludes and discusses how our results may vary outside of China.

2 Theoretical framework and expectations

In this section, we present a theoretical framework of why non-democratic critics exist among dissidents in authoritarian regimes. To do so, we first make clear our definitions of regime support and opposition. We then theorize why NDCs simultaneously oppose the current autocracy and democracy. Finally, we derive testable implications from this framework.

2.1 Conceptualizing regime support

There are different layers to regime support. Citizens may approve of the overall regime but dislike the incumbent political leader, or they may reject the basic arrangements of a political system but remain satisfied with the regime's handling of a few policy areas. Varying types of support have different implications for the stability of the regime. In a seminal contribution to the concept of political support, Easton (1965) drew a distinction between citizens' diffuse support (affect for the system) vs. specific support (affect for incumbent officials). Building on Easton's work, Norris (2011, 2017) decomposed political support into five levels along a diffuse-specific spectrum. The most diffuse level of support is support for national identities, followed by support for the general normative values of the regime. The middle level is approval of the overall performance of the regime, including general assessments about the workings of the regime's procedures and practices. A more specific level is confidence in particular regime institutions (e.g. legislature, local governments) and finally, the most specific level of support is approval of

incumbent officeholders. Support and opposition on more diffuse levels tend to be more stable over short- and medium-term factors such as economic or health crises. Hence, support on a more diffuse level is generally expected to be more important for the unity and survival of a regime (Easton 1965; Norris 2017).

Building on these insights, we define regime support and opposition as citizen attitudes regarding the *overall* political system of the regime, analogous to the middle level of support on Norris' diffuse-specific spectrum. More specifically, we measure citizens' overall satisfaction with the current authoritarian system in their country, rather than citizens' support for general values of authoritarianism (e.g. strong leaders) or support for specific incumbent officeholders. In parallel, we measure citizens' overall support for a multi-party democratic system—the system of government where two or more parties contest to rule in competitive elections,⁷ rather than their support for general democratic values (e.g. political accountability) or approval of specific democratic leaders.

We focus on citizens' overall satisfaction with the status quo authoritarian system because this level of support is most consequential for regime stability. Support on more specific levels for particular institutions or incumbents are more likely to fluctuate in response to short-term factors. Support on more diffuse levels for national identity or general values of authoritarianism are too broad that we may fail to capture some important groups of dissidents against the current regime. For example, if we define dissidents as people who reject the general values of autocracy, people who support these values but want a different authoritarian system in place of the status quo would not be counted as dissidents.

Using this definition of regime support, non-democratic critics oppose the current authoritarian system and also reject adopting multi-party democracy, but this does not mean they reject all general values of authoritarianism or all values of democracy. Specifically, we conceive three types of NDCs that could possibly exist in an authoritarian public: 1) NDCs who support a subset of authoritarian values and a subset of democratic values but believe that neither the current regime nor a multi-party democracy is able to deliver

⁷While democratic system takes a variety of forms, multi-party elections are generally considered the imperative institutional arrangement for a functioning democratic system (Dahl 1971; Huntington 2006). Therefore, this paper focuses on citizen attitude towards multi-party democracy.

on this mixed set of values; 2) NDCs who support general authoritarian values but are unhappy with their current political system (e.g. they favor a different type of autocracy under a different ruling party);⁸ 3) NDCs who reject both values of authoritarianism and values of democracy.⁹

A potential concern about the concept of NDCs is that while NDCs dislike the current regime and democracy, they would support the lesser of the “two evils” in a time of regime transition. This claim implies that when regime change becomes possible, NDCs will either join regime supporters or democratic activists. However, previous studies show that people who are disillusioned with both democracy and autocracy tend to abstain from participating in collective actions; namely, they do not defend the current regime nor protest to overthrow it (Hollyer, Rosendorff and Vreeland 2018; Meiowitz and Tucker 2013). Similarly, recent evidence from electoral autocracies shows that when pro-democracy parties mobilize collective action against the ruling party, this mobilization does not help either side gain new supporters in the next election (Tertychnaya 2020). These findings suggest that people who profess opposition to both the current autocracy and democracy constitute a distinct group that merits particular attention. Importantly, when regime change becomes possible, NDCs’ disagreement with democrats can split the anti-regime group and dampen prospects for regime transition.

2.2 Why do NDCs dislike autocracy and democracy?

Since we define regime support (opposition) as attitudes about a regime’s overall political system, we identify the source of NDCs’ political attitude by reviewing what constitutes a citizen’s affect for a political system. According to Easton (1965), support for a system is the belief that the regime “in some vague or explicit way conform to [a person’s] own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere” (p. 278).

This reveals two components that shape an individual’s support for a particular system of government. The first factor is the person’s “own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere,” or in other words, the person’s demands of a political regime. Demands

⁸Note that this type of NDC differs from the internal reformist in Przeworski’s framework because these NDCs do oppose the overall political system of the current regime.

⁹One example of this type of NDC is an anarchist, who oppose all systems of government.

are what the individual believes a regime *should* or *should not* do for its citizens. The second factor that shapes citizen attitude is how certain the person feels that the system in question can “conform to” or satisfy the person’s demands. In general, higher uncertainty surrounding regime performance decreases citizen support for the regime (Van Dalen, De Vreese and Albæk 2016). In this way, we theorize that an ordinary citizen living under autocracy may become simultaneously disillusioned with the current regime and multi-party democracy for two reasons. First, the person has different demands of a political regime compared to the demands of status quo supporters and democracy supporters. Second, the person has higher uncertainty than these two groups about whether multi-party democracy is able to meet the person’s demands.

Differing demands We conceptualize that a citizen’s demands of a political regime are represented in a multi-dimensional space,¹⁰ where some dimensions represent tangible, material benefits the citizen believes the regime should deliver to its people (e.g. public goods, social stability, economic growth) and other dimensions represent abstract norms and principles that the citizen believes the regime should uphold (e.g. accountability to citizens, respect for individual liberty). Previous research shows that the legitimacy of a regime may rest on its socio-economic performance (Wintrobe 1998; Zhao 2009), on the regime’s political norms and process (Fishkin 1991; Tang 2016), or on a combination of both (Geddes et al. 2018). Thus, we believe that these two groups of dimensions represent important foundations of a citizen’s expectation of a regime.

A citizen assigns a value on each dimension, representing how important that dimension is to the citizen. We assert that NDCs have differing demands than democracy or status quo supporters in the sense that NDCs on average assign different values to at least one dimension compared to these two groups, respectively. An exemplar NDC who holds a mix of some authoritarian values and some democratic values may have similar preferences as status quo supporters on some dimensions (e.g. high demand for strong leaders), have similar preferences as democrats on other dimensions (e.g. high demand for protec-

¹⁰Existing scholarship largely supports that citizen preference is multi-dimensional (Carsey and Layman 2006; Pan and Xu 2018).

tion of free speech), and differ significantly from both groups on remaining dimensions. Overall, however, this NDC has a different profile of demands compared to both regime supporters and democrats.

Uncertainty Conditional on a person's demands of a political regime, those with higher uncertainty about whether multi-party democracy outperforms the status quo autocracy in satisfying their demands are more likely to become NDCs. Existing research has shown that opponents of authoritarian regimes have varying levels of skepticism regarding the ability of a democratic system to create wealth, exercise fair treatment of citizens, or to empower citizens in policy formulation ([Mishler and Rose 1997](#)). As to why this is the case, one claim is that those with lower education levels and less access to information have higher uncertainty, due to a lack of adequate political knowledge or sophistication when evaluating regime performance ([Alvarez and Franklin 1994](#)).

However, recent studies show that uncertainty may in fact result from abundant information and high levels of political sophistication. Researchers find that for people who are highly educated and economically better-off, consuming more information paradoxically makes them report more uncertainty in their political attitudes ([Barker and Hansen 2005](#); [McGraw, Hasecke and Conger 2003](#); [Turgeon 2009](#)). Findings of these studies suggest that highly informed people are more likely to receive both positive and negative information about a regime and as a result, feel more ambivalent about the regime's overall performance. Studies in non-democracies also find that reading more foreign media content paradoxically increases citizens' skepticism of Western-style democracy because media sources in the West provide both positive and negative information about their governments ([Huang 2015](#); [Huang and Yeh 2019](#)). Similarly, research has shown that individuals with more socio-economic resources in authoritarian regimes tend to be more aware, compared to lesser-off citizens, of their incomplete knowledge of what life is like under democratic rule ([Geddes and Zaller 1989](#)).

2.3 Testable implications

Our theoretical framework implies that within the authoritarian public, proponents of democracy are only a subset of those who oppose the status quo regime. The remaining regime dissidents, whom we conceptualize as non-democratic critics, do not support adopting a multi-party democratic system in their country.

The framework also predicts two sources of NDCs' simultaneous disillusionment with the current regime and multi-party democracy. First, NDCs have a different set of demands for a regime compared to their fellow citizens who are status quo supporters or democracy supporters. Second, we expect that compared to status quo supporters and democracy supporters, NDCs are more likely to be uncertain whether a democratic system with multi-party elections could outperform the current regime in meeting their demands.

3 Non-Democratic Critics in China

To assess these implications in China, we first leverage qualitative interviews with ordinary Chinese people to explore the existence of NDCs in China and provide evidence that they hold diverging demands from regime supporters and democracy supporters, as well as possess a higher level of uncertainty about democracy. We also use patterns identified in these interviews to guide the design of our survey questionnaire.

We conducted interviews with 62 Chinese citizens in 2018. Interviewees cover an age range between 21 and 60 and come from 17 out of 31 provinces in China, representing regions with different levels of economic development. Interview subjects had diverse occupations in government agencies, public institutions, state-owned enterprises, and private and foreign firms. We recruited interviewees through snowball sampling, starting with people who know us in China to put interviewees at ease.¹¹ All interviews were conducted in private, one-on-one settings, and no personally identifying information was recorded.

Interviewees were first asked what they think about the current CCP regime. Then,

¹¹The initial group of interviewees include people who know us professionally (e.g. academic collaborators) and those who know us personally (e.g. friends) in China.

they were asked what they think about China adopting democracy with multi-party elections. If an interviewee shows support for the CCP regime and expresses negative views about China adopting multi-party elections, we categorize the person as a status quo supporter. If an interviewee expresses a negative view of the CCP government and positive views about adopting multi-party elections, we categorize this interviewee as a democracy supporter. Finally, if an interviewee expresses negative views towards both the CCP government and multi-party elections in China, we categorize the person as a NDC. Without telling interviewees their types, we then asked what qualities they do or do not expect from a government, as well as the extent to which they believe a democracy (characterized as a political system with multi-party elections) would meet their expectations.

Nearly half of interviewees reported dissatisfaction with the overall performance of the CCP regime and among them, half were NDCs. Our interviews suggest that NDCs have different demands of a political regime compared to status quo supporters and democracy supporters. When asked what they expect from a government, supporters of the CCP regime mentioned “social stability” most frequently, while supporters of democracy mentioned “real political competition” most often. However, neither “social stability” nor “political competition” ranked first among NDCs’ answers. The most frequent demand reported by NDCs is “transparency in the ruling party’s decision-making.”

Additionally, NDCs’ reported demands show greater variation compared to the demands of democrats and CCP supporters.¹² While over half of democracy supporters and over half of CCP supporters mentioned the top demand in their respective groups, the corresponding proportion among NDCs is less than a quarter. In contrast to democrats, the high level of disagreement among NDCs on what they desire most from a regime can also impede NDCs’ collective action when opportunities for regime change arises.

Our interviews also reveal that non-democratic critics have higher uncertainty about the performance of a multi-party democratic system compared to CCP supporters and democracy supporters. Among the interviewees, democrats mostly report that multi-party democracy would better deliver what they desire than the current regime, while status quo

¹²The more diffused demands of NDCs may be related to the diverse political values they hold. As we conceptualize in Section 2.1, some NDCs may uphold authoritarian values only, whereas others support a mix of authoritarian and democratic values among which the combination may also vary by people.

supporters generally report the opposite. Interviewees who are NDCs, however, are more likely to say they are “unsure” or “ambivalent” about whether multi-party democracy would outperform the CCP regime in meeting their expectations. One NDC said:

“I hope that citizens’ opinion matters in policy-making. I know we do not get that under the current regime, but I don’t know to what extent multi-party democracy can empower citizens in that area. After all, I have never lived under a multi-party system. I heard that democratic countries have elections and town hall meetings. But I also heard that democracy is money politics where only the rich people get a say in policy-making.”

This suggests that the uncertainty of Chinese NDCs may be related to political sophistication and access to information. Interviewees who are NDCs are well aware that their impression of life under a multi-party system may be partial or false. When assessing the performance of multi-party democracy, they are also able to recall two-sided information including both pros and cons of the system. This type of dual information may increase skepticism of the overall performance of multi-party democracy, making NDCs reluctant to support democracy in China despite their dissatisfaction with the current regime.

Our interviews further suggest that NDCs have no clear vision for what political system China should adopt if the current CCP regime does end, even though they agree that multi-party democracy is not the answer. At the end of the interview, interviewees were asked how China’s political system could be improved. Among interviewees who are non-democratic critics, over half wished to strengthen oversight of CCP leaders. However, most NDCs who answered so said they did not know what form this oversight should take or who should exercise it. On one hand, NDCs complained that the current government had too much power with too few constraints. On the other hand, NDCs are concerned that adding limitations on the ruling party may lead to undesired outcomes, such as low administrative efficiency or excessive competition between parties. One interviewee who is a NDC said: “I hope to increase checks and balance on the CCP. But I don’t know what should be the source of these checks and balances.” Another NDC echoed this view and explained the concern in more detail:

“I hope the policy-making process can incorporate more voices from different players, such as the general public and non-CCP elites. But it is tricky how to do this. If a policy-maker is too constrained by public opinion, that may lead to crazy policies because people may lack information and may be emotional. If a policy-maker is too constrained by non-CCP elites or another party, those elites may focus more on inter-party competition rather than the welfare of the general public. I wish there is more oversight, but I’m not sure who should exercise that oversight power and how.”

