Enlightened One-Party Rule? Ideological Differences between Chinese Communist Party Members and the Mass Public

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Abstract

A popular view of nondemocratic regimes is that they draw followers mainly from those with an illiberal, authoritarian mind-set. We challenge this view by arguing that there exist a different class of autocracies that rule with a relatively enlightened base. Leveraging multiple nationally representative surveys from China over the past decade, we substantiate this claim by estimating and comparing the ideological preferences of Chinese Communist Party members and ordinary citizens. We find that party members on average hold substantially more modern and progressive views than the public on issues such as gender equality, political pluralism, and openness to international exchange. We also explore two mechanisms that may account for this party–public value gap—selection and socialization. We find that while education-based selection is the most dominant mechanism overall, socialization also plays a role, especially among older and less educated party members. Our findings caution against the simple, dichotomous characterization of political regimes and underscore an important tension between modernization and democratization in developing societies.

Introduction

Understanding the similarities and differences between preferences of political insiders and the general public is essential to the study of all political systems. In democracies, assessing the level of opinion congruence between voters and politicians on key issues is an important way to evaluate the strength of electoral linkages and the quality of representation (Achen 1978; Converse and Pierce 1986). Similar comparisons can also be relevant for understanding systems where competitive elections are absent. Many influential theories of social movements and political transitions, for example, are premised on the existence of certain forms of preference divergence between regime elites and the public (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006b; Kuran 1991; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). So far, however, systematic comparison of elite and mass attitudes outside liberal democracies is still rather limited.

One popular view of authoritarian regimes is that they are intrinsically hostile to liberal democratic values. Many studies have argued that autocracies of both left and right tend to draw support mainly from the less enlightened segment of the society (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006a; Lipset 1959; Moore 1966). Individuals

with a reactionary, traditional view of the world are seen as natural partners of regimes that restrict political freedom and civil liberty in the name of order or national interests (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1996). According to this view, the principal political cleavage within an authoritarian regime is one between an illiberal ruling elite and an enlightened citizenry in favor of liberal democratic values, and establishment of democracy will bring social and economic progress by putting a more modern-minded group into power.

In this article, we challenge this perception by proposing a more nuanced understanding of political regimes' value orientations. In particular, we argue that not all authoritarian regimes should be seen as intrinsic ideological rivals of liberal democracies. Drawing on an older body of literature on political institutions and modernization (Apter 1965; Huntington 1968; Shils 1966), we argue

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that there exist a subset of autocracies that emerged as a political response to the challenges of modernization in backward societies. The modernizing imperatives compel those regimes to adopt relatively progressive policies and to form alliances with the more modern and productive sectors of a society. Instead of being ideological enemies, therefore, followers of those regimes may actually share considerable agreement with citizens in liberal democracies in terms of preferences and beliefs.

We substantiate these claims with evidence from China, a country that is increasingly being portrayed as a leader of the recent global wave of "authoritarian resurgence" (Nathan 2015). To many political analysts and practitioners in the West—the United States in particular—a rising China under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) poses not only a geopolitical but more importantly an ideological threat (Runciman 2018; U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services 2019). Coverage of the CCP in the Western media typically emphasizes its illiberal practices and hostility toward "Western values." While we certainly do not intend to glorify the regime or to defend some of its problematic policies, our argument nonetheless cautions against the tendency to regard the party as the *main* culprit of illiberalism in the Chinese society. Drawing on seven nationally representative surveys covering more than eighty thousand respondents, we carry out a systematic comparison of ideological values between CCP members and the general Chinese public in three key domains—gender and family relations, political institutions, and international outlook. Surprisingly, we find that, contrary to the popular perception of the party as the champion of illiberal authoritarianism, CCP members are actually the relatively more liberal and enlightened group in the Chinese society: compared with the average survey respondent, CCP members show greater support for equal treatment of men and women, putting checks-and-balances on political power and learning from foreign ideas. This relatively enlightened mind-set can be seen in both party members serving in government and those with nongovernmental jobs. Using a series of additional tests, we further show that this finding is robust to many alternative explanations, including the possibility that party members are deliberately falsifying their preferences (Kuran 1997).

We also probe two mechanisms that may give rise to the value difference between CCP members and nonmembers. The first is that the CCP deliberately *selects* individuals with more modern outlooks, especially those who come from highly educated backgrounds. The second is that party members are *socialized* to adopt more progressive values through party-sponsored activities. Using multivariate regression analyses, we find evidence that both selection and socialization may be at work. Overall, selective recruitment of the highly educated

appears to be the most dominant mechanism, explaining about three-quarters of the observed value gap between party and nonparty members. The effect of socialization, on the other hand, is also present but exhibits notable variation across subgroups: it is most salient on the older and the less educated party members, but is much weaker on the younger and highly educated ones.

Our study contributes to the literature on the comparison of mass and elite ideologies. Beginning with the seminal work of Converse (1964), a large body of research has been dedicated to measuring and explaining the relationship between mass and elite preferences in advanced liberal democracies (Converse and Pierce 1986; Dalton 1985), especially the United States (Bond and Messing 2015; Jennings 1992; M. K. Miller 2014). The general findings from this literature are that elites typically possess more coherent, and also more polarized, attitudes on social and political issues than does the general public (e.g., Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder 2006); these patterns are often explained with reference to electoral competition under a two-party structure (Jacobson 2000; Rohde 1991). Some more recent studies have explored these issues in the context of emerging democracies in Eastern Europe (A. H. Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1995, 1997; Reisinger et al. 1996) and Latin America (Lupu and Warner 2017; Saiegh 2015). Systematic comparison of mass and elite attitudes in nondemocracies, however, is still rare. Our analysis sheds light on this issue by providing evidence from China and suggests new avenues through which value differences between elites and masses can arise.

Findings from this study also help advance our understanding of not only the CCP but also a broader class of autocracies that assume a modernizing role in transitional societies. Although ideology is a key focus of earlier generation of research on communist or fascist parties (Arendt 1973; Schurmann 1968), the contemporary discussion of authoritarian regimes typically views them as nonideological entities, focusing instead on their ruling techniques and institutional characteristics (e.g., Gandhi 2010; Magaloni 2008; Svolik 2012). This study cautions against the tendency to treat all nondemocracies as either ideological vacuums or the embodiment of a coherent set of "authoritarian" values, and highlights important variations in value orientations within those regimes.

Our study is also related to two strands of literature in Chinese politics. A small but fledgling literature has examined ideological differentiation within the Chinese society. In an earlier study, Nathan and Shi (1996) demonstrate that Chinese society in 1990 was split between two loose ideological groups—one with more liberal attitudes toward public issues and the other with more conservative attitudes. A more recent study by Pan and Xu (2017) finds a similar pattern based on a large online

survey. So far, however, there is still limited evidence on how the ideological differentiation plays out between party members and nonmembers. In the meantime, another line of research has shown that party members are systematically different from nonmembers in terms of the level of regime support and the propensity to engage in certain political and civic behaviors (Chen 1999; Dickson 2014; Tang 2016b). This literature, however, has not yet explored the underlying gaps in values and preferences that may be associated with the manifested differences in attitudes and behaviors. Our study brings together these two lines of research by offering a systematic comparison of ideological leanings between party members and ordinary Chinese citizens.

