

## The Enigma of Political Trust in China Survey Response Patterns and Preferences for Redistribution

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### Abstract

In the growing research on Chinese political behavior, it is well known that Chinese survey respondents tend to show high levels of political trust, especially political trust in the central party-state. Scholars have debated about how to make sense of these high political trust levels. In this study, we draw on data from multiple surveys to advance the debate by developing a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of political trust and distrust in contemporary Chinese contexts. We demonstrate the value of employing a more conceptually variegated typology of trust by showing that such an approach can shed new light on preferences for redistribution, and thus help advance the understanding of the relationship between political trust patterns and redistributive preference formation under authoritarianism.

**Keywords:** Inequality, political psychology, political trust, redistributive preference, survey response styles.

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In the growing research on Chinese political behavior, it is well known that Chinese survey respondents tend to show high levels of political trust, especially political trust in the central party-state. As Kenneth Newton noted nearly two decades ago, China, compared to most other countries, “is an outlier that stands apart for its exceptionally high levels of social trust and political confidence.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars have disagreed on how to make sense of the high levels of political trust shown by Chinese survey respondents. On the one hand, scholars have attributed the high political trust to a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Newton, “Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Democracy,” *International Political Science Review* 22, no. 2 (2001): 208.

factors, including the influence of Confucian culture and traditional values, careful party-state manipulation of the media, and the effects of extraordinary economic growth.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the high trust levels have been met with skepticism. In the same article noted earlier, Newton goes on to say that “it is difficult to believe the high figure for political confidence.” He attributes it to “social pressures and political controls.”<sup>3</sup> In recent years, a number of studies have adopted different strategies to test for overestimation of political support among Chinese respondents. These studies indeed have found that the levels of political support tend to be inflated by self-censorship. Yet, even after discounting for significant inflation in reported levels of political trust and support, the Chinese party-state still enjoys a level of support and trust that would be the envy of many other countries, including most developed economies.

In this study, we draw on data from multiple surveys with the hope to advance the debate on political trust in China by taking a closer look at the patterns of responses by survey respondents. Based on evidence from the World Values Survey (WVS) China and the China General Social Survey (CGSS), our findings are consistent with works demonstrating China's strong stock of political trust, while we also find significant heterogeneity in the configurations of political trust among the Chinese public.

Our focus on response patterns is partly inspired by Jean Converse and Howard Schuman, who observed that survey interviews should be considered “conversations at random” that share similar dynamics with everyday conversations.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, contexts, personalities, and other factors beyond the contents of survey items affect the answers given by respondents, especially when the questions asked are controversial. Yet, given the variations in the respondents' cognitive capabilities and risk tolerance profiles, we do not expect all respondents to be equally affected; there may be systematic patterns in the levels of such effects among respondents.<sup>5</sup>

Given the history and nature of the Chinese political system as well as the rapid socioeconomic changes that have affected respondents, we suspect that Chinese respondents may go through complex psychological processes in

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<sup>2</sup> Lianjiang Li, “Political Trust in Rural China,” *Modern China* 30, no. 2 (2004): 228-258; Tianjian Shi, “Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan,” *Comparative Politics* (2001): 401-419; Wenfang Tang, *Public Opinion and Political Change in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); and Yida Zhai, “Traditional Values and Political Trust in China,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 53, no. 3 (2018): 350-365.

<sup>3</sup> Newton, “Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Democracy.”

<sup>4</sup> Jean Converse and Howard Schuman, *Conversations at Random: Survey Research as Interviewers See It* (New York: John Wiley, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Adam Berinsky, *Silent Voices: Public Opinion and Political Participation in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

responding to questions concerning political trust, and thus exhibit interesting patterns in their responses. In addition to the frequently examined phenomenon of hierarchical trust, our discussion here incorporates two additional dimensions of reported political trust—different types of trust and response styles (how they report trust)—in order to develop a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of political trust and distrust in contemporary Chinese contexts.

Why should we adopt these additional considerations? We demonstrate the value of employing a more conceptually variegated approach to political trust by speaking to the study of the politics of inequality and redistribution, easily one of the most salient social and political concerns of our era globally and within China.<sup>6</sup> The existing scholarship for understanding attitudes toward inequality and redistribution invoke the role of political trust, which has been identified as an important determinant of individual redistributive preferences and associated behaviors in non-Chinese contexts.<sup>7</sup> We find in the case of China that uniform trusters and uniform distrusters—individuals who exhibit either indiscriminately high or indiscriminately low levels of trust toward political institutions and policies—have a lower preference for governmental redistribution efforts than others. We also provide additional findings that *institutional confidence* (i.e., trust directed at the overall governmental system) and *performance satisfaction* (i.e., trust regarding particular policy outcomes) have opposing effects on an individual's observed preference for redistribution. We show that our approach can shed new light on the pathways of redistributive preference formation and thus on the relationship between political trust patterns and redistributive preference formation under authoritarianism.

