The CPC as a Populist Authoritarian Party: An *Impressionable Years* Analysis

TANG Wenfang and LIN Jingjing

This study examines the political attitude and behaviour of the rank-and-file members of the Communist Party of China (CPC). It compares five generations of Party members that carry distinctive memories during their political socialisation, and the findings show a significant decline in Party identity among the younger members. The empirical evidence, drawn from five national surveys of 11,989 respondents including 1,607 Party members, also suggests that the CPC has moved towards the trend of a populist authoritarian party.

The Communist Party of China (CPC) has outlasted the Soviet Communist Party and the Soviet Union as the world's longest surviving and ruling communist party. By 2017, the CPC had almost 90 million members,[1] about seven per cent of China's total adult population.[2] The Party, which will celebrate its 100th anniversary in 2021, shows no sign of falling membership. Despite the slowdown in China's economic development in recent years, the Party membership still grew more than six per cent in 2018. The CPC has enjoyed one of the strongest degrees of popular support in the world.[3] Chinese President Xi Jinping just amended the Constitution in 2018 so that he can stay in power with no term limit.

One reason for the CPC's success in avoiding the Soviet-style regime collapse, according to some observers, is the Party's effort to gain political support from its rank-and-file members by making them beneficiaries of China's economic reform. In return, Party members are required to show their loyalty.[4] Such policy leads China

Tang Wenfang (tangwenfang@ust.hk) is Visiting Professor at Southwest Jiaotong University and Chair Professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He obtained his PhD in Political Science from the University of Chicago. His current research focuses on public opinion and political change in contemporary China, as well as comparative political behaviour.

Lin Jingjing (Linjingjing929@126.com, corresponding author) is a Lecturer at Southwest Jiaotong University. She obtained her PhD in Project Management from the School of Economics and Management at Southwest Jiaotong University.

[1] See <https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/181700604367570804.html?qbl=relate_question_1> [14 February 2019].
[2] The adult population aged 16 and above in 2018 was 82.2 per cent of the total population. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/251524/population-distribution-by-age-group-in-china/> and <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/china-population/> [14 February 2019].
[3] Tang Wenfang, *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability* (New York Oxford University Press, 2016); Bruce Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[4] Milan W. Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

observers to expect that the CPC is becoming increasingly an elitist political party with its members regarded as privileged citizens in Chinese society, and that the newly recruited members are carrying on the CPC's ideological tradition and policies because they want to continue to reap the benefits from the current regime.

On the other hand, the newly recruited Party members grew up in the post-Mao market environment. They are better educated, more informed, and are likely to be more independent and self-serving.[5] Such traits may lead to the support for liberal ideas and the deviation from the Party line.[6] They may become the driving force in China's political democratisation that many people in the West are anticipating.

THE *IMPRESSIONABLE YEARS* MODEL OF POLITICAL LEARNING

The goal of this study is to take a rare peek inside the CPC and compare the political attitude among different generations of its members. It traces the differences in the Party members' political attitude and behaviour to the social and political environments during their upbringing, or their political socialisation. In its 71 years as the ruling party since 1949, the CPC has consistently recruited new members who have experienced vastly different upbringing due to China's recent social, economic and political changes. Consequently, these CPC members should have different values, attitudes and expectations. Studying such generational differences would provide useful insight into the future of the CPC beyond its centennial celebration in 2021.

There are at least two ways to study age effects in a society.[7] One is to divide the subjects into different cohorts, and the other is to group them into different generations. *Cohort effects* show variations in people's distinctive social and biological needs when they enter specific stages of the life cycle, such as education, employment, marriage, childbearing, retirement and so on, and whether their attitude and behaviour change at each stage. *Generational effects* characterise the specific imprint left during one's socialisation. People of each generation tend to exhibit similar political orientation even when they enter different stages of life. Generational effects could also provide insights into how major social and political events shape people's outlook, and how such outlooks influence people's attitude and behaviour. For example, the 9/11

---

[5] Tang Wenfang, "Same Bed, Different Dreams: The Bifurcation of the Chinese Communist Party", in *The Chinese Communist Party in Transformation: The Crisis of Identity and Possibility for Renewal*, ed. Zheng Yongnian and Lance L.P. Gore (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2018).

[6] Jiang Junyan, "Enlightened One-Party Rule? Ideological Differences between Chinese Communist Party Members and the Mass Public", paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting, 2018.

[7] Eitan Hersh, Stephen Ansolabehere and Kenneth Shepsle, "Mobility, Mobilization, and Registration: A Generational Model", American Political Science Association Annual Meeting Paper, 2010, at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1642573> [20 February 2019]; Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (Longman Classics Edition) (New York: Pearson Longman, 2002).

generation in the United States may be more nationalistic than the 1960s generation after the September 11 terrorist attack on the country in 2001.[8]

Traditionally, political socialisation and political behaviour are studied under two separate disciplines: psychology and political science. Torney-Purta[9] makes a distinction between psychologists, who do not actually believe that events after one's childhood would have an impact, and political scientists, who do not believe that events before one's adulthood would really matter. In other words, psychology focuses on the long-lasting impact of one's childhood environment, while political science only takes into account people's behaviour when they become fully functional citizens with voting rights.