The Modernizing Characters of Autocracies

A prevailing view among contemporary social scientists is that democracy appeals to the modern minds, whereas nondemocratic rule is more compatible with those possessing a traditional view of the world. According to this view, traditional societies tend to breed individuals who are intolerant, xenophobic, and blindly authority-worshiping, and those individuals are ideal supporters of authoritarian rule, which deprives civil liberties in the name of order and national interests (Eysenck 1998). Scholars have argued, for example, that lower class individuals, whose lifestyle produces "individuals with rigid and intolerant approaches to politics" (Lipset 1959), are more likely to become supporters of authoritarian and totalitarian parties than are the better-off classes. A related line of research from political psychology similarly argues that a traditional, authoritarian personality is positively associated with not only support for right-wing authoritarianism in Western democracies (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1996) but also support for the Communist Party in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Krauss 2002; McFarland, Ageyev, and Abalakina-Paap 1992). By contrast, educated and liberal-minded individuals are found to deliberately disengage from authoritarian politics (Croke et al. 2016).

Although this view certainly contains some elements of truth, it still remains an open question whether it is universally applicable to all nondemocratic systems. As a matter of fact, the very concept of "authoritarian regime" has long been criticized for being a residual category that bundles together highly heterogeneous polities whose only similarity is in not using competitive elections to select national-level leaders (Pepinsky 2014). In essence, the classification of autocracy only implies the presence of a centralized power structure, but does not necessitate constraints on a regime's ideological leanings. In this article, we argue that there exists a notable subclass of authoritarian regimes that draw support from the relatively more progressive and enlightened elements of a society. This argument builds on the observation that some authoritarian regimes emerge as a societal response to the challenge of modernization—an important yet highly destabilizing process that all contemporary societies have to grapple with.[1]

To navigate through this process sometimes requires the presence of a strong, centralized political power. These regimes, which have been variously called by names such as "modernizing autocracies" (Almond and Powell 1966; Apter 1965) or "modernizing oligarchies" (Shils 1966), played an instrumental role in maintaining order and regulating participation as societies went through turbulent and highly disruptive phases of modernization (Huntington 1968). They provided support for rapid social and economic change by serving as a counterweight to the influence of traditional beliefs and practices pervasive in transitional societies (Shils 1966, 68); sometimes, they were also directly involved in stimulating economic development and industrial upgrading through various policy interventions (Gerschenkron 1962). Although nondemocratic, these regimes were not opponents of modernization; instead, they actively embraced and facilitated it. Such regimes include development-oriented autocracies in South Korea (1961–1987), Singapore, Taiwan (1949–1987), Brazil (1964–1985), and China (Evans 1995; Kohli 2004), as well as those that oversaw radical secularization programs in Turkey (1921–1945) and Iran (1926–1941 and 1963–1979) (Atabaki and Zürcher 2004). Although they differ in the specific ways by which they organize power and mobilize followers, they all share a strong commitment to bringing social and economic progress—often benchmarked against the living standards and lifestyles in the West—to their respective societies.

Recognizing the modernizing character of this subset of authoritarian regimes gives us very different expectations about their followers' ideological orientations. To successfully carry out modernizing tasks requires recruiting talents with modern skills and ideas. This implies that, instead of relying on those with a traditional, illiberal mind-set, the ruling regime would prefer developing partnerships with those whose skills and outlook are more compatible with a modern society. In an influential earlier study on Communist regimes in Bulgaria and Hungary, for example, Konrád and Szelényi (1979) argue that the imperative to achieve economic modernization compelled the regime to allow the intellectuals to play an increasingly prominent role in administration. Similarly, the goal of creating the Republican People's Party (RPP) under Atatürk's Turkey was, according to Atabaki and Zürcher (2004, 104), to "unite all 'enlightened' elements in the country as a vanguard for the social and cultural

revolution." Moreover, the leadership of the People's Action Party (PAP), the ruling party of Singapore, also believed and acted upon the principle that "the party which manages to recruit the brightest and the best will prevail" and demonstrated strong preference for those who perform well scholastically, especially in the sciences (Mauzy and Milne 2002, 46–48).

In addition to deliberate selection, modernizing regimes may also socialize their followers into adopting relatively more progressive values. This is sometimes done by mobilizing followers to carry out social and educational programs that are essential components of a regime's modernization project. In 1930s' Turkey, for example, activists affiliated with the RPP, the ruling Kemalist Party, were regularly mobilized to spread the messages of the regime's reform programs that advocated for a more modern way of life (Atabaki and Zürcher 2004). In China, Communist Party members were also frequently called upon to support campaigns that promoted modern, civic values, such as gender equality (Johnson 1985; Lee 2012), and to act as role models for nonmembers (Dickson 2014). Although not all individuals who join the regime share the regime's ideological preferences to begin with, their views and preferences may gradually converge to the regime's position after they join through participation in these regime-sponsored programs.

Ideological Orientations of CCP Members

To provide evidence on the ideological characteristics of modernizing autocracies, this article focuses specifically on estimating the value orientations of CCP members and comparing them with those of the general Chinese public. CCP members make up about 6 percent of the Chinese population and are generally seen as having closer ties to the regime than nonmembers (Chen 1999; Walder, Li, and Treiman 2000). Although not all CCP members hold positions in the government, party membership is typically a mandatory requirement for leadership positions in the public sector. The rank-and-file party members also play an essential role in the regime's day-to-day governance, acting as its foot soldiers in the implementation of important political and policy initiatives (Koss 2018). The character of the regime, therefore, is in large part reflected in the character of the constituting members of the ruling party.

As a proletarian revolutionary party, the CCP came to power in 1949 with a largely lower-class following. During the first thirty years of its rule, the party faced two conflicting goals in recruitment: one was to select technically competent individuals to carry out the modernization project, and the other was to maintain a loyal cadre corpus dedicated to revolutionary causes. The first goal,

however, often gave way to the second amid frequent political campaigns and intense intraparty power struggles. After Mao's death, stagnated living standards, coupled with the loss of appeal of the communist ideology, compelled the regime to seek an alternative basis of legitimacy by emphasizing its substantive achievements in economic and social modernization (Yang and Zhao 2015). A series of reform measures were implemented around the early 1980s with the goal of replenishing the party with younger and more educated individuals, whose skills and outlook were more compatible with this new goal (Dickson 1997). According to the CCP's official statistics, the percentage of peasants and workers in the party has declined steadily during the reform period, whereas the share of those with college degrees has gone up. There have also been efforts to keep the sectoral and professional compositions of party members in pace with a society that is becoming increasingly modern and diverse. These efforts culminated in 2000 when Jiang Zemin, then the general secretary of the party, pronounced that the CCP should represent not merely the proletariat but also "the most advanced productive forces, the most advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people" (Z. Jiang 2013, 1–2).

Although the evolution of the party's official ideology has been extensively documented, there is still a lack of evidence on the ideological orientations of *individual CCP members*, despite a considerable scholarly interest in party members' socioeconomic characteristics.[2] The focus of the extant research has been primarily on party members' manifested support for the regime and their participation activities. The general finding from the literature is that compared with nonmembers, party members are more likely to report a high level of political support (Chen 1999; Dickson and Rublee 2000), to use regime-sponsored participation channels (Gang Guo 2007; Tang 2016b; Tsai and Xu 2018), and to engage in prosocial behaviors (Dickson 2014). Although these studies have significantly advanced our understanding of what it means to be a CCP member in China today, there is still relatively limited evidence on the characteristics of party members' values and preferences that underpin these manifested attitudes and actions. In the pages that follow, we shed light on this issue using data from a decade of social surveys in China.

Data and Method

Data

We use data from seven nationally representative surveys. The main analysis is based on the third and

Table 1. Survey Details.