The rest of the essay proceeds as follows. The second section introduces our conceptual framework and its operationalization. After describing the data that we use, we present our empirical findings in the third section. The fourth section investigates the varied implications of political trust patterns for redistributive preferences. In the final section, we conclude by summarizing our main findings and their implications, and discuss external validity as well as potential directions for future research.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano: Perceptions of Inequality and Distributive Injustice in Contemporary China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> John Scholz and Neil Pinney, "Duty, Fear, and Tax Compliance: The Heuristic Basis of Citizenship Behavior," *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (1995): 490-512; Benno Torgler, "Tax Morale, Rule-Governed Behaviour and Trust," *Constitutional Political Economy* 14, no. 2 (2003): 119-140; and Henrik Hammar, Sverker C. Jagers, and Katarina Nordblom, "Perceived Tax Evasion and the Importance of Trust," *Journal of Socio-Economics* 38, no. 2 (2009): 238-245.

## Conceptualizing and Operationalizing Political Trust

### *Varieties of Political Trust*

David Easton developed the typology for regime support that has shaped much of subsequent analyses of political support and trust.<sup>8</sup> The Easton typology distinguishes between specific and diffuse support: the former refers to people's satisfaction with the perceived performance or outputs of the political authorities; the latter refers to the public's attitudes toward generalized aspects of the political system in terms of attachment or ill-will that "will normally be independent of outputs and performance in the short run."<sup>9</sup> While sometimes dissatisfaction in the former may lead to discontent in the latter and even unleash fundamental social change, at other times the two may go separate ways. In Easton's original framework, specific support reflects how people assess the performance of incumbent political authorities in terms of policy outputs. In contrast, more intimately derived from deep-seated political values, diffuse trust is expressed in the form of structural legitimacy. It is in time disassociated from specific performance and transformed into generalized attitudes toward the authorities. Consequently, compared with specific support, diffuse trust is deemed more durable, and it can be considered "basic in a special sense."<sup>10</sup>

Easton and other scholars recognized the challenges of measuring the different dimensions of political trust or support. In the case of China, the measurements of both specific and diffuse support are fraught with complexities. To avoid confusion, we modify and build on Easton's framework by distinguishing between performance satisfaction and institutional confidence.

For institutional confidence, the major surveys to which we have access do not include questions assessing the respondents' confidence in the "system." Instead, we make use of responses assessing respondents' confidence in major political institutions, including the military, the police, the courts, the central government, the ruling political party, the civil service, and the legislature. We thus use the average level of reported confidence toward these institutions as a proxy for institutional confidence. Even though previous studies sometimes use these questions to measure people's diffuse trust, we recognize that the respondents' answers to this survey question are unavoidably tainted by the respondents' personal encounters with the local branches of these institutions, which is subject to short-term fluctuations.

For measurement of satisfaction with performance, we have recourse to a question asking respondents about their degree of satisfaction with

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<sup>8</sup> David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965), and David Easton, "A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support," *British Journal of Political Science* 5, no. 4 (1975): 435-457.

<sup>9</sup> David Easton, "A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support," *British Journal of Political Science* 5, no. 4 (1975): 444-445.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

government performance in areas that include “defending national security,” “fighting crime,” “enforcing the law fairly,” and “government departments acting impartially.” Again, we calculate the average score and use it as the proxy for performance satisfaction.

### ***Patterns of Responses***

However, to better understand the nature of political trust in China, it is not only valuable to examine variations in the level of trust toward different objects. It is well known that in situations of high political pressure, both rank and file in communist regimes feign compliance. In view of the elevated degree of political coercion under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule, scholars are rightfully concerned about whether survey respondents are truthful in answering politically sensitive questions on surveys.

As a result, it is also important to dissect the patterns of survey responses, especially the patterns of variation in individual trust choices, which may shed light on the range of considerations respondents bring to bear in making their answers. Previous research has done much to establish the existence and degree of falsification; in this study, we give special attention to the patterns with which respondents indicate political trust or distrust.

Scholars in social psychology have decomposed response variance into true and error variance, with the latter including variance due to response styles. To be more specific, response style refers to respondents’ tendency to respond to a series of survey items on a systematically different basis from what these items are designed to measure, which affects the validity of survey results.<sup>11</sup> Psychologists have classified typical response styles into extreme response style (ERS), mild response style (MLRS), net acquiescence response style (NARS), noncontingent response style (NCRS), and so forth. They also have examined how culture, political environment, cognitive load, and topic involvement can induce variation in response style.<sup>12</sup> However, their studies have paid limited attention to the implications of response styles for respondents’ political attitudes, especially concerning political trust.

