

The Understandings of Democracy, Commitment to Democracy, and Opinions about the Government among China's People

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Abstract

Based on an open-ended question about the understanding of democracy in the East Asian Barometer surveys, this essay begins by exploring the perceptions of the concept of democracy held by Chinese people. It then examines the effects of different understandings and perceptions of democracy on people's level of commitment to it. Multivariate analyses were conducted to further explore the effects of understandings of and commitment to democracy on institutional trust and regime support in China. There are three main findings. First, "direct democracy with Chinese characteristics" occupies an important and independent position in public perceptions of democracy in China, which reveals the limitation in using the binary categories "guardianship" vs. "liberal democracy" to explore what is on the minds of Chinese citizens when they think about democracy. Second, this study confirms that deviation from a liberal and procedural understanding of democracy corresponds with weakened commitment to democracy, elections, freedom of speech, and the rule of law, and strengthens tolerance of authoritarian rule and censorship of speech. Finally, people who adopt the communist understanding of democracy that is endorsed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) express higher levels of political trust and regime support than their counterparts. These findings help explain popular support for the authoritarian regime in China.

Keywords: China, commitment to democracy, public support for the government, understanding of democracy.

How do Chinese people understand democracy (*minzhu* 民主)? In the past few years, numerous studies have reflected on this question.¹ However, the use of

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¹ Jie Lu, "Democratic Conceptions and Regime Support among Chinese Citizens," Working Paper Series 66 (Taipei: Asian Barometer: A Comparative Survey of Democracy, Governance,

binary categories to describe Chinese people's perceptions of such concepts as guardianship and liberal democracy, procedural democracy and the *minben* tradition, and procedural and substantive democracy have occupied a dominant position in the accounts of public beliefs about the meaning of democracy, yet these terminologies fail to account for the variance in citizens' understandings of democracy. Moreover, few studies have explored the effects of political attitudes on the variation in citizens' views of democracy. For these reasons, it is necessary for students of Chinese politics to continue their research to fill existing gaps in scholarly analysis by contributing to the understanding of how democracy has been perceived among ordinary people in China.

This essay begins with a detailed review of previous studies concerning the way in which ordinary Chinese people understand, define, or evaluate the meaning of "democracy." The discussion then proposes a new typology of Chinese citizens' perceptions of democracy. Finally, the essay addresses the theoretical and political implications of the new typology.

Previous Research on Chinese People's Understanding of Democracy

According to the Democratic Theories Database, there are "five hundred and seven theories of democracy."² With this variety of potential meanings, even students of democratization may have difficulty in defining or grasping the concept of the "D-Word"; it doubtlessly is more demanding to ask average citizens who live outside established democracies to offer a reasonable, or even any, definition of democracy. So, what do ordinary people living under the single-party nondemocratic political regime in China believe about democracy?

Min Qi³ conducted the first national-level poll following the foundation of the People's Republic of China that "systematically surveyed Chinese political culture, including important topics such as democracy, patriotism, and attitudes toward the Chinese Communist Party."⁴ How did China's people

and Globalbarometer, 2012), 39-76; id., "Democratic Conceptions in East Asian Societies: A Contextualized Analysis," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 1 (July 2013): 117-145; Jie Lu and Tianjian Shi, "The Battle of Ideas and Discourses before Democratic Transition: Different Democratic Conceptions in Authoritarian China," *International Political Science Review* 36, no. 1 (January 2015): 1-22; Tianjian Shi, *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Zhengxu Wang, "Public Support for Democracy in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 53 (November 2007): 561-579.

² See Network, S. D., Democratic Theories Database: Five Hundred and Seven Theories of Democracy (2014), <http://sydneydemocracynetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Democratic-Theories-Database.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2016).

³ Min Qi, *Zhongguo zhengzhi wenhua: Minzhu zhengzhi nanchan de shehui xinli yinsu* [Chinese political culture: Social psychological factors that explain the difficulty in achieving democratic politics] (Kunming, China: Yunnan People's Press, 1989).

⁴ Dong Li, "Public Opinion Polls and Political Attitudes in China, 1979-1989" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, New York, 1994), 106.

understand democracy in the late 1980s? According to Min and Dong Li, the Chinese people’s interpretations of democracy could be divided into three broad categories: communist, traditional, and Western.⁵ The results of their survey are presented in table 1. The table shows that those who were inculcated with the rules of the CCP and understood democracy in a Leninist-Maoist way accounted for 61.2 percent of the responses, representing the largest percentage of the total number of answers. The category “Act for the people” presents responses that represented a traditional Chinese interpretation of democracy, including an aspiration for enlightened autocracy (*kaimingzhuanzhi* 开明专制), or a yearning for “honest and upright officials (*qingguan* 清官).” Categories 6–8 display responses broadly classified as Western-style democracy, which includes elections, the involvement of ordinary people in government, and the separation of powers.

Table 1. Concerning democracy, with which of the following would you agree more? (1987, n=1,373, in percent)

1. Democratic centralism	25.0	61.2% Communist interpretations
2. Widely solicit people’s opinions	19.5	
3. People [should] be their own masters	11.6	
4. Minority must obey majority	5.2	
5. Act for the people	10.9	10.9% Traditional interpretations
6. People can elect political leaders	6.6	20.8% Western interpretations
7. People can effectively participate in the management of social affairs	10.9	
8. Separation and limitation of powers	3.4	
9. Other	0.9	
10. Don’t know	6.3	

Sources: Li, “Public Opinion Polls and Political Attitudes in China, 1979–1989,” 215, and Min, *Zhongguo zhengzhi wenhua* [Chinese Political Culture], 181.

Based on the results shown in table 1, Min and Li concluded that the way in which Chinese people interpreted democracy through communist ideology, as well as their “frustrated and cynical attitude toward democracy, and a strong dependence on communist leaders for democracy,” indicated that many Chinese were satisfied with the current political system, or could not appreciate the true principles of democracy, such as multiple political parties and a representative system of government.⁶

Reviewing research on attitudes toward democracy in China since 1990, Zhengxu Wang reported that with the exception of two datasets—the World Values Survey (WVS) and the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS),

⁵ For the explanations of this typology, see *ibid.*, 209-213, 215-216.

⁶ Min, *Zhongguo zhengzhi wenhua* [Chinese political culture], 138-143, and *ibid.*, 245.

conducted in China since 2001 and 2002, respectively—very few studies of Chinese citizens’ political attitudes toward democracy have been based on a national representative sample.⁷ Compared to the WVS, the ABS provides a more thorough investigation of the popular understanding of democracy; consequently, studies increasingly are based on ABS data that explore the perceptions of Asian citizens concerning democracy.

Wang first explored ordinary citizens’ understanding of democracy in China based on ABS I in an article published in 2007. He indicated that Chinese people’s popular support for democracy was high and that the demand for democracy was rising. Yet the majority of Chinese citizens did not appear to be ready for Western-style democracy because they viewed rapid economic development, social stability, and national power as democracy’s most essential characteristics. Therefore, the public seemed satisfied with the current political regime as long as it continued to provide material benefits and maintained a stable social environment. A second article written by one of the designers of the ABS questionnaire, Tianjian Shi, reported a similar finding: the democratic values of Chinese people were conducive to the Chinese government’s maintaining its authoritarian rule.⁸

Further studies of democratic support among Chinese citizens have been produced based on ABS data. For example, Jie Lu argued that the seemingly strange positive relationship between support for the current authoritarian regime among Chinese people and their strong endorsement of democracy as the best political system was actually logical, because a large majority of Chinese citizens understood democracy based chiefly on “a guardianship discourse” rather than “a liberal democracy discourse.”⁹ As another expression of the “substantive style of democratic understanding,” the guardianship discourse refers to a common expectation that “the substance of government policies” should focus on “providing tangible benefits to its people and promoting the public interest over the long run.”¹⁰ Using the data from ABS III, Lu reached similar conclusions that “the substance-based democratic conception has won the hearts and minds of a majority of East Asians, including those who have been the citizens of mature democracies, such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea.”¹¹ Needless to say, his study indicates as well that Chinese respondents who live under authoritarian rule also have expressed a high level of support

⁷ Zhengxu Wang, “Public Support for Democracy in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 16, no. 53 (October 24, 2007): 563-565.