However, there are other observers who regard the two disciplines are intertwined and recognise the importance of political socialisation in one's later political life. Jennings[10] has developed an *impressionable years model* of political learning, in which there is "considerable fluctuation in political orientations during the adolescent and young adult years, followed by a period of modest to strong crystallization, and then by relative stability from thereon". This political learning process is heavily influenced by the collective memory shaped by the major political events before or during the crystallisation process. For example, Jennings and Zhang[11] have identified the political generations in rural China by examining their collective memories during the respondents' political socialisation. Critical events could sometimes undo political socialisation, particularly before the crystallisation stage. For example, in the United States, the benign 1950s generation became confrontational in the 1960s due to the critical event of the Vietnam War,[12] and similarly, the "global generation" in the 1980s turned ultra-nationalistic due to the 9/11 attack.

In China, critical events constitute part of one's political socialisation if political socialisation is defined as the protracted Chinese communist movement in the 20th century that includes such critical events as the anti-Japanese war, the civil wars, the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Great Leap Forward, the people's commune movement, the Cultural Revolution, market reform, and the explosive economic development. These events and their ideas penetrated deeply into all aspects of Chinese life including family, education, work and social interaction, and served to define one's political socialisation.

---

[8] Family is another source of political socialisation that will have long-lasting effects in one's later political orientation; see M. Kent Jennings, Laura Stoker and Jake Bowers, "Politics across Generations: Family Transmission Reexamined", *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 3 (July 2009): 782–99.

[9] Judith Torney-Purta, "Adolescents' Political Socialization in Changing Contexts", *Political Psychology* 25 (2005): 465–78, quoted by M. Kent Jennings, "Political Socialization", in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*, ed. Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 33.

[10] Jennings, "Political Socialization".

[11] M. Kent Jennings and Zhang Ning, "Generations, Political Status, and Collective Memories in the Chinese Countryside", *The Journal of Politics* 67, no. 4 (2005): 1164–89.

[12] Jennings, "Political Socialization".

This study relies on the *impressionable years model* of political learning to study the generational effects among the CPC members by dividing them into two broad groups. The first group consists of the revolutionary generation who completed their political learning before 1978, and the second includes the reform generation who completed their political socialisation after 1978. The year 1978 is an important dividing line in the past 70 years of the communist regime in China from 1949 to 2019. The first 30 years from 1949 to 1978 can be characterised as being under the influence of Maoist radical revolutionary ideology, being anti-market, anti-tradition, anti-establishment and anti-West, and adherent to a cult of personality, central economic planning, totalist political control and social egalitarianism. Major political events that may have shaped the collective memory of this generation include the CPC's seizure of power in 1949, the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, the Great Leap Forward and the people's commune movements in 1958, and the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. This group can be further divided into the *socialist* generation (1949–65) and the *Cultural Revolution* generation (1966–77). The latter generation symbolises the radicalisation of Mao Zedong's thought and his followers' egalitarian policy.[13]

The reform era began in 1978 when the CPC held the Third Plenum of the 11th Party Congress in November 1978 and decided to alter its course from revolution to market reform and economic modernisation. As a result, market competition, economic insecurity, economic growth, consumption, individual economic benefit and educational credentialism replaced economic planning, the iron rice bowl of social security and welfare benefits, frugality and political campaigns. The past 40-odd years from 1978 to 2019 also marked significant political events, which include the Third Plenum of the 11th CPC Congress; the abolishment of the collective farms (people's commune); the development of the private sector; the 1989 Tiananmen protests; Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Tour" and the acceleration of market reform and economic growth; the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and China's heightened visibility on the international stage; and the rapidly improving living standards. The reform group can be further divided into: first, the early *reform generation* (1978–89) that had aspirations for both economic and political reforms but whose dreams were dashed by the 1989 crackdown on urban protests; second, the *post-reform generation* (1990–2000) that was more programmatic in nature by steering clear of politics but in pursuit of economic benefits; and third, the *millennium generation* (the post-2000) that has experienced China's unprecedented consumption explosion.

This study categorises the CPC members into the aforementioned five generations based on the year when they turned 16 (Table 1). The age 16 is chosen because one would have completed the mandatory nine-year education and the middle school education, and the age also marks the completion of the political learning process. Although the "crystallisation" of political orientation takes place later in one's life, the

---

[13] For further discussions of age groups as different layers of China's political geography, see Tang Wenfang and William L. Parish, *Chinese Urban Life under Reform: The Changing Social Contract* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

political learning process before 16 would likely play a major role in shaping one's political attitude and behaviour.

TABLE 1
FIVE GENERATIONS OF PARTY MEMBERS

Year of turning 16	Name of generation	Main events during socialisation
Pre-1966	Socialist	Soviet-style central planning
1966–1977	Cultural Revolution	Radical equalitarianism
1978–1988	Reform	Economic and political liberalisation
1989–2000	Post-reform	Economic growth and political control
Post-2000	Millennium	Consumption and globalisation

Source: Authors' compilation.

This article uses a two-step research design. The first step examines the social and economic characteristics of the Party members, and the differences of these characteristics across the five generations. In other words, Party members (versus non-members) and the five generations are treated as dependent variables. The second step is to consider the five generations of Party members as independent variables and compare their impact on the Party members' political attitude and behaviour.

DATA

The data were drawn from five public opinion surveys based on probability samples, the 2013–15 Chinese Urban Surveys and the 2008 China Survey.