These considerations again show that non-democratic critics may be a politically attentive and sophisticated segment of the Chinese population. It also reveals that NDCs in China appear to hold a combination of some authoritarian values and some democratic values, but believe neither the current regime nor multi-party democracy is able to deliver on this set of mixed values. For example, the NDC interviewees quoted above want citizens to be able to meaningfully influence government decisions, but also desire a strong leader who is able to act against public sentiment when the mass make “irrational” decisions. These varying and at times conflicting demands may make it difficult for Chinese NDCs to envision a form of government that is able to fulfill their demands. Compared to democrats, NDCs’ lack of vision for alternative regimes could also decrease their desire to remove the status quo authoritarian regime.

4 Survey Design and Data

Building on this interview evidence, we conduct a survey to test the implications of our theoretical framework systematically. We secured approval from our university IRB for all elements of this study, including the interviews, the survey, and the research conducted to design the survey. Before conducting this study, we consulted two Chinese scholars who have rich experience in fielding surveys in the local context to make sure our study does not violate local laws or local norms of social surveys. We obtained consent from all survey participants and did not record any personally identifying information.

4.1 Identifying NDCs

We define NDCs as people who are dissatisfied with the current authoritarian system¹³ but also reject adopting multi-party democracy in China. Specifically, we code a respondent as a NDC if the person *agrees* with the “Oppose autocracy” statement but *disagrees* with the “Support democracy” statement below:

- **Oppose autocracy:** If I could choose the political regime of my country, the status quo authoritarian system (现行的集权制) would **not** be my ideal choice.
- **Support democracy:** If I could choose the political regime of my country, multi-party democratic system (民主多党制) would be my ideal choice.

Respondents who agree with both the “Oppose autocracy” and the “Support democracy” statements are coded as true supporters of multi-party democracy (hereafter democracy supporters). Respondents who disagree with both these statements are coded as true supporters of the status quo CCP regime (hereafter status quo supporters).

In the “Oppose autocracy” and “Support democracy” statements, we ask respondents if the status quo autocracy (multi-party democracy) is their ideal choice were they free to choose a political regime for China. We give respondents this hypothetical condition to guard against the possibility that people answer these questions based on their expectation of how likely or how costly it will be to establish democracy in China. Also, while “ideal choice” may be a stricter measurement of support compared to other measurements such as “trust in” or “respect,” we believe “ideal choice” is closer to the classic definition of popular legitimacy of a political regime. [Lipset \(1981\)](#) defines legitimacy as the belief that the existing political system is *most* appropriate for the society in question. Similarly, [Linz \(1988\)](#) states that legitimacy is the belief that the political system is better than all others that might be established.

¹³In China, the precise dividing line between the current regime and the CCP is fuzzy because the regime’s system is designed by and under the firm control of the CCP. That said, in this paper we define that a NDC opposes the *overall* political system of China’s current regime, not just the CCP. The concept of NDC implies that they also reject the non-CCP components of the current political system (e.g. the eight “democratic parties” in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference).

We use the phrase “集权制”—the direct translation is “concentration of power”—to describe China’s current authoritarian system. Previous research has warned that when translated into Chinese, the term “authoritarian” might have a negative, ideological connotation that predisposes people to reject statements with this term (Chen 2004, 2013). We assess the potential impact of this concern using several methods and confirm that ordinary Chinese people consider the phrase “concentration of power (集权制)” a fair description of China’s current regime. First, we read prominent academic journals published inside China and find that “power concentration (集权)” is widely used by scholars to portray the current system (Chen 2001; Fang 2011; Yang 2014). Second, in our pre-survey interviews, over three quarters of interviewees reported that “power concentration” is an important feature of China’s current system when asked about their views on the regime.

Moreover, we conducted two pilot surveys that use the “oppose autocracy” and support democracy” statements to identify NDCs and we asked pilot participants if any wording in the questionnaire made them feel uncomfortable or was unclear. 411 Chinese people with diverse backgrounds participated in these pilots online.¹⁴ None of them raised any issue with using “power concentration” (集权) to describe the status quo regime. Finally, we consulted local surveyors in China and they suggest that “power concentration” is a less sensitive and relatively safe term to use in domestic surveys at the time of this study, compared to other Chinese words for “authoritarian”.¹⁵

On measuring support for democracy, this study follows earlier research in China that uses support for multi-party electoral competition as the proxy of preference for democracy (Li 2011, 2021) and asks respondents for their attitude toward “multi-party democratic system (民主多党制)”. While it by no means captures all dimensions of democracy, multi-party competition is an essential pillar of modern representative democracy and would constitute a stepping stone for democratic transition (Dahl 1971). Existing studies show that some Chinese people may define democracy by certain socio-economic

¹⁴Pilot participants were recruited through snowball sampling in China. They were aged between 17 and 65. Similar to the sample of the final survey, the majority of pilot participants come from economically developed Eastern China and have a bachelor degree or above.

¹⁵Other Chinese translations for autocracy, including “专制” (despotism), “极权” (totalitarian) and “独裁” (dictatorship), were also rejected by the survey firm in China through which we recruited participants for being too sensitive.

outcome (e.g. economic equality) rather than its core political institution.¹⁶ In light of this, we highlight multi-party competition in our survey instrument to prime respondents to think of democracy's institutional feature.

A potential concern regarding our survey instrument is that the two terms “multi-party” and “democracy” have been used by the CCP regime to describe itself. The CCP claims that China’s political system is “democratic” in the sense that eight “democratic parties” exist in the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and can provide consultation for the CCP’s policy, provided that the CCP has firm control over these parties and has the final say on all matters.¹⁷ However, state-owned media in China also make clear to the public that CPPCC is different from the multi-party system in democracies and that multi-party democracy is antithetical to China’s single-party system.¹⁸ Furthermore, to assess the potential impact of this concern, we ask participants in our pre-survey interviews to list what countries they think of when they hear the phrase “multi-party democratic system (民主多党制)”. None of them mentioned China or CP-PCC. Instead, the interviewees named countries in North America, Western Europe, as well as democracies in Asia and South America such as Brazil, India, and South Korea. These responses also suggest that our instrument does not limit respondents to think only of regimes in the West.

As with other public opinion studies, this research faces the trade-off of choosing abstract or concrete objects for assessment when operationalizing the concept of political support (Lu and Dickson 2020). In previous studies, support for the current Chinese regime is often assessed by asking people’s attitude toward a set of specific institutions such as the courts and National People’s Congress (NPC) in China (Chen 2004; Dickson 2016; Shi 2014; Tang 2016), while support for democracy is often assessed by asking attitude toward a set of normative values such as freedom of speech and demonstration (Chen 2013; Gibson, Duch and Tedin 1992). These multi-item instruments operationalize political support in a concrete manner. However, we did not use these instruments for two

¹⁶In the 2014 Asian Barometer Survey, 23% of Chinese participants listed “economic equality” as the primary feature of democracy.

¹⁷For details, see <https://bit.ly/3xu23Cp>.

¹⁸See <https://bit.ly/3mJ69S1>.

reasons. First, we use an indirect questioning method to guard against the potential impact of preference falsification (more details below). Combining this method with multi-item instruments would cause a dramatic increase in the number of questions respondents need to answer, which would cause substantial attention and cognitive burdens for respondents.

More importantly, the concept of non-democratic critics requires that we assess people's attitudes of the current regime and democracy on the *same* level of political support—that is, people's support toward each regime's *overall political system*, a level that is more specific than support toward normative values and less specific than support toward particular institutions (e.g. NPC) in Norris' diffuse-specific spectrum (Norris 2011, 2017). This implies that the survey instruments for assessing sentiments regarding the current regime and democracy should have a similar level of specificity and similar levels of comprehension on the part of respondents. In this way, while asking respondents about their support for all major political institutions in China (e.g. NPC, police, PLA) can also capture their sentiment regarding China's overall political system (Chen 2013; Tang 2016), we do not believe it is reasonable to ask about people's attitudes toward the corresponding institutions in democracy because it would be extremely difficult for ordinary people in China to imagine how these specific institutions operate in a democratic system.

Among previous measures of regime support, our instrument is closest to those used in the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), which ask about Chinese people's belief in the superiority of their current political system as a whole.¹⁹ When comparing ABS with other commonly used survey instruments of regime support in China, Lu and Dickson (2020) find that ABS' instruments are best able to capture sentiment regarding China's overall political system. As they write, "An abstract object like 'our system' poses more cognitive challenges than a concrete object like 'the NPC,' [...] Nevertheless, a political regime is more than just specific institutions." (Lu and Dickson 2020, 691). Since we

¹⁹Starting from 2010, ABS' core questionnaire measures support toward China's current regime by asking respondents the extent to which they agree with four statements: 1) Thinking in general, I am proud of our political system; 2) Over the long run, our political system is capable of solving the problems our country faces; 3) A political system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people's support; and 4) I would rather live under our political system than any other I can think of. We do not use these statements directly because some of ABS' wording are not applicable to ask about people's support toward democracy (e.g. "I am proud of our system"). For more details of ABS questionnaire, please visit www.asianbarometer.org.

aim to capture people’s support of the overall political system, we follow ABS and ask people about their views on China’s current system as a whole and their views on the democratic system as a whole. Recognizing that the abstract word “system” in our survey instruments can potentially increase measurement uncertainty, we hope future research will study non-democratic critics using more concrete objects for assessment.

The Crosswise Model To elicit truthful answers to the “oppose autocracy” and “support democracy” statements, we use an indirect questioning technique that is adapted from the crosswise model (Gingerich et al. 2015). The crosswise model is a variant of the randomized response (RR) technique. Recent studies show that the RR method outperforms conventional indirect questioning methods such as the list experiment (Rosenfeld, Imai and Shapiro 2016). In our survey, we modified the crosswise model such that it measures *individual-level* attitudes towards the “oppose autocracy” and “support democracy” statements. This enables us to analyze the characteristics of NDCs and how they differ from status quo supporters and democracy supporters.

In our modified crosswise model (hereafter “crosswise model”), respondents see two statements, one sensitive and one non-sensitive, and then select one of the options below:

- A. Both statements are true OR neither statement is true
- B. One of the two statements is true

By choosing A or B, respondents do not reveal whether they agree with the sensitive statement directly. This allows respondents to respond to sensitive statements without fear of exposing their personal beliefs. We ask respondents about the “oppose autocracy” and the “support democracy” statements in two separate questions using the crosswise model. The two non-sensitive statements paired with the statements of interest are:

- I am currently between 25 and 30 years old (inclusive).
- I am currently located in one of the following provinces: Shanghai, Hubei, Gansu, Jiangxi, Inner Mongolia, and Heilongjiang.²⁰

²⁰We chose these non-sensitive statements with two goals in mind. First, they do not make respondents feel they can be personally identified. Second, these statements do not prime respondents to evaluate the

The two crosswise model questions about “oppose autocracy” and “support democracy” are asked at the beginning of the survey in randomized order. We also randomized the pairing between the non-sensitive and sensitive statements, as well as the order of the two statements within each question. Below is an example crosswise model question we used to measure individual attitudes towards the “oppose autocracy” statement:

In your opinion, how many of the following statements are true?

1. If I could choose the political regime of my country, the status quo authoritarian system would **not** be my ideal choice.
2. I am currently between 25 and 30 years old (inclusive).

You do not need to answer which statement is true, please select A or B below:

- A. Both statements are true OR neither statement is true
- B. Only one of the two statements is true

To reduce the possibility that responses to the question about “oppose autocracy” affect responses to the question about “support democracy”, or vice versa, we ask three innocuous questions between the two questions. These innocuous questions also use the crosswise model, but they only contain non-political statements and are constructed not to prime respondents to assess the CCP regime or democracy in a particular direction. One of them is also used to screen out inattentive respondents. For details, see Appendix 1.1.

At the end of the survey, people are asked their birth year and provincial location directly. Using responses to these demographic questions and the crosswise model questions, we are able to calculate individual-level support for the “oppose autocracy” statement and for the “support democracy” statement, respectively. To guard against that respondents think of the crosswise model when answering the demographic questions, we ask a series of other items (detailed in Sections 4.2 and 4.3) between the two sections.

In the two pilots before the actual survey, participants were asked the entire questionnaire and were then asked if any question made them feel uncomfortable or was unclear.

CCP regime or multi-party democracy in a particular direction. When asking about a respondent’s current location, we list two randomly selected provinces from the East, Central, and Western parts of China respectively, which represent varying levels of socio-economic development in China.

In their comments, 2 of the 411 pilot participants (0.5%) said they felt worried about answering the political questions truthfully. Three respondents (0.7%) commented that a few terms in the questions were hard to understand,²¹ and one person (0.2%) reported that the format of the crosswise model was puzzling. The small number of people who raised problems suggests that the crosswise model is comprehensible to the Chinese public and that people are generally willing to answer these questions truthfully.

4.2 Measuring demands on regime

After identifying NDCs, status quo supporters, and democracy supporters using the crosswise model, we examine why NDCs are disillusioned with both the CCP regime and multi-party democracy. Our theoretical framework predicts that NDCs differ on at least one dimension from status quo and democracy supporters in what they demand from a political regime. To assess this claim, we measure respondents' demands by asking their priorities across different functions a government could provide.

