

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

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Abstract

Opponents of authoritarian regimes are often assumed to desire democracy in place of the current regime. In this paper, we show that authoritarian dissidents hold divergent attitudes towards democracy and identify a key bloc within the regime opposition: “non-democratic critics” (NDCs) or those who are dissatisfied with the current regime but resist adopting democracy. We develop the concept of NDCs, theorize why they exist and how they differ from supporters of democracy and the status quo, 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 and status quo supporters, NDCs have a distinct set of political and socio-economic demands and higher uncertainty about the performance of democracy in meeting these demands. We also find that NDCs are economically better-off than democracy supporters, suggesting that unequal access to the benefits of state-led economic development may motivate differing attitudes toward democracy among regime opponents. These findings put forth an important explanation for why the world’s largest authoritarian regime endures—those who oppose the regime have divergent visions of what political system should be adopted in its place.

Keywords: public opinion, regime opposition, autocracy, democracy, China

Word Count: 11,122

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1 Introduction

Historically, autocracy, rather than democracy, has been the predominant political order of the world. Today, autocracies still rule in 94 countries, govern nearly 60 percent of the world's population, and occupy geo-politically critical regions (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2018). A prevailing factor in explaining this authoritarian durability is mass support (Bleck and Michelitch 2017; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Linz 2000). Dissidents, on the other hand, are portrayed as threats to regime survival because they are generally assumed to desire democracy in place of the status quo.¹ Yet, prior literature has not extensively explored the political preferences of authoritarian critics.² When people say they oppose the status quo authoritarian regime, what (if any) alternative political system do they believe should replace the status quo?

Often, the implicit (or explicit) assumption among academics and policy makers has been that the answer is democracy. Previous research contends that leaders of uprisings, insurgencies, and opposition parties in authoritarian regimes must promise democratization in order to attract mass support (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2018; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994). For example, during the Arab Spring, researchers, politicians, and media all emphasized the democratic demands of protesters (CNN 2011; Diamond 2011; Quinn 2012; Sakbani 2011; Stepan and Linz 2013). Similarly, most scholarly and media analyses of the 2022 zero-Covid protests in China focus on the possibility for democratization but rarely delve into the complexities of political demands among the protesters (Davidson 2022; French 2022; Perrigo 2022; Truex 2022; Westfall 2022).

While dissidents may harshly criticize the status quo authoritarian regime, this does not necessarily indicate support for democracy. Instead, regime opponents may have divergent visions on what alternative system they desire. Heterogeneous attitudes towards democracy among regime opponents have important implications for authoritarian durability. Dissidents' differing political preferences can contribute to sustained authoritarian rule by dampening prospects for collective action (Frye and Borisova 2019). For regime critics who are democrats, coordination is easier to achieve since they all envi-

sion a democratic system in place of the status quo (Przeworski 1991; Weingast 1997). Non-democratic critics, on the other hand, may have little interest in joining a movement for democracy. Even if these two blocs of opponents form a coalition to overthrow the status quo autocracy, their disagreement over the country's political future can undermine this coalition, leading to post-revolutionary conflicts and even authoritarian backsliding (Beissinger 2013).

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 in their country. 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 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime in China, nearly half (40%) are NDCs—dissidents who also reject adopting a multi-party democratic system in China. We find support for two sources of NDCs' simultaneous dissatisfaction with democracy and the current autocracy: first, NDCs have a fundamentally different set of demands from government 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,³ 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 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 democracy and the current CCP regime. Finally, we find that differing experiences of China's economic development are most likely to explain the differing attitudes toward democracy among regime 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 CCP propaganda.

These results shed new lights on the diversity of political preferences among dissidents of authoritarian regimes. 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 among NDCs and democrats.

Additionally, our findings add nuance to the debate around regime type and good governance. We show that for authoritarian critics, a multi-party electoral system does not necessarily equal good governance. This implies that citizens do not consider their status quo autocracy a bad government simply because it has no multi-party elections. This differs from the performance legitimacy theory, which often assumes that autocracies must search for other sources of legitimacy due to their lack of democratic procedures (Dickson 2016; Zhao 2016). Rather, our results suggest that citizens evaluate an autocracy's political system using a more complex set of metrics beyond simply the presence of multi-party elections. When people say they dislike the system, they mean it does not meet their standards for a good government (e.g., being transparent and effective), but they are not necessarily expressing an inherent desire for a multi-party democracy.

The 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 NDCs 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 the source of their political attitudes. Section 6 concludes and discusses additional implications of this research.

2 Theoretical Framework and Expectations

In this section, we theorize the concept of non-democratic critics in authoritarian regimes and lay out testable implications of this theory. To do so, we first make clear our definition of regime support and opposition. We then theorize that demands and uncertainty are the two sources of NDC's divergence from both status quo supporters and democracy supporters. Finally, from this framework we derive the socio-economic microfoundations of NDCs' simultaneous opposition to democracy and status quo autocracy.

2.1 Conceptualizing regime support

There are different layers to regime support (Chapman et al. 2023). 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) decompose 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. A more specific level is confidence in particular regime institutions 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-term factors such as economic or public health crisis, and thus more diffuse support 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 in this paper 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 sup-

port for specific incumbent officials. 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,⁴ 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 a political 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 for national identity or general values of authoritarianism and democracy are too broad, and we may fail to capture 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, we theorize four possible groups in an authoritarian public as shown in Table 1: those who support the status quo authoritarian

	Oppose status quo autocracy	Support status quo autocracy
Oppose Democracy	NDC	Status quo supporter
Support Democracy	Democracy supporter	Dual supporter

Table 1: Subgroups in an authoritarian public

system and oppose a multi-party democratic system are true status quo supporters; those who oppose the status quo autocracy and support multi-party democracy (MPD) are true democracy supporters; those who show support for both the current autocracy and MPD are dual supporters; finally, NDCs are the segment of the public who show simultaneous opposition to the status quo autocracy and multi-party democracy.

Note that the definition of regime support in this paper implies that NDCs do not necessarily reject all values of authoritarianism or all values of democracy. Specifically, we conceive of 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 autocracy nor a multi-party democracy is able to deliver

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 authoritarian system);⁵ 3) NDCs who reject both values of authoritarianism and values of democracy.⁶

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” when opportunities for regime change emerge and ally with either regime supporters or democratic activists. While this is plausible, studies of political psychology have shown that when people become disillusioned with the ideology of a group, the first action they would take is to disengage from activities organized by that group (Bjørgero 2011; Kenney and Chernov Hwang 2021; Meirowitz and Tucker 2013). Importantly, NDCs’ disagreement with democrats can split the anti-regime bloc and dampen prospects for regime transition.

Hypothesis 1: Among opponents of an authoritarian regime, there exists a subset who do not support having a multi-party democratic system in their country (i.e. non-democratic critics of the regime).

2.2 Explaining the four subgroups in authoritarian public

Since we define regime support (opposition) as attitude on a regime’s overall political system, we identify the source of regime views of the four groups in Table 1 by reviewing what constitutes citizens’ attitude toward 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 political system. 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 are what the individual believes a regime *should* and *should not* do for its citizens. The second factor that shapes citizen attitude is certainty of whether the system in question can “conform to” or satisfy the person’s demands. In this way, we theorize that the four groups in an authoritarian public have differing views towards the current regime and multi-party democracy for two reasons. First, the four groups have differing demands or

expectations of a political system. Second, they have different levels of uncertainty about whether multi-party democracy—a political system they have little first-hand experience living in—could outperform the status quo system in fulfilling their demands.

Differing demands The literature on political legitimacy suggests that public support for a regime may rest on the regime’s political institutions and procedures (Fishkin 1991; Tang 2016), on its socio-economic performance (Wintrobe 1998; Zhao 2009), or on a combination of both (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2018; Pan and Xu 2018). Based on this, we theorize two major types of demands that a citizen makes from a regime: political institutions and socio-economic outcomes. Figure 1 represents these two types of demands in a two-dimensional space. On the X-axis, a higher value means stronger preference for inclusive political institutions, such as free elections between political parties and institutionalized protection of freedom of expression. On the Y-axis, a higher value means stronger desire for positive socio-economic outcomes such as economic development and social stability. We conceptualize that a citizen’s demand of a regime is represented as a

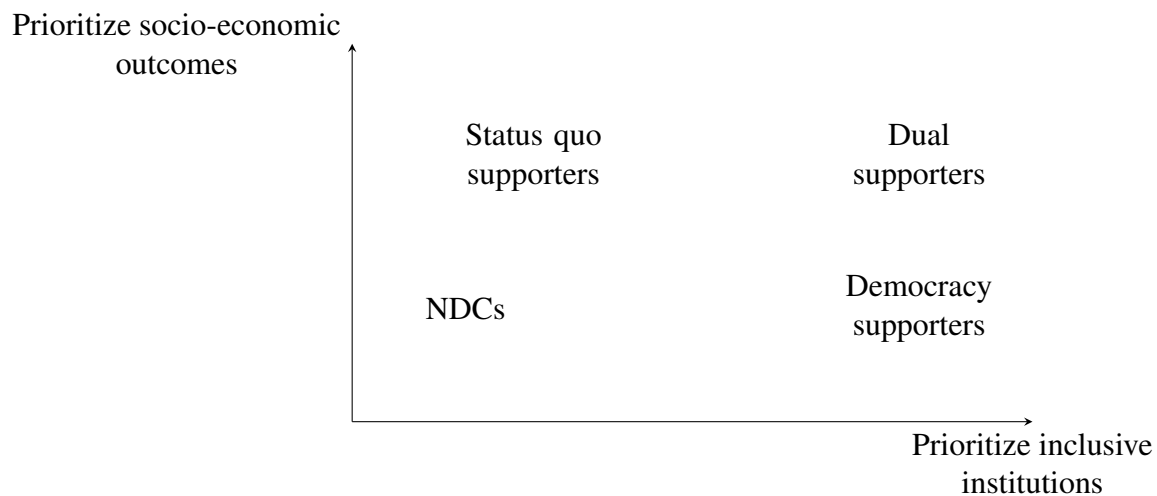


Figure 1: Theoretical expectation of demands

vector of two elements, where each element is a score the person assigns to each of these two dimensions to indicate how important that dimension is to them.

In this way, we theorize that the four subgroups of an authoritarian public differ, on average, in their vectors of demands from a political regime. Figure 1 lays out our expectation for the four groups’ demands. Previous research suggests that autocracies primarily

legitimize their rule based on socio-economic performance (Chu 2013; Dickson 2016; Epstein 1984; Gilley 2006; Holbig and Gilley 2010; Levi 1997; Nathan 2020), while democracies gain public support based mainly on their institutions and procedures (Dahl 1956; Munck 2016; North and Weingast 1989; Schumpeter 1942). Recent work in authoritarian politics also suggests that autocrats use quasi-democratic institutions and procedures (e.g., elections, online participation channels) in an attempt to bolster regime legitimacy (Chapman 2024; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Guriev and Treisman 2019). To date, the empirical evidence on whether these participatory institutions lead to regime support is mixed—while some find that participation in or even awareness of these institutions increases regime support for certain subgroups (Chapman 2021; Rhodes-Purdy 2017; Truex 2017), others find that this positive effect may be short-lived (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Gueorguiev 2021; Zhang 2022).