⁸ Tianjian Shi, “China: Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian System,” in *How East Asians View Democracy*, ed. Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁹ Lu, “Democratic Conceptions and Regime Support among Chinese Citizens.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹¹ Lu, “Democratic Conceptions in East Asian Societies,” 142.

for the substantive value of democracy.

The above studies were produced based on the ABS's close-ended questions regarding orientation toward democracy. Some of the other studies with similar scholarly focus used the ABS's open-ended question, "What does 'democracy' mean to you?" to look directly at Chinese citizens' understanding of democracy. In the book *How East Asians View Democracy*, Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin condensed respondents' answers into several categories such as "freedom and liberty," "political rights, institutions, and processes," "good government," and so on, and compared democratic perceptions across eight East Asian countries and regions.¹² Also using the ABS I data, Shi and Lu recoded the responses to this question into "procedural understanding," "*minben* (民本) understanding," "mixed understanding," "other," and "DK/NA (don't know/no answer)." The results show that more than 50 percent of the Chinese respondents did not have a coherent perception of democracy. What is more, while around one-fourth of the respondents endorsed a liberal conceptualization, 14.1 percent defined democracy according to the *minben* tradition.¹³

To summarize, most of the existing studies of Chinese citizens' understanding of democracy have adopted a similar theoretical framework that separates democratic perceptions into substantive and procedural aspects for analysis. Basically, all research comes to a similar conclusion: Chinese people tend to embrace perceptions of democracy that are performance-based rather than centered on procedural methods. Moreover, these studies indicate that people who have internalized the guardianship discourse "believe that their authoritarian regime is democratic in nature as long as it continuously generates satisfying governance."¹⁴

However, although previous studies have important implications regarding how people personally perceive democracy, they do not pay sufficient attention to "variance in the structure of citizens' democratic conceptualizations,"¹⁵ because a simple theoretical comparison between guardianship and liberal democracy discourses is limited. This essay argues that endorsement of "socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics," which emphasizes the direct political participation of "the masses," also should be taken into account as an independent aspect of public perception of democracy in China. This is so because the CCP intentionally has packaged the communist discourse as an

¹² Yun-han Chu, Larry Diamond, Andrew J. Nathan, and Doh Chull Shin, eds., *How East Asians View Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 12.

¹³ Tianjian Shi and Jie Lu, "The Shadow of Confucianism," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 4 (October 2010): 127.

¹⁴ Lu, "Democratic Conceptions in East Asian Societies," 143.

¹⁵ Damarys Canache, "Citizens' Conceptualizations of Democracy: Structural Complexity, Substantive Content, and Political Significance," *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 9 (September 2012): 1132.

alternate style of democracy, alleged to be superior to its liberal counterpart,¹⁶ and has indoctrinated China's people with it. This study hypothesizes that, with the CCP's control over media propaganda and school education,¹⁷ when asked to define democracy, Chinese citizens tend to associate it with political slogans such as the "mass line" and "people [should] be their own masters." In the next section, this essay explores whether this hypothesis is valid by examining the substance of the Chinese people's understanding of democracy.

Measuring Chinese People's Understanding of Democracy

According to Chu et al., "Before we can make sense out of our data about people's attitudes and orientations toward 'democracy', we need to explore how people understand the concept."¹⁸ This essay uses data collected from the third wave of the Asian Barometer Survey¹⁹ to explore the way in which Chinese view democracy. To achieve this goal, the essay first operationalizes Chinese citizens' perceptions of democracy, and then explores the substantive content of these perceptions. Finally, the essay discusses the theoretical and political implications of the empirical findings.

The author measured the understanding of democracy among the ABS respondents by conducting a qualitative-method "content analysis" to analyze their verbal answers to an open-ended question employed in the first through the third waves of the ABS conducted in mainland China: "What does 'democracy' mean to you?" Respondents were asked to give up to three answers to this question.

The main reason for this essay's devotion of much attention to the responses is because the question "encourages respondents to think about their own notions of democracy and allows them to name elements of democracy in their own words,"²⁰ even though the open-ended question may have disadvantages such as a high percentage of "don't know/no answer" responses. More importantly, given that answering open-ended questions is considered "high cost" behavior as opposed to answering close-ended questions—not to mention the difficulty of defining a complex concept such as democracy—it is natural that most respondents tend to provide answers without giving the questions too much thought, instead simply providing replies that are "most

¹⁶ Robert Alan Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), and Jinghan Zeng, *The Chinese Communist Party's Capacity to Rule: Ideology, Legitimacy and Party Cohesion* (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2015).

¹⁷ Jie Lu and Tianjian Shi, "The Battle of Ideas and Discourses before Democratic Transition: Different Democratic Conceptions in Authoritarian China," *International Political Science Review* 36, no. 1 (January 2015): 1-22.

¹⁸ Chu et al., *How East Asians View Democracy*, 10.

¹⁹ The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) project website, <http://www.eastasiabarometer.org> (accessed April 26, 2017).

²⁰ Chu et al., *How East Asians View Democracy*, 11.

accessible and plausible to them.”²¹ Hence, the responses generated from open-ended questions not only can reveal the existence of the implicit motives of the respondents, but also can allow a researcher to evaluate the influence of the creators and advocates of certain beliefs that deeply affect the general population.

Then, how should we analyze respondents' answers to the question, “What does ‘democracy’ mean to you?” As discussed above, we need to facilitate a systematic typology that does not reduce the description of democratic perception to dichotomies of guardianship and liberal democracy. Building on these structural accounts, the author goes beyond them in one important aspect: responses incorporating concepts and meanings that reflect an emphasis on the “Chinese style of democracy” should be assigned to an independent category referred to as “direct democracy with Chinese characteristics.” Thus, responses that mentioned “mass line” (*qunzhong luxuan* 群众路线), “democratic centralism” (*minzhu jizhongzhi* 民主集中制), “people [should] be their own masters” (*renmin dangjiazuo* 人民当家作主), “the minority must obey the majority” (*shaoshu fucong duoshu* 少数服从多数), “people should be able to say whatever they want” (*changsuoyuyan* 畅所欲言), “majority rules” (*dajia shuolesuan* 大家说了算), and “nobody should be allowed to have the final say alone” (*buneng yigeren shuolesuan* 不能一个人说了算) were assigned to this category. The remaining five major categories of democratic perceptions are: (1) liberal and procedural, including “elections,” “political rights,” “liberty and freedom,” “checks and balances,” and “division of power among different branches of the government”; (2) guardianship, including that the “government takes care of people’s interests,” the “government listens to people’s concerns when making decisions,” and the “government brings material benefits to people”; (3) understandings that relate to improving the quality of life, promoting economic growth, and narrowing the rich-poor gap; (4) other, including positive/negative evaluation of the implementation of democracy in China, and responses that do not make sense; and (5) don’t know/no answer (DK/NA). Three coders (including the author) read and assigned responses to these categories. A Cohen’s kappa of 0.847 indicated an acceptable level of interrater reliability. The frequency distribution of the responses is presented in table 2.