Specifically, after the crosswise model questions, we show respondents 16 qualities of a regime that are conventionally deemed desirable for citizens (e.g. public goods provision, respect for individual liberty). From the 16 qualities, respondents are asked to choose their most desired six and then rank the selected six qualities in the order of importance to them (ties allowed).²² We also show respondents a different list of 16 qualities that are conventionally deemed undesirable for citizens (e.g. corrupt bureaucrats, economic stagnation). From this list, respondents are asked to choose and rank six qualities that they detest most. We randomize the order between these two questions, as well as the order of the 16 qualities in each question.

The 16 desirable qualities and 16 undesirable qualities of a regime each encompass five major areas of politics: political institutions, societal-political outcomes, political leaders, individual rights and freedom, and socio-economic outcomes. We include regime qualities that the political legitimacy literature demonstrates can influence mass support

²¹None of the three people raised any issue with the terms “authoritarian system” or “multi-party democratic system” in the crosswise model questions.

²²To make it easier for respondents to evaluate each quality, we randomly split the 16 qualities into two groups of 8 qualities, show one group at a time and ask respondents to give us their top three in that group. Finally, we ask respondents to rank the selected six qualities in the order of importance.

for a regime. We also confirm that these qualities are substantively relevant for contemporary Chinese citizens by conducting a separate pre-test. For details, see Appendix 1.2.

4.3 Measuring uncertainty about the performance of democracy

In our theoretical framework, the second source of NDCs' rejection of both democracy and the current autocracy is that they have higher uncertainty than democrats and status quo supporters about whether multi-party democracy would outperform the current regime in satisfying their demands. After respondents select and rank their desired and undesired qualities of a regime, they are asked to assess the relative performance of multi-party democracy vs. the current autocracy in delivering their most desired quality and in avoiding their most undesired quality, respectively, by choosing one option from below:²³

1. Both the current autocracy and multi-party democracy do a satisfactory job.
2. Neither the current autocracy nor multi-party democracy does a satisfactory job.
3. Cannot tell which regime does better.
4. The current autocracy does a better job.
5. Multi-party democracy does a better job.

We expect that NDCs are more likely to choose that they cannot tell which regime does better compared to CCP supporters and democracy supporters.

4.4 Data

We conducted the survey online between February 20 and March 8 in 2019. Survey participants were recruited across China through a domestic survey firm.²⁴ All respondents are Chinese nationals aged 18 or above and are currently living in China. In total, 1,532 people completed the survey and 1,354 of them (88%) passed the attention filter described in Section 4.1. All results below use data from respondents who passed the attention filter.

Respondents have diverse sociodemographic backgrounds. We use a quota sampling strategy such that the sample is representative on age of China's general population and

²³We randomize the order of these options and the order between the two questions asking about relative performance on the respondent's most desired quality and most undesired quality.

²⁴The firm is one of the largest private survey firms in China. It is not affiliated with any government agencies in China. To keep the confidentiality of our respondents' identities and to protect future researchers who hope to work with the firm, we do not disclose the name of the firm.

encompasses residents of all 31 provinces in China. As shown in Appendix 2, respondents vary in education backgrounds and have diverse occupations across government agencies, state-owned enterprises, private firms, and foreign firms. Similar to previous online surveys in China, our respondents are more likely to come from urban areas, economically developed regions (Eastern China), and to have higher education levels than the general population (Huang 2015; Huang and Yeh 2019). Given these differences with the general population, we urge caution in generalizing the study's results to the entire Chinese population. That said, the breadth of the sample's socio-demographic backgrounds suggests that findings about the respondents' political preferences would nonetheless have some representativeness. In particular, our sample is similar to the Chinese Internet user population on multiple key socio-economic attributes.²⁵

We use an online sample for several reasons. To our knowledge, this is the first study that identifies non-democratic critics in China. No existing surveys with a nationally representative sample ask about people's attitudes toward the CCP regime and also multi-party democracy. Also, given the current regulatory and technical constraints in China, conducting a nationally representative survey with stratified sampling would inevitably require in-person interviews with respondents. That would be problematic for obtaining truthful answers to the political questions. Anonymous online surveys, in contrast, are more likely to elicit truthful answers. Moreover, the Internet has become an important site of political mobilization in China, with the middle class preferring digital forms of engagement over traditional avenues of participation (Lei 2013; Yang 2009). While our sample is Internet savvy and more educated on average than the general Chinese population, people with these attributes also tend to be more politically active (Welzel 2013), and so their attitudes towards the CCP regime and democracy merit particular attention.

To achieve better representativeness across geography and demographic characteristics, we also construct a new, reweighed sample of 400 respondents²⁶ by resampling from the original sample using population benchmarks²⁷ and an inverse probability reweigh-

²⁵See Table 5 in the Appendix.

²⁶Given that our original sample only has 1,354 people, resampling over 400 people will make the reweighed data statistically indistinguishable from the original sample on most sociodemographic features.

²⁷We use population statistics from the *Chinese Statistical Yearbook 2018*.

ing scheme. The reweighted sample is representative of China’s urban population²⁸ on province, age, and gender. We do not embed a reweighing scheme in statistical modeling because some estimation procedures in our analyses (e.g. confirmatory factor analysis) cannot easily accommodate sampling weights. We compare survey results of the original sample vs. the reweighted sample, and all the main results (e.g. size of NDCs) are statistically undifferentiated between the two samples, indicating that results of the survey may be generalizable to the urban population in China (for details, see Appendix 2.2).

Finally, we also compare the online survey sample with our interview sample and confirm that they do not differ significantly across key sociodemographic characteristics, such as geographic location and occupational sectors (see Appendix 2.3). Since we use findings from the interviews to guide and validate our survey design, the similarity between these two samples increases the credibility of our survey results.

5 Results

We find that nearly half of the opponents of the current authoritarian regime reject adopting democracy in China. Figure 1 presents the distribution of responses to the crosswise model questions. The left bar represents respondents who oppose the current CCP autocracy, agreeing that “the status quo authoritarian system would NOT be my ideal choice if I could choose the political regime of my country.” The right bar represents respondents who disagree with this same statement. Of all the 1,354 valid respondents, 564 (42%) report opposing the status quo autocracy in China and the remaining 790 (58%) respondents report supporting the status quo regime.

Among the 564 respondents who report opposing the current authoritarian system, 226 are non-democratic critics—they also disagree with the statement that “multi-party democratic system would be my ideal choice if I could choose the regime of my country.” The remaining 338 opponents of the current regime agree that multi-party democracy is their ideal form of government, making them true supporters of democracy. Non-democratic critics constitute 17% of all respondents and democrats constitute 25%. Importantly,

²⁸Since most of our respondents come from urban areas, we focus on urban population characteristics.

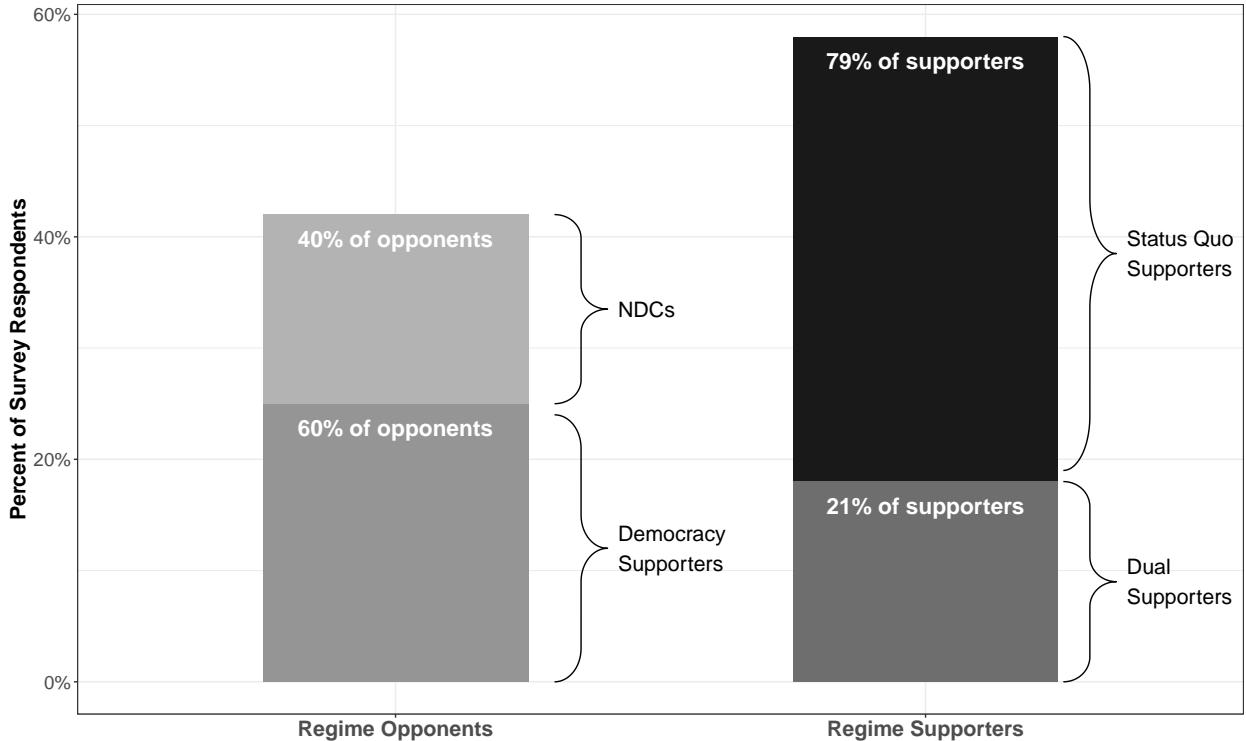


Figure 1: Distribution of political attitudes

NDCs comprise 40% of regime opponents, showing that a substantial portion of political dissidents in China do not support democracy.

Among the 790 respondents who report supporting the current autocracy, 553 are true supporters of the status quo regime as they also reject multi-party democracy. The remaining 237 respondents report that both the status quo autocracy and multi-party democracy are their ideal forms of government for China. To understand these responses, we compare the socio-demographic backgrounds of these dual supporters with the rest of the sample. We find that these dual supporters are closest to democracy supporters. Dual supporters differ significantly on three or more socio-demographic variables from NDCs and CCP supporters, respectively. In contrast, dual supporters do not differ significantly from democrats on any socio-demographic variable measured in the survey (see Appendix 5). This suggests that dual supporters may ideally want democracy but also believe that the CCP regime has its own merits under certain current conditions. Dual supporters constitute 18% of the overall sample and status quo supporters constitute 40%.

One potential concern regarding how we identify NDCs is preference falsification.

While the crosswise model attempts to reassure people that their political attitudes will be obscured, respondents might assume that researchers are able to identify their political opinion through identifying their age and province asked in the crosswise model. If that is true, then the proportion of CCP supporters identified in our survey should be at least as high as the corresponding proportions in surveys that use direct questioning. However, that is not what we observe. In our crosswise model, 58% of respondents report supporting the CCP regime. A survey conducted around the same time finds that over 70% of respondents report supporting the CCP regime when directly asked.²⁹ The survey used a similar strategy of participant recruitment and also took place online. Other recent surveys using face-to-face interviews identify 80% of the Chinese public are CCP supporters, which is also much higher than the corresponding proportion (58%) in our survey.³⁰

In addition, if respondents notice that we could calculate their individual political attitude using their responses to the crosswise model along with their responses to birth year and provincial location at the end of the survey, respondents might also lie when answering demographic questions. To assess the impact of this concern, we compare the self-reported provincial locations with provincial locations that are automatically recorded by the survey website.³¹ We find that only 9% of respondents' self-reported provinces do not match the provinces suggested by the survey website. If people report false locations because they fear exposing their opposition against the CCP regime, they would want to be coded as supporters of the CCP rather than opponents of it. Thus, we would expect that among the identified CCP supporters, there would be a higher proportion of misreporting, compared to the identified democrats and the identified NDCs. However, that is not what we see. There is no significant difference in the probability of location misreporting between CCP supporters and democrats, or between CCP supporters and NDCs. Finally, all results remain statistically undifferentiated between the whole sample and the subset of respondents whose self-reported provinces align with their system-recorded provinces.³²

²⁹See [Guang et al. 2020](#). Similar to us, they also ask respondents if the CCP regime is their ideal choice.

³⁰See [Cunningham, Saich and Turiel 2020](#) and Asian Barometer Survey 2012.

³¹Respondents took the survey on Qualtrics.com. After linking those IP addresses to provinces in China, we discarded all system-recorded IP addresses.

³²The 9% of people who misreport their location may be related to the resemblance between the question on household registration location and the question on current location, which are next to each other in the

5.1 Decomposing NDCs' political attitude

Our theoretical framework predicts two sources of NDCs' simultaneous disillusionment with the current autocracy and multi-party democracy: 1) NDCs differ from status quo supporters and democracy supporters in their demands of a regime; 2) NDCs are more likely to be uncertain than status quo supporters and democrats about the performance of multi-party democracy at satisfying their demands. We find evidence for both.

Configuration of demands Survey participants are asked to read 16 desirable qualities of a regime, choose their most desired six, and rank the six qualities in order of importance. They are also asked to read a different list of 16 undesired qualities and to choose and rank the six they detest most in order of undesirability. We map responses for each quality onto a seven-point scale: 6 if the respondent ranked that quality as his/her most desired (undesired) quality, 1 if the respondent ranked that quality as his/her sixth desired (undesired) quality, and 0 if the respondent did not select that quality into his/her top six. In this way, the re-coded response indicates the priority of each quality to respondents.

A person's ranking of different qualities are likely to be correlated.³³ Thus, we first use factor analysis to examine whether there is any systematic grouping between rankings of the 32 qualities and if yes, to identify the latent factors of respondents' demands. We then compare NDCs, democracy supporters, and status quo supporters on each latent trait (factor) we identify from the factor analysis.