Survey	Led by (institution name)	Sampling method	Sample size
ABS4 (2015)	National Taiwan University	Stratified three-stage PPS sampling	4,068
ABS3 (2011)	National Taiwan University	Implicit stratification three-stage PPS sampling	3,413
CGSS2015	Renmin University	Stratified three-stage PPS sampling	10,968
CGSS2013	Renmin University	Stratified three-stage PPS sampling	11,438
CGSS2012	Renmin University	Stratified three-stage PPS sampling	11,765
CGSS2010	Renmin University	Stratified three-stage PPS sampling	11,783
CFPS2014	Peking University	Implicit stratification three-stage PPS sampling	37,147

ABS = Asian Barometer Survey; CGSS = Chinese General Social Survey; PPS = probability proportional to size; CFPS = China Family Panel Survey.

fourth waves of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS),[3] which were fielded in 2011 and 2015, respectively. The ABS surveys provide an extensive range of questions that enable us to probe into respondents' preferences in multiple domains. In addition, we also draw data from four waves of the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) between 2010 and 2015[4] and one wave of the China Family Panel Survey (CFPS) in 2014.[5] Both the CGSS and CFPS provide a more focused coverage of respondents' social and family values. All these surveys are conducted in the form of face-to-face interviews by reputed university survey teams.[6] Stratified multistage sampling methods were used to target the adult population above the age of eighteen (sixteen for CFPS). Details of these surveys are displayed in Table 1.

One important concern is that while these surveys are designed to be representative of the national adult population, the subsample of party members may not be necessarily representative of the national population of party members. This could create potential bias when we carry out the party–public comparison. To address this problem, we conduct additional weight calibration on the survey weights, with the goal of making the sample statistics of CCP members in surveys to be as close to their population statistics as possible. Our targeted statistics include the percentage of party members as well as the cross-tabulation between party membership and gender, age (younger than thirty-five), and education level (college or above). These statistics are obtained from China's population yearbooks and CCP's annual censuses.[7] Calibration is carried out using an iterated ranking algorithm, whereby weights are adjusted to match the corresponding census figures, subject to the constraints of minimal deviance from the original survey weights (Deville and Särndal 1992). We provide more details on the calibration procedure in Online Appendix D.

Figure 1 summarizes the calibration results. We can see that the calibration exercise has substantially improved the congruence in key summary statistics

between the surveys and the party censuses. Although most surveys tend to undersample highly educated and younger party members (compared with the party census of the same year), the degree of underrepresentation approaches zero once the calibrated weights are applied. The values of the original weights range from 0.040 to 8.581 and the adjusted weights range from 0.025 to 8.943.

Survey Instruments

Our surveys contain a range of questions that ask respondents whether they agree or disagree with certain statements or policy proposals. We select questions that cover mainly three domains: (1) attitude toward family and social relations, (2) attitude toward political institutions, and (3) attitude toward international values and ideas. According to research by Inglehart (1997) and Inglehart and Welzel (2005), these domains are among the most important ones that distinguish between a traditional and a modern mind-set: individuals from preindustrial societies are typically more tolerant of male dominance in economic and social life, more authoritarian, and less open to different views and ideas; modernminded individuals, by contrast, often prefer the opposite. While we recognize that such characterization of traditional values might be a gross simplification that does not fit all premodern societies, we believe that they are appropriate in the context of China, where the traditional Confucian culture does place emphasis on patriarchy, obedience to authority, and China's cultural superiority to foreigners (Pye 1981).

We select survey instruments based on a close reading of the content of the questionnaire. Although each survey sometimes has many candidate questions that touch on the areas of interest, we focus on those questions that have been asked in multiple waves of the same survey to ensure that the results of our analysis are comparable across time within each survey. We are able to select a total of sixteen questions on social issues, ten questions on political issues, and
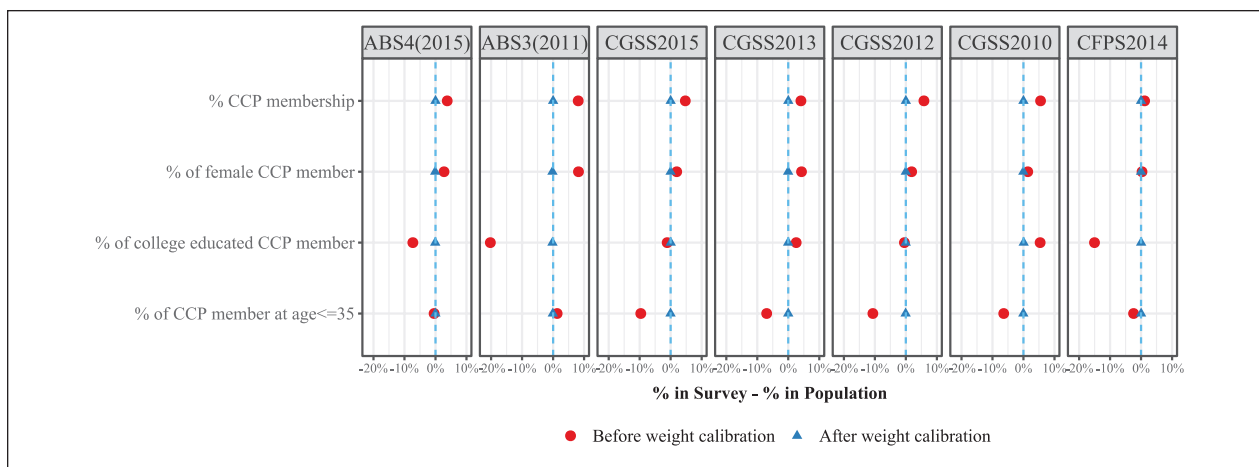
Figure 1. Sample deviation from population statistics: before and after reweighting.
This figure presents the magnitudes of sample deviations from the population before and after the weight calibration exercise. We focus on four key target statistics: the overall share of CCP membership in the population, the share of female party members, the share of party members with a college degree, and the share of party members younger than thirty-five years old. ABS = Asian Barometer Survey; CGSS = Chinese General Social Survey; CFPS = China Family Panel Survey; CCP = Chinese Communist Party.

four questions on international issues. Table 2 displays these questions and the surveys in which they were asked (for the original wording in Chinese, see Online Appendix C). Questions under the social domain ask respondents about the extent to which they approve of certain traditional social and familial arrangements or common gender stereotypes. Those under the political domain touch on issues such as tolerance of diverse opinions and preferences for putting checks-and-balances on those in power. Those under the international domain primarily ask about one's openness toward foreign values and ideas. These questions are originally recorded in 4- or 5-point Likert-type scales from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."[8] For consistency, we reordered responses to some of the questions so that in all questions, responses with higher values indicate more modern/liberal attitudes.

Do questions in each domain indeed reflect a coherent underlying value as we expect? We conduct two tests to evaluate the internal consistency of the selected questions. First, we apply principal component analysis (PCA) to questions under the same value domain and examine the amount of variance explained by the extracted components. In most issue domains, the PCA yields a clear, dominant first component that explains at least twice as much the variance as the rest of the components. Second, we also calculate the reliability scores (Cronbach's α) for questions in each domain. Once again, we find that most alphas are at .6 or higher. These patterns suggest that there is a good degree of internal consistency within our selected questions.[9]

Item Response Theory (IRT) Estimation

We use IRT models to generate a continuous, unidimensional measure of respondents' ideological orientations for each value domain in each survey. The IRT method was initially developed in the education testing literature as a method to infer students' abilities based on their answers to exam questions. This method was later adopted by political scientists to estimate "ideal points" of organizations or individuals based on their manifested behaviors, such as voting, campaign contributions, or responses to survey questions (Bonica 2014; Caughey and Warshaw 2018; Treier and Hillygus 2009).[10] Compared with the more conventional factor analysis models, the IRT method has two distinct advantages. The first is that it does not make the assumption of multivariate normal distributions for survey responses. In our case, relaxing this assumption is important because all answers to our questions are ordinal and clearly do not follow a multivariate normal distribution. Second, the conventional factor analysis method, such as PCA, cannot perform estimation on observations with missing responses. Listwise deletion can sometimes lead to efficiency loss and, worse still, biased estimates. The IRT method, by contrast, allows a latent trait (a quantity similar to factor score) to be estimated as long as respondents provide valid answers on at least one of the questions of interest. This makes our results much less sensitive to the influence of missing data.