Building on Cary Wu and Rima Wilkes’s research,<sup>13</sup> we classify survey respondents into three categories: cognizant respondents are those who

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<sup>11</sup> Delry Paulhus, “Measurement and Control of Response Bias,” in *Measures of Social Psychological Attitudes, Vol. 1. Measures of Personality and Social Psychological Attitudes*, ed. John P. Robinson, Philip R. Shaver, and Lawrence S. Wrightsman (San Diego: Academic Press, 1991), 17-59, and Hans Baumgartner and Jan-Benedict Steenkamp, “Response Styles in Marketing Research: A Cross-National Investigation,” *Journal of Marketing Research* 38, no. 2 (2001): 143-156.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed review, see Yves Van Vaerenbergh and Troy Thomas, “Response Styles in Survey Research: A Literature Review of Antecedents, Consequences, and Remedies,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 25, no. 2 (2013): 195-217.

<sup>13</sup> Cary Wu and Rima Wilkes, “Finding Critical Trusters: A Response Pattern Model of Political Trust,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 59, no. 2 (2018): 110-138.

report varied assessments of confidence in political institutions or of policy performances; in contrast, *uniform trusters* and *uniform distrusters* are individuals who report either indiscriminately high or indiscriminately low levels of trust toward political institutions and policies.

In table 1, we present our definitions and varieties of political trust and of response styles tailored to the China General Social Survey and the World Values Survey for China. Specifically, Performance Satisfaction is measured as

Table 1. Definitions and Varieties of Political Trust Response Styles (CGSS and WVS)

	CGSS	WVS
Varieties of Political Trust	Performance satisfaction is measured as the average degree of respondents' satisfaction with government performance in areas that include "defending national security," "fighting crime," "enforcing the law fairly," and "government departments acting impartially." For these questions, responses are measured on a Likert scale that ranges from "Strongly dissatisfied" (1) to "Strongly satisfied" (5).	Institutional Confidence is measured as the average degree of confidence in major political institutions, including the military, the police, the courts, the central government, the ruling political party, the civil service, and the legislature. For these questions, responses are measured on a Likert scale that ranges from "None at all" (1) to "A great deal of confidence" (4)
Uniform Truster (broad definition)	Respondents who report indiscriminately "5=Very satisfied" or "4=Generally satisfied" with government performance in four areas (level $\geq$ 4 & variability=0)	Respondents who report indiscriminately "3=Quite a lot of confidence" or "4=A great deal of confidence" in seven political institutions (level $\geq$ 3 & variability=0)
Uniform Truster (narrow definition)	Respondents who report "5=Very satisfied" with government performance in four areas (level=5 & variability=0)	Respondents who report "4=A great deal of confidence" in seven political institutions (level=4 & variability=0)
Uniform Distruster (broad definition)	Respondents who report indiscriminately "1=Very dissatisfied" or "2=Generally dissatisfied" with government performance in four areas (level< 3 & variability=0)	Respondents who report indiscriminately "1=No confidence at all" or "2=Not very much confidence" in seven political institutions (level<3 & variability=0)
Uniform Distruster (narrow definition)	Respondents who report "1=Very dissatisfied" with government performance in four areas (level=1 & variability=0)	Respondents who report "1=No confidence at all" in seven political institutions (level=1 & variability=0)

the average degree of respondents' satisfaction with government performance in areas that include "defending national security," "fighting crime," "enforcing the law fairly," and "government departments acting impartially." For these questions, responses are measured on a Likert scale that ranges from "Strongly dissatisfied" (1) to "Strongly satisfied" (5). Institutional Confidence is measured as the average degree of confidence in major political institutions, including the military, the police, the courts, the central government, the ruling political party, the civil service, and the legislature. For these questions, responses are measured on a Likert scale that ranges from "None at all" (1) to "A great deal of confidence" (4).

For the non-discriminating respondents, we offer two sets of definitions and classifications. For the broad definition, *uniform trusters* (performance satisfaction) are respondents who report indiscriminately "5=Very satisfied" or "4=Generally satisfied" with government performance in four areas; in other words, their trust level toward political institutions is not lower than 4, with zero variability. In the same vein, for the broad definition, *uniform distrusters* refers to respondents who report indiscriminately "1=Very dissatisfied" or "2=Generally dissatisfied" with government performance in four areas. In contrast, for the narrow definition, uniform trusters report "5=Very satisfied" with government performance in four areas, while uniform distrusters report "1=Very dissatisfied" with government performance in four areas. We do the same for measures of institutional confidence. We report our empirical findings for both broad and narrow definitions in the third section.