We conduct principal component analysis (PCA) of the observed rankings for the 32 qualities and confirm that they are organized in a non-random manner (see Appendix 3.1). Then, we use confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to identify latent factors underlying the observed rankings. CFA is a type of factor analysis that evaluates the fit between observed data and a model specified by the researcher about how the observed variables map onto a construct of latent factors (Brown 2014). By construction, each latent factor drives only a subset of the observed variables. This feature makes latent factors in CFA easier

survey. 87% of misreporting respondents answered the same province to both questions.

³³For example, people who prioritize legislative constraints over executive may also think that an independent court is important.

to interpret compared to latent traits in other types of factor analysis such as PCA and exploratory factor analysis (EFA). An additional advantage of CFA over PCA and EFA is that CFA produces a set of fitness statistics for each model, such as chi-square (χ^2) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). These metrics allow us to compare models using statistical tests. Previous studies have used CFA to study the configuration of public opinion in China (Lu and Dickson 2020; Pan and Xu 2018).

With a large number of observed variables, the number of possible CFA models can easily become astronomical. The 32 qualities we asked in the survey come from 5 areas of a political regime (see Appendix 1.2). To make our analysis tractable and simplify models, we add two assumptions when building the CFA models: (1) each quality is driven by only one latent factor; (2) all qualities in the same area are driven by the same latent factor.³⁴ Under these assumptions, the maximum number of latent factors in a CFA model is 5 and the total number of possible models is reduced to 52. We estimate all 52 models and find that a model of three latent factors best characterizes respondents' reported demands (for details, see Appendix 3.2). Below we explain the substantive meaning of each latent factor and compare its values between NDCs, democrats, and status quo supporters.

The first dimension, which we refer to as *desire for social stability*, includes qualities in three areas: political institutions, societal political outcomes, and political leaders. Higher values along this latent factor indicates that the respondent places higher priority on social stability and lower priority on inclusive political institutions, such as legislative oversight over executive or an independent court. Figure 2 presents the mean values, as well as the 95% confidence intervals, of NDCs, status quo supporters, and democracy supporters on the first latent factor. Supporters of China's current regime exhibit stronger preference for social stability than NDCs and democracy supporters, whereas NDCs and democracy supporters report higher priorities for inclusive political institutions than status quo supporters. There is no significant difference between NDCs and democracy support-

³⁴Though restrictive, these assumptions substantially reduce model complexity. The first assumption rules out cases where one quality is driven by two or more latent traits. This makes sense substantively because each quality in the survey only touches on one dimension of a regime. The second assumption improves the clarity of interpretation of each latent trait. We allow for correlation between any two latent factors and the collapse of multiple factors into one factor.

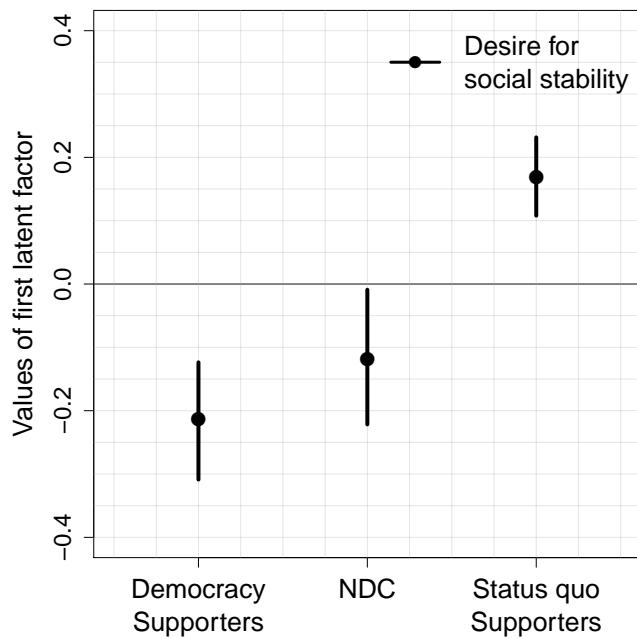


Figure 2: Values on first latent factor

ers in their demands along this dimension.

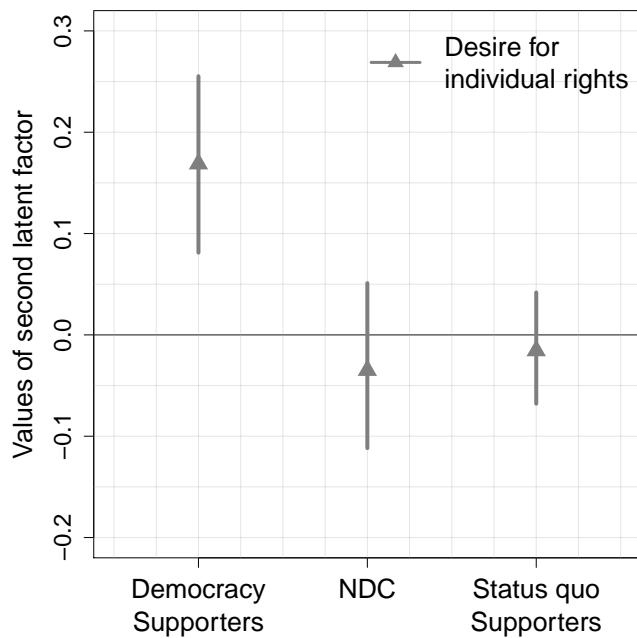


Figure 3: Values on second latent factor

The second dimension, which represents *desire for individual rights and freedom*, includes qualities in this area. Higher values on this latent factor means stronger demand for

protection of individual rights, such as property rights and freedom of speech. Figure 3 shows the mean values, as well as the 95% confidence intervals, of NDCs, status quo supporters, and democracy supporters on the second latent factor. Supporters of democracy put higher priority on individual rights and freedom compared to NDCs and status quo supporters, but there is no significant difference between NDCs and status quo supporters along this latent trait.

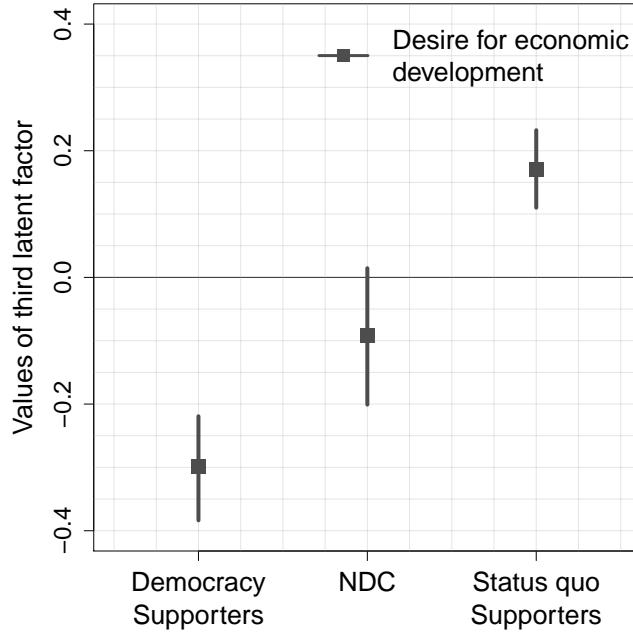


Figure 4: Values on third latent factor

The third dimension, which we call *desire for economic development*, includes qualities in the area of socio-economic outcomes. Higher values on this dimension means stronger desire for economic growth and better public goods provision. Figure 4 displays the means, as well as the 95% confidence intervals, of NDCs, status quo supporters, and democracy supporters on the third latent trait. Supporters of the CCP regime desire good economic outcomes most, followed by NDCs and democrats. NDCs are significantly different from both status quo supporters and democracy supporters along this dimension.

Overall, NDCs differ from democracy supporters on 2 out of 3 dimensions in terms of demands for a political regime. Compared to democrats, NDCs care more about economic development and care less about individual rights or freedom. NDCs also differ from sta-

tus quo supporters on 2 out of 3 dimensions. Compared to CCP supporters, NDCs care more about inclusive political institutions, and they care less about economic outcomes and social stability. This profile of NDCs' demands echoes our observation from interviews that NDCs in China appear to hold mixed values, being closer to autocrats on some dimensions and being closer to democrats on some other dimensions.³⁵ On the whole, these results suggest that NDCs hold distinct expectations for a political regime compared to democrats and status quo supporters. Since NDCs disagree with democrats on what they expect from a regime, this may increase the difficulty for these two groups to coordinate on collective action when opportunity for regime change arises.

Higher uncertainty After respondents select and rank their most desired and undesired qualities of a political regime, they are asked which system of government (multi-party democracy or current autocracy) could better deliver their most desired quality and which system could better avoid their most undesired quality. In line with our theoretical predictions, NDCs are more likely to be uncertain about whether democracy can outperform the current regime at meeting their demands, compared to democracy supporters and status quo supporters. 44% of NDCs chose “cannot tell which regime does better” at delivering their most desired quality or avoiding their most undesired quality, while this percentage is significantly lower among status quo supporters (32%) and democracy supporters (35%) at 0.05 level. With high uncertainty of their payoff under a democratic system, NDCs are likely to resist adopting democracy in China despite their opposition of the CCP regime.

5.2 Why do regime opponents have divergent attitudes toward democracy?

An important implication of NDC's existence is that China's current regime endures not only because of its supporters, but also because its opponents have divergent views about what political system should be adopted in its place. In this section, we explore what may lead to this divergence in political attitudes among regime opponents. We begin by analyzing whether NDC and democrat differ on the socio-demographic factors that

³⁵See Section 3.

existing literature predicts would lead to support for democracy.

Existing literature largely contends that within an authoritarian public, democracy supporters are the segment that is younger, more educated, economically better-off, more likely to work in the private sector, and consume more information outside the regime's control (Duch 1993; Gibson, Duch and Tedin 1992; Inglehart 1997; Lipset 1959; Nelson 1997). Yet, our results suggest that while these socio-demographic features do predict opposition against the status quo authoritarian regime in China, they do not necessarily indicate support for democracy. Figure 5 presents differences in personal characteristics

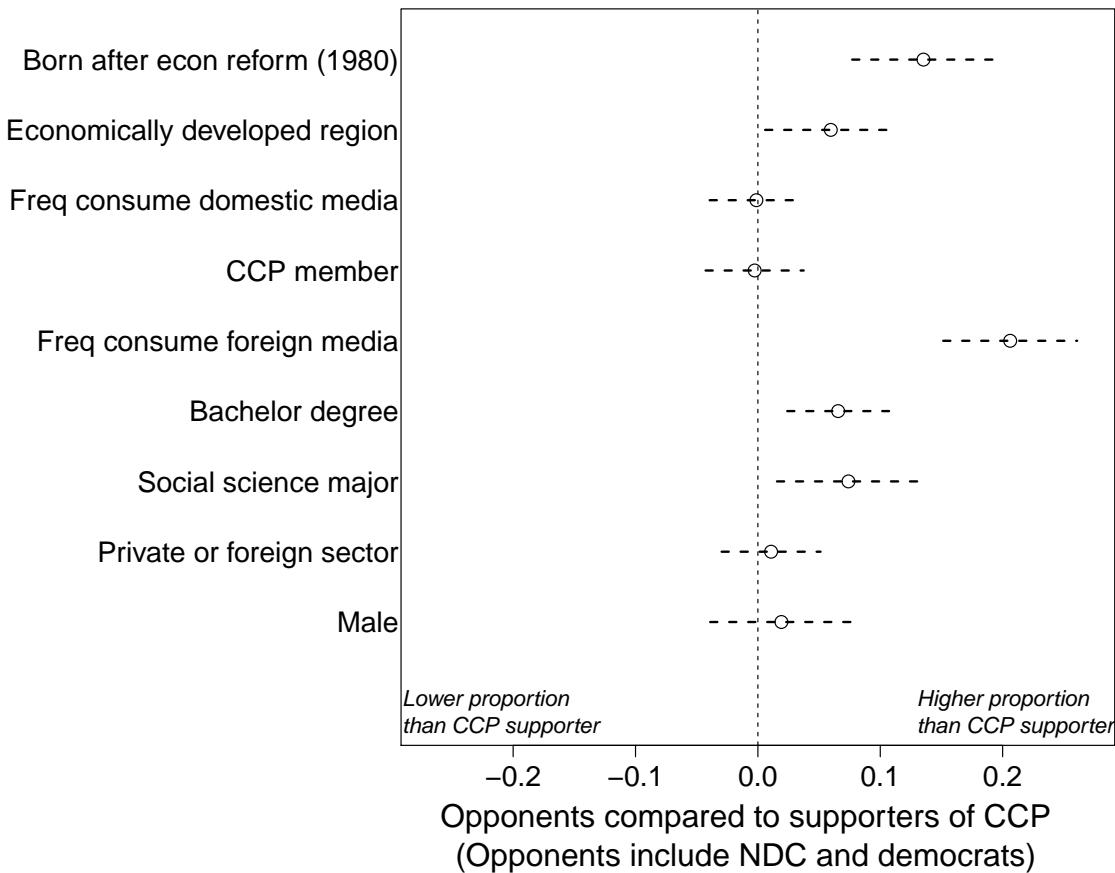


Figure 5: Differences in socio-demographic characteristics, with 95% confidence intervals, between opponents and supporters of the status quo CCP regime.

between opponents vs. supporters of China's current regime. Opponents include NDCs and democracy supporters. The figure shows that compared to regime supporters, opponents are indeed younger, more educated, have better economic status, and consume more foreign information.