Given the ordinal nature of our questionnaire items, we estimate a graded IRT model with the following specification:

Table 2. Survey Instruments..

Social	ABS (3 and 4)	Even if parents' demands are unreasonable, children still should do what they ask.
	ABS (3 and 4)	When a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law come into conflict, even if the mother-in-law is in the wrong, the husband should still persuade his wife to obey his mother.
	ABS (3 and 4)	Being a student, one should not question the authority of their teacher.
	ABS (3 and 4)	Wealth and poverty, success and failure are all determined by fate.
	ABS (3 and 4)	If one could have only one child, it is better to have a boy than a girl.
	ABS (3 and 4)	Women should not be involved in politics as much as men.
	CGSS (2010–2015)	Men should prioritize career and women should prioritize family.
	CGSS (2010–2015)	Men are naturally more competent than women.
	CGSS (2010–2015)	It's better (for women) to marry well than to do well.
	CGSS (2010–2015)	During economic downturn, women should be fired first.
	CFPS2014	Children should give up their personal ambitions and try to achieve their parents' wishes first.
	CFPS2014	Sons should live with their parents after getting married.
	CFPS2014	In order to pass on the family, men should have at least one son.
	CFPS2014	Men should prioritize career and women should prioritize family.
	CFPS2014	It's better (for women) to marry well than to do well.
	CFPS2014	A woman is only complete when she has a child.
Political	ABS (3 and 4)	We should get rid of the people's congress and elections and have a strong leader decide things.
	ABS (3 and 4)	The army should be allowed to rule our country.
	ABS (3 and 4)	We should get rid of elections and the people's congress and have experts make decisions on behalf of the people.
	ABS (3 and 4)	You can generally trust the people who run our government to do what is right.
	ABS (3 and 4)	A citizen should always remain loyal only to his country, no matter how imperfect it is or what wrong it has done.
	ABS (3 and 4)	Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions.
	ABS (3 and 4)	The government should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society.
	ABS (3 and 4)	Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups.
	ABS (3 and 4)	If we have political leaders who are morally upright, we can let them decide everything.
	ABS (3 and 4)	If people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic.
International	ABS (3 and 4)	Our country should defend our way of life instead of becoming more and more like other countries.
	ABS (3 and 4)	We should protect our farmers and workers by limiting the import of foreign goods.
	ABS3	Foreign goods are hurting the local community.
	ABS4	Do you think the government should increase or decrease the inflow of foreign immigrants into the country?

ABS = Asian Barometer Survey; CFPS = China Family Panel Survey; CGSS = Chinese General Social Survey.

$$\Pr\left(\text{Response}_{ij} = k|\theta_j\right) = \Pr\left(\text{Response}_{ij} \geq k|\theta_j\right) - \Pr\left(\text{Response}_{ij} \geq k+1|\theta_j\right),$$

where

$$\Pr\left(\text{Response}_{ij} \geq k|\theta_j\right) = \frac{\exp\left\{\alpha_i\left(\theta_j - b_{ik}\right)\right\}}{1 + \exp\left\{\alpha_i\left(\theta_j - b_{ik}\right)\right\}},$$

$$\theta \sim N(0,1).$$

k is a given response for question i. θ_j is the latent trait of person j, which is assumed to follow a standard normal distribution. α_i is the discrimination parameter for question i, which measures the extent to which answers to question i can successfully separate respondents with different latent traits. b_{ik} represents the

level of "difficulty" for getting a response at or above the level of k or higher for question i. Estimation is performed using maximum likelihood (ML) with an iterative two-stage procedure (Birnbaum 1968).[11] In the first stage, we fix the ability parameter θ_j and estimate item parameters (α_i, b_{ik}); in the second stage, the item parameters are fixed and the ability parameter is estimated. These two steps are repeated until both the ability and item parameters converge. The main quantity of interest here is the ability parameter θ_j, which measures the extent to which a respondent j's underlying preferences conform to the more modern/liberal position. We estimate four different sets of θ_js, one for each of the three distinct value domains and a fourth one based on questions from *all* domains.
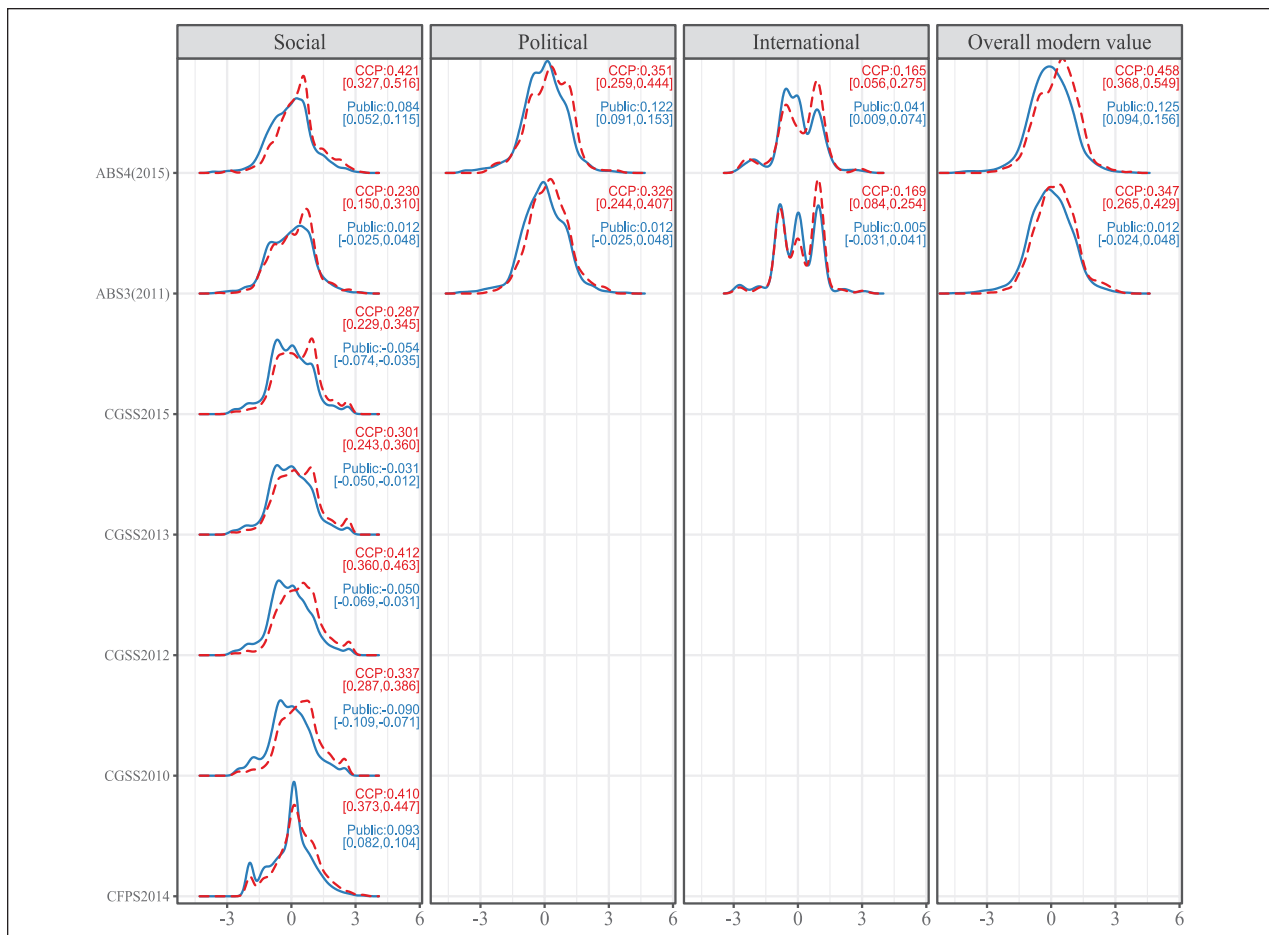
Figure 2. Main result: weighted difference in means.
This figure presents the weighted distributions for CCP members (dashed) and nonmembers (solid) on three value domains from seven different surveys. The (weighted) mean estimate and the associated 95% confidence intervals are reported at the top right of each panel. The value in each survey domain is standardized with a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1. For some surveys, the mean estimates for CCP members and citizens are both positive because of weighting adjustments. ABS = Asian Barometer Survey; CGSS = Chinese General Social Survey; CFPS = China Family Panel Survey; CCP = Chinese Communist Party.