According to table 2, although a large majority of the respondents provided at least one definition of democracy, it should be noted that the percentage of DK/NA responses was high, with up to 37.7 percent of the respondents providing no substantive response to “What does ‘democracy’ mean to you?” Were the interviewees afraid of political persecution because of the sensitivity of democracy-related considerations in China’s authoritarian setting? Before examining the substance of the Chinese people’s perceptions of democracy,

²¹ Marc Swyngedouw, “The Subjective Cognitive and Affective Map of Extreme Right Voters: Using Open-ended Questions in Exit Polls,” *Electoral Studies* 20, no. 2 (2001): 223.

Table 2. Responses to “What does ‘democracy’ mean to you?”

Categories	Percent of total sample mentioning this meaning
Liberty and procedure	23.2
Direct democracy with Chinese characteristics	26.7
Good government that represents people's interests	13.2
Life quality, economic development, and income equality	11.7
Other	8.4
Don't know/No answer	37.7
N=	3,473

Note: Total exceeds 100 percent because respondents could give up to three meanings.

we must consider the honesty of the respondents who expressed their understandings of democracy.

Don't Know/No Answer Responses and the Reliability of the Data

Previous studies have suggested that, although fear of political repercussions seems to undermine the reliability of survey data collected in China, in fact low levels of education and political interest are responsible for the decision of respondents not to give substantive answers to highly sensitive political questions.²² In addition, one of the designers of the ABS, Tianjian Shi, explained in detail how to ensure the reliability of responses, and concluded, “Political fear did not influence the way respondents answered the questions used to measure cultural orientations or those measuring political attitudes and behaviors.”²³

The author ran a correlation test to gauge what prevents respondents from providing candid answers—political fear or cognitive deficiency. The item, “People are free to speak what they think without fear” (asked on a four-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”), was used to assess political fear reflected among respondents. Respondents who provided no response to “What does ‘democracy’ mean to you?” were coded as 1, and those who provided at least one substantive answer were coded as 0. It was expected that there would be no correlation between no response and the measure of political fear. The author also tested the relationship among political interest,²⁴ education level,²⁵ and DK/NAs. According to Shi, if the

²² Liying Ren, “Surveying Public Opinion in Transitional China: An Examination of Survey Response” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, 2009); Tianjian Shi, “Survey Research in China,” in *Rethinking Rationality, Research in Micropolitics*, vol. 5, ed. Michael Delli-Carpini, Leonie Huddy, and Robert V. Shapiro (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1996), 213-250; and id., “China: Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian System.”

²³ Shi, *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan*, 63-65.

²⁴ Political interest is measured by the question, “How interested would you say you are in

political fear hypothesis were correct, educated people would be more likely to give no response than those with less education, since educated people would more likely be aware of the risks involved in expressing opinions that are independent of official ideology.²⁶ In addition, the author predicted that people who showed low interest in politics would be more likely not to provide substantive answers. The results of the three tests are displayed in table 3.

Table 3. Correlation of Education Level, Political Interest, and Political Fear with DK/NA and Number of Responses

	DK/NAs	N of responses
Education	-.16***	.21***
Political interest	-.20***	.19***
Fear of criticizing government	#NAME?	-.04**

Note: **p<.05 ***p<.001.

Table 3 demonstrates that less-educated people and those who showed little interest in politics were more likely to be reluctant to give substantive answers to “What does ‘democracy’ mean to you?” Moreover, the results also show that DK/NAs are not related to political fear. All these results do not support the political fear hypothesis and indicate that cognitive deficiency likely is responsible for DK/NAs.

Another way to assess the political fear hypothesis is to examine the relationship between political fear and the ability of respondents to define democracy. The author used the number of responses offered when asked the meaning of democracy as the measurement of the extent to which the respondents were able to understand the concept of democracy (the percentages of respondents who provided 0–3 responses are 37.7 percent, 35.5 percent, 18.5 percent, and 8.4 percent, respectively).

Although, as Damarys Canache suggested, providing more responses does not necessarily guarantee a more “correct” and sophisticated perception of democracy,²⁷ at least it expresses an attitude of sharing one’s opinion without fear. If the political fear hypothesis is correct, we should find the number of responses to be negatively correlated with a measure of political fear. The

politics?” It is measured on a four-point scale, ranging from “not at all interested” to “very interested.”

²⁵ The ABS asked the respondents to report their highest level of education. Respondents with “no formal education” to “complete primary/elementary school” were coded as “low education level.” Those with “incomplete secondary/high school: technical/vocational type” to “complete secondary/high school: technical/vocational type” were coded as “middle education level.” Those with “some university education” to “post-graduate degree” were coded as “high education level.”

²⁶ Shi, “China: Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian System,” 214.

²⁷ Canache, “Citizens’ Conceptualizations of Democracy.”

correlative relationship between the number of responses and education level/ political interest also was examined to test the cognitive deficiency hypothesis. The prediction was that levels of education and political interest would be positively correlated with the number of responses. The results are presented in table 3 as well.

As shown in table 3, the results support the cognitive deficiency hypothesis. However, the results also indicate that political fear is significant at the 0.05 level but weakly related to the number of responses, which not only reveals that political fear exists among respondents, but also reminds us that it is essential to deal more carefully in the future with sensitive questions. Nonetheless, it is still safe to say that political fear has little effect on the intention of respondents to give substantive answers, because the correlation coefficient is close to zero.

The above findings allow us to proceed with the rest of the analysis. In the sections that follow, the substance of the understanding of democracy held by Chinese people is examined.

Exploring the Content of Responses

As shown in table 2, the understandings of democracy in China are rich in meaning. Among respondents who provided substantive answers to the open-ended question, “What does ‘democracy’ mean to you?” the largest cluster of ideas associated democracy with communist terms, including direct participation in politics and democratic centralism. More than one-fourth of the respondents mentioned that “people [should] be their own masters,” “from the masses, to the masses,” and “democratic centralism” in their responses, which clearly echoes the CCP’s official propaganda that emphasizes the superiority of the mass-line leadership. The second largest cluster of ideas equated democracy with one of the universal liberal democratic values, which was coded as “liberty and procedure.” A little fewer than a quarter of the respondents said that democracy involves political rights and political participation in such areas as influencing decision making, protecting political freedom and the rule of law, and voting in elections. The government’s care for people, coded as “good government that represents people’s interests” occupies the third position. Among the respondents, 13.2 percent were inclined to define democracy according to *minben* doctrine, a human-based understanding of government derived from Confucian and Mencian thinking, including the idea that rulers have an obligation to provide for those who are ruled, but also that it is essential for rulers to have the final say on political issues.²⁸ Finally, 11.7 percent expressed desire for improvement of quality of life, economic

²⁸ David J. Lorenzo, *Conceptions of Chinese Democracy: Reading Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, and Chiang Ching-kuo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), and Viren Murthy, “The Democratic Potential of Confucian Minben Thought,” *Asian Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (March 2000): 33–47.

development, and income equality by applying democratic principles to the pursuit of them.

Given that the respondents were invited to provide multiple answers to “What does ‘democracy’ mean to you?” the author reassigned those who provided answers that contained only one specific meaning to the category, “one-dimensional understanding.” A new category, “multifaceted understanding,” also was created having two subcategories called “half-liberty” and “non-liberty.” A respondent who mentioned “liberty” in his or her responses along with other meanings was assigned to “half-liberty,” but to “non-liberty” if no liberal and procedural meanings were mentioned in his or her multidimensional responses. “Other” and “DK/NAs” were combined to create a “no meaning” category. The distribution of the frequency of the responses is presented in table 4.