Therefore, we expect that supporters of the status quo autocracy primarily prioritize the delivery of socio-economic outcomes with a lower demand for inclusive institutions compared to democracy supporters and dual supporters. In contrast, democrats prioritize inclusive political institutions and emphasize less on socio-economic benefits. Dual supporters value the merits of both democracy and the current autocracy, so we expect that they have a strong desire for both inclusive institutions and material outcomes. Finally, NDCs dislike both democracy and the status quo autocracy, which implies that they may have a relatively low demand for inclusive institutions and a low demand for socio-economic outcomes.

Hypothesis 2a: Compared to status quo supporters, NDCs have, on average, a lower demand for positive socio-economic outcomes.

Hypothesis 2b: Compared to democracy supporters, NDCs have, on average, a lower demand for inclusive political institutions.

Hypothesis 2c: Compared to dual supporters, NDCs have, on average, a lower demand for positive socio-economic outcomes and a lower demand for inclusive institutions.

Uncertainty Conditioning on an individual's demands, uncertainty about the ability of a regime to satisfy those demands also plays a role in shaping the person's support for the regime. Ordinary citizens may have little uncertainty about whether the status quo authoritarian system meets their expectation since they live in the system every day. However, studies have shown that authoritarian public often have varying levels of uncertainty regarding the ability of a democratic system to create wealth, exercise fair treatment of citizens, and empower citizens in policy formulation (Huang 2015; Mishler and Rose 1997). Research on uncertainty and public opinion suggests that in general, the more uncertain an individual is about the performance of a political system, the less likely the person will prefer that system over alternatives (Van Dalen, De Vreese and Albæk 2016; McGraw, Hasecke and Conger 2003; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Among the four subgroups of an authoritarian public, supporters of the status quo autocracy and supporters of democracy each has a strict regime preference. Thus, we infer that these two groups have low uncertainty regarding the performance of democracy relative to the current autocracy. Status quo supporters believe for certain that democracy does less well than the status quo in delivering their demands, while democrats have high certainty that democracy does better than the status quo. In contrast, NDCs and dual supporters have no clear preference between the two regimes. So, we theorize that these two groups have a high level of uncertainty regarding whether a democratic system can outperform the current autocracy in fulfilling their demands.

Hypothesis 3: Compared to status quo supporters and democracy supporters, NDCs and dual supporters each have, on average, a higher level of uncertainty regarding the performance of democracy relative to the status quo regime in satisfying their demands.

2.3 Microfoundations of demands and uncertainty

We have theorized that the four groups in authoritarian public diverge in their regime views because they have differing demands and differing levels of uncertainty. Then, what shapes people's demand and uncertainty? In this section, we propose the socio-economic microfoundations that differentiate the political views of the four groups.

Economic beneficiary of the current autocracy Existing literature on authoritarian public opinion suggests that the more dependent an individual is on material benefits provided by the regime, such as through public sector employment and high economic status under state-led growth, the more emphasis this person will place on material outcomes when evaluating a political system (Chen 2004; Frye 2022; Rosenfeld 2017; Zhao 2009). For example, people living in the most developed region of China (Eastern provinces) are more economically dependent on the regime since the prosperity of this region is largely due to preferential treatment by the Chinese government, such as subsidies and more liberal economic policies. Hence, when evaluating multi-party democracy, people living in this region tend to be more concerned about their economic payoff under a multi-party system (Yang and Zhao 2015). Accordingly, we theorize that the greater an individual is an economic beneficiary of their status quo regime, the more they will prioritize positive socio-economic outcomes (e.g., economic growth and public goods) when assessing a regime. Since we expect that NDCs demand less from government on socio-economic outcomes compared to supporters of the status quo autocracy and dual supporters, we expect that NDCs are less dependent on regime-provided economic benefits compared to these two groups.

Access to information outside regime control Conventional wisdom holds that more access to information outside the regime's control, through foreign media and higher education, leads to more critical assessments of the regime and demand for institutions that check and balance the power of the status quo ruler (Huntington 2006; Levitsky and Way 2006). Relatedly, prior research suggests that exposure to information outside the regime control can cultivate liberal values like respect for diversity and hence foster support for protection of individual rights and freedom (Inglehart 1997; Welzel 2013). Therefore, we theorize that an individual's demand for inclusive political institutions increases in their access to outside information. Since we expect that NDCs have a weaker demand for inclusive institutions compared to supporters of democracy and dual supporters, we expect that NDCs have less access to information outside the current regime's control compared to democrats and dual supporters.

Access to free information can also impact the level of uncertainty citizens attach to how well a multi-party democratic system delivers their demands compared to the status quo. Specifically, we propose that the level of uncertainty has an inverted U-shape relationship with access to information. When an individual has little or no access to outside information, regime propaganda is their only source of information, which can make the person believe for certain that the status quo outperforms democracy in satisfying their demands. Hence, we expect that supporters of the status quo autocracy have low access to free information. On the other hand, when an individual has very high exposure to information outside the dictator's control, prior literature suggests that they will have a deep knowledge of democracy and hence, high certainty that democracy outperforms the status quo in improving their well-being (Huntington 2006; Inglehart 1997). Thus, we expect that democracy supporters have high access to free information.

Finally, when an individual has a middle level of access to free information, we propose that they will have higher uncertainty about the relative performance of democracy vs. the status quo. Political psychologists find that when people begin to access new information that contradicts their prior beliefs, they become more uncertain about their political views because they now have opposing considerations on an issue (Barker and Hansen 2005; McGraw, Hasecke and Conger 2003; Turgeon 2009). Similarly, we theorize that some exposure to information outside the autocrat's control can make people become more critical of the status quo, yet compared to those who get high exposure to free information, this middle group does not receive adequate information that makes them sufficiently confident that democracy is better than the status quo. Since we expect that NDCs and dual supporters have higher uncertainty compared to democrats and regime supporters, we expect that these two groups have more access to outside information than status quo supporters and have less access to outside information than democracy supporters.

Overall, the discussion above yields three testable implications regarding the socio-economic microfoundations of the four types of people within an authoritarian public:

Hypothesis 4a: Compared to supporters of the status quo autocracy, NDCs have, on average, less economic dependence on the current regime and more access to free infor-

mation outside of the regime's control.

Hypothesis 4b: Compared to supporters of democracy, NDCs have, on average, less access to free information outside of the regime's control.

Hypothesis 4c: Compared to dual supporters, NDCs have, on average, less economic dependence on the status quo regime and less access to free information outside of the regime's control.

3 Interviews with Non-Democratic Critics in China

To assess these implications in China, we first leverage qualitative interviews with ordinary Chinese citizens. We also use patterns identified in these interviews to inform the design of our survey. 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. We obtained consent from all participants and did not record any personally identifying information.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 62 Chinese citizens in 2018. Interviewees are aged 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 our professional and personal connections in China to put interviewees at ease. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and in private, one-on-one settings.⁷

Interviewees were first asked what they think about the current CCP regime. Then, they were asked what they think about China adopting democracy, which was primed to them as a political system that conducts regular and competitive multi-party elections. If an interviewee shows support for the current regime and expresses negative views about China adopting multi-party elections, we categorize the person as a status quo supporter. If an individual expresses negative views to the CCP regime and positive views about adopting multi-party elections, we code this person as a democracy supporter. If one

expresses positive views for both the current regime and multi-party elections, we code this person as a dual supporter. Finally, if an interviewee expresses negative views towards both the current regime and multi-party elections, we categorize this person as a NDC. Without telling interviewees their types, we then asked what qualities they 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.

In this study, we prime all respondents to think of democracy in terms of multi-party elections for two reasons. First, while electoral competition by no means captures all dimensions of democracy, it is generally considered by political scientists as the most foundational and distinguishing feature of democratic systems (Dahl 1971; Przeworski 2000; Schumpeter 1942). Existing literature suggests a variety of definitions and operationalizations of democracy. For example, some scholars advocate that democracy includes not only elections but also the rule of law (Carothers 2002; Munck 2016; Coppedge et al. 2023). Prior surveys find that some people also associate democracy with certain material outcomes like economic equality.⁸ Among these varying conceptualizations, however, free and competitive elections is the most commonly included feature of democracy (for a more detailed review, see Appendix A.2.1). Second, since this research focuses on exploring differing attitudes towards democracy among authoritarian opponents, we endeavor to make people's reported views on democracy comparable. To do so, we prime all respondents to think about this one but foundational democratic institution—multi-party election—when they evaluate democracy.

Among the interviewees, nearly half reported dissatisfaction with the overall performance of the CCP regime and among these regime opponents, half were NDCs (for details, see Appendix A.1.3). The interviews reveal that NDCs have different demands of a political regime compared to status quo supporters and democrats. 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 of these ranked first among NDCs. The top demand reported by NDCs was “transparency in the ruling party's decision-making.” Moreover, NDCs' re-

ported demands show greater diffusion compared to the demands of democrats and CCP supporters. While the most common demand among CCP supporters and democrats was mentioned by more than half of the respective groups, the most common answer among NDCs was mentioned by less than a quarter of NDCs. Compared to democrats, NDCs' higher level of disagreement on what they desire most from a regime may also impede their collective action when opportunities for regime change arise.

The 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 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. Multiple NDCs express views in line with the following quote:

"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 elections can empower citizens in that area. After all, I have never lived under a multi-party democracy. I heard that democratic countries have popular elections and town hall meetings. But I also heard that electoral 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. 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. Note that these opposing considerations on democracy nevertheless show that NDCs have substantive political preferences rather than being ambivalent about everything. For example, the quote above shows that this NDC demands a political system where citizen opinion has a meaningful impact on government decision-making, but the NDC is uncertain whether a multi-party democracy is able to deliver this quality.

In fact, we find that over 90% of NDCs in the interviews gave such two-sided remarks on the ability of democracy in fulfilling their political demands.⁹ These opposing considerations can increase uncertainty about the overall performance of multi-party democracy (Zaller and Feldman 1992), making NDCs reluctant to support democracy despite their dissatisfaction with the current regime.

The interviews further suggest that NDCs in China lack a clear, unified 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 NDCs, over 80% wished to strengthen oversight of CCP leaders. However, most NDCs who answered so said they did not know what form this oversight should take and who should exercise it. While NDCs complained that the current government had too much power with too few constraints, they were also concerned that adding limitations on the ruling party may lead to undesired outcomes, such as low administrative efficiency or excessive competition between parties. One 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 can be emotional and may lack information. 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 answers again demonstrate 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 interviewee quoted above wants citizens to be able to meaningfully influence government decisions, but also desires a strong leader who is able to act against public sentiment at moments when the mass make “emotional” 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 motivation to remove the status quo authoritarian regime.