Results

Overall Difference between Party and Public

As our primary goal is to investigate whether and how the values of CCP members *as a whole* differ from those of nonmembers, the most direct approach is an (unconditional) comparison of the distributions of values between the two groups. Figure 2 visualizes the respective distributions of latent ideological traits for CCP members (red dashed) and the nonmembers (blue solid) from the seven surveys.[12] We also report the weighted means and their 95 percent confidence intervals for party members and nonmembers at the top right of each panel. Several observations stand out: first, we note that in each value domain, the shapes of value distributions for party members and nonmembers are quite similar; this suggests that there is a reasonably high level of ideological congruence between the regime insiders and the public.[13]

Second, and more importantly, we see that in all surveys and across all value domains, the modal values of party members' distributions are to the right of those of nonmembers', suggesting that party members have on average a more modern outlook than nonmembers. To further quantify the difference, column 4 of Figure 2 presents the average modern values for party members and nonmembers, respectively (estimated from running IRT on *all* questions, only available for ABS3 and ABS4). We see that party members' scores are about one-third of a standard deviation higher than nonmembers'. To give this difference a more substantive interpretation, it implies that an *average* party member has a worldview that is more modern that about 58.2 percent of the non-party respondents in ABS3 (2011) and 58.3 percent of the respondents in ABS4 (2015).[14]

One potential concern with a simple two-group comparison is that party members are not homogeneous.[15] In
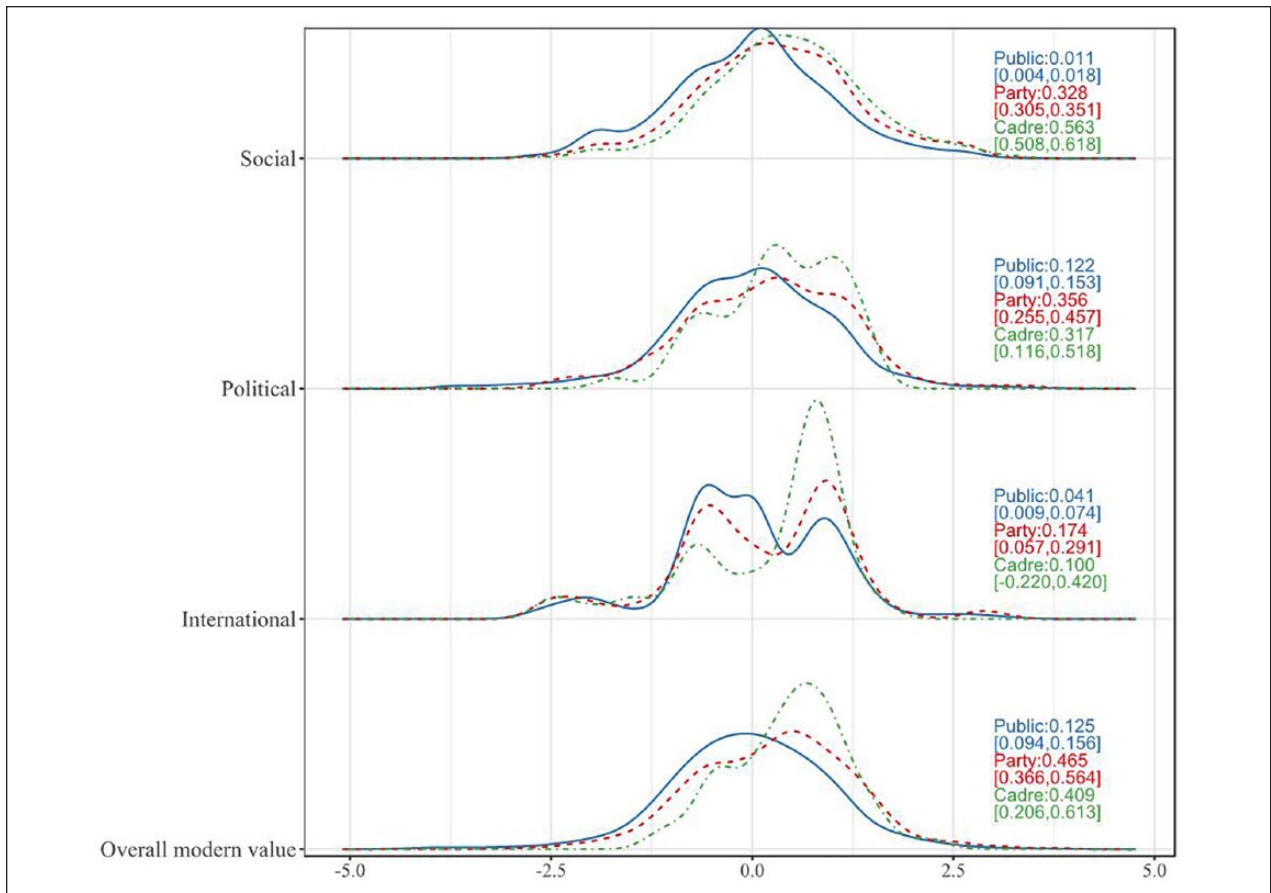
Figure 3. Citizen–party member–cadre comparison.
This figure presents the estimated ideological distributions for three groups: party members who work in the government (Cadre, dash-dotted), party members with nongovernment jobs (Party, dashed), and nonmembers (Public, solid). The mean estimates and the associated 95% confidence intervals are reported at the top right of each panel.

particular, we note that those who hold positions in the government make up for only a fraction of all CCP members. It could be argued, therefore, that even though the majority of the party members are relatively more modern-minded than the public, those who work in the government are actually of a different type. To address this possibility, we compare in Figure 3 the ideological distributions for three different groups: nonmembers, ordinary party members, and cadres (defined as those with employment in the government). In the interest of space and readability, we combine estimates from all surveys into a single distribution for each value domain. The results suggest that the values of party cadres are actually quite similar to party members working outside the government: both groups report values that are relatively more modern than non-CCP respondents do. Cadres are somewhat more liberal than other party members on social and international issues but more conservative on political issues, but these differences are not statistically significant.