The Chinese Urban Surveys consist of four waves of telephone surveys involving 8,000 urban residents.[14] The four surveys were carried out in 17 cities[15] in October 2013, May 2014, October 2014 and May 2015, with 2,000 respondents in each wave. The selection of cities was based on both their social, political, and economic importance and the representativeness of their geographic locations. Within each city, respondents were randomly selected in four steps. First, the first seven digits of the 11-digit mobile phone numbers were randomly chosen. Second, the last four digits within each seven-digit number were again randomly selected. Third, the age, gender and education quota were created based on the sixth Population Census data in each city and applied to the final sampling process. Fourth, a weight variable was created in the data set

---

[14] The Chinese Urban Surveys were conducted by the Research Center for Contemporary China, Peking University. They were carried out in four waves to manifest the change in people's level of satisfaction with various policy issues over time.

[15] The 17 cities (with provinces in parentheses) are: Beijing, Deyang (Sichuan), Jinan (Shandong), Jinzhou (Hubei), Nantong (Jiangsu), Duyun (Guizhou), Shanwei (Guangdong), Kashi (Xinjiang), Lhasa (Tibet), Shenyang (Liaoning), Shanghai, Wuhan (Hubei), Guangzhou (Guangdong), Shenzhen (Guangdong), Chongqing, Chengdu (Sichuan), Kunming (Yunnan), Xi'an (Shaanxi), Urumqi (Xinjiang), Jinghong (Yunnan), Tongliao (Neimeng), Yanji (Jilin), Yinchuan (Ningxia), Hetian (Xinjiang), Yili (Xinjiang) and Rikeze (Tibet).

using census information to assure the ultimate representativeness of the data set. On average, each telephone interview lasted about 15 minutes and the response rate was about 15 per cent across the four waves. The content of the questionnaire focused on people's evaluation of important public policy issues, satisfaction with the government, the possible actions they may take when being unfairly treated, as well as demographic information such as age, gender, education level, occupation, working hours, marital status, ethnicity, religious belief, income level and so on. One of the most valuable components of these surveys is that they included 1,277 communist party members among the 8,000 respondents.

The second data source was drawn from the 2008 China Survey conducted by Texas A&M University. Of the random sample of 3,989 respondents in this face-to-face survey, 330 were CPC members. The 2008 China Survey included questions related to respondents' views on many political issues, such as trust and satisfaction in the government, tolerance of different social and political groups, support for democracy, political disobedience, nationalism, political participation and political efficacy. A unique feature of this survey is the questions posed to establish why people want to join the CPC. The responses to such questions have provided rare information for the study of the Party members' political attitude and behaviour from different angles.

In sum, these surveys covered 11,989 respondents and 1,607 Party members, and are substantially large to produce meaningful statistical comparisons between the CPC members and the public, as well as among the different generations of Party members within the CPC itself.

DEFINING THE FIVE GENERATIONS OF PARTY MEMBERS IN SURVEY DATA

Party members are classified and analysed in five generational age groups—the socialist generation, the Cultural Revolution generation, the reform generation, the post-reform generation and the millennium generation (Table 1), each representing different layers of China's recent political history. As is widely believed, when students graduated from junior high, they would have completed the first stage of political socialisation by acquiring political and social values at age 16.[16] Using this assumption as a benchmark, respondents in the 59 and above age group in the 2008 China Survey should have reached 16 in 1965 or earlier (2008–(59–16)=1965), suggesting that this age group grew up during the socialist years and had received the most intensive form of socialist education. Respondents of the 47–58 age group in 2008 should have reached 16 between 1966 and 1977 (2008–(58–16)=1966, 2008–(47–16)=1977), suggesting that they completed their political socialisation during the radical movement of the Cultural Revolution. Respondents of the 36–46 age group in 2008 reached 16 between 1978 and 1988 (2008–(46–16)=1978, 2008–(36–16)=1988) during the early years of market

---

[16] Tang and Parish, *Chinese Urban Life under Reform.*

reform and can be labelled as the reform generation. Respondents belonging to the 35 and below age group completed their political socialisation after 1989, had less exposure to socialist influence and were categorised as the post-reform generation. Using the same method, the age ranges of the aforementioned generations in the 2013, 2014 and 2015 surveys were calculated. In the later surveys, a new millennium generation, who had completed political socialisation since 2001, was created and added. See Appendix 1 for a complete listing of the age ranges of the five generations in the five surveys.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CPC MEMBERS

Prior to analysing the CPC members' political attitude, it is necessary to know their background and their socio-economic characteristics. In logistic regression (equation 1, Table 2), the CPC members were compared with the public in the 2013–15 Chinese Urban Surveys. In the 2013–15 Chinese Urban Surveys, the Party members were mostly concentrated in the Cultural Revolution generation, followed by the reform, post-reform and the millennium generations in descending order. The socialist generation had the fewest members compared with the four younger generations. Such a trend is probably to be expected because joining the CPC tends to be a life-long commitment. An increasing number of the younger generations have been recruited while the older Party members are dying out.