4 Survey Design

To systematically test the implications of our theoretical framework, we conducted an online survey in China between February 20 and March 8, 2019. Respondents were recruited across the country through a domestic survey firm in China.¹⁰

4.1 Identifying NDCs

We define NDCs as people who are dissatisfied with the current authoritarian system but also reject adopting multi-party democracy. Specifically, in the survey we code a respondent as a NDC if the person *agrees* with the “Oppose autocracy” statement and *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. Respondents who disagree with both these statements are coded as true supporters of the CCP regime. Those who disagree with “Oppose autocracy” statement and agree with the “Support democracy” statement are coded as dual 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” or “respect,” it is close to the classic definition of popular legitimacy of a political system. 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.

We use the phrase “集权制”—the direct translation is “concentration of power”—to describe China’s current authoritarian system. Previous research contends 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 and confirm that ordinary Chinese citizens consider the phrase “concentration of power (集权制)” a fair description of China’s current regime. First, we read prominent academic journals published in China and find that “power concentration (集权)” is used by scholars in China to portray the current system (Chen 2001; Fang 2011; Yang 2014). Second, in our pre-survey interviews, over 85% of interviewees reported that “power concentration” is an important feature of China’s current system when asked about their view on the regime.¹¹ Moreover, we conducted two pilot surveys that use the “oppose autocracy” and “support democracy” statements, and we asked pilot participants if any wording in the questionnaire made them feel uncomfortable or was unclear. 411 Chinese citizens with diverse backgrounds participated in these pilots online.¹² None of them raised 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 safer term to use in domestic surveys compared to other Chinese terms such as “极权” (totalitarian).¹³

On measuring support for democracy, we follow earlier research on China (Li 2011, 2021) and ask respondents about their attitudes toward “multi-party democratic system (民主多党制)” as a proxy of support for democracy. School textbooks and state-owned media in China often use this term to describe multi-party electoral competition and then tell the Chinese public that it is antithetical to China’s single-party system. Like in the interviews (see Section 3), we prime all survey participants to conceptualize democracy in terms of multi-party elections because electoral competition is considered the most foundational feature of democracy in the political science literature. Also, by reminding all respondents to think about the same institutional feature when they evaluate democracy, we hope to make valid comparisons of their views on democracy. A potential concern regarding this instrument is that “multi-party” and “democracy” have been separately used by the CCP regime to describe the eight “democratic parties” in China which are under the firm control of CCP.¹⁴ Using responses in the interviews and survey, we check and confirm that no respondent associates the term “multi-party democracy” with the CCP regime or those eight “democratic parties” in China (see Appendix A.2.1).

The Crosswise Model To elicit truthful answers to the “oppose autocracy” and “support democracy” statements, we use an indirect questioning technique that we adapted from the crosswise model (Gingerich et al. 2015). The main advantage of this technique is that it measures *individual-level* attitudes on the two statements of interest, which enables us to analyze the characteristics of NDCs at the individual level. Below is an example question we used to measure individual attitude 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

In this modified crosswise model (hereafter “crosswise model”), a politically sensitive statement and a non-sensitive statement are presented to respondents in randomized order. The sensitive statement is randomly selected from the “oppose autocracy” and “support democracy” statements. The non-sensitive statement is independently and randomly selected from the two statements below:

- 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.¹⁵

Importantly, by choosing A or B, respondents do not reveal whether they agree with the sensitive statement directly. We ask respondents about the “oppose autocracy” and the “support democracy” statements using two separate crosswise model questions, in a randomized order, at the beginning of the survey. To reduce the possibility that responses to the first question affect responses to the second question, 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 (see Appendix [A.2.2](#)).

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 calculate individual-level support for the “oppose autocracy” statement and for the “support democracy” statement, respectively. To guard against respondents thinking 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 if any question made them feel uncomfortable or was unclear in the end. In their responses, 2 of the 411 pilot participants (0.5%) said they felt worried about answering the political questions truthfully and only one person (0.2%) reported that the format of the crosswise model

was puzzling. This suggests that the crosswise model is comprehensible to the Chinese public and people are generally willing to answer these questions truthfully.

4.2 Measuring demands of government

Our theoretical framework predicts that NDCs have different demands of a political regime compared to status quo supporters, democracy supporters, and dual supporters. 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).¹⁶ 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 each encompass five major aspects of a regime: 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 public support 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 [A.2.3](#).

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 regime in delivering their most desired quality and in avoiding their most undesired quality, respectively, by choosing one option from below:¹⁷

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.

Our framework predicts that compared to CCP supporters and democracy supporters, NDCs are more likely to choose that they cannot tell which regime does better.

4.4 Survey sample

Respondents are Chinese nationals aged 18 or above and were residing in China at the time of the survey. In total, 1,532 people completed the survey and 1,354 of them (88%) passed the attention filter described in Appendix [A.2.2](#).

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 encompasses residents of all 31 provinces in China. As shown in Appendix [A.3](#), respondents vary in education backgrounds and have 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, and to have higher education levels than the general population ([Huang 2015](#); [Huang and Yeh 2019](#)). Thus, we urge caution in generalizing the empirical estimates to the entire Chinese population. That said, the breadth of the sample's sociodemographic 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.¹⁸ To achieve better representativeness, we also construct a reweighed sample of 400 respondents that are representative of China's urban population on province, age, and gender.

We find that all the main results (e.g., size of NDCs) are statistically undifferentiated between the original sample vs. the reweighed sample, indicating that findings of the survey may be generalizable to the Chinese urban population (for details, see Appendix A.3.2).

Furthermore, we 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 A.3.3). 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 regime opponents also reject adopting democracy in China. Figure 2 presents the distribution of responses to the crosswise model questions. The

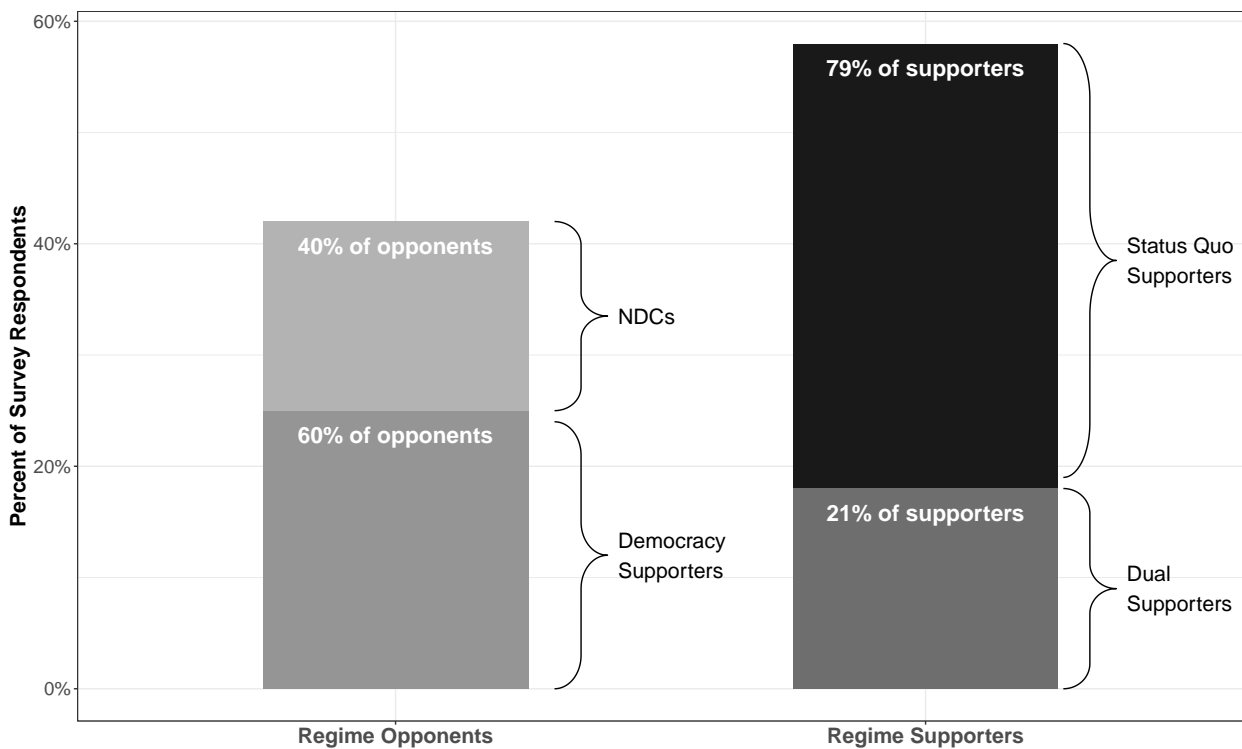


Figure 2: Distribution of political attitudes

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 respondents who passed the attention filter, 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 (40%) 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%. In line with our first hypothesis, nearly half of regime opponents are NDCs.

Among the 790 respondents who report supporting the current regime, 553 are true status quo supporters as they also reject multi-party democracy. The remaining 237 respondents are dual supporters. Dual supporters constitute 18% of all respondents and status quo supporters constitute 40%. We conduct extensive checks for preference falsification and find no evidence that people lie in their political responses (see Appendix A.2.4).

5.1 Decomposing NDCs’ political attitude

Our theoretical framework predicts two sources of NDCs’ simultaneous disillusionment with autocracy and multi-party democracy: 1) NDCs have different demands of a regime compared to status quo supporters, democracy supporters, and dual supporters, respectively; 2) NDCs are more likely to be uncertain than democrats and status quo supporters regarding the relative performance of multi-party democracy at satisfying their demands. The empirical results in part support these expectations.

A distinct profile of demands Respondents 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 undesirable 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 their most desired (un-

desired) quality, 1 if the respondent ranked that quality as their sixth desired (undesired) quality, and 0 if the respondent did not select that quality into their top six. In this way, the re-coded response indicates the priority of each quality to respondents.

We first conduct principal component analysis (PCA) of the observed rankings for the 32 regime qualities and confirm that there are systematic groupings between these reported priorities. We then use confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to identify latent factors underlying the observed rankings (Brown 2014; Pan and Xu 2018) and find that a model of three latent factors best characterizes respondents' reported demands for a political regime. For details, see Appendix A.4.1.