Another important concern with our results is that the difference in reported preferences may be driven by social desirability bias (J. Jiang and Yang 2016). If party members are more likely to perceive the survey questions as politically/socially sensitive than ordinary citizens do, they may deliberately supply more socially desirable (i.e., liberal) answers even if they believe otherwise.[16] We address this issue in several ways. First, we limit the comparison to a subset of respondents who are willing to provide rather unorthodox answers to several anchoring questions that are presumably much more sensitive than our own survey questions. The idea here is that if these individuals are willing to reveal attitudes that may be deemed as politically incorrect on these anchoring questions, they are probably also less likely to conceal their true preferences on the less sensitive questions that we are interested in.[17]

We focus on three anchoring questions for the ABS surveys:

- In your view, is it true that in our country officials who committed crimes can often escape punishment?
- In your view, is it true that in our country officials often conceal important information from the public?
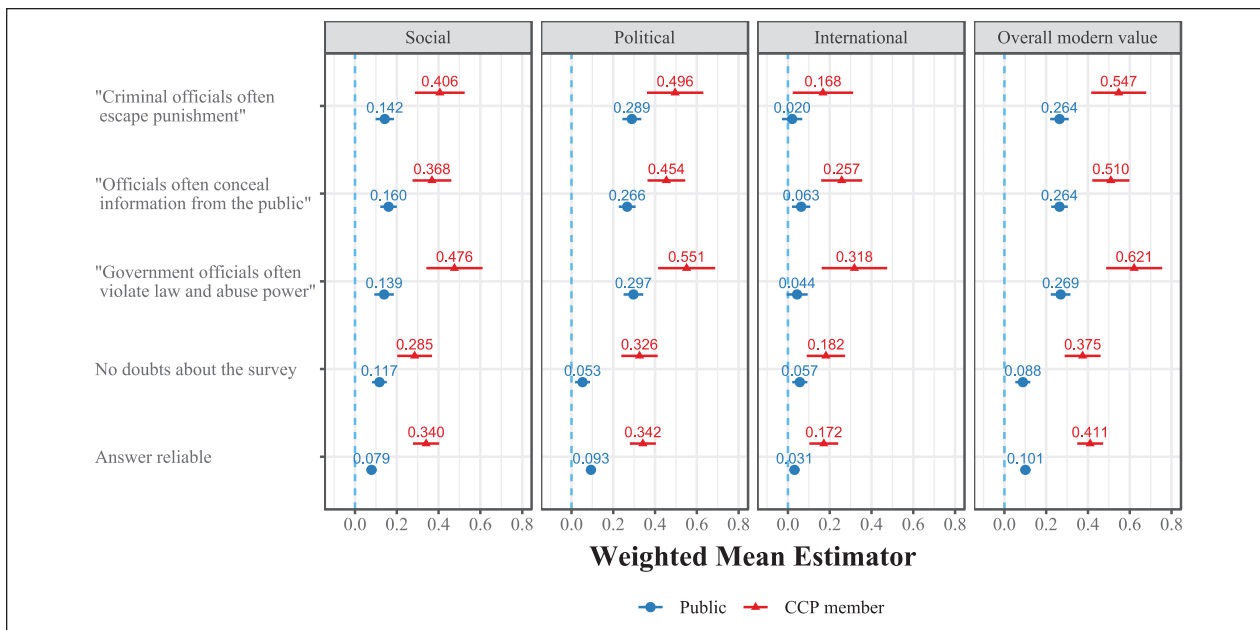
Figure 4. Party–public comparison in subsamples less affected social desirability.
This figure presents results on party–public value comparison focusing on respondents who have given critical answers to politically sensitive questions or whose answers are rated as trustworthy by survey enumerators. The *y* axis indicates the statements that we use to subset the sample. For example, the first row reports the party–public comparison among respondents who indicate that the statement 'Criminal officials often escape punishment" is *often true* or *always true*.

- In your view, is it true that in our country officials often violate the law or abuse power?

For each question, respondents were given four choices: (A) never true, (B) occasionally true, (C) often true, and (D) always true. If a respondent chooses option C or D, we assume that this person is not too concerned with desirability issues as he or she is willing to reveal a critical attitude toward the authority. In the first three rows of Figure 4, we restrict our sample to such individuals only (for both CCP members and nonmembers). Within this subsample, the average ideology estimates for party members remain higher than those for nonmembers across all value domains. This suggests that even among respondents who are not so sensitive toward desirability issues, party members still report a relatively more modern outlook than nonmembers.

Moreover, assessments from the survey enumerators also provide clues about the reliability of respondents' answers. In all the surveys that we use, enumerators have to answer several questions about their own interactions with respondents at the end of each interview, including whether the respondents had doubts about the survey and whether their answers were reliable. In the fourth and fifth rows of Figure 4, we focus on the subset of respondents who were rated as having "no doubts about the survey" and those whose answers were rated as "reliable."

Again, we find that narrowing our sample to these individuals does not diminish our main finding about the party–public value difference.

Mechanisms: Selection and Socialization

What are the specific mechanisms that give rise to the value gap between party members and nonmembers? Although to fully address this question may require a separate paper with a whole new set of analyses, this section briefly explores two possible mechanisms. The first one is selection. It is well established in the literature that the CCP prefers to recruit individuals from certain demographic groups (Dickson and Rublee 2000; Tang 2016b). Consistent with previous studies, analysis of our own data also suggests that compared with the general public, CCP members are more likely to be older, wealthier, male, urban, and better educated (see Online Appendix G.1).

Of these demographic attributes, education is one that is most relevant for explaining the observed value gap, as the length of education is typically associated with modern outlook and open-mindedness. Apart from education-based selection, a different mechanism might be that some party members are socialized into adopting a more progressive worldview after joining the party through participation in various party-sponsored campaigns and programs.

To disentangle these two mechanisms, we conduct multivariate regression analyses to examine the impact of

Table 3. Multivariate Regression Analysis.

	Social		Political		International		Overall modern value	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Party membership	0.3105***	0.1597***	0.2408***	0.0739**	0.1254***	0.0457	0.2916***	0.0961***
	(0.0137)	(0.0133)	(0.0329)	(0.0332)	(0.0402)	(0.0432)	(0.0335)	(0.0326)
Education level		0.2117***		0.2526***		0.1205***		0.2959***
		(0.0084)		(0.0153)		(0.0134)		(0.0156)
Female	0.0568***	0.0777***	−0.0642**	−0.0215	−0.0800***	−0.0596**	−0.0713**	−0.0212
	(0.0116)	(0.0111)	(0.0257)	(0.0265)	(0.0237)	(0.0234)	(0.0275)	(0.0280)
Age	−0.0132***	−0.0084***	−0.0190***	−0.0128***	−0.0110***	−0.0080***	−0.0211***	−0.0138***
	(0.0007)	(0.0009)	(0.0011)	(0.0010)	(0.0009)	(0.0009)	(0.0012)	(0.0011)
Urban residency	0.2379***	0.1397***	0.2362***	0.1048***	0.0666*	0.0039	0.2649***	0.1111***
	(0.0129)	(0.0125)	(0.0386)	(0.0371)	(0.0347)	(0.0340)	(0.0385)	(0.0348)
Income level (reference: lowest 25%)								
25%–50%	0.0286*	0.0316**	0.0745*	0.0557	0.0297	0.0208	0.1169**	0.0949**
	(0.0150)	(0.0143)	(0.0428)	(0.0404)	(0.0407)	(0.0406)	(0.0457)	(0.0430)
50%–75%	0.1657***	0.1289***	0.1873***	0.1483***	0.0681	0.0495	0.2507***	0.2051***
	(0.0188)	(0.0189)	(0.0430)	(0.0410)	(0.0447)	(0.0440)	(0.0438)	(0.0413)
75%–100%	0.2123***	0.1080***	0.2934***	0.1646***	0.2169***	0.1554***	0.3899***	0.2390***
	(0.0177)	(0.0160)	(0.0471)	(0.0421)	(0.0506)	(0.0500)	(0.0472)	(0.0419)
Income missing	0.1555***	0.1139***	0.3155***	0.2488***	0.1782***	0.1464***	0.3673***	0.2891***
	(0.0224)	(0.0212)	(0.0530)	(0.0529)	(0.0403)	(0.0393)	(0.0498)	(0.0485)
Province-survey FE	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
R^2	.112	.138	.202	.240	.081	.090	.249	.302
Observation	83,502	83,502	7,463	7,463	7,463	7,463	7,463	7,463