However, when we examine differences within regime opponents along these same

characteristics (Figure 6), we find that the socio-demographic features conventionally expected of democrats cannot distinguish between democrats and non-democratic critics in the expected direction. Figure 6 shows that some of these socio-demographic features

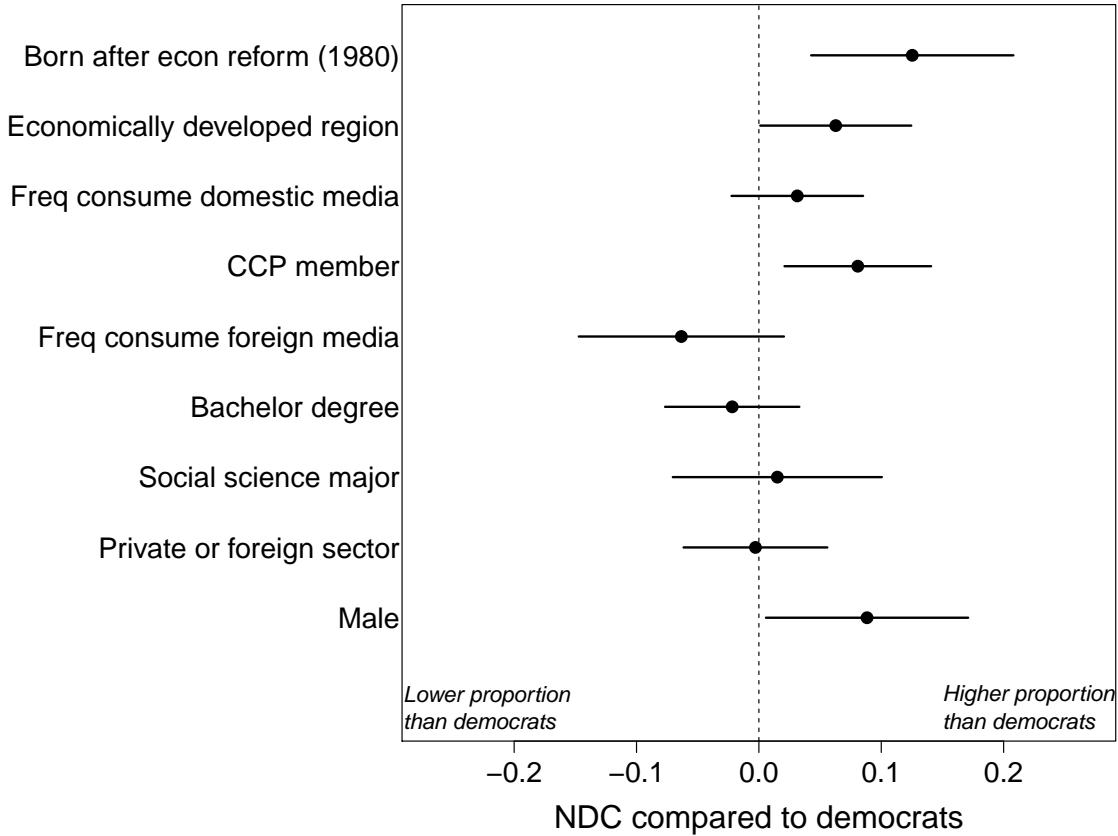


Figure 6: Differences in socio-demographic characteristics, with 95% confidence intervals, between NDCs and democracy supporters.

have a stronger association with NDCs than with democrats—compared to democrats, NDCs are younger and more likely to live in economically developed region—and the remaining features appear to characterize both NDCs and democrats—there is no statistically significant difference between these two groups in education level, private sector employment,³⁶ or foreign media consumption (for detailed statistics, see Appendix 4.1). Next, we discuss the socio-demographic differences between NDC vs. democrat in detail, link these differences to existing theories, and assess which factor is driving their differences in political attitude using regression analysis.

³⁶Existing studies on China have shown that working in private sector does not predict support for democracy because the regime has co-opted private entrepreneurs (Chen and Dickson 2008; Dickson 2016).

Economic status There is a longstanding view rooted in modernization theory that economic development leads to support for democracy (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Lipset 1959; Welzel and Inglehart 2008). ³⁷ In our survey, opponents of the CCP regime are indeed more likely to come from economically developed regions than regime supporters. However, among opponents, we find that hailing from economically developed regions has a stronger association with non-democratic critics. 77% of NDCs live in Eastern China, the most developed region of the country, whereas this proportion is significantly lower among democracy supporters (71%) at 0.1 level.

Previous research in non-democracies has shown that different access to the economic benefits generated by the regime can also lead to different attitudes towards democracy among the public (Rosenfeld 2017; Zhao 2009). China has experienced spectacular economic growth since 1980. But within China, there is increasing regional economic inequality. Compared to those living in under-developed regions, people living in more developed regions of China are beneficiaries of economic growth and hence more likely to be skeptical of whether democracy can outperform the current regime in improving their well-being (Yang and Zhao 2015). In line with this view, we find that among regime opponents, people residing in the economically developed Eastern provinces are less supportive of adopting democracy in China. Relatedly, while previous works predict that democracy supporters are younger than others in the authoritarian public (Almond and Verba 1963; Shi 1997), Figure 6 shows that non-democratic critics are on average younger than democrats and more likely to have grown up in the era of China's rapid economic growth. These differences between NDC vs. democracy supporter suggest that among regime opponents, being a beneficiary of China's economic growth may increase the probability of becoming a non-democratic critic of the regime.

Exposure to CCP Propaganda An alternative explanation for the emergence of NDC is that it is the result of the CCP's political propaganda. In China, state-controlled media and school curriculum portray the multi-party system of democracies as failures. Ex-

³⁷Exceptions are Chen 2004; Silver 1987, which argue that better-off people are more supportive of the status quo autocracy because they benefit more from the regime.

isting research has shown that the CCP's ideological propaganda increases Chinese students' skepticism of multi-party democracy (Cantoni et al. 2017). When comparing exposure to state propaganda between NDCs and democrats, we find some support for this explanation. First, NDCs consume domestic media at a slightly higher frequency than democrats, but this difference is not significant at any conventional level. 90% of NDCs and 87% of democrats report consuming news on domestic media several times a day. Also, NDCs have a higher proportion of CCP members (18%) than democracy supporters (10%). Joining the CCP often means receiving more training of the party's propaganda, yet CCP membership also signals higher productivity or academic merit in China (Li et al. 2012a,b). Overall, this descriptive comparison reveals that exposure to the CCP propaganda might also contribute to the emergence of non-democratic critics.

Consumption of foreign information The third potential explanation for differing views regarding democracy among regime opponents is varying access to foreign information. Conventional wisdom holds that foreign media consumption can cultivate support for democracy by prompting people to evaluate their current regime more critically (Huntington 2006; Levitsky and Way 2006). In addition, existing literature largely expects that higher education will foster support for democracy because education increases access to information and reinforces liberal values like respect for diversity (Inglehart 1997; Welzel 2013). Our results show that foreign media consumption and college education are both strongly associated with opposition to the CCP regime (Figure 5). Yet among regime opponents, these two factors have weak associations with support for democracy. 19% of non-democratic critics consume political news on foreign media several times a day, which is slightly lower than this proportion among democrats (20%) but this difference is not significant at any conventional level. Similarly, the portion of bachelor degree holders is only slightly lower among NDCs (87%) than among democrats (89%). When we compare the frequency of using foreign media in general, NDCs are on average significantly higher than regime supporters at 0.01 level, but NDCs do not differ from democracy supporters in this regard. In sum, these analyses show weak support for that different access to foreign information explains the political differences between NDC and democrat.

We explore the effects of these three socio-demographic factors—1) economic status; 2) exposure to CCP propaganda; 3) consumption of foreign information—on the probability of being a non-democratic critic using multinomial logistic regressions. Table 1 presents the results. The outcome is a four-level nominal variable, representing the four categories of respondents in our sample.³⁸ Among them, democracy supporter is the baseline category. Coefficients are marginal effects on the log odds of being a NDC vs. democracy supporter. Columns (1), (2), (3) and (5) control for respondents' gender, age, education level, CCP membership, and employment sector.

Table 1 shows that economic status outperforms the remaining two factors (exposure

Table 1: Predictors of NDC

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Economically developed region	0.356* (0.203)			0.346* (0.199)	0.374* (0.204)
Frequent consumption of CCP media		0.327 (0.276)		0.302 (0.273)	0.337 (0.276)
Frequent consumption of foreign media			-0.296 (0.181)	-0.281 (0.174)	-0.266 (0.181)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Observations	1354	1354	1354	1354	1354

Notes: Outcome is a 4-level nominal variable. All columns use multinomial logistic regression and coefficients are marginal effects on the log odds of being a NDC vs. Democrat. Economically developed region means living in Eastern China provinces. Frequent media consumption means several times a day. Controls include respondents' age, gender, education level, CCP membership, and employment sector. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

to CCP propaganda and consumption of foreign information) in explaining the prevalence of NDC among respondents. Living in the economically developed region increases the odds of being a non-democratic critic vs. democracy supporter in all models, while frequent consumption of domestic media or foreign media have no effect at conventional levels. In the most complete model (Column 5), when holding all other regressors at their median,³⁹ moving from the under-developed region to the developed region increases the

³⁸The four categories are: democracy supporter, NDC, status quo supporter, and dual supporter.

³⁹Since most of our regressors are dummies (e.g. gender, CCP membership, frequent consumption of

probability of becoming a non-democratic critic by 39% (6 percentage points). Breaking down this difference, 14% of respondents who live in the under-developed region are NDCs, while 20% of respondents in the economically developed region are NDCs. This suggests that being a beneficiary of China's economic growth may foster more criticism against the current regime and multi-party democracy simultaneously.

In addition, the lack of significant difference in foreign media consumption between NDCs and democrats, as well as the lack of significant difference between their consumption of foreign political news, suggest that NDCs are not disinterested in or ignorant of political systems outside China. Instead, NDCs actively consume information about foreign governments, and they do so as frequently as democracy supporters. Previous research shows that consuming foreign socio-economic news from foreign media makes regime critics in China hold a less rosy view of foreign regimes (Huang and Yeh 2019). Our results suggest that consuming foreign political news from foreign media may also inform disillusionment with democracy among regime critics.

We have several reasons to believe that these regression results are valid. First, we also measure respondents' economic status using GDP per capita in their current province, GDP per capita in their household's registered province (*Hukou* province), and whether respondents were born in the era of China's economic reform and opening (i.e. after 1980). The results remain substantively unchanged across these alternative measures. Second, we run all regression models using data on just regime opponents (i.e. democrats and non-democratic critics) and we find consistent results that residing in the economically developed region increases the probability of being a NDC while the consumption of domestic or foreign media have no effect. Third, given that the coefficient on frequent consumption of CCP media is also quite large (though not significant), we conduct a separate test for the effect of CCP propaganda by exploiting a reform of political textbooks in China between 2004 and 2010 (Cantoni et al. 2017). In different years during this reform, different provinces adopted a set of new textbooks for entering cohorts of high school students. These new books added substantial materials criticizing Western-style democracy. However, we find no effect of receiving this new curriculum on the likelihood of being a

media), we hold them at their median rather than mean to represent the "median" person in our sample.

NDC. For details on all these analyses, see Appendix 4.2.

Overall, we find that an average NDC is young, well-educated, and economically well-off, with a good knowledge of both Chinese and foreign political institutions. These results echo our interview findings that NDCs are politically attentive and sophisticated. While previous research largely contends that economic development would foster demand for democracy, our results suggest that economic development in China may instead motivate differing attitudes towards democracy among regime critics. In addition, contrary to the prevailing view that education and access to foreign information would cultivate support for democracy, our results suggest that these factors may also inform simultaneous disillusionment with democracy and the status quo authoritarian regime. Future research is needed to test these patterns more systematically.

6 Conclusion

Conventional wisdom about public opinion in authoritarian regimes generally assumes that opponents of the current regime support democracy (Geddes et al. 2018; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994). However, this study reveals that nearly half of those who oppose the current authoritarian regime in China also resist adopting democracy. Compared to democracy supporters, these non-democratic critics have lower demand for individual freedom, higher demand for economic growth, and higher uncertainty about the performance of democracy. Interviews with NDCs further suggest that they are dissidents of the status quo but are not proponents of any alternative political system in China, implying that they are less likely to actively push for meaningful changes toward an alternative regime. Additionally, we find that uneven access to the benefits of China’s economic development may explain the differing political attitudes between NDC and democrat. Overall, the differences between NDC and democrat shed light on a new explanation for authoritarian durability: opponents of the regime have divergent and unclear visions of what should be adopted in place of the status quo.

There is a need for future research to examine how NDCs’ simultaneous disillusionment with status quo and democracy affects their political behavior. While we expect

that NDCs have weak incentives to participate in a democratic revolution, will NDCs coordinate with democrats in other forms of resistance, such as non-compliance with government policies? Will NDCs themselves organize any form of collective action to vent discontent? How likely are these actions to escalate to overthrow the status quo regime?

Finally, we expect that the size and profile of NDCs will vary across different types of authoritarian regimes. Compared to other autocracies, the CCP regime exerts strong control over public access to foreign information through large-scale censorship. In more “open” autocracies, people may acquire more information about how foreign political systems work. Our results suggest that knowledge of foreign regimes may inform rejection of both current autocracy and democracy. In this way, will weaker information control in other autocracies increase the prevalence of NDC in the local public? Some NDCs we interviewed also recognized that the absence of an opposition party in China increases their skepticism of multi-party democracy. Then, in autocracies where the ruling party competes with opposition parties in regular elections, will such quasi-democratic institutions make local dissidents more supportive or more disillusioned with democracy? We hope this research opens avenues for studies on non-democratic critics and their impact on regime resilience in a broader range of authoritarian regimes.