It is evident that cognizant respondents apply themselves diligently to answering survey questions. In contrast, the categories of uniform trusters and uniform distrusters warrant further discussion. There are a number of possibilities. When it comes to uniform trusters, it is entirely possible that some of them are telling it as they see it and their responses to the political trust questions are based on well-formed attitudes. They are genuine believers in the political authorities when assessing the merits of the existing system. Some others, however, may lean in the direction of showing their trust and are what they would call cognitive misers. Sensing the low stakes of answering a survey and trying to save time and effort, they choose the easy route of answering resoundingly in showing trust. We would expect to find the ranks of these two sub-categories filled by those who benefit from the status quo politically and economically (though the opposite may not be true).

Yet, in the political context of the Chinese party-state, we suspect that at least a portion, perhaps a significant portion, of the uniform trusters may not be fully telling the truth in answering questions that may be considered politically sensitive. However, if this is the case, there may nonetheless exist a number of possibilities for how uniform trusters develop their responses. One possibility is that they worry about the political risk of revealing their true preferences and lie outright in answering the questionnaire for fear or owing to political cynicism. A second possible scenario is that the respondents lack well-formed

preexisting attitudes toward politics and thus toward answering the questions at-hand.<sup>14</sup> They may be incapable of making informed assessments because of cognitive limitations in processing available information or because of a lack of information. A third scenario, one that could intersect with the previous two, is that their answers are affected by the presence of the interviewer or investigator and, in what is known as social desirability bias, they proffer answers that may be somewhat ambiguous and let the interviewer construct their choice.

Against the background of the Chinese party-state, we have little reason to doubt the sincerity of the uniform distrusters. Nonetheless, we may speculate that they come to their scores via various mental processes. Some of them may arrive at each of their scores after careful assessment; others may simply want to give vent to their aversion to and disgust with the party-state. Whatever the cognitive and psychological processes by which they come to their scores of political distrust, the uniform distrusters are united in their negative opinion of the political institutions and policies. Compared with respondents in the other categories, the uniform distrusters are expected to be "losers" under the current political economic system and more likely to be from "outsider" groups. Alienated from the current system, we therefore also expect them to show less preference for giving the political authorities more power and responsibility, including for redistribution.

### **Empirical Findings: Trust Patterns and Response Types**

In this section, we document the political trust patterns based on types of trust and response styles, respectively. For our empirical analysis, we utilize data from two of the leading cross-sectional social surveys conducted in China. The China Social General Survey (CGSS) includes a series of questions on political and economic attitudes in CGSS2015. The World Values Survey (WVS) in 2013 on China includes standardized questions on institutional confidence. We find significant heterogeneity in the response patterns as well as configurations of political trust.

Before we proceed with our analyses of the People's Republic of China, we first situate China in comparative perspective using data regarding confidence in institutions from the World Values Survey wave 6 and compare China with seven other societies chosen for geographical characteristics, levels of economic development, as well as regime types. According to the 2017 Polity IV score, the People's Republic of China is categorized as an Autocracy, and Malaysia as an Open Anocracy. The rest are labeled as Full Democracy or Democracy. We include the statistics on truster/distruster types, based on both the broad and narrow definitions as defined in table 1.

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<sup>14</sup> John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Table 2. Comparison of Trust Patterns (Data: WVS6)

	Observations	Proportion of Uniform Trusters/Distrusters				Trust level
		Narrow definition		Broad definition		
		Uniform truster (%)	Uniform distruster (%)	Uniform truster (%)	Uniform distruster (%)	
Australia	1,451	0.6	0.3	2.6	1.4	2.46
Brazil	1,477	0.1	4.9	4.8	6.8	2.14
China	2,095	9.3	0.3	31.0	1.9	3.12
Chile	996	0.3	2.1	5.4	9.1	2.21
Malaysia	1,299	4.5	1.2	29.5	3.7	2.88
Mexico	1,998	0.6	6.1	3.7	11.6	2.08
Taiwan	1,201	0.3	0.6	7.0	4.7	2.42
United States	2,202	0.5	1.2	2.9	4.2	2.53

As table 2 shows, for both broad and narrow definitions of truster types, the comparisons exhibit similar patterns. Specifically, compared to other countries, a more substantial segment of respondents in the People’s Republic of China and Malaysia are in the uniform truster group for confidence in institutions; the percentages for China are especially large. In stark contrast, Mexico, Chile, and Brazil have a salient proportion of uniform distrusters. Meanwhile, for both broad and narrow definitions of political trust, Australia and the United States have the lowest percentage of non-discriminating respondents. In the rest of the essay, we base our analysis on the broad definition of truster type in the People’s Republic of China.