TABLE 2
SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CPC MEMBERS (WEIGHTED)

	logit, odds ratios	mlogit, relative risk ratios (Socialist as comparison, 8%)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	CPC (0–1)	Cultural Revolution	Reform	post-reform	millennium
Socialist pre-1966 (comparison)					
Cultural Revolution 1966–77	0.548***				
Reform 1978–89	0.277***				
Post-reform 1989–2000	0.218***				
Millennium post-2000	0.180***				
Income	1.061*	1.126	0.946	0.798	0.797
Urban *hukou*	1.336***	1.182	1.076	0.593	0.181***
Female	0.719***	1.230	1.126	1.204	2.174**
No job (comparison)					
Agriculture	1.253	12.700***	79.565***	89.340***	10.403***
Service	1.039	6.840*	144.221***	167.347***	60.087***
Self-employed	0.826	10.895**	187.594***	344.483***	38.903***
Blue-collar workers	0.989	10.477**	248.292***	375.784***	39.816***
Managerial	2.859***	3.176**	47.712***	42.625***	10.698***
Professional	1.416***	4.272**	40.337***	75.256***	19.281***

(*cont'd overleaf*)

TABLE 2 (*cont'd*)

	logit, odds ratios	mlogit, relative risk ratios (Socialist as comparison, 8%)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	CPC (0–1)	Cultural Revolution	Reform	post-reform	millennium
White-collar workers	1.409***	8.411***	170.115***	176.404***	51.797***
No education (comparison)					
Primary	1.339	1.221	1.084	0.804	2.807
Jr high (Junior high)	2.558**	1.509	2.120	1.571	4.070
Sr high (Senior high)	3.878***	1.146	4.206	2.494	7.569
College	8.706***	1.504	8.384	10.816	33.699**
Postgraduate	26.053***	2.309	38.661*	86.245**	193.531***
Constant	0.290**	0.253	0.071	0.117	0.420
Pseudo R2	0.121	0.228			
Observations	7,985	1,274	1,274	1,274	1,274

Notes: *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$
Other jobs, city and wave are controlled but not shown. The values for odds ratios and relative risk ratios should be interpreted as negative if less than 1, positive if greater than 1 and neutral if equal to 1.
Sources: Research Center for Contemporary China, Peking University, *Chinese Urban Surveys*, 2013–15.

In the same logistic regression equations, the Party members stand out in socio-economic status when compared to the public (equation 1, Table 2). The Party members are more likely to be from urban areas and male, as well as have higher income, more prestigious jobs (managerial, professional and white-collar) and higher education than non-Party members. These findings have also confirmed the earlier studies on the CPC as China's political elite.[17]

In the next step, the five generations of CPC members were compared in a multinomial logistic regression analysis (equations 2–5, Table 2). The socialist generation was used as a reference for comparison for relative risk ratios. Like odds ratios in equation 1, Table 2, a relative risk ratio score of less than "1" should be interpreted as a negative impact by a particular independent variable, a value greater than "1" represents a positive impact and a value equals to "1" denotes no impact. Income does not exhibit any significant variation among the five generations of the CPC members when taking into consideration other factors. The millennium generation is less likely to be from urban areas but more likely to be female. All of the four younger generations have better jobs (managerial, professional and white-collar) than the socialist group, but the reform and post-reform groups seem to have the best jobs compared to the millennium generation. The reform and post-reform groups are better-educated than the older generations but the millennium group seems to have the highest level of education. In other words, the millennium generation is better-educated, but less likely

---

[17] Svolik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*; and Tang, "Same Bed, Different Dreams".

to have prestigious jobs than the older generations. The gap between education and occupation may cause negative impacts on the millennium group's level of satisfaction with their external social and political environment.

POLITICAL ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR AMONG FIVE GENERATIONS OF CPC MEMBERS

This section compares the political attitude and behaviour of five generations of Party members across four dimensions: (i) ideological orientation; (ii) political satisfaction; (iii) political mobilisation; and (iv) political participation.

Ideological Orientation

One approach of examining and establishing the CPC members' ideological orientation is by asking the question why they want to join the Party. In the 2008 China Survey, Party members were asked to specify the reasons why they wanted to join the CPC. The seven responses to choose from include: (i) serving the people; (ii) working for communism; (iii) the CPC is the best party to lead China; (iv) career development; (v) social status; (vi) political opportunity; and (vii) higher income. Each respondent could pick more than one response. Table 3 shows the distribution of proportions for the seven choices. The top three reasons are serving the people (67 per cent), working for communism (50 per cent) and the CPC being the best party to lead the country (39 per cent), followed by career development (28 per cent), social status (20 per cent), political opportunity (18 per cent) and higher income (seven per cent).

TABLE 3
REASONS FOR JOINING THE CPC

What are your reasons for joining the CPC?	Party members, %
Serving the people	67
Working for communism	50
The CPC is the best party to lead China	39
Career development	28
Social status	20
Political opportunity	18
Higher income	7

Notes: Party members=330, weighted percentage.
Source: Texas A&M University, The 2008 China Survey, 2008.

A factor analysis (not shown) neatly divides the seven reasons into two factors, items 1 to 3 in one group and 4 to 7 in another. The first three items appear to be related to the Party's orthodox ideology and items 4 to 7 pertain to promoting one's personal interests. Accordingly, the first factor based on items 1 to 3 can be labelled as orthodox and the second as pragmatist. The ordinary least squares regression analysis

(Table 4) that controlled for social class, education, urbanisation and gender shows a clear distinction between the different generations of Party members. Compared to the post-reform and millennium generations, the reform, Cultural Revolution and socialist generations are more likely to be orthodox but less likely to be pragmatist. In other words, Party members from the post-reform and millennium generations—the youngest among the five generations—are more likely to join the Party to promote their personal interests than to serve the noble cause of the CPC. This is an interesting departure by the post-reform and millennium generations from the CPC's official line of propaganda.