Figure 3 presents the mean values, as well as the 95% confidence intervals, of NDCs,

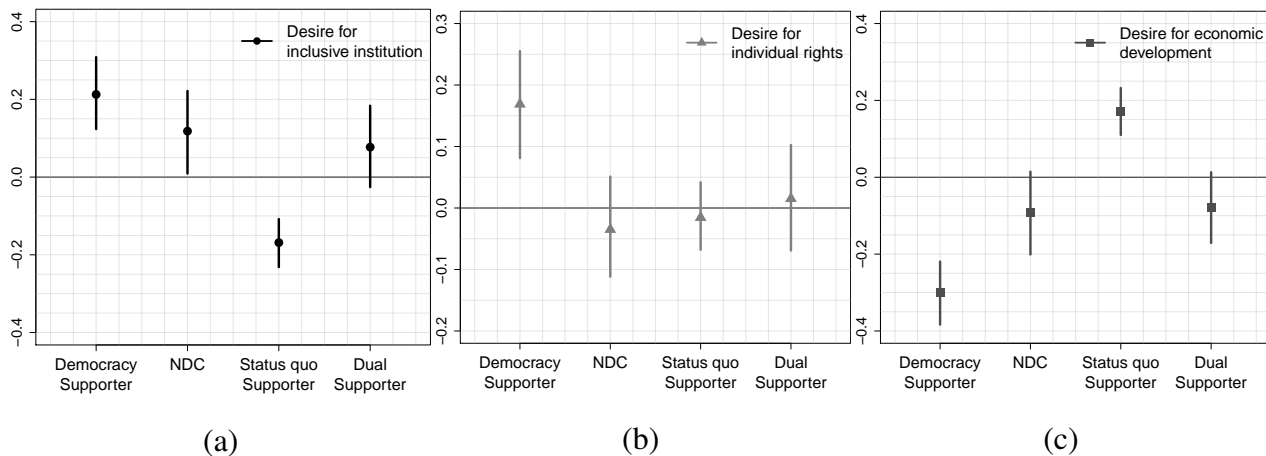


Figure 3: Values on three latent factors of demands

status quo supporters, democracy supporters, and dual supporters on each latent factor identified in the CFA model. The first dimension, which we refer to as *desire for inclusive institutions* (shown in Figure 3a), includes regime qualities in three areas: political institutions, societal political outcomes, and political leaders. Higher values along this dimension indicates that the respondent places higher priority on inclusive political institutions, such as legislative oversight over executive and an independent court, and lower priority on social stability. Figure 3a shows that NDCs, democrats, and dual supporters all report a stronger demand for inclusive institutions compared to status quo supporters. There is no statistically significant difference between NDC vs. democrats or between NDC vs. dual supporters in demand on this dimension. On the other hand, supporters of

the CCP regime place the highest priority on social stability among the four groups.

The second dimension is *desire for individual rights and freedom* (shown in Figure 3b). Higher values on this latent trait means stronger demand for individual liberty, such as institutionalized protection of freedom of speech. In our theory, this dimension is included in the demand for inclusive political institutions. The results show that supporters of democracy put the highest priority on this dimension among the four groups. In contrast, NDCs, status quo supporters, and dual supporters report a similarly weak demand for individual rights and liberty.

The third dimension, which we call *desire for economic development* (shown in Figure 3c), includes regime qualities in the area of socio-economic outcomes. Higher values on this dimension means stronger priority for economic growth and better public goods. The figure reveals that supporters of the CCP regime desire good economic outcomes most, followed by NDCs, dual supporters, and democrats. NDCs do not differ from dual supporters in this regard, but NDCs differ significantly from both status quo supporters and democracy supporters along this dimension.

Overall, these findings in part support our hypotheses regarding the demands of the four groups in authoritarian public. As we expected, the results show that NDCs hold a distinct profile of demands for regime compared to status quo supporters and democracy supporters. Compared to CCP supporters, NDCs differ on 2 out of 3 dimensions in their demands—they report a stronger demand for inclusive political institutions and in line with our Hypothesis 2a, a weaker demand for socio-economic outcomes. Compared to democrats, NDCs also differ on 2 of the 3 dimensions—they have weaker demands for individual liberty and demand more economic growth. These results echo our interview finding that NDCs may hold opposing considerations about democracy—they like inclusive political representation but may dislike the emphasis on individual freedom, which can contribute to their overall ambivalence towards democracy. Importantly, since NDCs disagree with democrats on what they expect from a regime, this can make it hard for the two groups to coordinate on collective action when opportunity for regime change arises.

On the other hand, the results suggest that NDCs have a stronger demand for in-

clusive political institutions and a stronger demand for positive socio-economic outcomes than what we theoretically expected. More specifically, while we hypothesized that NDCs would have a weaker demand for inclusive institutions compared to democracy supporters (Hypothesis 2b) and dual supporters (Hypothesis 2c), we find that NDCs demand inclusive institutions as strongly as democrats and dual supporters do.¹⁹ Also, we expected that NDCs would prioritize socio-economic outcomes less than dual supporters (Hypothesis 2c) and that NDCs would not differ from democrats in this regard. However, the results show that NDCs demand economic development as strongly as dual supporters do and that NDCs have a significantly stronger demand than democrats in this regard. To understand these unexpected findings, we assess the socio-economic microfoundations of the demands of the four groups in the next section (see Section 5.2).

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, respectively. In line with our Hypothesis 3, NDCs and dual supporters both report a higher level of uncertainty about whether democracy can outperform the current regime at meeting their demands, compared to democracy supporters and status quo supporters. 44% of NDCs and 49% of dual supporters chose “cannot tell which regime does better” at delivering their most desired quality or avoiding their most undesired quality. Compared to NDCs, the corresponding percentage is significantly lower among status quo supporters (32%) and democracy supporters (35%) at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level.

5.2 Socio-economic microfoundations of regime attitudes

What shapes the four groups’ demands from the regime and uncertainty regarding the performance of democracy? Our theoretical framework suggests that a citizen’s demand for good socio-economic outcomes increases with the economic benefits they receive from the current regime, and that a person’s demand for inclusive political institutions increases with their access to free information. We also theorize that access to free information

has an inverted U-shaped relationship with uncertainty regarding democracy.²⁰ In this way, we hypothesize in Section 2.3 that NDCs differ on these two microfoundations from democracy supporters, status quo supporters, and dual supporters, respectively. These hypotheses are in part supported by the empirical results.

We operationalize regime-generated economic benefits using three measures: 1) whether a respondent lives in the most economically developed region (Eastern provinces) of China; 2) whether a respondent works in the public sector, including government bureaucracy and state-owned enterprises (SOE); and 3) whether a respondent was born after China's economic reform and opening up in 1980. China has experienced spectacular yet unequal state-led economic growth since 1980, with Eastern provinces receiving substantially more subsidies and liberal economic policies from the regime (Yang and Zhao 2015; Zhao 2009). Thus, people living in Eastern China, as well as those who have grown up in the reform era, are greater beneficiaries of state-led economic development.

We operationalize access to free information outside CCP control using three measures: 1) whether a respondent consumes any information from foreign media several times a day; 2) whether a respondent consumes political news from foreign media several times a day; and 3) whether a respondent has a bachelor's degree. On the last measure, previous research shows that higher education motivates more consumption of foreign information by increasing knowledge of information sources and cultivating liberal values like respect for diversity (Inglehart 1997; Welzel 2013).

5.2.1 NDCs are greater economic beneficiaries of the CCP regime than democrats and regime supporters

Table 2 shows that the differing attitudes towards democracy between NDCs and democrats may be related to differing access to the benefits of state-led economic development. Compared to supporters of democracy, NDCs are greater economic beneficiaries of the CCP regime—NDCs are, on average, more likely to live in the most developed region of China, grow up in the era of rapid economic growth, and earn their income from the public sector. This greater economic dependence on the regime may contribute to NDCs' greater demand for positive economic outcomes from the regime as compared to democ-

Table 2: Microfoundations of NDC and Democracy Supporter

Measures	NDC	Democrat	p-value
Economic beneficiary of the CCP regime			
Live in economically developed region	0.77	0.71	0.072*
Work in public sector	0.38	0.31	0.095*
Born after economic reform (1980)	0.64	0.51	<0.01***
Access to free information outside China			
Frequent consumption of foreign media	0.42	0.48	0.14
Frequent consumption of political news via foreign media	0.19	0.20	0.85
Bachelor degree	0.87	0.89	0.44

Notes: Entries are proportions. P-values are from two-sample t-tests. Economically developed region means Eastern China. Public sector includes government and state-owned enterprises. Frequent media consumption means several times a day. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

racy supporters (see Section 5.1).

Also, contrary to our expectation that NDCs consume less information outside of the regime's control than democrats (Hypothesis 4b), Table 2 shows that there are no statistically significant differences in their access to foreign media, foreign political news, or higher education. This suggests that NDCs consume free information about foreign regimes as actively as democrats, which may explain why the two groups report an equally strong demand for inclusive political institutions.

Table 3 indicates that NDCs' opposition to the current CCP regime may be related to their access to free information and high economic status in China. As we expected in Hypothesis 4a, NDCs consume more foreign media, more political news via foreign outlets, and have higher educational attainment than supporters of the CCP regime. However, though we hypothesized that CCP supporters are greater economic beneficiaries than NDCs, the results show the opposite. Compared to regime supporters, NDCs are more likely to reside in economically developed region and grow up during the period of state-led growth. The two groups do not differ in their likelihood of working in government and SOEs. These results suggest that public sector employment and high economic status in China are not necessarily associated with support for the CCP regime.

Table 3: Microfoundations of NDC and Status Quo Supporter

Measures	NDC	CCP supporter	p-value
Economic beneficiary of the CCP regime			
Live in economically developed region	0.77	0.68	<0.01***
Work in public sector	0.38	0.38	0.99
Born after economic reform (1980)	0.64	0.43	<0.01***
Access to free information outside China			
Frequent consumption of foreign media	0.42	0.25	<0.01***
Frequent consumption of political news via foreign media	0.19	0.12	0.02**
Bachelor degree	0.87	0.82	0.06*

Notes: Same as Table 2.

Table 4 presents the difference in microfoundations between NDCs vs. dual support-

Table 4: Microfoundations of NDC and Dual Supporter

Measures	NDC	Dual supporter	p-value
Economic beneficiary of the CCP regime			
Live in economically developed region	0.77	0.70	0.088*
Work in public sector	0.38	0.34	0.39
Born after economic reform (1980)	0.64	0.49	<0.01***
Access to free information outside China			
Frequent consumption of foreign media	0.42	0.36	0.21
Frequent consumption of political news via foreign media	0.19	0.17	0.55
Bachelor degree	0.87	0.88	0.74

Notes: Same as Table 2.

ers. These results do not support our Hypothesis 4c: while we expected that NDCs receive less economic benefits from the CCP regime than dual supporters, we find that NDCs are more likely to hail from the most developed Eastern provinces and grow up in the era of reform compared to dual supporters. Also, while we hypothesized that NDCs have less access to free information than dual supporters, the table shows that NDCs are as highly educated as dual supporters and that NDCs consume media and political news outside of

China as frequently as dual supporters do. Their equal access to free information might explain why NDCs demand inclusive political institutions as strongly as dual supporters do (see Section 5.1). Overall, these results indicate that NDCs’ simultaneous rejection of democracy and status quo autocracy may be related to their high economic status.

Altogether, the pairwise comparisons above suggest that NDCs have a higher economic status and consume more information outside of the regime’s control than what we theoretically expected. We then use multinomial logistic regressions to explore the impact of these two microfoundations—economic status and access to free information—on the probability of being a non-democratic critic among all respondents. Table 5 presents the results. The outcome is a four-level nominal variable representing the four categories of respondents with democrat as the baseline category. Coefficients are marginal effects on the probability of being a NDC.