Table 4. Responses to “What does ‘democracy’ mean to you?” (in percent)

Categories		
One-dimensional understanding	Liberty and procedure	12.7
	Direct democracy with Chinese characteristics	17.2
	Good government that represents people’s interests	6.7
	Life quality, economic development, and income equality	4.1
Multifaceted understanding	Half-liberty	11.0
	Non-liberty	5.6
No meaning	Others and DK/NAs	42.9
N=		3,473

Several observations can be drawn from table 4. First, the results indicate that there appears to be no dominant understanding of democracy in Chinese society, because none of the total number of responses in the various categories exceeds the 30 percent mark. Second, although prior studies of popular perception of democracy have adopted the “guardianship” vs. “liberal” interpretations of democracy,²⁹ this analysis reveals that the most frequently mentioned understanding of democracy among Chinese concerns direct political participation. Third, among 1,984 respondents who provided substantive answers, 29.0 percent (N=575) offered mixed definitions, revealing that the views of democracy held by Chinese encompass complexity and multidimensionality, which are not taken into consideration in most existing studies of their perceptions of democracy. Regarding the content of these responses, to many respondents, liberal notions of democracy and an understanding based on the official CCP concept of democracy and benevolent

²⁹ Shi and Lu, “The Shadow of Confucianism,” and Lu, “Democratic Conceptions in East Asian Societies.”

leadership are compatible; 194 respondents chose the democratic meaning, without mentioning liberty and procedure-related issues.

In conclusion, this section examines the pattern of responses to “What does ‘democracy’ mean to you?” While a one-dimensional view is most common, the two- and three-dimensional replies allow us to explore the structure of the Chinese people’s democratic perceptions. The results demonstrate that different elements and principles related to direct political participation, liberty and procedure, and a paternalistic style of governance can be incorporated concurrently by the Chinese into the definitions of democracy. Does the tendency to merge direct, procedural, and substantive perceptions of democracy into one response simply show that an individual can attribute more than one feature to democracy, or does it reflect a superficial and incoherent understanding of democracy among the Chinese people? Do the results mean that respondents who attribute liberty and procedure to democracy are more “committed” to democracy than their counterparts? The remaining sections of the essay address these questions.

How the Chinese People’s Understanding of Democracy Affects Their Commitment to It

So far, this essay has discussed in detail how Chinese people adhere to certain types of democratic perceptions. Yet, what are the implications of these views of democracy regarding the political opinions of China’s citizens? To answer this question, the author regressed a series of attitudinal measures at the individual level concerning the substantive content of one’s understanding of democracy. The key independent variables are a group of dummy variables capturing specific aspects of perceptions of democracy: “liberty,” “socialism,” “half-liberty,” “non-liberty,” and “no meaning.” “Liberty” is used as the omitted category.

The dependent variables tap attitudes toward democracy, including detachment from authoritarianism, understanding and appreciation of open and competitive elections, view of censorship, and desire for the rule of law. This essay introduces the measurement of each of them, in turn, in the following paragraphs. It is worth mentioning that items that included the word “democracy” were avoided intentionally in measuring public opinion about the concept, because it is inappropriate to ask respondents who never have experienced democratic transition to answer questions addressing the suitability, effectiveness, or priority of a democratic system.

Detachment from Authoritarianism

Attitude toward authoritarian rule is an important assessment to detect one’s commitment to democracy.³⁰ The ABS probed citizens’ levels of preference

³⁰ Chu et al., *How East Asians View Democracy*.

for authoritarian alternatives, which was defined by Chu et al., as the rejection of four types of authoritarian regime: the rule of a strong man, military rule, one-party rule, and technocratic rule. The author constructed a five-point index by counting the number of antiauthoritarian responses regarding the four items introduced above to summarize the overall level of authoritarian detachment, with 4 meaning complete detachment and 0 meaning full attachment to authoritarian rule. The results are displayed in table 5.

Table 5. Authoritarian Detachment in China (in percent)

Item	
Reject “strongman rule”	68.4
Reject “military rule”	76.7
Reject “no opposition party”	27.7
Reject “experts decide everything”	79.1
Reject no authoritarian options	6.8
Reject one authoritarian option	15.5
Reject two authoritarian options	20.1
Reject three authoritarian options	46.9
Reject all authoritarian options	10.8

Note: All four four-way variables were recoded into dichotomous variables.

As shown in table 5, while a large majority of respondents rejected strongman rule, military rule, and rule by technocratic experts, fewer than one-third of the respondents refused dictatorship by a single party, indicating substantial support for single-party rule in China. Also, two-thirds of the respondents (67.2 percent) remained open to one or two authoritarian possibilities, while only 10 percent rejected all four types of dictatorship. This suggests that authoritarian rule is attractive to Chinese, especially those who have had no experience with democratic politics, and that experience with authoritarian rule encourages Chinese to remain attached to a single-party dictatorship.

Attitude toward Open and Competitive Elections

Whether grassroots elections will lead to democratization of China has long been debated. Launched by the Organic Law of Village Committees (enacted in 1987, amended in 1998), Chinese village elections are about to reach their thirtieth anniversary. A mountain of evidence shows that the implementation of direct village elections has made great strides. For instance, balloting has been carried out in every province, turnout rate generally has been high, and the conduct of elections, including nomination procedures, competitiveness, and balloting, has improved over time. A group of scholars thus argues that the future of grassroots democracy in China is bright, because the implementation of such elections is a “ ‘panacea’ that reassures us that China is heading in the

right direction and a reason we need not to be too dismayed about China's authoritarian present: better days are to come."³¹

Yet, a growing body of literature provides revealing evidence that, although grassroots balloting has an inevitable effect on villagers' political attitudes and sense of individual empowerment, village elections have failed to prompt any change in the local power structure overall. As Henry S. Rowen argued:

At first most presumed that upper levels of the government and Party would rig the outcomes, and in fact local Party cadres have continued to resist relinquishing their privileges, and non-Party members have often been subjected to various forms of discrimination. Some representative assemblies dominated by members of the old establishment still hold that Party membership is the main qualification for candidacy.³²

Indeed, party branches remain the dominant force in most locations. As a result, the village committee is "caught in a dilemma between fulfilling its obligations to the higher-level government (usually township authorities) and its loyalty to the villagers who have elected it."³³ A merge of the party branch and the village committee (i.e., overlapping memberships) has been implemented widely, which may even "make village elections close to meaningless."³⁴ In sum, while the influence of village elections cannot be denied, there is a good chance that grassroots elections in China not only are solidifying the existing authoritarian regime, but also impeding the process of democratization.

How do Chinese people view such elections? To summarize the overall level of preference for regulated, open, and competitive elections, the author constructed a five-point index ranging from 0 to 4 by counting the number of pro-election responses to the five items presented in table 6.

As shown in table 6, on the five-point summary measure of support for the implementation of elections, a little fewer than 45 percent of the respondents from ABS Wave III (43.8 percent) scored three points and a full mark (four points), which suggests that more than half of the Chinese population has not developed a full understanding and appreciation of free elections, the cornerstone of a democratic system. The author also examined the bivariate correlations between pro-election attitude and political trust for the central government and the governing party (not presented). The results show that

³¹ Kevin J. O'Brien, "Understanding China's Grassroots Elections," in *Grass Roots Elections in China*, ed. Kevin J. O'Brien and Suisheng Zhao (New York: Routledge, 2010), xi.