References

- Acemoglu, Daron and James Robinson. 2006. *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Cambridge University Press.
- Almond, Gabriel A and Sidney Verba. 1963. “The civic culture: Political attitudes in five western democracies.” *Princeton, NJ*.
- Alvarez, R Michael and Charles H Franklin. 1994. “Uncertainty and political perceptions.” *The Journal of Politics* 56(3):671–688.
- Barker, David C and Susan B Hansen. 2005. “All things considered: Systematic cognitive processing and electoral decision-making.” *The Journal of Politics* 67(2):319–344.
- Bauer, Raymond Augustine and David Gleicher. 1959. *The Soviet Citizen. Daily life in a totalitarian society*. Harvard University Press.
- Beissinger, Mark R. 2013. “The semblance of democratic revolution: Coalitions in Ukraine’s orange revolution.” *American Political Science Review* 107(3):574–592.
- Blair, Graeme, Kosuke Imai and Yang-Yang Zhou. 2015. “Design and analysis of the randomized response technique.” *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 110(511):1304–1319.
- Blanton, Hart, James Jaccard, Jonathan Klick, Barbara Mellers, Gregory Mitchell and Philip E Tetlock. 2009. “Strong claims and weak evidence: Reassessing the predictive validity of the IAT.” *Journal of applied Psychology* 94(3):567.
- Bleck, Jaimie and Kristin Michelitch. 2017. “Capturing the airwaves, capturing the nation? A field experiment on state-run media effects in the wake of a coup.” *The Journal of Politics* 79(3):873–889.
- Brown, Timothy A. 2014. *Confirmatory factor analysis for applied research*. Guilford Publications.
- Bush, Sarah Sunn and Amaney A Jamal. 2015. “Anti-Americanism, Authoritarian Politics, and Attitudes about Women’s Representation: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Jordan.” *International Studies Quarterly* 59(1):34–45.
- Cantoni, Davide, Yuyu Chen, David Y Yang, Noam Yuchtman and Y Jane Zhang. 2017. “Curriculum and ideology.” *Journal of Political Economy* 125(2):338–392.
- Carsey, Thomas M and Geoffrey C Layman. 2006. “Changing sides or changing minds? Party identification and policy preferences in the American electorate.” *American Journal of Political Science* 50(2):464–477.
- Chen, Jie. 2004. *Popular political support in urban China*. Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
- Chen, Jie. 2013. *A middle class without democracy: Economic growth and the prospects for democratization in China*. Oxford University Press.
- Chen, Jie and Bruce J Dickson. 2008. “Allies of the state: Democratic support and regime support among China’s private entrepreneurs.” *The China Quarterly* 196:780–804.
- Chen, Juncheng. 2001. “关于中央集权制的若干思考.” 岭南学刊 (2):93–94.
- Cunningham, Edward, Tony Saich and Jessie Turiel. 2020. Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time. Technical report Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation.
- Dahl, Robert. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. Yale University Press.
- Dickson, Bruce. 2016. *The dictator’s dilemma: the Chinese Communist Party’s strategy for survival*. Oxford University Press.

- Duch, Raymond. 1993. "Tolerating economic reform: popular support for transition to free market in the former Soviet Union." *American Political Science Review* pp. 590–608.
- Easton, David. 1965. *A systems analysis of political life*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Fang, Yaming. 2011. "城市病", 贫富分化与集权制的限度: 资源分布格局的政治之维." 湖北行政学院学报 (4):27–32.
- Fishkin, James S. 1991. *Democracy and deliberation: New directions for democratic reform*. Yale University Press.
- Geddes, Barbara. 1999. "What do we know about Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2.1:115–144.
- Geddes, Barbara and John Zaller. 1989. "Sources of popular support for authoritarian regimes." *American Journal of Political Science* pp. 319–347.
- Geddes, Barbara, Joseph Wright, Joseph George Wright and Erica Frantz. 2018. *How dictatorships work: Power, personalization, and collapse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gehlbach, Scott, Konstantin Sonin and Milan W Svolik. 2016. "Formal models of non-democratic politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 19:565–584.
- Gibson, James L, Raymond M Duch and Kent L Tedin. 1992. "Democratic values and the transformation of the Soviet Union." *The Journal of Politics* 54(2):329–371.
- Gingerich, Daniel W, Virginia Oliveros, Ana Corbacho and Mauricio Ruiz-Vega. 2015. "When to protect? Using the crosswise model to integrate protected and direct responses in surveys of sensitive behavior." *Political Analysis* 24(2):132–156.
- Guang, Lei, Margaret Roberts, Yiqing Xu and Jiannan Zhao. 2020. Pandemic sees increase in Chinese support for regime, decrease in views towards the U.S. Technical report China Data Lab, UCSD.
- Haggard, Stephan and Robert R Kaufman. 2016. "Democratization during the third wave." *Annual Review of Political Science* 19:125–144.
- Hollyer, James R, B Peter Rosendorff and James Raymond Vreeland. 2018. *Transparency, Democracy, and Autocracy: Economic Transparency and Political (In) Stability*. Cambridge University Press.
- Huang, Haifeng. 2015. "International knowledge and domestic evaluations in a changing society: The case of China." *American Political Science Review* 109(3):613–634.
- Huang, Haifeng and Yao-Yuan Yeh. 2019. "Information from abroad: Foreign media, selective exposure and political support in China." *British Journal of Political Science* 49(2):611–636.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 2006. *Political order in changing societies*. Yale University Press.
- Inglehart, Ronald. 1997. *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart, Ronald and Christian Welzel. 2005. *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: The human development sequence*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kuran, Timur. 1991. "Now out of never: The element of surprise in the East European revolution of 1989." *World politics* 44(1):7–48.
- Lei, Ya-Wen. 2013. The political consequences of the rise of the Internet: Political beliefs and practices of Chinese netizens. In *Political Communication in China*. Routledge pp. 37–68.
- Levitsky, Steven and Lucan A Way. 2006. "Linkage versus leverage. Rethinking the

- international dimension of regime change.” *Comparative Politics* pp. 379–400.
- Li, Cheng-Hsien. 2016. “Confirmatory factor analysis with ordinal data: Comparing robust maximum likelihood and diagonally weighted least squares.” *Behavior research methods* 48(3):936–949.
- Li, Hongbin, Lingsheng Meng, Xinzheng Shi and Binzhen Wu. 2012a. “Does attending elite colleges pay in China?” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 40(1):78–88.
- Li, Hongbin, Lingsheng Meng, Xinzheng Shi and Binzhen Wu. 2012b. “Does having a cadre parent pay? Evidence from the first job offers of Chinese college graduates.” *Journal of Development Economics* 99(2):513–520.
- Li, Lianjiang. 2011. “Distrust in government leaders, demand for leadership change, and preference for popular elections in rural China.” *Political Behavior* 33(2):291–311.
- Li, Lianjiang. 2021. “Distrust in government and preference for regime change in China.” *Political Studies* 69(2):326–343.
- Linz, Juan. 2000. *Authoritarian and Totalitarian Regimes*. Lynne Rienner.
- Linz, Juan J. 1988. “Legitimacy of democracy and the socioeconomic system.” *Comparing pluralist democracies* pp. 65–113.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1959. “Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy.” *American Political Science Review* 53(1):69–105.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin. 1981. “Political man.” *Johns Hopkins University Press*.
- Lohmann, Susanne. 1994. “The dynamics of informational cascades: the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany, 1989–91.” *World politics* 47(01):42–101.
- Lu, Jie and Bruce Dickson. 2020. “Revisiting the Eastonian framework on political support: assessing different measures of regime support in mainland China.” *Comparative Politics* 52(4):671–701.
- Lukin, Alexander. 2009. “Russia’s new authoritarianism and the post-Soviet political ideal.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25(1):66–92.
- Magaloni, Beatriz and Ruth Kricheli. 2010. “Political order and one-party rule.” *Annual review of political science* 13:123–143.
- Manin, Bernard. 1987. “On legitimacy and political deliberation.” *Political theory* 15(3):338–368.
- McGraw, Kathleen M, Edward Hasecke and Kimberly Conger. 2003. “Ambivalence, uncertainty, and processes of candidate evaluation.” *Political Psychology* 24(3):421–448.
- Meiowitz, Adam and Joshua A Tucker. 2013. “People power or a one-shot deal? A dynamic model of protest.” *American Journal of Political Science* 57(2):478–490.
- Millar, James R. 1987. *Politics, work, and daily life in the USSR: A survey of former Soviet citizens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mishler, William and Richard Rose. 1997. “Trust, distrust and skepticism: Popular evaluations of civil and political institutions in post-communist societies.” *The journal of politics* 59(2):418–451.
- Nelson, Michael. 1997. *War of the black heavens: The battles of Western broadcasting in the Cold War*. Syracuse University Press.
- Norris, Pippa. 2011. *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge U Press.
- Norris, Pippa. 2017. The conceptual framework of political support. In *Handbook on political trust*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Pan, Jennifer and Yiqing Xu. 2018. “China’s ideological spectrum.” *The Journal of Politics* 80(1):254–273.

- Przeworski, Adam. 1991. *Democracy and the market: Political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Przeworski, Adam. 2016. "Democracy: A never-ending quest." *Annual Review of Political Science* 19:1–12.
- Rosenfeld, Bryn. 2017. "Reevaluating the middle-class protest paradigm: A case-control study of democratic protest coalitions in Russia." *American Political Science Review* 111(4):637–652.
- Rosenfeld, Bryn, Kosuke Imai and Jacob N Shapiro. 2016. "An empirical validation study of popular survey methodologies for sensitive questions." *American Journal of Political Science* 60(3):783–802.
- Shi, Tianjian. 1997. *Political Participation in Beijing*. Harvard University Press.
- Shi, Tianjian. 2014. *The cultural logic of politics in mainland China and Taiwan*. Cambridge University Press.
- Silver, Brian D. 1987. "Sources of support for regime norms." *Politics, work, and daily life in the USSR: A survey of former Soviet citizens* p. 100.
- Simpser, Alberto, Dan Slater and Jason Wittenberg. 2018. "Dead but not gone: contemporary legacies of communism, imperialism, and authoritarianism." *Annual Review of Political Science* 21:419–439.
- Singh, Naunihal. 2014. *Seizing power: the strategic logic of military coups*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Svolik, Milan. 2009. "Power sharing and leadership dynamics in authoritarian regimes." *American Journal of Political Science* 53(2).
- Tang, Wenfang. 2016. *Populist authoritarianism: Chinese political culture and regime sustainability*. Oxford University Press.
- Tertychnaya, Katerina. 2020. "Protests and voter defections in electoral autocracies: Evidence from Russia." *Comparative Political Studies* 53(12):1926–1956.
- Tsai, Kellee S. 2007. *Capitalism without democracy: The private sector in contemporary China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Turgeon, Mathieu. 2009. "'Just Thinking': Attitude Development, Public Opinion, and Political Representation." *Political Behavior* 31(3):353–378.
- Van Dalen, Arjen, Claes H De Vreese and Erik Albæk. 2016. "Mediated uncertainty: The negative impact of uncertainty in economic news on consumer confidence." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 81(1):111–130.
- Welzel, Christian. 2013. *Freedom rising*. Cambridge University Press.
- Welzel, Christian and Ronald Inglehart. 2008. "The role of ordinary people in democratization." *Journal of Democracy* 19(1):126–140.
- Wintrobe, Ronald. 1998. *The Political Economy of Dictatorship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yang, Guangbin. 2014. "走出集权一分权的二元对立误区——论十八届三中全会“决定”中的集权与分权问题." 中国特色社会主义研究 1(1):11–15.
- Yang, Guobin. 2009. *The power of the Internet in China: Citizen activism online*. Columbia University Press.
- Yang, Hongxing and Dingxin Zhao. 2015. "Performance legitimacy, state autonomy and China's economic miracle." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(91):64–82.
- Zhao, Dingxin. 2009. "The mandate of heaven and performance legitimization in historical and contemporary China." *American Behavioral Scientist* 53(3):416–433.

A Online Supplementary Appendix

1 Appendix: Details of survey design

1.1 Innocuous questions in the crosswise model section

In the crosswise model section of the survey, we ask additional innocuous questions that also use the format of the crosswise model. Table 2 presents the two statements—both

Table 2: Statements in the innocuous crosswise questions

Question	Innocuous statements
1 (practice)	(1) Modern society needs specialized personnel more than generalists. (2) I do not have a driver's license now.
2	(1) I usually wear glasses for reading. (2) I will stop anyone who smokes in a public non-smoking space.
3 (attention filter)	(1) I am a male (2) I have full-time working experience.
4	(1) Luck is more important than effort for a person's success. (2) My current cell phone is a Samsung model.

are non-political—in each innocuous question. These innocuous questions serve three purposes. First, Question 1 appears at the beginning as a practice question, aiming to familiarize respondents with the crosswise question format. Second, Questions 2, 3, and 4 are inserted in randomized order between the crosswise question on current autocracy and the crosswise question on democracy to reduce the possibility that responses to the first political question affect responses to the second political question. Third, Question 3 also helps us to filter out respondents who do not pay attention or fail to follow the instructions of the crosswise model.⁴⁰ The statements in each innocuous question are constructed so that they do not prime respondents to evaluate the CCP regime or multi-party democracy in a particular direction. For example, we construct statements on social topics commonly debated in both authoritarian and democratic countries (e.g. non-smoking).

⁴⁰The two statements in this question concern the respondent's gender and whether he/she has full-time working experience. At the end of the survey, we also ask respondents their gender and years of full-time work directly.