TABLE 4
DETERMINANTS OF DIVISION AMONG PARTY MEMBERS (OLS REGRESSION, WEIGHTED)

Party member type:	Orthodox	Pragmatist
Mean (0–1), weighted	.519	.224
Post-reform and millennium (<36, comparison)		
Reform (36–46)	0.144***	–0.146***
Cultural Revolution (47–58)	0.188***	–0.188***
Socialist (58+)	0.279***	–0.205***
Social class (1–5)	–0.015	0.024
Education (year)	–0.006	0.009*
Rural	0.014	0.047
Migrant	0.036	0.153*
Urban (comparison)		
Female	0.047	0.043
Constant	0.467***	0.137
N	319	319
R^2	0.126	0.148

Notes: *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$
Source: Texas A&M University, The 2008 China Survey, 2008.

The second approach to measuring ideological orientation is by religiosity. As the CPC is an atheist political party, its members are forbidden from engaging in religious practices. Hence, the CPC members are expected to show a low level of religiosity and there should be no difference among the five generations of the CPC members. The 2013–15 Chinese Urban Surveys attempted to establish respondents' level of religiosity by determining whether they often, sometimes or never engaged in such religious practices as burning incense, *feng shui* (geomancy), praying and ancestor worship. These practices are more likely to capture the survey respondents' diffuse religious behaviour in the Chinese context than the standard survey questions about Western institutionalised religion such as believing in God and attending church ceremonies.[18] Comparing the CPC members to the public, Party members indeed

---

[18] See Tang Wenfang, "The Worshipping Atheist: Institutional and Diffused Religiosities in China", *China: An International Journal* 12, no. 3 (December 2014): 1–26.

show less religiosity, confirming the impact of the Party's atheist orientation. However, by intergenerational comparison, the three younger generations (reform, post-reform and millennium) were significantly more religious than the two older generations (socialist and Cultural Revolution, see equation 1, Table 5).

The findings corroborate the view that the younger generations of the Party members are becoming more focused on personal gains and departing from the Party's atheist orientation. At least from these limited measures, the CPC's ideological education of the younger members does not seem to be as effective as for the older generations.

Political Satisfaction

The 2013–15 Chinese Urban Surveys also evaluate the respondents' political satisfaction by establishing their level of satisfaction with the following four aspects: (i) the performance of the central government; (ii) the government's response to people's needs; (iii) the government efficiency; and (iv) freedom of speech (equations 2–5, Table 5).

The Party members as a whole demonstrate a higher level of political satisfaction than the public in the central government's performance, government responsiveness, its efficiency and freedom of speech. These are the expected results since the Party members are more integrated into the system and are more likely to benefit from it.

However, an intergenerational comparison of the five generations of Party members yields interesting findings. Compared to the socialist and Cultural Revolution generations, the millennium generation, the youngest of the five, stands out as being consistently more dissatisfied with all of the four aspects; the post-reform generation is more dissatisfied with the central government's performance and with freedom of speech; and the reform generation shows greater dissatisfaction with the central government's performance. Overall, the three younger generations are unhappier politically than the two older generations.

Political Mobilisation

Traditionally the CPC firmly controls the media as its propaganda machine. The media is used to spread the Party's policies and to rally political support. The rise of the internet has diversified the public's channels of information gathering and provided an alternative voice either through social media or online international sources. The 2013–15 Chinese Urban Surveys attempt to establish how people access the news if they acquire political news through TV, which is firmly under the Party's control, or via the internet.

As evident in Table 5 (equations 6–7), the Party members—who as a whole show greater political interest—are more likely than the public to gather political news through TV as well as the internet. The three younger generations (reform, post-reform and millennium) are less likely to watch the Party-controlled TV news but are more likely to use the internet, signifying that the traditional channel of political mobilisation is increasingly less effective for the younger generations.

TABLE 5
GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES AMONG CPC MEMBERS (OLS REGRESSION)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Religiosity	Beijing sat.	Gov. response	Gov. efficiency	Free speech	TV news	Net news	Go net	Go gov	No action
Mean (0–1)	.195	.784	.669	.570	.712	.702	.570	.065	.332	.142
CPC (0–1)	−0.034***	0.013*	0.049***	0.022*	0.018***	0.074***	0.043***	−0.002	0.017	−0.019
Socialist (comparison)									−0.096	
Cul. Rev	0.034	−0.014	0.030	−0.017	0.007	−0.066	0.107**	0.016		−0.090*
Reform	0.143***	−0.064**	−0.054	−0.049	−0.010	−0.185***	0.244***	0.072**	−0.115**	−0.113**
Post-reform	0.102***	−0.080***	−0.027	−0.049	−0.039*	−0.178***	0.351***	0.123***	−0.155**	−0.136***
Millennium	0.069*	−0.086***	−0.112**	−0.190***	−0.045**	−0.337***	0.297***	0.119***	−0.142**	−0.124**
Constant	−0.122	0.047	0.487***	0.840***	0.407***	1.237***	0.221	0.004	0.447**	0.096
Observations	1,271	1,236	1,272	1,274	1,272	1,274	1,274	1,274	1,274	1,274
Adjusted R^2	0.141	0.128	0.640	0.159	0.760	0.137	0.395	0.027	0.049	0.041

Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
For each equation, income, occupation, urbanisation, marital status, education, gender, ethnicity, city and survey time are controlled but not shown here. All mean values are weighted.
Sources: Research Center for Contemporary China, Peking University, Chinese Urban Surveys, 2013–15.