Table 5: Predictors of NDC

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Live in economically developed region	0.054*** (0.020)		0.05*** (0.023)
Frequent consumption of foreign media		0.037 (0.024)	0.034 (0.021)
Controls	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1354	1354	1354

Notes: Outcome is a 4-level nominal variable. All columns use multinomial logistic regression and coefficients are average marginal effects on the probability of being a NDC. Democrat is the reference category. Economically developed region means Eastern China. Frequent media consumption means several times a day. Controls include respondents’ gender, age, education level, CCP membership, employment sector and frequency of consuming CCP-controlled media. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

The table shows that high economic status outperforms free information consumption in explaining the likelihood of becoming a NDC. In the most complete model (Column 3), when holding all other predictors at their median,²¹ moving from other regions to the most developed Eastern China region increases the likelihood of becoming a NDC by 42% (5.5 percentage points). Breaking down this difference, 18% of respondents who live in

the most developed region are NDCs, while this proportion is 13% among those living in other, less developed regions. In contrast, frequent consumption of foreign media has no statistically significant effect. We conduct extensive robustness checks on these results and finally, since consumption of outside information is inversely related to consumption of domestic propaganda, we also check and confirm that consumption of CCP propaganda has no effect on the probability of being a NDC. For details, see Appendix [A.4.3](#).

5.2.2 Discussion and implications

These results suggest that having a high economic status in China may simultaneously foster criticism against multi-party democracy and the current autocracy. On one hand, among the four groups within the authoritarian public, NDCs benefit most from state-led economic growth under the current single-party system, which can make this group skeptical about the ability of a multi-party system to deliver high growth. On the other hand, compared to the other three groups, NDCs' greater wealth can also make them become more vulnerable to economic expropriation by the CCP regime since there are no institutions that can credibly commit to protecting citizens' economic interests. If their material welfare is hurt by CCP policies, NDCs have no effective and legitimate means to punish the autocrats. This could make NDCs worry about the security of their economic fortune under the current regime and hence, motivate their opposition to the regime.

These considerations are reflected in our interviews with NDCs. When asked about their views on the CCP regime and multi-party democracy, over three quarters of NDCs express worry about their economic well-being under both systems. On one hand, these people criticize that multi-party competition will hurt the economy by increasing political cleavages, social instability, and waste of resources on excessive electoral campaigns. On the other hand, these people criticize the current regime for being too centralized and not prioritizing the interests of ordinary citizens. According to these NDC interviewees, Chinese officials today face little public oversight when formulating important socio-economic policies (e.g., tax, housing, social security), leading to massive corruption. Thus, these people believe policy-making process should be more transparent to the public so they can monitor whether officials consider citizens' well-being. Our survey

findings also show that compared to supporters of the CCP regime, NDCs more strongly demand inclusive political institutions, which include a “transparent decision-making process” and “consulting societal professionals in policy formulation” (see Figure 3).

These findings have implications for how economic development is related to support for democracy and support for autocracy. A longstanding view rooted in modernization theory holds that economic development will foster democratization by creating a middle class that supports democracy (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Lipset 1959; Welzel and Inglehart 2008). Hence, modernization theory predicts that economically well-off citizens like NDCs would support democracy and oppose the CCP regime. However, NDCs partly reject this view—they do not support democracy because their high economic status largely depends on state-led development in China. This implies that in autocracies, state-led economic growth does not necessarily lead to support for democracy. Instead, the more an individual benefits from this growth, the more skeptical they will be about the ability of democracy in satisfying their economic demands.

On the other hand, the high economic status of NDC also suggests that being a material beneficiary of autocracy does not necessarily lead to support for the regime. The performance legitimacy literature largely holds the view that authoritarian rulers are able to gain public support by providing material benefits to citizens (Chu 2013; Dickson 2016; Holbig and Gilley 2010). Relatedly, Rosenfeld (2017) writes that people who work in the public sector and are economically well-off would support the ruling autocrats and reject democracy since their material well-being is highly dependent on the regime. However, NDCs challenge these expectations. Our results show that among the four groups within the authoritarian public, NDCs and CCP supporters both have the highest likelihood (38%) of working in the public sector, and NDCs are also economically better-off than CCP supporters. Yet, NDCs do not support the CCP regime due to fear of government expropriation—NDCs’ affluence motivates their dissatisfaction with the underrepresentation of citizen interests in the current autocratic system.

Finally, in addition to being economically well-off, our survey reveals that an average NDC is also highly educated and frequently consumes information about foreign govern-

ments and societies from sources outside of China. This socio-economic profile echoes our interview finding that NDCs are politically attentive and sophisticated. While conventional wisdom holds that consuming information outside of the autocrat's control will cultivate support for democracy (Huntington 2006; Levitsky and Way 2006), we find that non-democratic critics consume foreign media as actively as democracy supporters do. Access to outside information alone does not necessarily lead to support for democracy. Instead, the socio-economic characteristics associated with NDCs imply that access to outside information, when combined with a high economic status in the current autocracy, can inform simultaneous disillusionment with democracy and the status quo regime.

6 Conclusion

This paper shows that opposition to autocracy does not necessarily mean support for democracy. We find that nearly half of individuals who oppose the current authoritarian regime in China also reject adopting democracy. Interviews with NDCs suggest that though they are critical of the status quo, they are not proponents of an alternative political system in China. This implies NDCs are less likely to actively push for meaningful regime change. Additionally, we find that uneven access to the benefits of China's economic development most likely explains the divergent attitudes towards democracy between NDCs and democrats.

To explain authoritarian resilience, political scientists have typically focused on regime supporters (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Huang, Intawan and Nicholson 2022). Our findings shift the conversation to regime opponents and suggest another important reason for authoritarian durability: regime opponents have divergent and unclear visions of what political system should be adopted in place of the status quo. When opportunities for regime change emerge, the disagreement between non-democratic critics and democrats on whether their country should transition to democracy and more fundamentally, on what they demand from a regime, can dampen prospects for broad and durable collective action.

This implies that the splintering views between NDCs and democrats can help existing autocracies endure political crisis. For example, when the Chinese regime's COVID-19

lockdown policies sparked unprecedented mass resistance in late 2022, interviews with protesters revealed that although they were all frustrated with the government, they had different visions for what change should occur. While some called for multi-party democracy, many others aimed for ending the lockdown, reducing unemployment, or relaxing control over expression rather than full democratic transition.²² The lack of a unified political agenda explains in part why these protests did not evolve into a durable, national movements for regime change.²³

Our findings also have implications for democratic consolidation in former authoritarian countries. The divergent preferences between NDCs and democrats imply that even if they jointly overthrow the current dictator, there could be splits after the revolution. For instance, while mass protests during the Arab Spring initially generated optimism for democratization, protests in many countries led to political turmoil rather than stable democracies because the newly formed governments were not able to accommodate differing political and economic demands from the protesters (Bradley et al. 2011; Robinson and Merrow 2020). Similarly, many post-Soviet countries suffered from extended social unrest and even authoritarian backlash. Research shows that this instability may be due to the hastily convened opposition at the time of revolution, which lacked consensus over political visions for the future (Beissinger 2013).

Moreover, the findings about NDCs' characteristics in China, combined with institutional differences between China and other autocracies, have several implications for the profile of NDCs outside of China. First, our results show that compared to regime supporters and democracy supporters, NDCs enjoy the highest economic well-being under state-led development in China. Compared to China, most other authoritarian regimes achieve less and slower economic growth, which could reduce regime opponents' skepticism of democracy and hence reduce the size of NDCs. Yet, our finding implies that among the public in other autocracies, those who have the highest economic status are most likely to become opposed to democracy and also to the status quo out of concern about economic expropriation. Second, our results suggest that access to foreign media, when combined with high economic status, can inform simultaneous disillusionment with

democracy and the status quo in China. This indicates that democracies may have a public image problem — consuming more information about their current events can motivate rejection of democracy. Compared to the CCP regime, other autocracies generally possess a less sophisticated apparatus of information control. This could allow more of their citizens to access outside information and hence, increase the share of NDCs in their public. Third, unlike China, other autocracies allow opposition political parties to compete in elections. In our interviews, NDCs recognized that the absence of an opposition party in China increases their uncertainty about the performance of a multi-party system. We conjecture that if opposition parties in an autocracy are perceived as effective by their citizens, there may be more certainty regarding the benefits of a multi-party system and thus fewer NDCs. However, if opposition parties in an autocracy are perceived as corrupt or useless by their citizens, they may become disillusioned with multi-party elections, leading to fewer democrats and more NDCs. Additionally, all participants in our study were primed to conceptualize democracy specifically as multi-party elections. Future research could explore how priming different definitions of democracy may vary the size of NDCs in a variety of authoritarian contexts.

Finally, our findings suggest that for those living under authoritarian rule, multi-party election is not necessarily considered a necessary or sufficient condition of good government even among opponents of the status quo autocracy. Instead, we find that ordinary citizens evaluate a regime using a more diverse set of metrics. For example, Chinese NDCs report a strong demand for economic growth and a strong demand for inclusive political institutions. This indicates that in their definition, a good government should possess institutions that represent citizens' interests and also deliver positive material benefits to citizens. This definition of good government is more complex than simply the presence of multi-party elections, implying that both academics and policy-makers may need to think more carefully about conceptualizations of democracy and good government when they use those terms and avoid equating (bad) good government simply with (the lack of) multi-party elections. For example, US and Europe-led democracy promotion campaigns primarily focus on establishing multi-party elections and achieving electoral

accountability. Our findings imply that democracy or good government promotion campaigns should expand their definition of “democracy” by understanding and addressing the specific demands of local populations. Overall, given the substantial size of NDCs among regime opponents in China and their many political differences with democracy supporters, studying heterogeneous preferences among regime opponents in a wide variety of authoritarian systems is likely to advance our understanding of authoritarian durability and regime transition.

Notes

¹Exceptions are [Beissinger \(2013\)](#) and [Rosenfeld \(2017\)](#), which note that protesters against authoritarian leaders in post-Soviet countries hold differing regime preferences. Our study differs from these works by focusing on the preferences among all authoritarian critics rather than only on those who protest.

²This paper uses “critics”, “opponents”, and “dissidents” interchangeably. It also uses “democrats” and “democracy supporters” interchangeably.

³This paper uses “status quo supporter”, “CCP supporter”, and “regime supporter” interchangeably.

⁴While 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](#)).

⁵Note that this type of NDC differs from the internal reformist in Przeworski’s framework in that these NDCs oppose the overall political system of the current regime.

⁶One example of this type of NDC is an anarchist, who oppose all systems of government.

⁷For details of interviewee demographics and interview questions and responses, see [Appendix A.1](#).

⁸In the 2014 Asian Barometer survey, 23% of Chinese participants listed “economic equality” as the primary feature of democracy. See [asianbarometer.org](#).

⁹We code an indicator variable at individual level that equals 1 if the interviewee gave two-sided, substantive comments on multi-party democracy (e.g., “While I think democracy is good in X, I also think the system is bad in Y”), and equals 0 otherwise.

