

Government for the People in China?

Surveys belie claims that Chinese are becoming fed up with their government.

By **Wenfang Tang, Michael S. Lewis-Beck, and Nicholas F. Martini**
June 17, 2013

An apparent contradiction exists at the heart of political commentary on China. On the one hand, some foreign China watchers frequently discuss how ordinary Chinese citizens are growing increasingly dissatisfied with their government and communist party rule. On the other hand, public opinion polls have shown a high level of popular support for the ruling Chinese Communist Party.



Image Credit: Wikicommons

Indeed, in a major national face-to-face survey we participated in, **the results of which we published recently in an article in *Political Research Quarterly***, we uncovered an extremely high level of public satisfaction with the national government. Based on responses from a national random sample of 3,763 Chinese, we found the average person's support for the government in Beijing was about 8.0 on a 10-point scale.

This result is consistent with calculations from other recent surveys. For example, according to the **6th Wave World Values Survey**, conducted at the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, the average level of support among Chinese respondents was 7.5 on a 0-10 scale. This level of support compares favorably with many democratically elected governments across the world. From these numbers, then, the Chinese government hardly appears on the verge of collapse, as some commentators would have it.

Instead, our research shows that, with respect to the political psychology of the Chinese people, political trust – a belief in the legitimacy of the government – appears as the dominant reason for their broad support of the political system.

A number of theories have been advanced to explain the Chinese people's high level of public trust in government. One often stated argument is that public opinion polls in China are simply not accurate. According to this view, in a repressive society like China, people are too afraid to tell researchers what they really believe, and instead feign support for the government.

But this argument is belied by the lively online political discussion in China, the frequent protests and petitions, and even everyday conversations with ordinary people on the street, all of which make clear that individual citizens are not bashful about expressing their dissatisfaction with the state, even if they may be more cautious about participating in organized political activities.

These observations also go against another common explanation for China's high political trust – media censorship. This viewpoint contends that because the government inhibits the free flow of information in Chinese society, only positive news gets aired. As such, the media serves to mobilize public support of the government.

However, controlling the internet is much more difficult in the information age. It is no longer easy to hide the dark side of government. The role of the media in political mobilization, we believe, has decreased. Profit considerations have further reduced the media's role in political mobilization. In a market environment, media organizations compete for audience with different political opinions, resulting in media diversification. Also, there are social media sites which **increasingly expose government corruption**

and scandals. Overall, then, claiming that most Chinese are only privy to “good news” about the government is hardly an accurate description of modern China.

Economic performance is another frequently mentioned reason for the Chinese government’s popularity. This view holds that China’s high growth rates and improved living standards have left most Chinese happy with their personal finances and optimistic about their country’s future economic outlook. Because they attribute these economic conditions to government policy, they are by and large satisfied with the government’s performance.

One problem with this economic explanation is that it fails to account for the gap between China and other high growth societies. At similar high levels of economic growth, why is political trust still higher in China than in other societies, such as India and Brazil? Mongolia, for instance, has had one of the highest growth rates in the world over the last few years and **yet, in a June 2012 survey**, “over 80 percent of respondents believed that government policies were ‘always’ or ‘often’ failing to solve their concerns.” Moreover, many democratic transitions in the Asia-Pacific, such as South Korea and Taiwan, began after the governments had begun improving the economy. Thus, it is hardly the case that economic growth automatically translates into high levels of support for the government.

Another explanation for the Chinese public’s high level of confidence in the central government is Confucianism, which emphasizes hierarchy and obedience. Observers putting forth this argument contend that culturally the Chinese are simply accustomed to unconditionally accept political authority. Implicitly, then, the CCP’s performance has little bearing on the level of trust the Chinese people place in it.

This explanation also fails to pass muster. To begin with, if Confucianism does instill obedience to government, why don’t other Confucian societies like Taiwan place similarly high levels of trust in their governments? And Confucianism has been a mainstay of China for centuries, but China’s history is chock full of examples of the central government losing public support. It’s also worth noting that government leaders in China today certainly aren’t convinced that they can take public support for granted.