This table presents the multivariate regression results on the impact of party membership conditional on potential confounders. Standard errors clustered at the province level are reported in parentheses. Results for the social domain is based on observations from all seven surveys and results for the other two domains (as well as the overall value) are based on observations from ABS3 and ABS4. FE = fixed effects.
*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$ (two-tailed test).

party membership on ideology conditional on a number of covariates, including the level of education. If the selection mechanism is at work, we would expect a good deal of the party–public value gap to be explained by the education variable. By contrast, if party membership continues to show significant association with more modern attitudes after controlling for other potential confounders, this would be evidence of the socialization mechanism. Table 3 presents the regression results. For each value domain, we run two regressions. The first one shows the party–public value gap conditional on a number of key demographic variables that may be correlated with both party membership and respondents' ideology, including gender, age, place of residence, and income. The second one additionally includes education level as the key mediating variable.[18] We can see that when education is not included, the estimated party–public value gap is about 24 to 30 percent of a standard deviation, which is comparable to the difference found from the (unconditional) mean comparison. The difference shrinks by a sizable margin after education is included, but still remains statistically significant in all except the international domain.

Using the mediation analysis method developed by Imai et al. (2011), we estimate that about three-quarters of CCP members' relative modern-mindedness (~72%) can be attributed to education-based recruitment, whereas

the direct effect of party membership explains about one-quarter (for more details on the mediation analysis, see Online Appendix K). Essentially, these patterns suggest that both mechanisms may be at work: While education-based recruitment is the most dominant mechanism, the party also has an independent impact on its members' ideology net of the influence of other confounders.

If party membership has an independent impact on one's attitudes, an important question that naturally follows is, "Which groups does the party have the greatest impact on?" To explore this issue a bit further, we estimate a saturated regression model with the following specification:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Ideology}_{ips} = {} & \delta_1 \text{Party membership}_{ips} \times \\ & \text{College Education}_{ips} + \\ & \delta_2 \text{Party membership}_{ips} \times \\ & \text{Urban Residency}_{ips} + \\ & \delta_3 \text{Party membership}_{ips} \times \text{Age}_{ips} + \\ & \delta_4 \text{Party membership}_{ips} \times \text{Female}_{ips} + \\ & \delta_5 \text{Party membership}_{ips} \times \text{Income}_{ips} + \\ & \alpha \text{Party membership}_{ips} + \mathbf{X}\beta_{ips} + \phi_{ps} + \epsilon_{ips} \end{aligned}$$
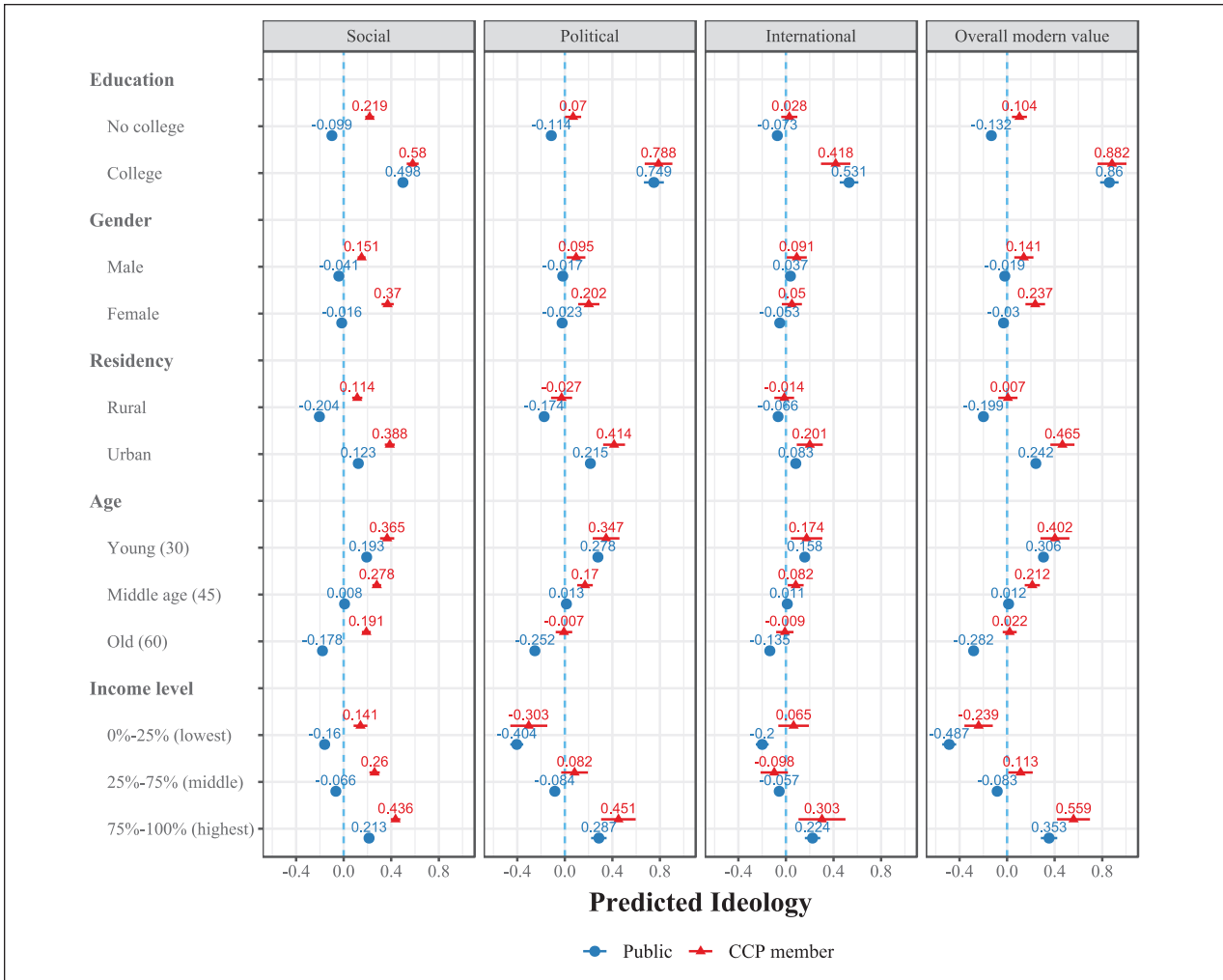
Figure 5. Heterogeneous party effects.

where *i, p*, and *s* index individual, province, and survey, respectively. **X** includes the main effects for all the variables to be interacted with party membership and ϕ_{ps} is the province-survey fixed effects that remove all unobserved heterogeneity across provinces and surveys. We compute the predicted ideological values of party members and nonmembers for all the subgroups and visualize them in Figure 5. Two observations stand out. First, we note that while individuals with college degrees generally hold more modern values than those without, party membership actually has the greatest impact on modern-mindedness among the less educated. On the overall modern value, for example, the party–public value difference is merely 2 percent of a standard deviation among the college educated (conditional on all other covariates) but 23 percent of a standard deviation among those who did not attend college. Second, the party's impact on ideology also varies considerably across age cohorts. Here, the party's effect seems to concentrate on the older

generation, who are typically more conservative. For an average respondent at the age of sixty, for example, being a party member increases overall modern-mindedness by about 30 percent of a standard deviation. By contrast, party membership is associated with less than 10 percent of a standard deviation increase in modern values for those at the age of thirty, even though the younger generations as a whole are considerably more modern-minded than the older ones. These patterns suggest that when it comes to socialization, what the CCP does is to modernize the values of the more conservative segments of society, rather than to make the already liberal-leaning groups even more liberal.