¹⁰The firm is one of the largest private survey firms in China and is not affiliated with any government agencies. To keep the confidentiality of respondent identities and to protect future researchers who hope to work with the firm, we do not disclose the name of the firm.

¹¹See [Appendix A.1.3](#).

¹²Pilot participants were recruited through snowball sampling. 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.

¹³Other terms for autocracy including “极权” (totalitarian), “专制” (despotism) and “独裁” (dictatorship) were rejected by the local Chinese firm through which we recruited participants for being too sensitive.

¹⁴For details, see <https://bit.ly/3xu23Cp>.

¹⁵We chose these non-sensitive statements because they do not make respondents feel they can be personally identified. Also, these statements do not prime respondents to evaluate the CCP regime or 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.

¹⁶To 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. We then ask respondents to rank the selected six qualities in the order of importance.

¹⁷We randomize the order of these options and the order between the two questions asking about relative performance on the respondent’s most desired and most undesired qualities.

¹⁸See [Table A6](#) in [Appendix](#).

¹⁹NDCs also demand inclusive political institutions more than status quo supporters do. This finding is in contrast to the expectation grounded in existing works on authoritarian legitimation that NDCs may demand inclusive institutions less than status quo supporters (see Section 2.2).

²⁰An alternative explanation for NDCs' higher uncertainty is that they define democracy in terms of socio-economic outcomes. We check and find that NDC respondents associate democracy with electoral institution rather than outcomes as we primed (for details, see Appendix A.1.3).

²¹Since most predictors are dummies (e.g., gender, CCP membership, frequent consumption of media), we hold them at their median rather than mean to represent the “median” person in our sample.

²²See <https://bit.ly/3rc95fe> and <https://bit.ly/3XJ22Y1>.

²³See *Ai Weiwei on China's protests (2022)*.

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A Online Supplementary Appendix

Table of Contents

A.1	Appendix: Additional details of interviews	A2
A.1.1	Interview questionnaire	A2
A.1.2	Demographics of interviewees	A2
A.1.3	Distribution of responses	A3
A.2	Appendix: Additional details of survey design	A5
A.2.1	Operationalization of democracy	A5
A.2.2	Innocuous questions in the crosswise model section	A8
A.2.3	Desirable and undesirable qualities of a regime	A9
A.2.4	Checks of preference falsification	A10
A.3	Appendix: Additional details of survey sample	A13
A.3.1	Descriptive statistics of respondents	A13
A.3.2	Reweighting survey sample	A13
A.3.3	Comparing interview sample and survey sample	A17
A.4	Appendix: Additional details of survey results	A18
A.4.1	Factor analyses of demands	A18
A.4.2	Socio-economic characteristics by group	A21
A.4.3	Robustness checks on predictors of NDC	A24

A.1 Appendix: Additional details of interviews

A.1.1 Interview questionnaire

Each interviewee was asked the following six open-ended questions:

1. What do you think about the status quo Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime?
2. What do you think about China adopting multi-party democracy—a political system that conducts regular, competitive elections between different political parties?
3. What countries came to your mind just now when you heard the term “multi-party democracy”?
4. Assuming that you can freely choose to live in any country, what are the five most important qualities and deliverables that you would demand from the government of that country?
5. On the five qualities you just said, to what extent do you think a multi-party democracy—defined as a political system that conducts regular, competitive elections—would be able to deliver these qualities? Why?
6. In your opinion, how could China’s current political system be improved?
7. (Other questions on interviewee’s socio-demographic information)

A.1.2 Demographics of interviewees

Table A1 shows that an average interviewee in our study is a young and highly educated woman. Similar to our survey sample, the majority of interviewees have a college degree and come from high or middle income regions in China.

Table A1: Demographics of interviewees (N=62)

Demographics	Mean	Standard deviation
Male	0.32	0.47
Age	26.7	7.2
Bachelor’s degree	0.97	0.18
East China (high income region)	0.74	0.44
Central China (middle income region)	0.08	0.27
Full-time work experience	0.42	0.50
Work in public sector	0.26	0.44

A.1.3 Distribution of responses

Political attitudes Among the 62 interviewees, 26 are supporters of only the CCP regime, 14 are supporters of only multi-party democracy (MPD), 6 are dual supporters of both CCP regime and MPD, and the remaining 16 are non-democratic critics who oppose both the CCP regime and MPD. In this way, 48% of interviewees report opposition to the CCP regime, and among these regime opponents (i.e. NDCs and democrats), 53% are NDCs.

Conceptualization of status quo autocracy An important purpose of the interviews was to help us select context-appropriate terms to describe democracy and the current Chinese autocracy in the survey. When asked what they think about the status quo regime in China, over 80% of interviewees reported that “concentration /centralization of power (集权/中央集权)” is a primary feature of the current political system in each of the four types of respondents (NDC, democrat, and CCP supporter, and dual supporter). Therefore, we use the term “concentration of power (集权制)” to represent the status quo political system in China in the survey.

Conceptualization of multi-party democracy Each interviewee was asked what countries came to their mind when they heard the term “multi-party democracy” (民主多党制). Below are the countries that were mentioned by over half of interviewees among NDCs, democrats, and status quo supporters, respectively:

- **NDCs:** US, Korea, India, France, Germany, Brazil, UK, Denmark
- **Democrats:** US, India, Japan, Brazil, UK, France, Italy, Sweden
- **Status quo supporters:** US, UK, Japan, India, France, Germany

In all three groups, interviewees mentioned countries that have different levels of economic development (e.g., in each group, over half of interviewees mentioned both India and the US) and also countries that have different sizes of social redistribution programs (e.g., in each group, over half of interviewees mentioned the US and also some welfare states in Europe such as France and Nordic countries). These results show that in all

three groups, people do not associate the term “multi-party democracy” only with positive outcomes (e.g., highly developed economy). Instead, all states mentioned by NDCs, democrats, and CCP supporters conduct regular, competitive elections. In this way, we believe that using the term “multi-party democracy” in the survey is more likely to prime respondents to think about democratic institutions (e.g., election) rather than certain outcomes.

Responses in the survey confirm that NDCs are more likely to associate the term “multi-party democracy” with institutions rather than outcomes. [Chapman et al. \(2023\)](#) finds that people who define democracy along economic outcomes have weak and inconsistent support for democracy compared to those that define democracy in terms of institutions. In this way, if NDCs define multi-party democracy in terms of outcomes and democrats define MPD in terms of institutions, this might explain why NDCs report higher uncertainty than democrats regarding the ability of democracy in the survey. Since we did not have a question in the survey that directly asked about respondents’ definition of democracy, we assess the potential impact of this concern by analyzing in what area (institution or outcome) do NDCs think MPD outperforms the CCP regime.

71 of the 226 NDCs in the survey report that MPD outperforms the CCP regime at delivering their most desired regime quality or avoiding their most undesired quality. If NDCs conceptualize the term MPD as certain outcomes rather than institutions, we would expect these 71 respondents to report that MPD outperforms the CCP regime at delivering good outcomes, not institutions. However, that is not what we see. Among these 71 NDCs, 32% report that MPD does a better job at delivering positive outcomes such as economic growth and public goods, but the remaining 68% all report that MPD does better at providing their desired institutions such as protection of free speech and regular checks and balances on the ruling party. While these results does not cover all NDCs in the survey, they nevertheless provide strong suggestive evidence that NDCs think MPD’s merit lies mainly in its institutions. In other words, these findings suggest that NDCs are more likely to associate the term MPD with institutions rather than outcomes.

A.2 Appendix: Additional details of survey design

A.2.1 Operationalization of democracy

There are multiple definitions and operationalizations of democracy, both in popular discourse and academic work. Some scholars focus on a narrow definition that highlights meaningful political competition and representation (Schumpeter 1942; Dahl 1971). These works then distinguish between democracy and autocracy through the presence or lack of competitive, free, and fair elections. Other scholars advocate for broader definitions of democracy and emphasize citizen participation and deliberation as well as effective governance. Based on these conceptualizations of democracy, there have also been various datasets that categorize countries into regime types as outlined in Table A2. The common denominator of all these various measures of democracy, however, is their inclusion of political competition through elections as a primary feature of democratic regimes.

Another potential concern regarding the “Support Democracy” 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 policy consultation for the CCP, provided that the CCP has firm control over these parties and has the final say on all matters.²⁴ We assess the potential impact of this concern using two strategies. First, we ask participants in the pre-survey interviews to list what countries they think of when they hear the term “multi-party democratic system”. No one mentioned China or CPPCC (See Appendix A.1.3). Second, in the survey we ask respondents to rate on the scale of 0 to 6 how much they desire “*effective checks and balances between the ruling political party and other political parties (执政党权力受到其它政治团体的有效监督)*.” On average, respondents who agree with the “support democracy” statement give a higher rating than those who disagree with this statement by 35% (0.26 points). This difference is significant at 0.01 level, suggesting that the “support democracy” statement makes respondents think about meaningful inter-party competition rather than the CPPCC. Additionally, state-owned media in China also make clear to the public that CPPCC is different from the multi-party system in democracies.²⁵

Dataset	Conceptualization	Measurement
Varieties of Democracy (Coppedge et al. 2021)	Broad (electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, egalitarian)	Continuous (0-1)
Regimes of the World (Lührmann, Tannenberg and Lindberg 2018)	Narrow (electoral and liberal democracy)	Classification
Lexical Index (Skaaning, Gerring and Bartusevicius 2015)	Narrow (electoral or liberal democracy)	Categorization
Boix-Miller-Rosato (Boix 2003)	Narrow (electoral democracy)	Binary
Polity (Marshall and Gurr 2021)	Narrow (electoral and liberal democracy)	Continuous (-10 to 10)
Freedom House (Freedom in the World 2022)	Narrow (electoral and liberal democracy)	Categorical
Bertelsmann Transformation Index (Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2024)	Broad (electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberate, and effective democracy)	Continuous (1-10)

Table A2: Operationalizations of Democracy in the Literature

Comparison with other instruments of political attitude As with other public opinion studies, our survey faces the question of choosing abstract vs. concrete objects for assessment when operationalizing the concept of political support (Lu and Dickson 2020). In previous studies, support for the Chinese regime is often assessed by asking people’s attitude toward a set of specific institutions such as the court and National People’s Congress (NPC) (Chen 2004; Dickson 2016; Shi 2014; Tang 2016), while support for democracy is assessed through attitude toward a set of normative values such as freedom of speech and protest (Chen 2013; Gibson, Duch and Tedin 1992). Compared to these multi-item instruments, we recognize that the abstract term “system” in our instrument may potentially increase measurement uncertainty. Yet, we chose not to use multi-item instruments for two reasons. First, we use an indirect questioning method to guard against the impact of preference falsification. Applying this method to each item in a multi-item design would dramatically increase the number of survey questions, which would cause substantial cognitive and attention burdens for respondents.