Indeed, one of the less noticed political realities in China is government responsiveness to public demand.

At first glance, it is counter-intuitive that an authoritarian government needs to respond to public opinion, since authoritarian leaders do not have to face any meaningful elections at the national level. However, our research demonstrates that an absence of meaningful national elections does not indicate an absence of public political demand. While it is true that, on average, satisfaction with the national government is high, it is by no means perfect, or monolithic. In fact, about 65 percent of the public in China reports at least some degree of dissatisfaction with the central government. This dissatisfaction appears to be “listened to” by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which claims to represent the interests of “most” Chinese people.

Lacking elections as an effective yardstick to measure such representativeness, the CCP is paranoid about every single protestor on the street. While resorting to coercive methods whenever necessary, it also feels compelled to respond to public demand when possible. Thus, while media control, economic performance and cultural tradition are not entirely irrelevant, they are a relatively small part of the explanation for why political trust is so high in China. In fact, our ongoing analysis of more recent public opinion survey data suggests that such responsiveness accounts for more than 50 percent of the variation in political trust. In other words, government responsiveness is by far the most important reason for the high level of political trust in China.

This is not to say that China’s government model guarantees political stability despite lacking the institutional mechanisms of free and fair elections. Public sentiment is sensitive to major political events, such as a bad policy or the fall of a major leader. Public opinion can also quickly turn into public grievance, and regime legitimacy and political stability could be directly threatened as result. Indeed, we found that the major source of national government popularity (or lack of it), besides the trust factor itself, was policy performance. In particular, when the central government fails to deliver adequate local services, the public expresses increased dissatisfaction with it.

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37 Comments

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Victor Zhu · 9 days ago

When I look at the comments of this post, all I see are posts affected by propaganda. How do you know the Chinese hate the party so much? I come from a Chinese background, and when i have asked some of my relatives/friends in China, they all seem pretty happy with the government. What kind of biased statement is : ' America is thousands of times better than China for sure'? Many people take offence from that and we have national pride just like you do. Western powers have portrayed China as a country far behind just because of its government, and everywhere I go, China is portrayed so. Maybe you should look at the flaws of the Western Powers for once before just pointless insulting the Chinese race and people.

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Dewey Last [formerly But....] · a year ago

(at)Jack

You changed the subject since you didn't like the conversation. The article is about a survey of what the Chinese people think of the government today.

You can't keep your disdain for the CCP from bubbling over to a different topic entirely. I suggest a sedative and rest. You'll live to write another post another day when that sort of article is put up by The Diplomat.

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Jack · a year ago

Shanghai was a wealthy city before the communists took over. China was a prosperous trader. After the communists took over and the cultural revolution hit, famine and tragedy followed. Most of Chinese culture was destroyed. Books with only one hand written copy, lost. Canibalism was rife. Over 50,000,000 died or were killed. Then Deng changed his mind and let in the capitalists. The Americans and Europeans but also the Japanese invested and built China's modern economy.

Per capita it is still way below Japan but growing quickly. To put it simply. No communism until 1949 and China was one of the greatest civilizations ever. Communism takes over. All is lost. Humanity was lost. Brother against brother and father. Trust evaporated. Then the communists decided to step aside and the good times return with capitalism and modern medicine and long life spans. If you look at North Korea, you can see China a few years back.

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papa john · a year ago

Whatever you compared America to China, America is thousands of times better than China for sure, Chinese Lee. Just look at the long queue waiting to apply for a visa at any American consulates in China, you get a right answer for your question.

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Tom F · a year ago

(at)TDog - *"Or they don't want it removed. You assume people only act in a manner allowed by law, but if that were the case there would be no need for prisons"*

But no more want than a feudal subject wanting his/her master to exist and be in control.