³² Henry S. Rowen, "The Short March: China's Road to Democracy," *National Interest*, no. 45 (Fall 1996): 62.

³³ Shuna Wang and Yang Yao, "Grassroots Democracy and Local Governance: Evidence from Rural China," *World Development* 35, no. 10 (2007): 1638.

³⁴ Kevin J. O'Brien and Rongbin Han, "Path to Democracy? Assessing Village Elections in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 60 (January 2008): 16.

Table 6. Chinese People's Attitudes toward Elections (in percent)

Item	
Elections make government pay attention to people's demands.*	76.0
We should elect political leaders through elections, not their virtue and capability.**	73.1
Even though having a government that represents people's interests is important, the opportunity to elect political leaders through elections is more essential to a democratic system.	60.6
The system of election in our country is capable of electing the most qualified people to be political leaders.***	37.3
None of the above	4.3
One pro-election response	21.4
Two pro-election responses	30.5
Three pro-election responses	35.8
All of the above	8.0
N=	3,401

Notes: * Four-way variable recoded into a dichotomous variable.

** Dichotomous variable.

*** This item is used to assess respondents' knowledge of the nature of China's uncompetitive elections. Hence, a score of 1 was assigned if a respondent chose "somewhat disagree" or "strongly disagree," and a score of 0 if "somewhat agree" or "strongly agree" was the chosen option.

respondents who held a more positive attitude toward elections were more likely than other respondents to embrace the current political regime. In other words, rather than causing dissatisfaction with the CCP's one-party dictatorship, public support for the implementation of elections contributes to trust in incumbent authorities.

Opposition to Censorship

Since Deng Xiaoping announced "Stability overrides everything" (*wending yadao yiqie* 稳定压倒一切) and enacted the system of stability preservation (*weiwen tizhi* 维稳体制), "post-1989 politics in China has been dominated by the concept of preserving stability."³⁵ Although a few Chinese scholars argue that under the false pretense of preserving "stability," social justice and freedom have been "overridden" in the process of consolidating authoritarian rule, the neoconservative view prevailing in current Chinese intellectual circles is in accordance with the CCP's call to maintain political stability at all costs.³⁶ Given this background, it is easy to speculate that a great many

³⁵ Feng Chong Yi, "Preserving Stability and Rights Protection: Conflict or Coherence?" *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 42, no. 2, special issue on "Preserving Stability: Process, Dimensions and Ideological Exercise" (2013): 22.

³⁶ Feng Chen, "Order and Stability in Social Transition: Neoconservative Political Thought in Post-China," *China Quarterly* 151 (1997): 593-613.

Chinese appreciate consolidation and regulation of opinions, even if it means a certain reduction of freedom.

Three items were used to assess the attitudes of Chinese toward censorship. The respondents first were asked to choose from two sets of statements regarding preferred regime style (response percentages are in parentheses):

Set 1:

Statement 1. The media has the right to publish news and ideas without government control (45.8 percent).

Statement 2. The government has the right to prevent the media from publishing things that might be politically destabilizing (54.2 percent).

Set 2:

Statement 1. People are free to criticize the things the government does (60.2 percent).

Statement 2. The government should prevent harmful ideas from being discussed in society (39.8 percent).

Third, the ABS asked respondents to answer whether they agreed with the statement, “The government should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society” (42.6 percent of the respondents chose “somewhat disagree” or “strongly disagree”). A score of 1 was assigned if a respondent chose Statement 1 and replied negatively to the last item, and a score of 0 if otherwise. The author combined these three items in relation to attitudes toward censorship to form an additive index (alpha coefficient=0.45), ranging from 0 (indicating support for censorship) to 3 (indicating opposition to censorship).

Support for Rule of Law

Rule of law is considered indispensable in Western-style democracy.³⁷ Under an authoritarian regime such as China’s, however, judicial authority is usually “respected in the commercial realm but not in the political realm.”³⁸ In other words, although the rule of law has become “the key to the long-term stability and prosperity of the nation and will enable China to escape from its historical dynastic cycles in which each powerful regime ultimately declined and fell,”³⁹ leaders of the CCP are determined not to relinquish their firm grip on

³⁷ Dieter Fuchs, “The Democratic Culture of Unified Germany,” in *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*, ed. Pippa Norris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁸ Yuhua Wang, *Tying the Autocrat's Hands: The Rise of the Rule of Law in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

³⁹ Albert H. Y. Chen, “Toward Legal Enlightenment: Discussions in Contemporary China on the Rule of Law,” *Pacific Basin Law Journal* 17, nos. 2–3 (1999): 138-139.

political power. Against this background, it is important to explore whether an orientation toward liberal democracy encourages people to be less tolerant of the fact that “the ruling party, with its monopoly of power, is above the law.”⁴⁰

The author used the following three statement choices to measure public attitudes toward the rule of law (each statement was asked on a four-point ordinal scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”):

1. When judges decide important cases, they should accept the view of the executive branch.
2. If the government is constantly checked by the legislature, it cannot possibly accomplish great things.
3. When the country is facing a difficult situation, it is okay for the government to disregard the law in order to deal with it.

Principle Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted to measure public opinions toward the rule of law. The first three eigenvalues were 1.61, 0.73, and 0.64. Thus, one general factor was extracted that accounted for 54.2 percent of the total variance.

Control Variables

The regression models include control variables that have been found to predict support for democratic or authoritarian rule in previous analyses.

Political Culture

Political culture is widely regarded as one of the most obvious influences on how citizens form their views of democracy.⁴¹ This study focuses on two important aspects of Chinese political culture: collectivism and paternalism.

The following three statements were used to measure orientation toward collectivism: (1) “For the sake of the family, the individual should put his personal interests second”; (2) “For the sake of the national community/society, the individual should be prepared to sacrifice his personal interests”; and (3) “As a group, we should sacrifice our individual interests for the sake of the group’s collective interest” (each statement was asked on a four-point ordinal scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). The author conducted PCA to measure orientation toward collectivism. The first

⁴⁰ Minxin Pei, “‘Creeping Democratization’ in China,” *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 4 (October 1995): 67.

⁴¹ Shi, *The Cultural Logic of Politics in Mainland China and Taiwan*, and Doh Chull Shin, *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

three eigenvalues were 1.79, 0.74, and 0.48, and the one general factor was extracted that accounted for 59.5 percent of the total variance.

Next, the following four items were used to measure preference for a paternalistic style of governance, which refers to a government serving the masses by “using a family as a model”⁴²: (1) “Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions”; (2) “The state is like a big machine and the individual is but a small cog, with no independent status”; (3) “A citizen should always remain loyal only to his country, no matter how imperfect it is or what wrong it has done”; and (4) “If we have political leaders who are morally upright, we can let them decide everything” (each statement was asked on a four-point ordinal scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). The author conducted PCA to measure orientation toward paternalism. The first three eigenvalues were 1.41, 0.89, and 0.71. A one-factor solution with 46.9 percent of variance was considered suitable.

Psychological Involvement Variables

Two variables that tap respondents’ psychological involvement in politics were used in this analysis: political interest and internal political efficacy. The measurement of political interest is explained above.⁴³ To measure internal efficacy—“beliefs about one’s own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in politics”⁴⁴—the author used the following three items: (1) “I think I have the ability to participate in politics”; (2) “Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what is going on”; and (3) “People like me don’t have any influence over what the government does.” Each statement was asked on a four-point ordinal scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The author conducted PCA to extract the factors that measure the respondents’ level of internal efficacy. The three eigenvalues were 1.27, 0.95, and 0.78, and the one general factor was extracted that accounted for 40 percent of the total variance.