More importantly, the concept of non-democratic critics requires that we assess people’s attitude 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. This implies that the two survey instruments for assessing support for the current regime and democracy should have a similar level of specificity and a similar ease of comprehension for respondents. Thus, while asking respondents about their support for all major political institutions in China may also capture their attitude towards China’s overall political system, it is not reasonable to ask about people’s attitudes toward the corresponding institutions in democracy because it would be extremely difficult for ordinary citizens 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 people’s belief in the superiority of their current political system as a whole.²⁶ When comparing ABS with other commonly used 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 challenge than a concrete object like ‘the NPC;’[...]Nevertheless, a political regime is more than just specific institutions” (p. 691). To capture people’s support of the overall political system, we follow ABS and ask respondents about their views on China’s current system as a whole and their views on a democratic system as a whole.

A.2.2 Innocuous questions in the crosswise model section

In the crosswise model section of the survey, we asked four innocuous questions that also use the format of the crosswise model. Table A3 presents the two statements—both

Table A3: 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 one. Statements in all innocuous question are constructed so that they do not prime respondents to evaluate the CCP regime or democracy in a particular direction. For example, we construct statements on social topics commonly debated in both autocracies and democracies (e.g., non-smoking).

Third, Question 3 also helps us filter out respondents who do not pay attention or fail to follow the instructions of the crosswise model. More specifically, the 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 directly ask respondents about their gender and length of full-time work experience. By comparing their responses to these direct questions and responses to Question 3, we are able to see whether a respondent correctly understands the instructions of the crosswise model.

A.2.3 Desirable and undesirable qualities of a regime

Table A4 presents the 16 desirable qualities we show to survey participants. Table A5 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 the 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 A4 and the 16 undesirable qualities in Table A5. In the first step, we reviewed the existing literature on regime legitimacy, as well as seminal works on democracy and autocracy to identify representative features of each regime (Dahl 1971; Geddes 1999; Gehlbach, Sonin and Svobik 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 32 undesirable qualities that cover the five areas stated above. In general, political scientists believe that democratic legitimacy stems from its institutions or procedures, which are conventionally considered to be more fair and lib-

Table A4: Desirable Qualities of a Political Regime

Areas of a regime	Qualities
Political institutions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Effective checks and balance between the ruling party and other political groups 2. Legislature has power to overrule executive decisions 3. Merit-based selection of government leaders 4. The ruling party is free to mobilize societal resources 5. Highly centralized government 6. Government must consult societal professionals 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 physical safety from 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)

eral than autocratic regimes (Bohman 2000; Christiano 1996; Dahl 1956; Merkel 2004; Munck 2016; Schumpeter 1942). But scholars have also found that democracy is effective at providing desirable outcomes like a vibrant civil society (Berman 1997; Hollyer, Rosendorff and Vreeland 2011; North and Weingast 1989). In the second step, we select from these 63 qualities a subset that are most relevant for contemporary Chinese citizens. Specifically, we ask 366 Chinese citizens with diverse socio-demographic backgrounds²⁷ to rank the importance of the 63 qualities we summarized from the literature. We include the top-rated 16 positive qualities (Table A4) and the top-rated 16 negative qualities (Table A5) in the survey.

A.2.4 Checks of preference falsification

A potential concern with identifying NDCs is preference falsification. While the cross-wise model is designed to assure people that their political attitudes are obscured, respon-

Table A5: Undesirable Qualities of a Political Regime

Areas of a regime	Qualities
Political institutions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Social instability 6. Political conflicts are resolved violently 7. Tyranny of the majority 8. There exist political extremist groups
Political leaders	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Corrupt bureaucrats 10. Incompetent political instigators take office
Individual rights and freedom	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14. Economic inequality 15. Decline of the national economy 16. Bad provision of public goods (e.g., education and health care)

dents might assume that researchers could identify their political opinion through collecting demographic information. If there is preference falsification, then the proportion of CCP supporters identified in our survey should reflect 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 asked directly.²⁸ The survey used a similar strategy of participant recruitment and was also fielded online. Other recent surveys using face-to-face interviews identify 80% of the Chinese public as CCP supporters, which is also much higher than the corresponding proportion (58%) in our survey.²⁹

In addition, if respondents believe we could calculate their individual political attitude using their responses to the crosswise model along with responses to birth year and provincial location at the end of the survey, respondents might also lie when answering

the demographic questions. To assess the impact of this concern, we compare the self-reported provinces in the survey with IP addresses that are automatically recorded by the survey website.³⁰ We find that only 9% of respondents' self-reported provinces do not match the provinces suggested by their IP address. If people report false locations because they fear exposing their opposition against the CCP regime, they would want to be coded as regime supporters rather than opponents. This would imply there would be a higher proportion of misreporting among the identified CCP supporters, compared to the identified CCP opponents. However, that is not what we observe. There is no statistically significant difference in the probability of location misreporting between CCP supporters and CCP opponents, or between CCP supporters and NDCs. We also see no significant difference in the duration of completing the survey between NDCs vs. CCP supporters or between NDCs vs. democrats, which suggests that NDC is not a group constructed simply by respondent inattentiveness (see Table [A11](#) below).

A.3 Appendix: Additional details of survey sample

A.3.1 Descriptive statistics of respondents

Table A6: Characteristics of Survey Participants

	Survey participants	Chinese adult population	Chinese Internet population
Female	42.3%	48.8%	47.3%
Urban	87.3%	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	10.4%	21.9%	12.5%
By region			
Eastern China	70.6%	46.2%	53.3%
Central China	14.3%	26.6%	23.1%
Western China	14.1%	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/3yEynH5>). Data about Chinese Internet user population are from *The 43rd Statistical Report of Internet Development in China, 2018* (<https://bit.ly/46KtKrw>). 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>.

A.3.2 Reweighting survey sample

We use an online sample for several reasons. To our knowledge, no existing survey with a nationally representative sample asks about people's attitude toward the overall sys-

tems of the CCP regime and multi-party democracy using the same format in the same questionnaire. 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. Relatively speaking, anonymous online survey is more likely to elicit truthful responses. 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.

That said, to achieve better representativeness across demographics, we also construct a new, reweighed sample of 400 respondents³¹ by resampling from the original sample using population benchmarks and an inverse probability reweighing scheme. The joint distribution of gender, age cohorts, and province in the reweighed sample aims to match the urban population distribution in the 2015 *Chinese General Social Survey*.³² Since nearly 90% of our online participants come from urban areas, we focus on the urban population characteristics in reweighing. 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. Table A7 compares the original sample, reweighed sample, and the Chinese urban population. It shows that compared to the original sample, the reweighed sample is substantially closer to the urban population on multiple key socio-demographic characteristics such as age and geographic location.

Table A8 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.

Table A7: Original sample vs. reweighed sample

	Original sample	Reweighed 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%	15.2%	17.6%
30-39	33.1%	24.0%	23.5%
≥40	47.3%	60.2%	58.0%
By region			
Eastern China	70.6%	67.2%	61.1%
Central China	14.3%	19.8%	21.6%
Western China	14.1%	12%	17.3%
By education			
< high school	2.9%	3.5%	51.1%
High school	11.4%	15.0%	23.9%
College or above	85.7%	81.5%	25.0%

Notes: Data about Chinese urban population (18+) are from *Chinese Statistical Yearbook 2018* (<https://bit.ly/3yEynH5>). The categorization of Eastern, Central, and Western provinces are the same as Table A6.

Table A8: Survey Results in the original sample vs. Results in the reweighed sample

	Original sample	Reweighed sample	P-value
Proportion of NDCs	0.167	0.175	0.708
Uncertainty level of NDCs	0.434	0.386	0.478
NDCs' demands of a regime			
Desire for social stability	-0.118	-0.165	0.674
Desire for individual freedom	-0.035	-0.027	0.93
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	0.544	0.629	0.211
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.

A.3.3 Comparing interview sample and survey sample

Table A9 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 individual-level characteristics.

Table A9: Interview sample vs. survey sample

	Survey participants	Interview participants	p-value
Work in public sector	0.35	0.26	0.11
Male	0.58	0.32	<0.01
By region			
Eastern China	0.71	0.74	0.60
Central China	0.14	0.08	0.12
Western China	0.14	0.18	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 A6.

A.4 Appendix: Additional details of survey results

A.4.1 Factor analyses of demands

We first confirm that the observed rankings of the 32 qualities are organized in a non-random manner by conducting a principal component analysis (PCA). Figure 4 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.³³ Figure 4 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%, 7%, 5%, and 5% of the variation, respectively.

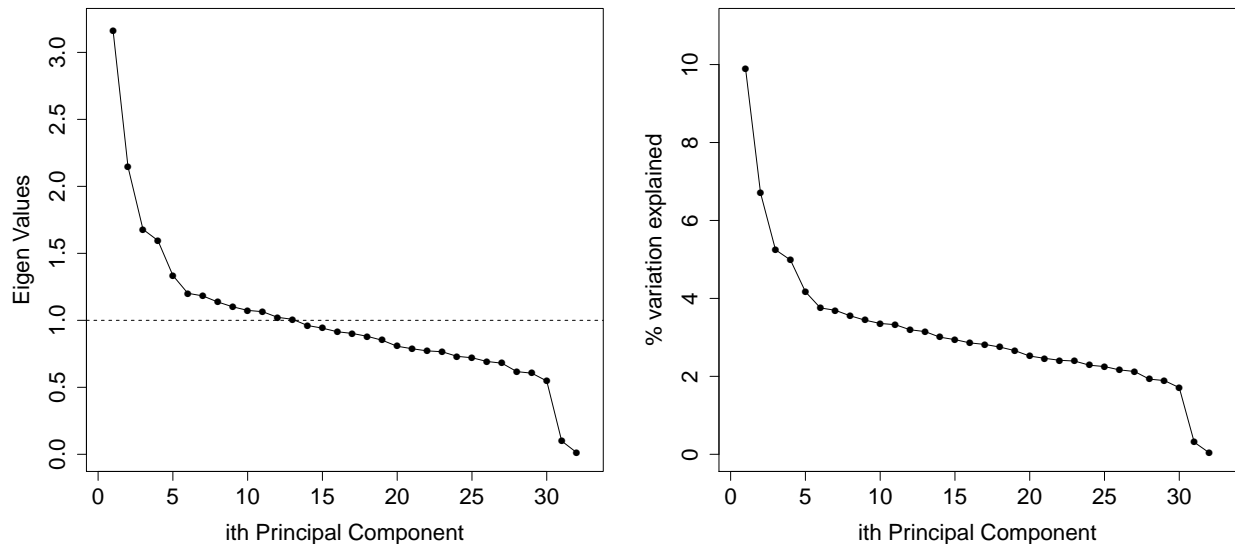


Figure 4: Scree Plot

We then use confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to identify the latent factors of respondents' reported demands from a political regime. 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 to interpret compared to latent traits in other types of factor analysis such as PCA and exploratory factor analysis (EFA). An additional advan-

tage 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. CFA has been used to study 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 A.2.3). To make our analysis tractable, 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.

Dimensionality 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.³⁵ Table A10 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 fit 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.