How Chinese act is not an assumption, it's the practical reality for people devoid of self determination. It begins with the law, followed closely by the need to watch their backs, and capped off with go with the flow, as to do so otherwise means a constant struggle. When the tone is, if you resist, we'll send in tanks to crush you and mow you down with machine guns, I think most Chinese want to live, no matter how little self determination they'll end up with.

They need prison it is a part of the administration of law, sedition being one of them.

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Oro Invictus · a year ago

(at) ACT

Unfortunately, it seems people have misinterpreted my post; the wasp and fly bit was simply meant as an analogy, that's all (I thought it would help people better understand the concept of social conditioning, but apparently it had the opposite effect). Essentially, the point was simply: The CPC provides an imperfect solution to a problem(s), much of which is its own creation, and seeks to suppress the idea of there being any other which will work for their "unique" circumstances. I was not trying to say that everyone is indoctrinated and that there is no resistance to the CPC (I've

expressed the opposite opinion many times), I was simply trying to explain the phenomenon of (apparently) high CPC approval in the PRC despite the dissatisfaction of the populace there with its policies. That's why I linked to Chinasmack, because it offered individual examples of these phenomena. Similarly, the conclusion to was more an examination of the CPC than the PRC; I was simply suggesting that, given that the CPC lacks oversight by the public, it has come to see itself *as* the state, such that it would seek self-preservation over serving the nation.

Does that clarify matters?

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Tom F · a year ago

(at)Game - *"Just talk to normal Chinese, and ask what they think about China....Chinese are genetically more optimistic, and good"*

...as long as they bring prosperity to the masses.... This is unknown in the west"

Normal Chinese aside, I have lots of Chinese and Asian friends working in China or have projects in China at the moment. Only a few weeks ago I caught up with an ex-pat working in Beijing, the picture painted is *sure* it is very bright *if you're at or near the pointy end of the CCP membership chart, but not particularly bright and particularly dimmed if you're NOT a card carrying member of the CCP, and even factions of the CCP are fighting (though this is probably to be expected of any regime).*

My friend attended a banquet to celebrate the groundbreak of a project with a *client* whilst a group of just recently made homeless farmers were protesting outside. The client reassured my friend not to worry, they will be dealt with later. You know the rest of the story, two bottles of Moutai to the local official (who ~~was at the table) was all it took~~

[see more](#)

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ACT · a year ago

(at)Oro Invictus

that is an *awfully* biased post, coming from you, Oro. I would suggest that the people are not so much the fly as they are another creature entirely; while the protests of september-october of last year certainly demonstrated that the CPC has succeeded in indoctrinating a section of the PRC public with the belief that Japan's nationalization of the Senkakus somehow threatens the territorial integrity of China, there have also been mounting protests *against* the CPC in equal measure. I think that the situation is much like here in the U.S; there is a large segment of the population--the silent majority--that only really comments or

a large segment of the population--the silent majority--that only rarely comments or expresses discontent with both parties in private, while relatively smaller sections of the public are for/against the government.

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TDog · a year ago

(at)Tom F,

Or they don't want it removed. You assume people only act in a manner allowed by law, but if that were the case there would be no need for prisons.

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Oro Invictus · a year ago

(at) Davidake

IQ has nothing to do with it; it is a matter of conditioning (i.e. "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.").

(at) OJ Jones

First off, when you're going to say I've made "too many assumptions", you're actually going to have to point them out; otherwise, what you're saying has no actual weight, amounting to (hopefully non-intentional) slander.

Also, I never said that the conditioning of the people of the PRC was so complete to prevent upheavals like those at Tiananmen; indeed, I've noted elsewhere that such totality in characterizations is a fool's errand. Similarly, I've also noted that great communication and networking is resulting in a manner of a social awakening for much of the PRC (such as here: <http://thediplomat.com/2013/06...>

Finally, if you think I said anything approaching comparing the people of the PRC to "brainwashed goons", then you didn't actually read my post; that, or you don't understand how analogies work. Either way, *I* have no words.