1.2 Desirable and undesirable qualities of a regime

Table 3 presents the 16 desirable qualities we show to survey participants. Table 4 presents the 16 undesirable qualities in the survey. Each group of 16 qualities covers the following five areas of a political regime:

- 1. Political Institutions:** institutions for selection of political leaders, horizontal relationship between legislature, executive, and judiciary organizations, and vertical relationship between center and local governments.
- 2. Societal-political outcomes:** outcomes regarding social stability and continuity of government policy.
- 3. Political leaders:** outcomes regarding the capability and integrity of political leaders in domestic and foreign affairs.
- 4. Individual rights and freedom:** institutions regarding government's influence on individual rights and freedom.
- 5. Socio-economic outcomes:** outcomes regarding economic growth and provision of public goods.

We take two steps to select the 16 desirable qualities in Table 3 and the 16 undesirable qualities in Table 4. In the first step, we reviewed the existing literature on regime legitimacy, as well as classic work on democracy and autocracy to identify representative features of each regime (Dahl 1971; Geddes 1999; Gehlbach, Sonin and Svolik 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2016; Linz 2000; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Manin 1987; Przeworski 2016; Simpser, Slater and Wittenberg 2018). From these theoretical works, we collected 31 desirable qualities and 35 undesirable qualities that cover five areas of a political regime stated above. Among these 66 qualities, we select in the second step a subset that are most relevant for contemporary Chinese citizens. Specifically, we ask 366 Chinese citizens with diverse socio-demographic backgrounds⁴¹ to rank the importance of the 66 qualities we summarized from the literature. We include the top-rated 16 positive qualities (Table 3) and the top-rated 16 negative qualities (Table 4) in the survey.

⁴¹The 366 participants in this pre-test are between 18 and 69 years old, and vary in education levels from high school to PhD degrees. They also have diverse working experience across public institutions, government agencies, state-owned enterprises, private firms and foreign firms.

Table 3: Desirable Qualities of A Political Regime

Areas of a regime	Qualities
Political institutions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The ruling party is checked by other political groups 2. Legislature has power to overrule executive decisions 3. Merit-based selection of government leaders 4. The ruling party has little constraint in mobilizing societal resources 5. Highly centralized government 6. Government must consult experts on policy proposals 7. Transparency in the government's decision-making process
Societal-political outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Social stability 9. Government policy has high continuity
Political leaders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. National leaders stand up for national interests in foreign affairs 11. Local officials execute orders from the center with high efficiency
Individual rights and freedom	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Effective protection of private property rights 13. Legal institutions protect the freedom of speech 14. Effective protection of citizen safety from arbitrary state repression
Socio-economic outcomes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 15. Steady growth of national economy 16. Good provision of public goods (e.g. education and health care)

2 Appendix: Survey sample

2.1 Descriptive statistics of online survey sample

2.2 Reweighting online survey sample

To achieve better representativeness across demographics, we resampled 400 respondents⁴² from the original online sample using inverse probability reweighting. The joint distribution of gender, age cohorts, and province in the reweighted sample match the urban population distribution in the 2018 *Chinese Statistical Yearbook*. Since nearly 90% of our online participants come from urban areas, we focus on the urban population characteristics in reweighting.

Table 6 compares the original sample, reweighted sample, and the Chinese urban population. Table 6 shows that compared to the original sample, the reweighted sample is

⁴²Since our original sample has a limited size (1354 respondents), resampling over 400 participants would make the reweighted data statistically indistinguishable from the original sample on most sociodemographic characteristics.

Table 4: Undesirable Qualities of A Political Regime

Areas of a regime	Qualities
Political institutions	1. Legislative gridlock 2. Too frequent turnover of executives 3. A low bar for political groups that can contest for ruling power legally 4. Government has the power to manipulate judiciary decisions
Societal-political outcomes	5. Social instability 6. Political conflicts are resolved violently 7. Tyranny of the majority 8. There exist political extremist groups
Political leaders	9. Corrupt bureaucrats 10. Incompetent political instigators take office
Individual rights and freedom	11. Weak protection of private property 12. No legal institution protects the freedom of speech 13. Government can repress the mass without constraints
Socio-economic outcomes	14. Economic inequality 15. Decline of the national economy 16. Bad provision of public goods (e.g. education and health care)

substantially closer to the urban population on multiple key socio-demographic characteristics such as age and geographic location.

Table 7 compares all results presented in the paper about NDCs (size, political demands, uncertainty level, and socio-demographic features) between the original sample and the reweighed sample. It shows that there is no significant difference in any of these results between the two samples. This suggests that results from our original sample may be generalizable to the urban population of China.

2.3 Comparing interview sample and online survey sample

Table 8 compares the interview and survey samples on socio-demographic characteristics that are collected in both samples. It shows that the two samples are statistically indistinguishable on most personal characteristics.

Table 5: Characteristics of Survey Participants

	Survey participants	Chinese adult population	Chinese Internet population
Female	42.3%	48.8%	47.3%
Urban	87.5%	58.5%	73.3%
By age group			
≤19	0.4%	1.1%	21.6%
20-29	19.3%	24.7%	26.8%
30-39	33.1%	24.6%	23.5%
40-49	36.9%	27.7%	15.6%
≥50	10.3%	21.9%	12.5%
By region			
Eastern China	71.4%	46.2%	53.3%
Central China	14.4%	26.6%	23.1%
Western China	14.2%	27.2%	23.6%
By education			
< high school	2.9%	68.6%	56.9%
High school	11.4%	17.6%	24.5%
College or above	85.7%	13.9%	18.6%

Notes: Data about Chinese adult population (18+) are from *Chinese Statistical Yearbook 2018* (<https://bit.ly/3xWxOTH>). Data about Chinese Internet user population are from *The 43rd Statistical Report of Internet Development in China, 2018* (<https://bit.ly/2v8nRnj>). East provinces include: Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong, Hainan, Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang. Central provinces include: Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei and Hunan. West provinces include: Neimenggu, Guangxi, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang. This categorization comes from <http://bit.ly/2pS0ygQ>.

Table 6: Original sample vs. reweighed sample

	Original sample	Reweighted sample	Chinese urban population
Female	42.3%	45.8%	48.6%
By age group			
≤ 19	0.4%	0.5%	0.9%
20-29	19.3%	15.3%	17.6%
30-39	33.1%	24.0%	23.5%
≥ 40	47.2%	60.2%	58.0%
By region			
Eastern China	71.4%	67.3%	61.1%
Central China	14.4%	19.8%	21.6%
Western China	14.2%	12.9%	17.3%
By education			
< high school	2.9%	3.5%	51.1%
High school	11.4%	15.0%	23.9%
College or above	85.8%	81.5%	25.0%

Notes: Data about Chinese urban population (18+) are from *Chinese Statistical Yearbook 2018* (<https://bit.ly/3xWxOTH>). The categorization of Eastern, Central, and Western provinces are the same as Table 5.

3 Appendix: Details of factor analysis

3.1 Principal component analysis

We confirm that the observed rankings of the 32 qualities are organized in a non-random manner by conducting a principal component analysis (PCA). Figure 7 shows the scree plot. The left panel displays the eigenvalue of each principal component (PC). The right panel displays the percentage of variation each PC explains in the normalized data.⁴³ Figure 7 shows that the first 13 PCs have eigenvalues bigger than 1, which is the variance of each normalized observed variable. In particular, the first four PCs explain considerably larger variation of the observed data than the rest of PCs. The first four PCs explain 10%,

⁴³We normalized each observed variable by subtracting its mean from the data and then dividing by its standard deviation. So, the total variance after normalization equals 32, the number of observed variables.

Table 7: Survey Results in the original sample vs. Results in the reweighed sample

	Original sample	Reweighted sample	P-value
Proportion of NDCs	0.167	0.175	0.708
Uncertainty level of NDCs	0.438	0.386	0.438
NDCs' demands of a regime			
Desire for social stability	-0.118	-0.165	0.674
Desire for individual freedom	-0.035	-0.029	0.931
Desire for economic development	-0.091	-0.140	0.660
NDCs' personal characteristics			
Male	0.633	0.671	0.553
Aged over 30	0.695	0.743	0.431
Eastern China (most developed region)	0.774	0.671	0.106
Work experience over 10 years	0.554	0.647	0.170
CCP membership	0.181	0.143	0.436
Bachelor degree	0.872	0.800	0.180
Major in social science / humanities	0.358	0.276	0.230
Frequent consumption of domestic media	0.898	0.914	0.683
Frequent consumption of foreign media	0.416	0.457	0.548
Observations	1,354	400	-

Notes: Political demands are values on latent factors. All other entries are proportions.

7%, 5%, and 5% of the variation, respectively.

3.2 Confirmatory factor analysis

Dimensionality Given the five areas of regime qualities asked in the survey, there are a total of 52 possible models, allowing for models from one to five dimensions. Since we have ordinal data, we use the Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) estimator to estimate CFA models (Li 2016).

We run a complete search of all 52 models and select the model that has the best fitness statistics. 24 of the 52 models are valid, which means these model converge and their estimated variance-covariance matrices of the latent factors are positive definite.⁴⁴ Table 9

⁴⁴If the estimated variance-covariance matrix is not positive definite, that indicates some of the latent factors are highly collinear and should be collapsed into a single factor.

Table 8: Interview sample vs. survey sample

	Survey participants	Interview participants	p-value
Work in public sector	35.2%	25.8%	0.11
Male	57.7%	32.3%	0.01
By region			
Eastern China	70.8%	74.0%	0.61
Central China	14.1%	8.0%	0.12
Western China	15.1%	18.0%	0.49
Observations	1,354	62	-

Notes: Public sector includes government bureaucracies and their affiliated institutions (e.g. public schools and state-owned enterprises). The categorization of Eastern, Central, and Western provinces are the same as Table 5.

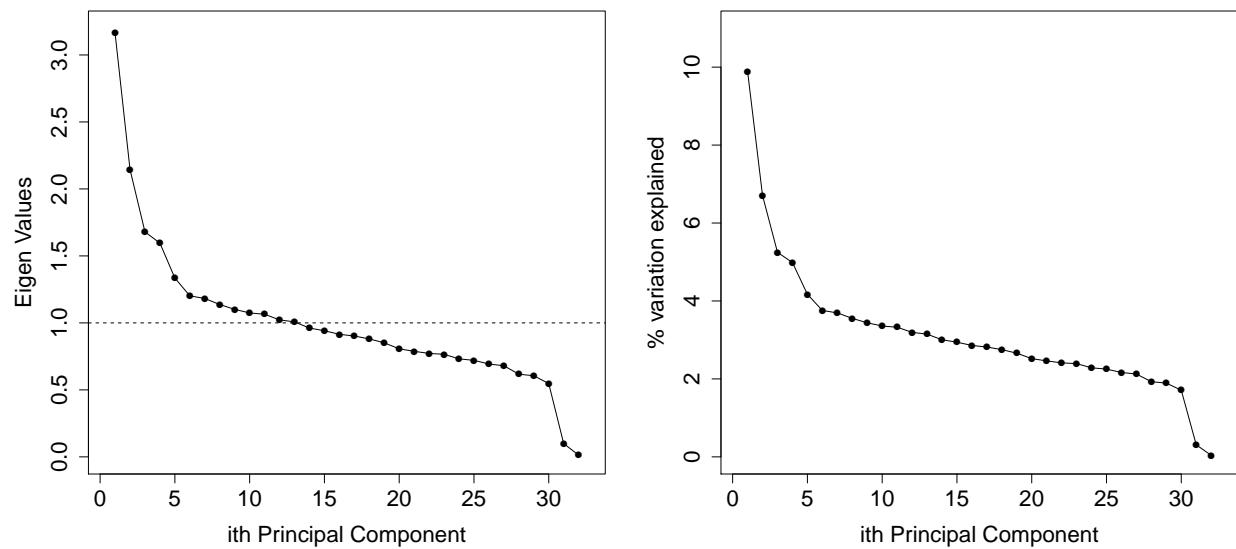


Figure 7: Scree Plot

presents the fitness statistics of the best valid model of each dimension (#dim), including measures of absolute fit (χ^2 and RMSEA) and measures of relative fit (CFI or Comparative fix index, and TLI or Tucker-Lewis Index). It shows that a three-dimensional model (Model A) best describes the configuration of people's demands of a political regime.

Table 9: CFA Model Selection

	#dim	χ^2	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	$\Delta\chi^2$	p-value
Model A	3	3509	0.590	0.559	0.070		
Model B	4	3618	0.575	0.539	0.072		
Model C	2	3684	0.566	0.535	0.072	175	0.000
Model D	1	4097	0.511	0.477	0.076	588	0.000

Notes: The chi-square difference test (last two columns) shows that Model A has significantly better fit than Models C and D. The best model of 4 dimensions (Model B) is not a nested model of Model A. So, the chi-square test is not applicable to test if they are distinguishable. We determine Model A is better than Model B because A has bigger CFI and TLI, as well as smaller RMSEA.

Substantive meaning of latent traits The first dimension of Model A, which we refer to as *desire for social stability*, includes qualities of three areas in Tables 3 and 4: political institutions, societal-political outcomes, and political leaders. The CFA estimates of this first latent factor, as well as their 95% confidence intervals, are shown in Figure 8. Each coefficient represents the standard deviation increase (or decrease if the sign is negative) in the ranking for the observed quality due to one standard-deviation increase in this first latent factor. Figure 8 shows that people who care more about social stability tend to care less about having inclusive political institutions (e.g. legislative check over executive).

The second dimension of Model A, which we refer to as *desire for individual rights and freedom*, includes qualities of this area in Tables 3 and 4. The CFA estimates of this second latent factor, as well as their 95% confidence intervals, are shown in Figure 9. It shows that people who desire more protection of private property also tend to desire more constraints of government repression (i.e. protection of individual's safety).