Conclusion

During much of the post–Cold War era, political developments around the world have been framed as a competition between liberal democracies and authoritarianism.

The CCP is now increasingly being portrayed as a champion of this "authoritarian camp" and a challenger to the values and ideals that Western liberal democracies espouse (Gat 2007). While not to deny that certain conflicts of interests do exist between China and the West, our analysis suggests that the depiction of an ongoing "cultural war" between China and Western democracies can be quite misleading. Instead of being an organization staffed by traditionally minded authoritarians, the CCP actually rules with a base that has a relatively more modern and progressive mind-set than the general public. The ideological differences that we find between party members and nonmembers are robust to various specifications and subsample analyses that take into account the possibility of preference falsification. Further analysis also suggests that while selective recruitment of the highly educated is the most dominant mechanism that contributes to this party–public value gap, intraparty socialization also plays a role, especially among older and less educated members.

These findings help explain a long-standing puzzle about the CCP's durability: namely, why does the party enjoy widespread, high-level support from the public (Dickson 2016; Tang 2016a), including not only its conventional base of lower class followers but also those from the more "modern" sectors, such as the middle class and the majority of the educated individuals? While the existing theories focus mainly on mechanisms such as indoctrination or co-optation, our analysis suggests that part of the support may be explained by the ideological configurations in the contemporary Chinese society. One reason could be that there is a relatively high degree of congruence in ideological preferences between the party and the society (as evidenced by the similarity in the shapes of value distributions in Figure 2). For individuals from those modern sectors, moreover, another reason could be that although many of them do hold more liberal values than party members, their value difference with the rest of the nonparty public is even greater.[19]

It is important to stress, of course, that by characterizing certain authoritarian regimes as "enlightened" or "modernizing," we are by no means equating them to liberal democracies. Most crucially, enlightened autocracies differ from liberal democracies in the lack of strong, rights-protecting institutions that constrain the power of the executives. Without such constraints, these regimes, when being pressed by perceived practical exigencies, still can and sometimes do enact illiberal policies or even commit horrendous human rights violations. This point is especially relevant in light of the CCP's recent authoritarian turn in many policy areas (Shirk 2018). What our analyses suggest is that when the party's base is already quite enlightened, support for those illiberal policies within the party may not be as strong as it appears on the surface, and that

illiberalism in the long run is likely to weaken, rather than strengthen, the regime by undermining the confidence of the party's modern-minded followers.

On the contrary, results from our analyses also underscore the potential danger of premature regime change. In societies where a liberal culture has not yet taken root, getting rid of a relatively modern-minded autocracy will not necessarily result in bringing a more enlightened force into power. Instead of making China a more open, peaceful, and progressive actor, democratization, by virtue of giving the average person a louder voice in the system, might end up empowering the more conservative, reactionary, and xenophobic elements in the Chinese society. Great caution is therefore needed in assessing the welfare implications of regime changes for both the domestic and international stakeholders.

Notes

1. The view of authoritarian regimes as agents of modernization was popular in the comparative politics literature during 1960s and 1970s (Huntington and Moore 1970), but largely forgotten after the end of Cold War. The contemporary discussion of authoritarian regimes, inheriting the framework from Linz (2000), treats these regimes as mainly non-ideological entities.
2. A sizable interdisciplinary literature has also debated about the material implications of party membership. The general finding is that the socioeconomic privileges associated with party membership have declined during the reform era but persisted somewhat longer in the state sector (e.g., Dickson and Rublee 2000; Walder, Li, and Treiman 2000). More recent studies, however, provide evidence that party membership itself does not bring better economic outcomes when the underlying ability is accounted for (Li et al. 2007).

3. See www.asianbarometer.org
4. See www.chinagss.org
5. See opendata.pku.edu.cn/dataverse/CFPS
6. Both waves of Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) were carried out by the National Taiwan University and its mainland partner institutions; Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) was carried out by Renmin University, and China Family Panel Survey (CFPS) was carried out by Peking University.
7. The party census is published annually by the Central Organization Department. See http://news.12371.cn/dzybmbdj/zzb/dntjgb/.
8. The available options for ABS surveys are "strongly disagree," "disagree," "agree," and "strongly agree." CFPS and CGSS surveys contain an extra "neutral" option between "disagree" and "agree."
9. The more detailed results from the internal consistency checks can be found in Figure A.1 of the Online Appendix.
10. Another common political science application of item response theory (IRT) models is to generate measures of institutional characteristics that are multifaceted but conceptually important, such as democracy (Treier and Jackman 2008).
11. Alternatively, we could also estimate the IRT model using a full Bayesian procedure. We prefer the maximum likelihood approach in this study because it allows us to incorporate survey weights. We provide the (unweighted) Bayesian results in Online Appendix F. The results are quite similar.
12. We ran a total of thirteen IRT models, one for a distinct value domain in each survey.
13. In Online Appendix H, we quantify the congruence and show that the level of party–public congruence in China is greater than politician–voter congruence in many Latin American democracies.
14. The calculation is based on comparing the average modern value of party members with percentiles among nonmembers in both ABS3 and ABS4.
15. Tang (2016b), for example, discusses the differences between individuals who join the party for ideological versus pragmatic reasons. Unfortunately, we could not explore the ideological differences between these two subtypes in this study as none of the surveys contain questions about motivations to join the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, the following analysis investigates a different type of division within the party based on sector of employment.
16. Another possibility is that ordinary citizens may feel more pressure to voice the more proregime/authoritarian response than party members, who are actually more confident/comfortable in voicing liberal progressive political values because they are more empowered. To address this concern, we examine in Table A.16 the correlation between doubts about the survey (as an indicator of a respondent's perception of sensitivity, rated by the enumerator) and answers to our survey instruments. We find that having doubts about the survey has no consistent relationship with the content of responses in the more sensitive political domain, for either party members or nonmembers.

17. As a proxy measure for the degree of sensitivity, we compare the percentages of respondents who refuse to provide answers for both the anchoring questions and our survey instruments. More sensitive questions typically induce more nonresponses. In ABS3, the missing rates for the three anchoring questions are 10, 11.2, and 16.4 percent, respectively, and the average missing rate for all our survey instruments is 7.8 percent. In ABS4, the rates for anchoring questions are 20.3, 22.2, and 24 percent, respectively, and the average rate for survey instruments is 13.6 percent. These patterns suggest that the anchoring questions are indeed perceived to be much more sensitive than our survey instruments.
18. Education is coded with four levels: (1) elementary school or below, (2) middle school, (3) high school, and (4) university or above. Other specifications (e.g., three levels, or binary for with and without college) yield similar results.
19. In Online Appendix L.3, we show that the average party member is located between the middle class/intellectuals and the rest of the nonparty public in terms of modern-mindedness.

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Supplemental Material

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