Political Participation

The 2013–15 Chinese Urban Surveys establish the respondents' political participation by asking whether they would go to the government, use the internet or take no action if they face mistreatment by government officials. Going to the government means taking the traditional channel for problem-solving, and using the internet represents new and relatively autonomous political participation, while not taking any action suggests political apathy.

As is evident in equations 8, 9 and 10 of Table 5, there is no significant difference between the Party members and non-members in political participation. Among the five generations of CPC members, however, the younger generations, particularly the reform, post-reform and millennium generations, are less likely to visit the government offices but are more likely to use the internet for problem-solving; and they are less likely to take no action when dealing with mistreatment by government officials. These findings show higher political activism and political participation through non-traditional channels among the younger generations of the CPC.

CONCLUSION: THE CPC AS A POPULIST AUTHORITARIAN PARTY

Using the *impressionable years* analysis,[19] this study categorises the CPC members into five generations, namely the socialist, Cultural Revolution, reform, post-reform and millennium generations. Using data from five Chinese public opinion surveys, this article finds that the CPC members are beneficiaries of China's economic growth. Compared to the public, the Party members are more likely to earn higher income, live in urban areas, work in jobs of higher prestige and receive higher education. The millennium generation, while enjoying the highest level of education, is falling behind in getting jobs with higher prestige as compared to the reform and post-reform generations.

There are significant intergenerational differences in ideological orientation, political satisfaction, political mobilisation and political participation. The three younger generations (reform, post-reform and millennium) are noticeably less indoctrinated by the orthodox Party ideology, less satisfied with the government, and less willing to follow the Party's propaganda and political mobilisation. They demonstrate stronger political activism than the older generations, but are also more likely to go through the less controlled channels such as the internet, rather than visiting government offices.

There are at least four scenarios such generational differences could produce for the future of China's political landscape, namely the collapse of the Party-state, the cohort effect, the intra-Party democracy and populist authoritarianism.

---

[19] Jennings, "Political Socialization".

The first scenario is the collapse of the CPC rule due to political deviation and political unhappiness among its newly recruited members. This scenario, although plausible, does not appear to be very likely in the near future, given the strong public support for the Party-state in China. The CPC in fact enjoys substantial political legitimacy in Chinese society even if its younger members are deviant.

The second scenario is that the CPC rule continues to perpetuate itself when the cohort effect kicks in. Young Party members who are unhappy would become more obedient and resemble the older generations, having gone through their rebellious years and experienced life-cycle events, such as education, marriage, childbearing, employment, mortgage payments, retirement and so on. As discussed earlier, the impressionable years theory emphasises the lasting memory and its effect throughout one's lifetime. The analysis in this study corroborates the theory. The generational differences stay statistically significant even taking into consideration other biological and socio-economic factors, such as gender, education, occupation, income, marital status and geographic location.

The third scenario is intra-Party democracy.[20] In this scenario, different generations representing different political orientations would form political factions and compete with each other within the CPC, while the Party itself continues to stay in power. Japan's Liberal Democratic Party is an exemplary of the scenario, having managed to stay in power since WWII with different factions taking turns to control the government.[21] The scenario, which many have hoped for,[22] seems unlikely under the current Party boss Xi Jinping, whose style tends to emphasise power consolidation.[23]

The fourth scenario is the CPC's shift towards a populist authoritarian party. In such a political environment, the Party members' identity with the Party would continue to erode while the CPC becomes cartelised. The findings in this article about the new

---

[20] See Zheng Yongnian, *The Chinese Communist Party as Organizational Emperor* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010). Interestingly, some researchers observe that intra-party democracy has also become a new trend in political parties in democratic countries. See John D. Martz, "Political Parties and Candidate Selection in Venezuela and Colombia", *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no. 4 (2000): 639–59; Susan E. Scarrow, Paul Webb and David M. Farrell, "From Social Integration to Electoral Contestation: The Changing Distribution of Power within Political Parties", in *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, ed. Russell J. Dalton and Martin P. Wattenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Lars Bille, "Democratizing a Democratic Procedure: Myth or Reality? Candidate Selection in Western European Democracies 1960–1990", *Party Politics* 7, no. 3 (2001): 363–80; and Wu Chung-li, "The Transformation of the Kuomintang's Candidate Selection System", *Party Politics* 7, no. 1 (2001): 103–18; Reuven Y. Hazan and Gideon Rahat, *Democracy within Parties: Candidate Selection Methods and Their Political Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[21] Frances McCall Rosenbluth and Gary Cox, "Factional Competition for the Party Endorsement: The Case of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party", *British Journal of Political Science* 26, no. 2 (1996): 259–97.

[22] See, for example, footnotes 6 and 7 in Tang, "Same Bed, Different Dreams" for a list of references in Chinese and English.