The third dimension of Model A, which we refer to as *desire for economic development*, includes qualities of the area of socio-economic outcomes in Tables 3 and 4. The

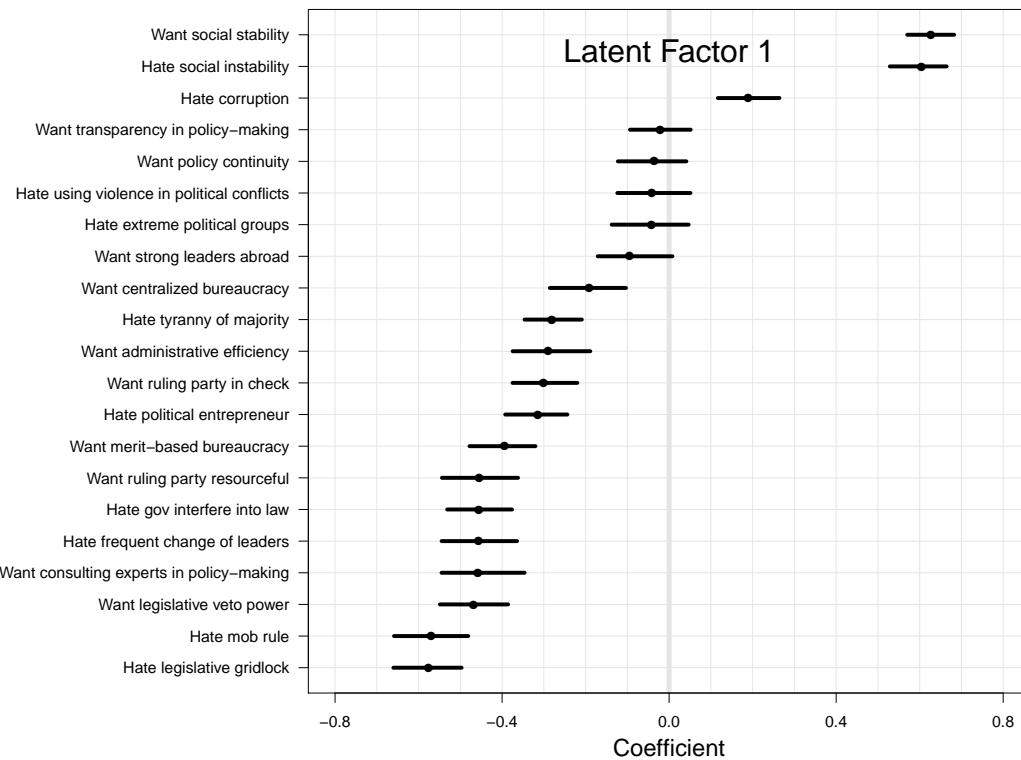


Figure 8: CFA Coefficients: First Latent Factor

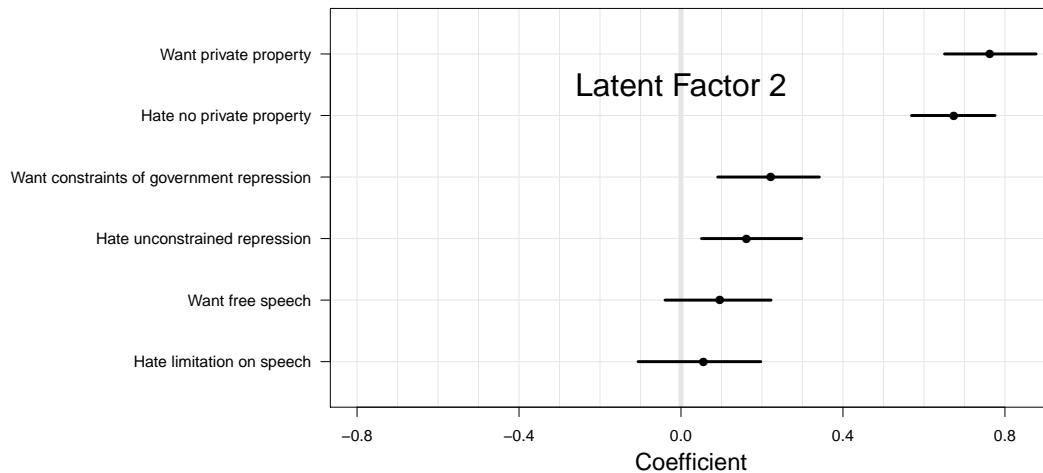


Figure 9: CFA Coefficients: Second Latent Factor

CFA estimates of this third latent factor, as well as their 95% confidence intervals, are shown in Figure 10. This figure shows that people who care more about public goods also tend to care more about economic growth and economic equality.

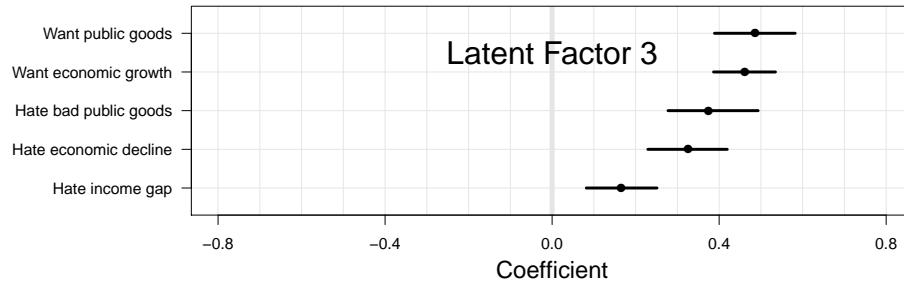


Figure 10: CFA Coefficients: Third Latent Factor

4 Appendix: Details about the source of divergence among regime opponents

4.1 Socio-demographic profile of NDCs

Table 10 presents the summary statistics of NDCs, democracy supporters (DEM), and status quo supporters (CCP). The first three columns present the mean values in each group. The last two columns present p-values from t-tests between NDCs vs. democracy supporters and between NDCs vs. status quo supporters.

4.2 Robustness checks on predictors of NDC

1) Using alternative measures of economic status Table 11 shows that the results in Table 1 stays qualitatively unchanged when using three alternative measures to assess a respondent's economic status: GDP per capita in the respondent's current province, GDP per capita in the person's Hukou province, and whether the respondent was born after economic reform (1980).

2) Predicting NDC status among regime opponents Table 12 and Table 13 present the effects of the three predictors—1) economic status; 2) exposure to CCP propaganda; 3) consumption of foreign information—on the probability of being a NDC among regime opponents. In both tables, the outcome is a binary indicator that takes on the value of 1 if

Table 10: Socio-demographic Profiles

	NDCs	Democracy supporters	Status quo supporters	p-value (NDC vs. DEM)	p-value (NDC vs. CCP)
Born after 1980	0.64	0.51	0.43	<0.01	<0.001
Work experience over 10 years	0.54	0.64	0.68	0.03	<0.001
Economically developed region (East China)	0.77	0.71	0.68	0.09	0.01
Frequent consumption of domestic media	0.90	0.87	0.88	0.25	0.47
CCP membership	0.18	0.10	0.14	0.01	0.12
Frequent consumption of foreign political news	0.19	0.20	0.12	0.85	<0.02
Frequent consumption of foreign media	0.42	0.48	0.25	0.14	<0.001
Bachelor degree	0.87	0.89	0.82	0.44	0.04
Major in social science / humanities	0.36	0.34	0.28	0.73	0.04
Employed in private sector	0.48	0.55	0.48	0.12	0.98
Employed in foreign sector / joint ventures	0.14	0.14	0.13	0.93	0.74
Male	0.63	0.54	0.56	0.04	0.06

Notes: Entries in the table are proportions. Frequent media consumption means several times a day. East China provinces are Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong, Hainan, Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang.

the respondent is a NDC and 0 if the respondent is a democracy supporter. Consistent with the results when we use multinomial regression, Tables 12 and 13 show that residing in the economically developed region increases the likelihood of being a NDC among regime opponents in all models, whereas consumption of the CCP propaganda or foreign media have no effect at any conventional level after controlling for other personal characteristics of respondents.

Table 11: Predictors of NDCs using alternative measures

	(1)	(2)	(3)
GDP per capita in current province (in 100,000 RMB)	0.363* (0.207)		
GDP per capita in Hukou province (in 100,000 RMB)		0.343* (0.208)	
Born after 1980			0.415** (0.196)
Frequent consumption of CCP media	0.370 (0.276)	0.358 (0.276)	0.413 (0.283)
Frequent consumption of foreign media	-0.277 (0.181)	-0.265 (0.180)	-0.306 (0.189)
Province fixed-effects	N	N	Y
Controls	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1354	1354	1354

Notes: Outcome is a nominal variable that has four levels. Frequent media consumption means several times a day. All columns use multinomial logistic regression and coefficients are marginal effects on the log odds of being NDC vs. Democrat. Controls include respondents' age, gender, education level, CCP membership, and employment sector.*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table 12: Predictors of NDC among regime opponents

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Economically developed region	0.079* (0.045)			0.081* (0.045)	0.082* (0.044)
Frequent consumption of CCP media		0.084 (0.058)		0.066 (0.062)	0.081 (0.058)
Frequent consumption of foreign media			-0.064 (0.041)	-0.064 (0.041)	-0.066 (0.041)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Age fixed-effects	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Observations	564	564	564	564	564

Notes: Outcome is a binary indicator that takes on the value of 1 if the respondent is a NDC, and 0 if the respondent is a democracy supporter. Economically developed region means living in Eastern China provinces. Frequent media consumption means several times a day. All columns use logistic model and coefficients are marginal effects on the probability of being a NDC. Robust standard errors are clustered at the province \times age level. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table 13: Predictors of NDCs among regime opponents using alternative measures

	(1) OLS	(2) Logit	(3) OLS	(4) Logit	(5) OLS	(6) Logit
GDP per capita in current province (in 100,000 RMB)	0.088* (0.053)	0.088* (0.050)				
GDP per capita in Hukou province (in 100,000 RMB)			0.084* (0.050)	0.085* (0.050)		
Born after 1980					0.076* (0.044)	0.077* (0.043)
Frequent consumption of CCP media	0.075 (0.060)	0.074 (0.061)	0.074 (0.060)	0.073 (0.061)	0.093 (0.061)	0.093 (0.058)
Frequent consumption of foreign media	-0.066 (0.043)	-0.065 (0.042)	-0.062 (0.042)	-0.062 (0.042)	-0.062 (0.045)	-0.062 (0.042)
Province fixed-effects	N	N	N	N	Y	Y
Age fixed-effects	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	564	564	564	564	564	564

Notes: Outcome is a binary indicator that takes on the value of 1 if the respondent is a NDC, and 0 if the respondent is a democracy supporter. Controls include respondents' gender, education level, CCP membership, and employment sector. Robust standard errors are clustered at the province \times age level. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

3) Effect of political curriculum reform on NDC Table 14 shows that while the new political curriculum in high school adds substantial materials criticizing Western-style democracy, this new curriculum has no effect on the probability of being a NDC. Column (1) replicates the main regression model in Cantoni et al. (2017),⁴⁵ which uses a generalized difference-in-difference framework by controlling for age fixed-effects and province fixed-effects. Column (2) adds the same controls as in our main regression models (Table 1), including respondents’ gender, employment sector, education level, and CCP membership.

Table 14: Effect of political curriculum reform on NDC

	(1)	(2)
New curriculum	-0.072 (0.102)	-0.086 (0.101)
Controls	N	Y
Age fixed-effects	Y	Y
Province fixed-effects	Y	Y
Observations	552	552

Notes: Outcome is a binary indicator that takes on the value of 1 if the respondent is a NDC, and 0 if the respondent is a democracy supporter. Controls include respondents’ gender, employment sector, education level, and CCP membership. All columns use linear model. Robust standard errors are clustered at the province \times age level. * $p<0.1$; ** $p<0.05$; *** $p<0.01$.

5 Appendix: Dual supporters for autocracy and democracy

To understand why 237 respondents report simultaneous support for the CCP regime and multi-party democracy in the crosswise model, we compare these dual supporters with the rest of the sample regarding their responses to other questions in the survey. Table 15 presents the mean values of dual supporters on socio-demographic variables measured in the survey (column 1), as well as the p-values from t-tests between the dual supporters vs. democracy supporters (DEM), dual supporters vs. status quo supporters (CCP), and dual

⁴⁵Cantoni, Davide, Yuyu Chen, David Y Yang, Noam Yuchtman and Y Jane Zhang. 2017. “Curriculum and ideology.” *Journal of Political Economy* 125(2):338–392.

supporters vs. NDCs, respectively (columns 2-4).

Table 15: Characteristics of dual supporters

	Dual supporter (Dual)	P-value Dual vs. DEM	P-value Dual vs. CCP	P-value Dual vs. NDC
Male	0.608	0.131	0.219	0.578
Age (years)	38.7	0.484	0.130	0.018
Work experience over 10 years	0.675	0.332	0.895	0.004
CCP membership	0.118	0.510	0.495	0.057
Bachelor degree	0.882	0.666	0.019	0.740
Major in social science / humanities	0.316	0.883	0.012	0.961
Frequent consumption of domestic media	0.857	0.725	0.366	0.172
Frequent consumption of foreign media	0.359	0.291	0.011	0.445
By region				
Eastern China (most developed region)	0.705	0.828	0.458	0.088
Central China	0.143	0.881	0.877	0.954
Western China (most underdeveloped region)	0.148	0.366	0.296	0.013

Notes: Entries are proportions, except that age is in years. Frequent consumption of media means watching/reading news several times a day.

Table 15 shows that the dual supporters are closest to democracy supporters in terms of socio-demographic background. There is no significant difference on any socio-demographic variable between dual supporters and democrats. Instead, dual supporters differ significantly from the CCP supporters on three socio-demographic variables at 0.05 level. Dual supporters also differ significantly from NDCs on three socio-demographic variables at 0.05 level and on another two demographic variables at 0.1 level.