Economic Evaluation

The respondents’ evaluation of their personal economic situation also was added as a control, because a person’s economic circumstance is found to be closely associated with his or her political orientation.⁴⁵ The assessment of one’s economic situation is measured by the respondents’ current, prospective, and retrospective evaluations of their families’ and the country’s economic

⁴² Murthy, “The Democratic Potential of Confucian Minben Thought,” 38.

⁴³ Political interest is measured by the item, “How interested would you say you are in politics?” on a four-point scale, ranging from “not at all interested” to “very interested.”

⁴⁴ Richard G. Niemi, Stephen C. Craig, and Franco Mattei, “Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study,” *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 4 (December 1991): 1407-1408.

⁴⁵ Jie Chen, *A Middle Class without Democracy: Economic Growth and the Prospects for Democratization in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

status based on the ABS survey. The questions are as follows: (1) “How do you rate the economic situation of your family/our country today?” (answers were given on a five-point ordinal scale, from “very bad” to “very good”); (2) “What do you think the economic situation of your family/our country will be five years from now?” and (3) “How would you compare the current economic situation of your family with what it was five years ago?” Answers were given on a five-point ordinal scale, ranging from “much worse” to “much better.” The author conducted PCA to extract factors that measure the respondents’ overall evaluation of the economic situations of both their families and China.⁴⁶

Media Exposure

A large amount of research has explored the effects of education and the media in authoritarian societies. Conventional wisdom has long prevailed that state-controlled education and media play an essential role in sustaining authoritarian rule because there are few sources from which ordinary citizens can obtain information, making it inevitable that their viewpoints will be heavily shaped by party propaganda.⁴⁷

Regarding the effects of education and the media on the perceptions of democracy held by ordinary citizens, Lu pointed out, “The leaders in non-democracies have every incentive to sustain or even indoctrinate different discourses on and conceptions of democracy that could facilitate and even prolong their authoritarian rule.”⁴⁸ Lu, John Aldrich, and Shi, as well as Lu and Shi in a separate project, conducted empirical studies which revealed that domestic media consumption can lead to a high level of collectivistic orientation, making audiences more likely to accept the guardianship discourse of democracy: a government should provide stable material benefits and shape the opinions of ordinary citizens.⁴⁹

This study also takes media exposure into account when assessing political attitudes among Chinese. The ABS asked the respondents how often they followed news about politics and government on a five-point scale, ranging

⁴⁶ Regarding the measurement of the evaluation of the national economic situation, the three eigenvalues were 1.94, 0.62, and 0.44, and one general factor was extracted that accounted for 64.7 percent of the total variance. In terms of the assessment of one’s personal economic situation, the three eigenvalues were 1.75, 0.71, and 0.53, and one general factor was extracted that accounted for 58.5 percent of the total variance.

⁴⁷ Barbara Geddes and John Zaller, “Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 2 (May 1989): 319-347.

⁴⁸ Lu, “Democratic Conceptions in East Asian Societies,” 121.

⁴⁹ Jie Lu, John Aldrich, and Tianjian Shi, “Revisiting Media Effects in Authoritarian Societies: Democratic Conceptions, Collectivistic Norms, and Media Access in Urban China,” *Politics and Society* 42, no. 2 (March 2014): 253-283, and Jie Lu and Tianjian Shi, “The Battle of Ideas and Discourses before Democratic Transition: Different Democratic Conceptions in Authoritarian China,” *International Political Science Review* 36, no. 1 (January 2015): 1-22.

from “practically never” to “every day.” The responses were used as the measurement of frequency of exposure to political news. The ABS also asked the respondents to identify their main sources of information about politics and government: “television,” “newspaper,” “radio,” “the Internet,” “cell phone short message,” or “personal contact.” The author focused on Internet usage. Respondents who answered “yes” to “the Internet” were coded as 1, while those who answered “no” were coded as 0.

Demographic Background

Finally, the author examined the demographic characteristics of respondents in terms of their gender, age, educational attainment,⁵⁰ rural residency, CCP affiliation, and self-identified socioeconomic status.⁵¹

The Multivariate Analysis

Because the dependent variables are continuous, OLS regressions are adopted in this study. All variables have been standardized to make the coefficients directly comparable. The results of the OLS regressions are presented in table 7.

This study focuses only on the effects of democratic perception, to provide a succinct explanation of how democratic perceptions affect public attitudes toward democracy and its related concepts. Several findings can be drawn from table 8. First, even after controlling for other factors, various understandings of democracy still have significant effects on public attitudes toward democracy and its related concepts, which suggests that one’s understanding of democracy plays an essential role in shaping how fully or firmly a person is committed to it.

Second, the significant results exhibit consistency with the direction within each model, with the general tendency showing that respondents who understand democracy in keeping with communist and substantive terms tend to have low levels of support for democracy, open and competitive elections, and the rule of law, and high levels of attachment to authoritarian rule and tolerance for censorship of free speech. The consistency is especially evident with focus on direct democratic meaning and no definition of democracy.

Additionally, all but one of the coefficients for the “half-liberty” variable achieved statistical significance, and three of the other four coefficients are positive. These results also provide evidence of the positive effects of a liberal and procedural understanding of democracy on one’s commitment to it.

⁵⁰ See footnote 25.

⁵¹ Although family income is considered an important factor in influencing democratic perceptions (see Shin, *Confucianism and Democratization in East Asia*), in light of the high rates of missing income data, self-evaluated social status was used instead. Respondents assessed their families’ socioeconomic status on a ten-point scale.

Table 7. Multiple Regression (OLS) of Public Support for Democracy and Its Related Issues by the Understanding of Democracy in China

Dependent variables	Commitment to democracy	Detachment from authoritarianism	Support for competitive election	Opposition to censorship	Support for the rule of law
<i>Understanding of democracy</i>					
Direct democracy with Chinese characteristics	-0.103 (0.098)	-0.164 (0.078)**	-0.378 (0.098)***	-0.387 (0.096)***	-0.391 (0.108)***
Half-liberty	0.138 (0.105)	0.057 (0.084)	-0.245 (0.104)**	-0.085 (0.102)	0.034 (0.114)
Non-liberty	-0.083 (0.010)	-0.068 (0.079)	-0.358 (0.099)***	-0.281 (0.096)**	-0.330 (0.108)**
No meaning	-0.318 (0.088)***	-0.336 (0.070)***	-0.268 (0.088)**	-0.378 (0.086)***	-0.504 (0.096)***
Liberty and procedure			baseline category		
<i>Demographic factors</i>					
Gender (Male=1)	0.045 (0.059)	0.054 (0.047)	0.105 (0.059)*	-0.048 (0.058)	0.084 (0.065)
Age	0.004 (0.002)**	-0.007 (0.002)***	0.003 (0.002)	-0.010 (0.002)***	-0.004 (0.002)
Education	-0.048 (0.052)	-0.059 (0.041)	-0.015 (0.052)	-0.059 (0.051)	-0.048 (0.058)
Rural residency (Rural resident=1)	-0.022 (0.066)	-0.062 (0.052)	-0.080 (0.065)	0.051 (0.065)	-0.007 (0.073)
CCP affiliation (CCP member=1)	0.061 (0.082)	-0.100 (0.065)	0.030 (0.081)	0.012 (0.080)	0.024 (0.092)
Self-evaluated social status	0.144 (0.051)**	-0.010 (0.040)	0.049 (0.051)	-0.105 (0.050)**	-0.076 (0.056)
<i>Political culture</i>					
Orientation toward collectivism	0.188 (0.053)***	-0.057 (0.042)	0.089 (0.053)*	-0.143 (0.052)**	-0.015 (0.059)
Preference for paternalistic government	0.005 (0.037)	-0.120 (0.030)***	-0.011 (0.037)	0.054 (0.037)	-0.198 (0.042)***
<i>Psychological involvement</i>					
Political interest	-0.021 (0.038)	-0.028 (0.030)	0.017 (0.038)	0.030 (0.038)	-0.068 (0.042)
Internal political efficacy	0.041 (0.026)	0.037 (0.021)*	0.095 (0.026)***	0.067 (0.026)**	0.137 (0.029)***