[23] See, for example, Zheng Yongnian, "Recent Changes in China's Elite Politics", paper presented at the Workshop on "Anticipating China's Post-Xi Jinping Generation Leaders", East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, 22 February 2019.

generations of the CPC members' diminishing identity with the Party suggest an emerging global trend in other countries where political parties have experienced declining party membership.[24] In adapting to such decline, political parties have become cartelised. Power consolidation among the top party elites, interpenetration between the party and the state, and the collusive control of state resources by the party are characteristics of a cartelised party.[25] Meanwhile, other studies have also suggested that the CPC is likely to continue its populist approach in political mobilisation by directly reaching out to the public through the mass line under the traditional party ideology.[26] These trends predict the CPC's move towards a populist authoritarian political party that will continue to cartelise within itself on the one hand, and mobilise political support by directly reaching out to the public on the other.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

[24] Susan Scarrow and Burcu Gezgor, "Declining Memberships, Changing Members? European Political Party Members in a New Era", *Party Politics* 16, no. 6 (2010): 823–43; Paul Whitely, "Is the Party Over? The Decline of Party Activism and Membership across the Democratic World", *Party Politics*, 17, no. 1 (2011): 21–44; Russell J. Dalton, "The Decline of Party Identification", in *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, ed. Russell J. Dalton and Martin P. Wattenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Russell J. Dalton, Ian McAllister and Martin P. Wattenberg, "The Consequences of Partisan Dealignment", in *Parties Without Partisans*, ed. Dalton and Wattenberg; Martin Wattenberg, "The Decline of Party Mobilization", in *Parties Without Partisans*, ed. Dalton and Wattenberg; Susan Scarrow, "Parties without Members? Party Organizations in a Changing Electoral Environment", in *Parties Without Partisans*, ed. Dalton and Wattenberg; Kaare Strom, "Parties at the Core of Government", in *Parties Without Partisans*, ed. Dalton and Wattenberg; Miki L. Caul and Mark M. Gray, "From Platform Declarations to Policy Outcomes: Changing Party Profiles and Partisan Influence over Policy", in *Parties Without Partisans*, ed. Dalton and Wattenberg; Michael F. Thies, "On the Primacy of Party in Government: Why Legislative Parties Can Survive Party Decline in the Electorate", in *Parties Without Partisans*, ed. Dalton and Wattenberg.

[25] Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party", *Party Politics* 1, no. 1 (1995): 5–28; Ruud Koole, "Cadre, Catch-all or Cartel?: A Comment on the Notion of the Cartel Party", *Party Politics* 2, no. 4 (1996): 507–23.

[26] See, for example, Tang, *Populist Authoritarianism*.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1
Constructing Five Generations of CPC Members in Public Opinion Surveys

	2008 survey	2013 survey	2014 surveys	2015 survey
Socialist (1965 & before)	59+	64+	65+	66+
Cultural Revolution (1966–1977)	47–58	52–63	53–64	54–65
Reform (1978–1988)	36–46	41–51	42–52	43–53
Post-reform (1989–2000)	35–younger*	29–40	30–41	31–42
Millennium (2001 and after)		28–younger	29–younger	30–younger

Notes: * Post-reform and millennium generations are combined to ensure adequate observations for statistical analysis.

The age range for each generation is calculated based on the year when the respondent turned 16 (see Table 1). For example, the socialist generation is calculated: survey year+16–1965; the Cultural Revolution generation: survey year+16–1966 and survey year+16–1977; the reform generation: survey year+16–1978 and survey year+16–1988; the post-reform generation: survey year+16–1989 and survey year+16–2000; the millennium generation: survey year+16–2001.

APPENDIX 2
VARIABLES IN THE 2013-15 CHINESE URBAN SURVEYS (UNWEIGHTED)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
religiosity	7,984	.2136774	.2785645	0	1
beijingdisat	7,677	.2398334	.2125614	0	1
govresponse	7,992	1.269007	.6324542	-.06	2
govefficiency	7,997	.500097	.4240738	0	1
free speech	7,992	.7105303	.299988	0	1
tvnews	8,000	.6111875	.378152	0	1
netnews	8,000	.5245625	.420357	0	1
gointernet	8,000	.078875	.2695604	0	1
gogov	8,000	.2955	.4562957	0	1
noaction	8,000	.17075	.3763139	0	1
ccp	8,000	.159625	.3662808	0	1
socialist	7,998	.0385096	.1924351	0	1
culrevolution	7,998	.0787697	.2693958	0	1
reform	7,998	.1926732	.3944232	0	1
post-reform	7,998	.3144536	.4643269	0	1
millennium	7,998	.3755939	.4843062	0	1
income	8,000	2.271375	.9521523	1	5
agri	7,987	.1037937	.3050118	0	1
service	7,987	.0893953	.2853313	0	1
private	7,987	.1042945	.3056613	0	1
blue	7,987	.1392262	.3462041	0	1
manager	7,987	.0677351	.2513065	0	1
professional	7,987	.1185677	.3232993	0	1
white collar	7,987	.1506198	.3577002	0	1
nojob	7,987	.2089646	.4065945	0	1
joboth	7,987	.0174033	.1307767	0	1
urbanhukou	8,000	.611125	.4875253	0	1
married	8,000	.701	.4578484	0	1
noeduc	8,000	.02025	.1408631	0	1
primary	8,000	.1245	.3301717	0	1
jrhi	8,000	.236	.4246487	0	1
srhi	8,000	.270125	.4440519	0	1
college	8,000	.3225	.4674624	0	1
postgrad	8,000	.026625	.1609949	0	1
female	8,000	.436	.4959181	0	1
beijing	8,000	.1	.3000188	0	1
deyang	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
jinan	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
jinzhou	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
nantong	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
duyun	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1