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OJ Jones · a year ago

You assume too much. If your thesis is really the case, how can you explain the Tiananmen Protests? If you have to characterize the people of China as a bunch of poisoned, brainwashed goons with reference to insects, than I have no words.

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Game · a year ago

LOL... Just talk to normal Chinese, and ask what they think about China. No survey, just randomly make Chinese friends, and ask them. The degree of social trust is

strong in China, because Chinese are genetically more optimistic, and good. The system is outwardly meritocratic, but there is an obviously a lot of corrupt as well. Yes, another contradiction?

The Chinese both genetically, and culturally believe in a platonic notion that government gets its legitimacy by mandate of heaven (Tian), and they have the mandate as long as they bring prosperity to the masses. This is unknown in the west.

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Dewey Last [formerly But...] · a year ago

I usually read the 50-cent posters with a sense of glee since they liven up the forum with slapstick, side-splitting humorous replies. The Diplomat can have an article: 5-Year-Old Japanese Lemonade Stand Owner Wins The Local Rotary Club Business Of The Month. 50-cent posters will have this child as a member of an organization bent on making slaves of the Chinese people who will then be forced to crush lemons.

If you don't like what is being said, change the conversation.

The 50-cent posters are adept at doing this.

HOWEVER [excuse the caps], when anti-Chinese posters don't like something written about China, all sorts of reasons are cultivated and digressed. They answer the people are scared of the survey and worried the CCP will take them to a gulag in outer Mongolia if they answer wrong. If the lemonade stand owner happens to be Chinese, then the child's parents are CCP members, the loan for building the stand is a no-interest loan with the understanding the police will have free lemonade.

If you don't like the conversation, discredit the subject.

China bashers are adept at doing this.

Nowhere has any poster written that they went to the original work. No poster even wrote they went to the website of the survey foundation and looked at their methodology. The reports are inexpensive however no poster saw fit to buy one.

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Davidake · a year ago

You have underestimate Chinese IQ.

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Tom F · a year ago

(at)TDog - **"Protests rarely call for the removal of the CCP in Beijing"**

Because, it's against the law to do so, and in a country where you can be held without trial indefinitely, most Chinese have learnt to avoid making such calls.

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Tom F · a year ago

Could the result of the survey realistically go any other way?

When you have CCP card carrying members amongst your midst, when you know the government controls all forms of communication, and a survey means you can go on the record, would you say anything else?

A better survey would have been, do you think there is any risk in participating in this survey?

But, let's entertain the objective nature of the survey. Was there a baseline? What is the trajectory from the baseline?

The baseline was a starving nation devoid of prospects publicly worshipping the chairman with unanimous exuberance. Current trajectory reveal a productive nation, aiming for the title of the biggest economy in the world, yet more and more are (taking risk in) publicly expressing distrust of authorities. This is also despite a firmer grip on communication by the CCP.

IMO, the true gauge of trust and mutual approval between the CCP and the Chinese people is the degree of state control over communication, and free flow of capital.

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Dewey Last [formerly But...] · a year ago

China's population is appr. 1.34 billion people. In the late 1970's the population living in poverty was 1,139 billion. By 2008 the rise in the standard of living dropped the poverty figure to appr. 175 million. I cannot find the latest figures, however we can reasonably say a billion people are no longer living in extreme poverty. This result has been achieved in our generation. This is quite an achievement.

I can believe the results of the survey. From near starvation to eating regularly, from rural labor to urban worker, from no school to education for everyone, from bicycles to superhighways: Chinese society has changed remarkably. The question of capitalism doing better is a different topic. Let's look at the reasons why the survey has this result.

Wikipedia: Since the start of far-reaching [economic reforms](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C... "Chinese economic reform") in the late 1970s, growth has fueled a remarkable increase in [per capita income](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P... "Per capita income") and a decline in the poverty rate from 85% in 1981 to 13.1% in 2008.