Table 7. Multiple Regression (OLS) of Public Support for Democracy and Its Related Issues by the Understanding of Democracy in China

Dependent variables	Commitment to democracy	Detachment from authoritarianism	Support for competitive election	Opposition to censorship	Support for the rule of law
Media exposure					
Exposure to political news	-0.001 (0.021)	-0.005 (0.016)	0.084 (0.021)	-0.051 (0.020)**	-0.026 (0.023)
Internet usage	-0.073 (0.076)	0.032 (0.018)	0.001 (0.076)	0.137 (0.074)*	0.043 (0.084)
Evaluation of economic situation					
Assessment of national economic evaluation	0.081 (0.023)***	-0.064 (0.018)**	0.011 (0.024)	-0.070 (0.023)**	-0.046 (0.026)*
Assessment of family economic evaluation	0.092 (0.025)***	0.025 (0.020)	0.049 (0.025)*	0.002 (0.025)	-0.045 (0.028)*
N	1777	1757	1592	1605	1565
R2	0.087	0.114	0.037	0.084	0.127
Adjusted R2	0.077	0.105	0.026	0.074	0.117

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. * p<.1. ** p<.05. *** p<.001

In summary, this analysis indicates that deviation from a liberal understanding of democracy corresponds with weakened commitment to democracy, free, fair, and open elections, freedom of speech, and the rule of law. The next tests concern the effect of people's understanding of democracy on public support for the government.

The Effect of People's Understanding of Democracy on Popular Support for the Government in China

There are two conflicting views about the effects of understandings of democracy on political attitudes and behaviors. The first asserts that support for liberal and procedural democratic values reduces support for the regime among Chinese people,⁵² and encourages them to engage in elections.⁵³ The second view contends that support for liberal elements of democracy, including competitive elections, a multiparty system, free media, civil rights, and so on, has a negative effect on formal and conventional forms of participation, such as voting in local elections⁵⁴ and voicing concerns and opinions to incumbent leaders. Thus, two competing hypotheses can be derived from previous studies. One is that people who embrace procedural and liberal political principles are less likely to be supportive of China's political institutions and system, because current authoritarian rule is not compatible with their support of Western-style democracy. The Chinese also tend to participate in political events to express their opinions and exercise their influence. The other hypothesis states, to the contrary, that believers in democracy are less likely to vote or engage in petitioning or other activities to promote democratization because "they regard officials and governments as the products of a non-democratic political system."⁵⁵ This final section of the essay addresses the two multivariate analyses conducted by the author to explore these competing hypotheses by investigating the relationship between one's understanding of democracy and public support for the regime.

⁵² Chen, *A Middle Class without Democracy*; Jie Chen and Bruce J. Dickson, "Allies of the State: Democratic Support and Regime Support among China's Private Entrepreneurs," *China Quarterly* 196 (2008): 780-804; and Lu, "Democratic Conceptions in East Asian Societies."

⁵³ Tianjian Shi, "Village Committee Elections in China: Institutional Tactics for Democracy," *World Politics* 51, no. 3 (April 1999): 385-412, and id., "Voting and Nonvoting in China: Voting Behavior in Plebiscitary and Limited-Choice Elections," *Journal of Politics* 61, no. 4 (November 1999): 1115-1139.

⁵⁴ Chen, *A Middle Class without Democracy*; Jie Chen and Yang Zhong, "Why Do People Vote in Semicompetitive Elections in China?" *Journal of Politics* 64, no. 1 (February 2002): 178-197; and Yang Zhong and Jie Chen, "To Vote or Not to Vote: An Analysis of Peasants' Participation in Chinese Village Elections," *Comparative Political Studies* 35, no. 6 (August 2002): 686-712.

⁵⁵ Chen, *A Middle Class without Democracy*, 133.

Chinese Citizens' Support for the Regime and Political Trust

It remains a puzzle to numerous scholars and observers outside China why the authoritarian Chinese government enjoys a high level of political support and legitimacy. Although thought control by the government could be an explanation for this phenomenon, many studies argue that public support for the current regime stems from “individual rational choice based heavily on institutional performance—especially the subjective evaluation of the performances.”⁵⁶

While previous studies have shed light on the sources of political support in China, this analysis provides a new perspective on public attitudes toward the regime by exploring how perceptions of democracy affect political support among Chinese. In this study, political support is defined according to Eastonian conceptualization, which captures diffuse and specific forms of system justification.⁵⁷ More specifically, diffuse support in China refers to “Chinese citizens’ supportive attitudes toward the fundamental values that the current, post-Mao regime advocates, and the basic political institutions through which the regime rules the country.” Specific support denotes “Chinese citizens’ positive assessment of public policies made by China’s incumbent central authorities in dealing with major socioeconomic issues.”⁵⁸ This study focuses on the effect of one’s perception of democracy on diffuse support, and uses the terms “regime support” and “political trust” to refer to diffuse support, a political attitude that is fundamental, durable, and “normally... independent of outputs and performance in the short run.”⁵⁹ First, the measurement of these two concepts is explained, then the results of the multivariate analysis are presented.

Support for the Regime

A set of questions measuring support for “our system of government” was newly added to the third wave of the ABS. Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Neil Munro indicate that the vagueness of the term “system of government” “avoids the mistake of assuming that everyone on all continents of the world lives in a democracy,”⁶⁰ and better taps into “a person’s conviction that the existence and functioning of the government conform to his or her moral or ethical principles about what is right in the political sphere.”⁶¹ The answer to

⁵⁶ Qing Yang and Wenfang Tang, “Exploring the Sources of Institutional Trust in China: Culture, Mobilization, or Performance?” *Asian Politics & Policy* 2, no. 3 (July 2010): 417.

⁵⁷ David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: John Wiley, 1965).

⁵⁸ Jie Chen, *Popular Political Support in Urban China* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2004), 4.

⁵⁹ David Easton, “A Re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support,” *British Journal of Political Science* 5, no. 4 (October 1975): 444-445.

⁶⁰ Richard Rose, William Mishler, and Neil Munro, *Popular Support for an Undemocratic Regime: The Changing Views of Russians* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24.

⁶¹ Chen, *Popular Political Support in Urban China*, 4.

each of the questions is on a four-point scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The answers were recoded so that 1 refers to positive responses and 0 denotes negative ones. Moreover, to summarize the overall level of regime support, the author constructed a six-point index, ranging from 0 to 5 by counting the number of pro-regime responses to the five items presented in table 8.

Table 8. Diffuse Support for Political Regime in China (in percent)

Item	
Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces.*	88.8
I am proud of our system of government.*	89.2
A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people’s support.*	77.9
I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.*	88.4
Our system of government works fine as it is, and only needs minor change.*	71.8
None of the above	3.7
One pro-existing-system response	5.0
Two pro-existing-system responses	6.9
Three pro-existing-system responses	12.3
Four pro-existing-system responses	28.3
All of the above	43.9
N=	3,209

Note: * Four-way variable recoded into a dichotomous variable.