By incorporating measurements of trust types and response styles and examining their variations, we take into account the social dynamics in survey interviews and develop a more nuanced description and interpretation of political trust among Chinese respondents than previous studies. Who are the non-discriminating citizens (uniform trusters and distrusters)? What are their characteristics? We ran binomial logit regressions to check the characteristics of different types of trusters and display the main results of our analyses in table 3, with separate presentations for analyses of the CGSS (government performance) and WVS data (institutional confidence).

The most interesting results from this exercise are the opposite signs of coefficients for subjective and real income levels. This is consistent with Ian Shapiro’s argument that people are not well-informed about their place in the distribution of income and wealth.<sup>15</sup> Respondents tend to believe that

<sup>15</sup> Ian Shapiro, “Why the Poor Don’t Soak the Rich,” *Daedalus* 131, no. 1 (2002): 118-128.

Table 3. Analyses of Truster Types with Logit Regression (CGSS2015; WVS6)

Panel 3.1 Analysis of Truster Types with Logit Regression CGSS2015

	Uniform truster	Uniform distruster
Female	0.040	0.085
Hanzu (Han nationality)	-0.079	-0.213
Education level	-0.132**	0.048
CCP member	0.082	-0.230*
Non-agri. <i>hukou</i>	0.177***	0.078
Subjective income status	0.147***	-0.117**
Real income group	-0.081***	-0.021
Age	0.008***	-0.008***
Employed	-0.046	0.014
Province fixed effects	Y	Y
Observations	8,949	8,949

Panel 3.2. Analysis of Truster Types with Logit Regression WVS6

	Uniform truster	Uniform distruster
Female	0.132	-0.475
Age	0.002	0.003
Employed	0.111	-0.572
Education level	-0.083**	0.145
Subjective income status	0.024	-0.014
CCP member	-0.229	-15.349
Observations	1,782	1,782

their relative position is better than it actually is, making the subjective income level a better predictor of uniform truster status than the real income level. It is also interesting that CCP members, who are the potential beneficiaries of the current regime, are less likely to be uniform trusters. The coefficients of CCP membership are negative in both tables 3.1 and 3.2 and statistically significant in the WVS (institutional confidence) estimates. Not surprisingly, the less educated and older respondents are more likely to become uniform trusters; those who are better educated are more likely to offer varied responses in the surveys.

The uniform distrusters tend to have a lower evaluation of their income status than uniform trusters and thus are more likely to be those who have been left behind by China's rising economic tide. Relative economic deprivation is

therefore the leading source of uniformly low trust in public institutions and government performance in China.

## **Political Trust and Preferences for Redistribution**

Rising inequality is one of the foremost concerns of our age.<sup>16</sup> In this section, we build on our approach to political trust to shed light on the relationship between patterns of political trust and preferences for redistribution in China.

We begin with the recognition that few issues are as salient globally as those concerning inequality and redistribution today. For such issues, it is quite challenging for individuals to develop their own well-thought-out positions regarding the role of government.<sup>17</sup> Earlier studies have found the relationship uncertain between political trust in government and individual redistributive preferences in non-Chinese contexts. Marc Hetherington and Suzanne Globetti as well as Thomas Rudolph and Jillian Evans found that less trust in government led to decreasing support for government spending on redistributive policies.<sup>18</sup> Jonas Edlund explored the relationship between the level of political trust and preferences for redistribution but found the association to be weak in both Norway and the United States.<sup>19</sup>

China is a country distinguished by Communist Party leadership and the dominance of the party-state. It weathered nearly three decades of Maoist misrule and since the 1980s has experienced rapid economic growth amid market-oriented reforms. During the latter period, China also has experienced a dramatic increase in inequality of income and wealth.<sup>20</sup> In utilizing data from surveys conducted in between 2013 and 2015, we anticipate that the relationship between political trust and the preferences for redistribution might be different in China than elsewhere, and are conditioned by the Communist Party's ideological commitments (including its championship of the state sector) and its governing history and performance, as evidenced in the historical practices of strong party-state presence in matters big and small.

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> Philip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964), 206-261.

<sup>18</sup> Marc Hetherington and Suzanne Globetti, "Political Trust and Racial Policy Preferences," *American Journal of Political Science* 46, no. 2 (2002): 253-275, and Thomas Rudolph and Jillian Evans, "Political Trust, Ideology, and Public Support for Government Spending," *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (2005): 660-671.

<sup>19</sup> Jonas Edlund, "Trust in Government and Welfare Regimes: Attitudes to Redistribution and Financial Cheating in the USA and Norway," *European Journal of Political Research* 35, no. 3 (1999): 341-370.