APPENDIX 2 (*cont'd*)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
shanwei	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
kashi	8,000	.05	.2179586	0	1
lhasa	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
shenyang	8,000	.05	.2179586	0	1
shanghai	8,000	.05	.2179586	0	1
wuhan	8,000	.05	.2179586	0	1
guangzhou	8,000	.1	.3000188	0	1
shenzhen	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
chongqing	8,000	.075	.2634078	0	1
chengdu	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
kunming	8,000	.05	.2179586	0	1
xian	8,000	.05	.2179586	0	1
urumqi	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
jinghong	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
tongliao	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
yanji	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
yinchuan	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
hetian	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
yili	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
rikeze	8,000	.025	.1561347	0	1
wave1	8,000	.25	.4330398	0	1
wave2	8,000	.25	.4330398	0	1
wave3	8,000	.25	.4330398	0	1
wave4	8,000	.25	.4330398	0	1

APPENDIX 3
VARIABLES IN THE 2013-15 CHINESE URBAN SURVEYS (PARTY MEMBERS, UNWEIGHTED)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
religiosity	1,274	.200157	.2680411	0	1
beijingdisat	1,239	.2322031	.2178947	0	1
govresponse	1,275	1.249629	.6387244	0	2
govefficiency	1,277	.5287784	.4191684	0	1
freespeech	1,275	.6849089	.3133659	0	1
tvnews	1,277	.7004699	.3662696	0	1
netnews	1,277	.6249021	.4107949	0	1
gointernet	1,277	.0798747	.2712053	0	1
gogov	1,277	.3328113	.4714042	0	1
noaction	1,277	.1503524	.3575565	0	1
socialist	1,277	.07361	.2612375	0	1
culrevolution	1,277	.1064996	.3085969	0	1
reform	1,277	.1871574	.3901906	0	1
post-reform	1,277	.2975724	.4573695	0	1
millennium	1,277	.3351605	.4722315	0	1
income	1,277	2.47455	.9445533	1	5
agri	1,274	.0698587	.2550089	0	1
service	1,274	.0604396	.238393	0	1
private	1,274	.0635793	.2440978	0	1
blue	1,274	.0769231	.266574	0	1
manager	1,274	.1718995	.3774413	0	1
professional	1,274	.16719	.3732919	0	1
white collar	1,274	.1742543	.379477	0	1
nojob	1,274	.1962323	.3973023	0	1
joboth	1,274	.0196232	.1387562	0	1
urban hukou	1,277	.7165231	.4508624	0	1
married	1,277	.7282694	.445026	0	1
noeduc	1,277	.0062647	.0789323	0	1
primary	1,277	.0524667	.2230536	0	1
jrhi	1,277	.1393892	.3464879	0	1
srhi	1,277	.2153485	.4112249	0	1
college	1,277	.5027408	.5001884	0	1
postgrad	1,277	.0837901	.2771814	0	1
female	1,277	.3844949	.4866663	0	1
beijing	1,277	.101018	.3014706	0	1
deyang	1,277	.018794	.1358502	0	1
jinan	1,277	.0227095	.1490341	0	1
jinzhou	1,277	.0234926	.1515211	0	1
nantong	1,277	.018011	.133043	0	1
duyun	1,277	.0242756	.153964	0	1
shanwei	1,277	.0211433	.1439183	0	1

APPENDIX 3 (*cont'd*)

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
kashi	1,277	.0540329	.2261712	0	1
lhasa	1,277	.027408	.163333	0	1
shenyang	1,277	.054816	.2277099	0	1
shanghai	1,277	.0587314	.2352134	0	1
wuhan	1,277	.064213	.245228	0	1
guangzhou	1,277	.0986688	.2983336	0	1
shenzhen	1,277	.0219264	.1465006	0	1
chongqing	1,277	.0704777	.2560506	0	1
chengdu	1,277	.0164448	.1272283	0	1
kunming	1,277	.0743931	.2625124	0	1
xian	1,277	.0618637	.2410023	0	1
urumqi	1,277	.0289742	.1677996	0	1
jinghong	1,277	.0148786	.1211146	0	1
tongliao	1,277	.0156617	.1242115	0	1
yanji	1,277	.0227095	.1490341	0	1
yinchuan	1,277	.0195771	.1385962	0	1
hetian	1,277	.0164448	.1272283	0	1
yili	1,277	.0227095	.1490341	0	1
rikeze	1,277	.0266249	.1610476	0	1
wave1	1,277	.2905247	.4541824	0	1
wave2	1,277	.2161316	.4117663	0	1
wave3	1,277	.2866092	.4523545	0	1
wave4	1,277	.2067345	.4051221	0	1

APPENDIX 4
VARIABLES IN 2008 CHINA SURVEY (PARTY MEMBERS, WEIGHTED)

	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Orthodox	330	0.519223	0.357252	0	1
Pragmatist	330	0.223849	0.299412	0	1
Age 35	330	0.317877	0.466358	0	1
Age 36-46	330	0.241148	0.42843	0	1
Age 47-58	330	0.170308	0.376474	0	1
Age 59	330	0.270668	0.44498	0	1
Social class	319	3.26256	0.931457	1	5
Education (years)	329	10.13942	4.372275	0	18
Rural	330	0.508983	0.500679	0	1
Migrant	330	0.043933	0.205257	0	1
Urban	330	0.440323	0.49718	0	1
Female	330	0.25421	0.436077	0	1