Substantive meaning of latent traits The first dimension of Model A, which we refer to as *desire for inclusive political institutions*, includes qualities of three areas in Tables A4 and A5: 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 5. 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 5 shows that people who care more about social

Table A10: 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.

stability tend to care less about having inclusive institutions.

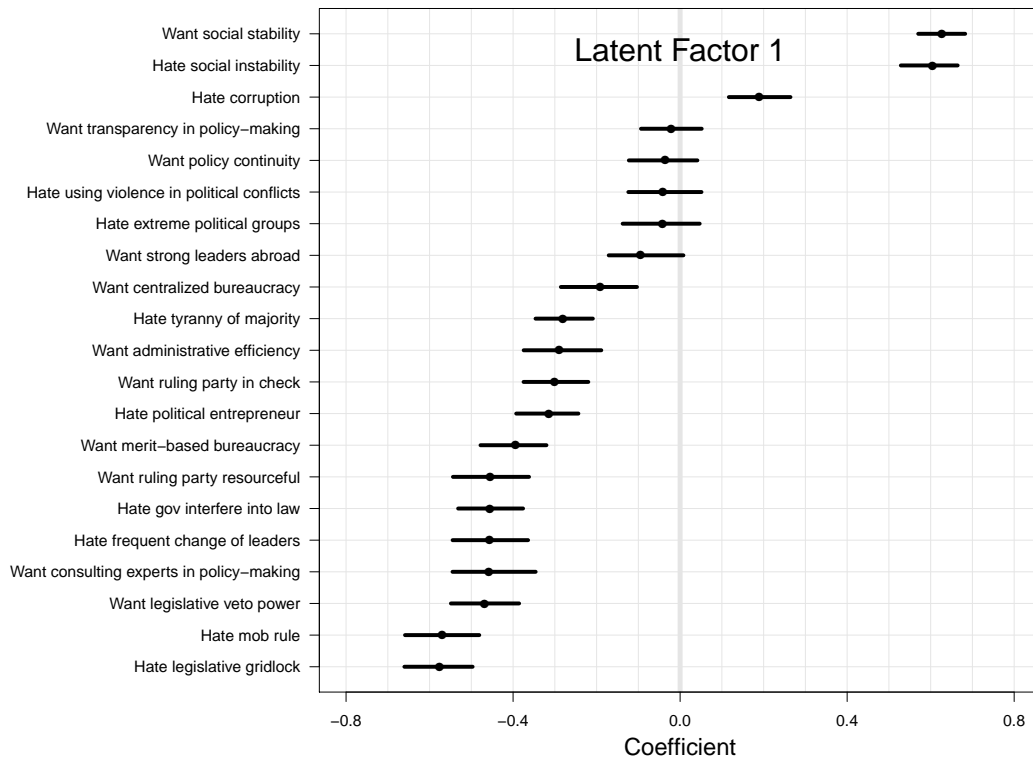


Figure 5: CFA Coefficients: First Latent Factor

The second dimension of Model A, which we refer to as *desire for individual rights and freedom*, includes qualities in this area in Tables A4 and A5. The CFA estimates of this second latent factor, as well as their 95% confidence intervals, are shown in Figure 6. 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).

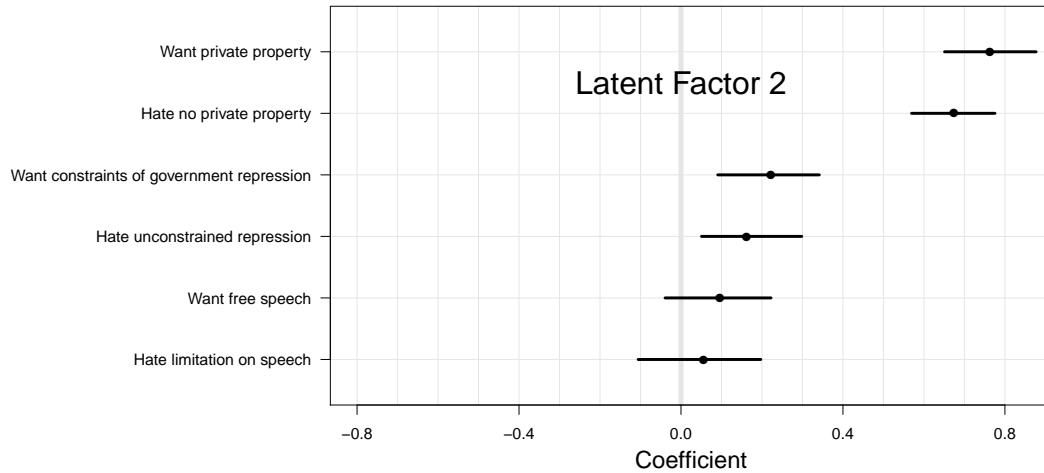


Figure 6: CFA Coefficients: Second Latent Factor

The third dimension of Model A, which we refer to as *desire for economic development*, includes qualities in the area of socio-economic outcomes in Tables A4 and A5. The CFA estimates of this third latent factor, as well as their 95% confidence intervals, are shown in Figure 7. This figure shows that people who care more about public goods also tend to care more about economic growth and economic equality.

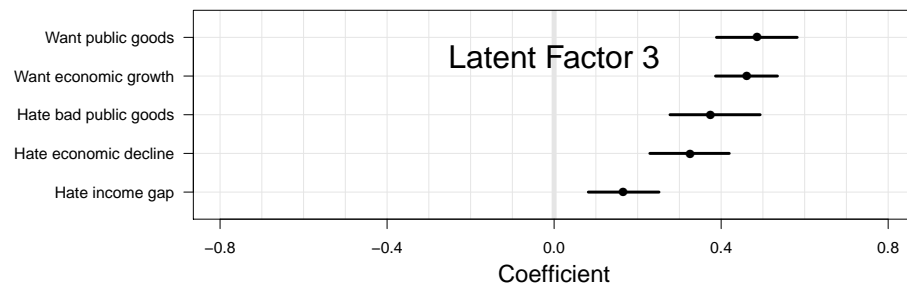


Figure 7: CFA Coefficients: Third Latent Factor

A.4.2 Socio-economic characteristics by group

Table A11 presents the socio-economic characteristics 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.

Table A12 presents the socio-economic features of dual supporters (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 supporters vs. NDCs, respectively (columns 2-4). The table shows that dual supporters are closest to democrats in terms of socio-demographic background. There is no statistically 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. These results suggest that dual supporter is a distinct group from non-democratic critics.

Table A11: Socio-demographic characteristics of NDC, democrats, and CCP supporters

	NDCs	Democracy supporters	Status quo supporters	p-value (NDC vs. DEM)	p-value (NDC vs. CCP)
Born after economic reform (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	0.07	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	0.058
Major in social science / humanities	0.36	0.34	0.28	0.73	0.04
Employed in public sector	0.38	0.31	0.38	0.095	0.999
Male	0.63	0.54	0.56	0.04	0.06
Time of completing the survey (minutes)	31	21	46	0.49	0.39

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.

Table A12: Socio-demographic 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	0.019
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	0.352	0.833	0.048	0.897
Frequent consumption of domestic media	0.857	0.725	0.366	0.172
Frequent consumption of foreign media	0.544	0.291	0.011	0.445
By region				
Western China (most underdeveloped region)	0.148	0.366	0.296	0.013
Eastern China (most developed region)	0.705	0.949	0.458	0.088
Central China	0.143	0.881	0.877	0.954

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

A.4.3 Robustness checks on predictors of NDC

1) Using alternative measures of economic status Table A13 shows that the results in Table 5 in the main paper stays substantively 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).

Table A13: 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			0.599*** (0.193)
Frequent consumption of CCP media	0.370 (0.276)	0.358 (0.276)	0.437 (0.283)
Frequent consumption of foreign media	-0.277 (0.181)	-0.265 (0.180)	-0.278 (0.188)
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, and employment sector. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

2) Predicting NDC status among regime opponents Table A14 and Table A15 present the effects of 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 equals 1 if the respondent is a NDC and 0 if the respondent is a democrat. The two tables use different measures to assess respondents’ economic status. Consistent with the results when we use multinomial

regression in the main paper, Tables A14 and A15 show that residing in the economically developed region increases the likelihood of being a NDC among regime opponents in all models, whereas consumption of CCP propaganda or foreign media have no effect at the conventional level after controlling for other characteristics of respondents.

Table A14: Predictors of NDC among regime opponents

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Economically developed region	0.085* (0.045)			0.086* (0.045)	0.088** (0.044)
Frequent consumption of CCP media		0.084 (0.058)		0.065 (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
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. Controls include respondents' gender, age, education level, CCP membership, and employment sector. *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.

Table A15: Predictors of NDCs among regime opponents using alternative measures

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	OLS	Logit	OLS	Logit	OLS	Logit
GDP per capita in current province (in 100,000 RMB)	0.088*	0.088*				
	(0.053)	(0.050)				
GDP per capita in Hukou province (in 100,000 RMB)			0.084*	0.085*		
			(0.050)	(0.050)		
Born after 1980					0.109**	0.110***
					(0.044)	(0.042)
Frequent consumption of CCP media	0.075	0.074	0.074	0.073	0.091	0.092
	(0.060)	(0.061)	(0.060)	(0.061)	(0.061)	(0.058)
Frequent consumption of foreign media	-0.066	-0.065	-0.062	-0.062	-0.062	-0.063
	(0.043)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.042)	(0.045)	(0.041)
Province fixed-effects	N	N	N	N	Y	Y
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Controls include age	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N
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, age, 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 Given that the coefficient on frequent consumption of CCP media is also large (though not significant) in Table A13, we conduct a separate test for the effect of CCP propaganda on the likelihood of being a NDC by exploiting a gradual reform of political textbooks in China between 2004 and 2010 (Cantoni et al. 2017). In different years during this reform, different provinces started to use a new set of state-approved textbooks that added substantial content criticizing Western-style democracy for the entering cohort of high school students. Table A16 shows that receiving this new ideological curriculum has no effect on the probability of being a NDC. Column (1) replicates the main regression model in Cantoni et al. (2017),³⁶ 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 model (Table 5 in the main paper), including respondents' gender, employment sector, education level, and CCP membership.

Table A16: 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. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Notes

²⁴For details, see <https://bit.ly/3xu23Cp>.

²⁵See <https://bit.ly/3mJ69S1>.

²⁶Since 2010, ABS' core questionnaire measures support for the Chinese 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").

²⁷The 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.

²⁸See [Guang et al. 2020](#). This survey also asks respondents if the CCP regime is their ideal choice.

²⁹See [Cunningham, Saich and Turiel 2020](#) and Asian Barometer Survey 2012.

³⁰Respondents took the survey on Qualtrics. After linking those IP addresses to provinces in China, we discarded all system-recorded IP addresses.

³¹Given 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.

³²For details, see <https://bit.ly/3WMsccf>.

³³We 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.

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.

³⁵If 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.

³⁶Cantoni, Davide, Yuyu Chen, David Y Yang, Noam Yuchtman and Y Jane Zhang. 2017. "Curriculum and ideology." *Journal of Political Economy* 125(2): 338–392.