<sup>20</sup> Fubing Su, Ran Tao, and Dali L. Yang, "Rethinking the Institutional Foundations of China's Hyper Growth," in *The Oxford Handbook on the Politics of Development*, ed. Carol Lancaster and Nicholas van de Walle (online publication date, January 2017), DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199845156.013.8, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com>.

We propose to employ the typology of trust patterns described above in examining and shedding light on the relationship between political trust and redistributive preferences in China. As Marc Hetherington argues, the effects of political trust on policy attitudes vary according to the perceived risk associated with a given policy, and it is most consequential when individuals are asked to make material sacrifice, such as paying more taxes.<sup>21</sup> While we conjecture that the divergent patterns of political trust in China affect the formation of redistributive preferences through different mechanisms, we intuitively expect to find that those who approve of the party-state's policy performance are more willing to support a greater role for the state, including in extraction and redistribution, particularly amid growing inequality.

Meanwhile, institutional confidence is considered a measure of systematic legitimacy and more deep-seated political values. While it is theoretically disassociated from specific policy performance, in practice, it may be difficult to disentangle institutional confidence from policy performance.<sup>22</sup> We are thus uncertain about the relationship between measured institutional confidence and redistribution preferences.

When it comes to considering the relationship between response patterns and redistributive preferences, it is important to distinguish between trust or distrust in the party-state and preference for preserving or altering the status quo of income distribution. Uniform trusters may show high levels of trust, but this information does not allow us to infer their attitudes toward redistribution. They may be beneficiaries of the existing political arrangements but may nonetheless harbor different attitudes: some may like the current income distribution patterns as they are; others may decide that the preservation of the existing political arrangements requires greater governmental intervention to reduce income inequality. In fact, as of the time of the surveys, the Chinese leadership already had adopted social policies that had the effect of curtailing growing income inequality.<sup>23</sup> The question is whether the political trust that uniform trusters revealed also meant trust in the growing number of social policies designed to alleviate income inequality.

We may also make similar conjectures about uniform distrusters and distinguish between their political distrust and their attitudes toward redistribution. Following these considerations, we cannot be certain of how the different response styles are correlated with attitudes toward redistribution, if at all, and leave this as an empirical issue for investigation. To anticipate, we find that, compared with cognizant trusters, both uniform trusters and uniform

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<sup>21</sup> Marc Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> David Easton, "A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support," *British Journal of Political Science* 5, no. 4 (1975): 435-457.

<sup>23</sup> Qin Gao, Sui Yang, and Fuhua Zhai, "Social Policy and Income Inequality during the Hu—Wen Era: A Progressive Legacy?" *China Quarterly* 237 (2019): 82-107.

distrusters have a lower preference for redistributive policies in China. Moreover, institutional confidence (trust directed at the governmental system) and performance satisfaction (i.e., trust regarding particular policy outcomes) have opposite effects on individuals' observed preference for redistribution.

Governments have two major redistributive instruments to affect inequality: taxation and spending. Studies of redistributive preference have tended to examine people's attitudes toward taxation progressivity and toward public spending for anti-poverty programs, social insurance, or, more generally, regarding the size of government. In our empirical investigation, we follow existing studies and measure preferences for redistribution using data from the World Values Survey China (2013) and the China General Social Survey (CGSS 2015).<sup>24</sup> For the World Values Survey, we utilize responses on two questions. The first one asks the respondent to rate his or her views on a scale from 1 to 10 about the following statement: "The government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for" (1), versus "People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves" (10). The second question asks the respondent to rate "Income should be made more equal" (1), versus "We need larger income differences as incentives" (10). For CGSS, we also utilize two response items. The first question asks respondents if they think the government should be responsible for providing job opportunities, medical insurance, and elderly care for everyone (combined into an index). The second question asks respondents whether they agree with the statement, "The government should tax the rich more in order to uplift the poor." We code all the responses such that a higher numeric value is associated with preference for more government intervention.