As shown in table 8, approximately three-fourths of the respondents (72.2 percent) scored four points and a full mark (five points), which indicates that the Chinese government enjoys high regime legitimacy, a phenomenon usually observed in authoritarian regimes. However, when asked to evaluate their country’s political system, nearly 30 percent of the Chinese respondents chose “needs major change” (20.1 percent) or “should be replaced” (8.1 percent). This result implies that, although there is solid support for the current political regime, more and more people in China hold a negative attitude toward the country’s political system, a tendency that could threaten China’s future political stability. PCA was conducted regarding the measurement of regime support. The first three eigenvalues were 2.68, 0.86, and 0.62. Thus, only one general factor was extracted that accounted for 53.5 percent of the total variance.

Political Trust

The ABS asked the respondents about their levels of trust in “the courts,” “the central government,” “the CCP,” “the National People’s Congress [NPC],” “government officials,” “the People’s Liberation Army [PLA],” “the police,” “local government,” “newspapers,” “television,” and “nongovernmental organizations [NGOs],” on a four-point scale ranging from “none at all” to “a great deal of trust.” The author used factor analysis to sort out the relationships among the eleven institutions. Table 9 reports the results.

Table 9. Factor Analysis of Institutional Trust in China

	Trust in national-level institutions	Trust in local-level institutions	Trust in societal institutions
Central government	0.87	-0.00	0.02
CCP	0.90	-0.02	0.02
NPC	0.90	0.06	0.02
PLA	0.65	0.13	0.02
Court	0.16	0.56	0.03
Government officials	-0.05	0.78	0.04
Police	0.10	0.78	-0.02
Local government	0.08	0.75	0.00
Newspapers	0.03	-0.04	0.92
Television	0.08	-0.02	0.84
NGOs	-0.16	0.25	0.48

Note: The entries are factor loadings of .45 or larger from the varimax rotate matrix for all factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0.

As displayed in table 9, the results of factor analysis tell us that the institutional trust of the Chinese people can be divided into three groups. The first group includes the central government, the CCP, the NPC, and the military, which the author describes as trust in national-level institutions. The second group includes the courts, government officials, the police, and local government. The third group of institutions contains the media and NGOs, which are referenced as “trust in local-level institutions” and “trust in societal institutions,” respectively. This analysis focuses on the first group. The factor score for this category is used as the index of institutional trust in the analysis that follows.

The Multivariate Analysis

Finally, the author conducted multivariate analysis to examine the effects of perceptions of democracy on public support for the government. The same predictor variables and regression models were employed as in the last section;⁶² the results of the OLS regressions are presented in table 10.

⁶² “Access to public service” and “government responsiveness” were added to the models as

As shown in table 10, all of the content variables produce positive coefficients in the models for regime support and institutional trust, but only the communist understanding of democracy reached statistical significance. This shows that those who perceive democracy in terms of communist discourses tend to exhibit a higher level of support for the existing political system and government than people who understand democracy differently. Combined with the results displayed in table 7, we can see that defining democracy in keeping with the CCP's propaganda shows an especially strong and consistent effect in lessening support for democratic principles and strengthening support for the regime. In other words, those who endorse principles including "rule by the people," "majority rule," "people should be able to say whatever they want," and so on, simultaneously have no problem agreeing with statements that defy these principles. Indeed, they show higher levels of support for the single-party authoritarian state ruled by the CCP than their counterparts. This finding establishes that the way in which the CCP constructs the concept of democracy not only profoundly influences citizens' understanding of democracy but also contributes to building support for the regime.

Conclusion

This study provides a general overview of what democracy means to the Chinese, based on responses to the open-ended question, "What does 'democracy' mean to you?" After a careful analysis of the patterns and contents of the responses, the author concludes that China's people are most likely to understand democracy through the lens of a socialist interpretation of it. This finding reveals the limitation in using the binary categories, "guardianship" vs. "liberal democracy," to explore what is on the minds of Chinese citizens when they think about democracy. The exploration of the effects of different understandings of democracy on political attitudes also provides evidence that "direct democracy with Chinese characteristics" occupies an important and independent position among public perceptions of democracy in China.

In 1987, Min indicated that a large percentage of Chinese interpreted democracy in the Leninist-Maoist way advocated by the CCP.⁶³ More than

controls. Regarding the assessment of public service, the ABS asked respondents to answer whether it was easy or difficult to obtain service from the government, including "an identity document," "a place in a public primary school for a child," "medical treatment at a nearby clinic," and "help from the police when needed," on a four-point scale, ranging from "very difficult" to "very easy." The author combined these four items to form an additive index (alpha coefficient=0.80), ranging from 2 (indicating a high level of dissatisfaction with public service provided by the government) to 16 (indicating a high level of satisfaction with public service). Furthermore, the question, "How well do you think the government responds to what people think?" (asked on a four-point scale, ranging from "not responsive at all" to "very responsive") was used to assess government responsiveness.

⁶³ Min, *Zhongguo zhengzhi wenhua* [Chinese political culture], 246.

Table 10. Multiple Regression (OLS) of Regime Support and Institutional Trust by the Understanding of Democracy in China

Dependent variables	Regime support	Political trust
<i>Understanding of democracy</i>		
Direct democracy with Chinese characteristics	0.211 (0.119)*	0.420 (0.179)**
Half-liberty	0.072 (0.127)	0.156 (0.192)
Non-liberty	0.105 (0.119)	0.213 (0.180)
No meaning	0.048 (0.106)	0.202 (0.160)
Liberty and procedure		baseline category
<i>Demographic factors</i>		
Gender (Male=1)	0.085 (0.071)	0.096 (0.107)
Age	0.010 (0.027)***	0.014 (0.004)
Education	0.028 (0.063)	0.225 (0.095)**
Rural residency (Rural resident=1)	-0.041 (0.079)	0.014 (0.119)
CCP affiliation (CCP member=1)	-0.006 (0.100)	-0.019 (0.150)
Self-evaluated social status	0.220 (0.062)***	0.185 (0.092)**
<i>Political culture</i>		
Orientation toward collectivism	0.366 (0.065)***	0.477 (0.098)***
Preference for paternalistic government	0.163 (0.045)***	0.090 (0.069)
<i>Psychological involvement</i>		
Political interest	-0.043 (0.046)	0.025 (0.069)
Internal political efficacy	-0.061 (0.032)*	-0.020 (0.048)
<i>Media exposure</i>		
Exposure to political news	-0.015 (0.025)	0.012 (0.037)
Internet usage	-0.046 (0.091)	-0.151 (0.137)
<i>Evaluation of economic situation</i>		
Assessment of national economic evaluation	0.257 (0.029)***	0.395 (0.043)***
Assessment of family economic evaluation	-0.067 (0.031)**	0.135 (0.046)**
<i>Evaluation of governance</i>		
Government responsiveness	0.517 (0.054)***	0.813 (0.081)***
Assessment of public service	0.007 (0.014)	0.072 (0.021)**
N	1606	1760
R2	0.315	0.289
Adjusted R2	0.307	0.281

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses. * p<.1. ** p<.05. *** p<.001

twenty-five years later, Chinese citizens' perceptions of democracy have not experienced a dramatic change. To conclude, this study's empirical findings are tantamount to an extension of the central argument that has been advanced in this research: the prevailing understanding of democracy among Chinese people is shaped by the incumbent state, which predictably moderates any incentive to delegitimize the current regime and forecloses on any demand for political reform.