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Stevelaudig · a year ago

One, of many, possible reason for this satisfaction/dissatisfaction divide is that in China, unlike the US, the government will, on occasion, execute the corrupt wielders of public, and private, power. When was the last time any corruptionist was given any serious jail time? The lack of a lawyer/lobbyist dominated public policy making ethos is helpful also. Ninety percent of US nationals wanted some form of gun control and 40 old white men [fueled by gun money] thwarted it. If 90% of Chinese nationals wanted a specific public policy is there any doubt it would be so? Not having the charade of auctions *cough* err I mean elections requires a higher degree of responsiveness to maintain legitimacy. And there is more economic freedom in China than the US. A simple, you may call it naive if you wish, observation. Prices for most things most of the time are negotiable to an extent unimaginable in the US, so everyday a typical average income Chinese person has agency in their economic life, most Americans have none, or a best, the freedom to pay the ticket price or not.

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klee · a year ago

Survey also shows that more and more Americans are dissatisfied with the US government, especially after the scandals of IRS, female soldiers raped in military, the PRISM privacy violation, now the NSA activities exposed by Edward Snowden. Americans are scared the increasing crimes in Chicago and Miami and millions of Americans go without health insurance every day.

So, what do think about the Obama administration? Nothing, life will go on. Maybe the authors need to analyze the situation in US.

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Kim's Uncle · a year ago

Yes , people are very satisfied that their government can do all the thinking for them! They don't have worry about a thing because the CCP has the brains in China. The CCP rulers are so sure of the Chinese masses' satisfaction that they hide real historical events such as 6-4? It is a very strange way to rule if the rulers are so self-confident in the people' faith for its rulers eh? Sounds a bit contradicting?

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applesauce · a year ago

so polls are inaccurate but your online, anonymous anecdotal evidence is suppose to be better somehow?

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One Injustice · a year ago



Oro Invictus · a year ago

An interesting article, albeit flawed; while I thoroughly respect the work the authors have done to try and gauge public opinion in the PRC, this article's thesis is lacking. Namely, the article pushes a premise based on exclusionary deduction with minimal support for the final conclusion. The various "refutations" of the usual given explanations for why official polls show such high support for the government smack more of straw man arguments than anything else, especially given the lack of accompanying data (however, this may simply be the result of length-of-article constraints).

The article's premise is that, the CPC, out of a desire for self-preservation, is keen to respond to public discontent thus giving them some degree of responsiveness to such issues and creating a sense of satisfaction in the populace. This is not actually a new theory, and there are indeed a fair amount of individuals who subscribe to it (I believe we even have a few people here who subscribe to it). The problem is that, if this was that case, should we not see a public which polls in such a manner which suggests they believe the government responds to their demands? If their policies are truly guided in any significant measure by the will of the people, should we not see widespread acceptance of government policies (and I'm talking about specifics, not

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TDog · a year ago

The confusion many Westerners display over the seeming contradictions in these poll results is the result not of an inscrutable Chinese mentality, but in the hubris many Westerners possess. To many Westerners, if it's not their way, it's the wrong way. They can not fathom that someone might hold as legitimate a nondemocratic government.

But reconciling the seeming satisfaction with the government and the amount of political protests is simple: support for the central government may be rock solid, but such is not the case with local officials. Protests rarely call for the removal of the CCP in Beijing. Protests and riots often stem from resentment and dissatisfaction with heavy handed local bureaucrats who overstep the limits of their powers. The result: the locals protest and riot to draw attention to their plight.

And given that the central government has been known to respond favorably to the locals (if they are Han Chinese) rather than the local officials, these poll results are not all that confusing.

Many China observers don't observe so much as wish for things to happen according to their own world view. Many so-called "China experts" have been predicting the fall of communism in China for decades, but like most fortune tellers and soothsayers, they pretty much only tell their audience what they want to hear.

In this case, the audience happens to be a Western populace confounded by the fact that there can be another way to do things rather than the way they dictate.

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gngott • a year ago