Our main independent variable of interest is the trust pattern discussed in the previous section, namely institutional confidence/performance satisfaction, type of truster (uniform truster and uniform distruster). We also include two sets of individual-level characteristics as co-variates: (1) basic demographic characteristics, including gender, age, income, and employment status; and (2) CCP membership. We estimate the following basic model specification:

$$Y_{ip} = \alpha_p + \beta_1 TrustLevel_{ip} + \beta_2 UniTruster_{ip} + \beta_3 UniDistruster_{ip} + ZX_{ip} + \epsilon_{ip}$$

where  $Y_{ip}$  indicates the response to one of the redistributive preference questions described above of individual  $i$ , interviewed in province  $p$ . The variables termed Uniform Trusters and Uniform Distrusters are two dummies indicating whether an individual is a uniform truster or uniform distruster. The  $\alpha_p$  are province-level fixed effects, which are the sum of all unobserved characteristics that

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<sup>24</sup> For example, Alberto Alesina and Eliana La Ferrara, "Preferences for Redistribution in the Land of Opportunities," *Journal of Public Economics* 89, nos. 5–6 (2005): 897–931, and Paola Giuliano and Antonio Spilimbergo, "Growing up in a Recession," *Review of Economic Studies* 81, no. 2 (2013): 787–817.

affect redistributive preferences and thus help to partially address the omitted variable bias problem.  $X_{ip}$  is a set of individual characteristics as control variables. We cluster standard errors at the province level.

Table 4 displays the results of the regression analyses for satisfaction with government performance using the CGSS 2015 data. Table 5 displays our estimates using the WVS 6 data for China. For ease of interpretation, we employ OLS regressions for all models, but note that additional analyses with logit regressions are consistent with the findings presented here.

Table 4 presents the estimates of different model specifications when the political trust pattern indicators are regressed on respondents' redistributive preference. In general, greater performance satisfaction is associated with stronger preference for redistribution in terms of favoring more taxation on the rich or for greater government responsibility for redistribution. Meanwhile, both the uniform trusters and the uniform distrusters show reduced preference for redistribution, and these results are consistent when we control for a range of individual characteristics. In columns 3 and 7, we exclude the performance satisfaction variable; in columns 4 and 8, we similarly exclude the uniform truster/distruster dummy variables. The results from this exercise suggest that the effects of the political trust pattern are largely robust and stable, with column 8 being a notable exception.

Among the results we can discern, satisfaction with government performance (CGSS) is positively associated with a preference for taxing the rich and helping the poor. Given the context of Communist Party leadership in China, this result suggests that those who are satisfied with government performance in China are more likely to favor a greater role for government in addressing the issue of growing inequality by taxing the rich and helping the poor.

The attitudes of the uniform distrusters on redistribution suggest that their distrust of the government extends to government policies for more taxation and spending. As individuals who may be systematically disadvantaged by or discontented with the existing order, they have little inclination to trust the government to manage social stratification.<sup>25</sup> The uniform distrusters thus appear to be China's "libertarians," who are distrustful of the party-state and want to have less of it.

The uniform trusters are also found to be disinclined to favor policies that would impose more taxes on the rich and prompt the government to help the poor. On the surface, the uniform trusters appear to like the existing political arrangements and are not bothered by the need to tackle the increases in inequality. They are thus China's "conservatives" in the sense of wanting to conserve the status quo. Yet earlier we also discussed the possibility that some of the uniform trusters may have feigned their responses to the political trust

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<sup>25</sup> Whyte, *Myth of the Social Volcano*, 190.

Table 4. Performance Satisfaction and Redistributive Preference (CGSS2015)

	Tax the top rich more				More government responsibility to provide for the poor			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Performance satisfaction	0.100***	0.077***		0.068***	0.024**	0.027**		0.015
Uniform distruster	-0.122***	-0.134***	-0.172***		-0.054**	-0.051**	-0.064***	
Uniform truster	-0.071**	-0.086***	-0.032		-0.061***	-0.059***	-0.040*	
Female		0.018	0.017	0.016		-0.001	-0.002	-0.002
Han		-0.016	-0.019	-0.014		0.041	0.040	0.042
Education level		-0.033***	-0.035***	-0.033***		0.006	0.006	0.007
CCP member		-0.023	-0.018	-0.021		0.005	0.007	0.006
Non-agricultural hukou		0.033	0.033	0.030		-0.031*	-0.031*	-0.033**
Subjective income status		-0.066***	-0.061***	-0.066***		-0.027***	-0.025***	-0.027***
Real income level		-0.021**	-0.023***	-0.020**		0.007*	0.006	0.007*
Age		0.006***	0.006***	0.006***		0.0004	0.001	0.0004
Employed		0.076***	0.076***	0.076***		0.004	0.004	0.004
Observations		8,988	8,988	8,988		8,988	8,988	8,988

Note: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01.

All specifications include provincial-level fixed effects and have standard errors clustered at the provincial level.

questions. We believe it is more likely they are revealing their true preferences on the issue of redistribution here. Because of the complex make-up of the uniform trustor group, the connection between uniform trustor status and preference for redistribution is more complicated than what the data show.

Table 5. Confidence in Institutions and Redistributive Preference (WVS6)

	Dependent Variable			
	Agree: Income should be made more equal		Agree: Government should take more responsibility	
	1	2	3	4
Institutional confidence	-0.280 *	-0.317**	-0.474***	-0.491**
Uniform distruster	-0.021	-0.094	0.369	0.314
Uniform trustor	-0.142	-0.187	-0.379*	-0.395***
Female		0.145		-0.058
Age		0.0001		-0.004
Employed		-0.204		-0.190
Education		-0.056		-0.024
Subjective income level		-0.076*		-0.079**
CCP member		-0.240		-0.128
Observations	1,494	1,494	1,494	1,494

Table 5 makes use of the much smaller WVS dataset and substitutes our measure of institutional confidence for government performance. It finds that trust or confidence in institutions in China does not translate into more demand for government intervention to address inequality. Quite the opposite. Table 5 also shows that uniform trustors showed decreased interest in having government take responsibility for the poor.

For the regression co-variables, one interesting result in table 4 is that the coefficients of CCP membership are NOT statistically significant across different model specifications. In other words, in spite of their official ideological commitments, CCP members are NOT more enthusiastic than non-members about taxing the rich and having the government provide for the poor. This does not contradict earlier findings that show CCP members being less trusting and showing mobilized loyalty.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bruce J. Dickson, “Who Wants to Be a Communist? Career Incentives and Mobilized Loyalty in China,” *China Quarterly* 217 (2014): 42-68, and Ran Tao, Dali Yang, Ming Li, and Xi Lu, “How Does Political Trust Affect Social Trust? An Analysis of Survey Data from Rural China Using an Instrumental Variables Approach,” *International Political Science Review* 35, no. 2 (March 2014): 237-253.

The effects for the other regression co-variables are most visible on the issue of taxing the rich. Age and employment status are positively correlated with a desire for taxing the rich, but education level and income status (both subjective and real) are negatively correlated. In other words, those with higher income and education levels are less likely to favor taxing the rich. Those who enjoy higher subjective economic status also are less likely to favor having the government take responsibility for the poor, and they are joined by those who have non-agricultural household registration (*hukou*). In contrast, even though those with higher real incomes are less likely to favor taxing the rich, they are nonetheless inclined toward having the government provide for the poor.

## Conclusion

Whereas survey-based studies of political trust in China offer an important window onto the nature of Communist Party rule, scholars conducting such research also have been challenged by a variety of issues pertaining to surveys and survey data in contemporary China. In this study, we have laid emphasis on delineating the configurations of political trust in China, with special attention to the patterns of responses by survey subjects. This has allowed us to offer a more nuanced perspective on political trust in China, on which, in turn, we have drawn to probe into the relationship between political trust patterns and attitudes toward redistribution.

By exploring the patterns of political trust and their connections to attitudes toward redistribution, we have shed new light on these issues, and our findings contribute to the large body of literature on democratic transition and authoritarian resilience. Yet we have undertaken this exercise knowing that public opinion surveys in China's authoritarian setting suffer from various biases.<sup>27</sup> Some of these biases appear to be quite regular and, combined with our findings, point to mysteries about the political psychology of Chinese respondents and raise new questions about survey research design and the need to deploy experimental approaches. For example, how might future surveys take into consideration the existence of the substantial block of uniform trusters in China? Why do both uniform trusters and distrusters exhibit a lower preference for redistributive policies? What are the implications of a declining block of uniform trusters for understanding the political dynamics of authoritarian governance, generally, and political participation, in particular? How are people's redistributive preferences shaped by the interactions of trust, welfare policies, institutional capacity, and historical legacies within a certain country?

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<sup>27</sup> Junyan Jiang and Dali L. Yang, "Lying or Believing? Measuring Preference Falsification from a Political Purge in China," *Comparative Political Studies* 49, no. 5 (2016): 600-634, and Darrel Robinson and Marcus Tannenber, "Self-censorship of Regime Support in Authoritarian States: Evidence from List Experiments in China," *Research & Politics* 6, no. 3 (2019): in press; accessed at <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168019856449>.

Appendix: Summary Statistics for Surveys Used

Summary Statistics				
CGSS15	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Performance satisfaction	3.50	0.67	1	5
Real income group	1.51	1.49	0	8
CCP membership	0.10	0.30	0	1
Female	0.53	0.50	0	1
Hanzu	0.92	0.27	0	1
Nonagricultural <i>hukou</i>	0.56	0.50	0	1
Education level	2.58	1.23	1	6
Subjective income status	2.65	0.72	1	5
WVS6				
Institutional confidence	3.12	0.54	1	4
“Incomes should be more equal”	6.55	2.74	1	10
Female	0.51	0.50	0	1
Employed	0.74	0.44	1	7
CCP membership	0.10	0.36	0	2