



A Comparative Survey of

DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT

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Democratic Conceptions and Regime Support among
Chinese Citizens

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Asian Barometer

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Democratic Conceptions and Regime Support among Chinese Citizens

Jie Lu

Abstract

Using the 2011 mainland China national survey (as a part of the ABS III), this paper examines the possible relationship between Chinese citizens' support for their one-party regime and their democratic conceptions. This paper argues that the puzzling coexistence of and a positive correlation between high regime support and prevailing acceptance of democracy as the best form of government in mainland China could be, at least partly attributed to Chinese citizens' distinct democratic conceptions that are shaped by different political discourses, i.e., a guardianship discourse vs. a liberal democracy discourse. Empirical evidence based on comparable survey instruments from mainland China and the US confirms the validity of this differentiation between the two democratic conceptions on how democracy should be understood and practiced. Moreover, once Chinese citizens have embraced distinct democratic conceptions, their regime support responds differently to the performance of their political system. And the relationship between regime support and acceptance of democracy as the best form of government varies, as moderated by distinct democratic conceptions.

Thanks to the booming survey industry in mainland China, students of comparative public opinion have accumulated abundant information on how Chinese citizens think of their government, their political leaders, and their regime across regions and over the time (e.g., Chen 2004; Chen and Dickson 2008; Li 2004, 2008, 2011; Manion 2006; Shi 2001; Tang 2005). This literature significantly enriches our understanding of Chinese politics, in particular, and authoritarian rule, in general. Nevertheless, there are still many puzzling empirical phenomena that are left unresolved, which demand more systematic data, deeper empirical analysis, and more refined theorization. This paper contributes to this line of research in two ways: 1) I use the most recent national survey from mainland China, with newly crafted survey instruments, to reexamine a still unresolved empirical puzzle in the literature: the coexistence of high regime support and acceptance of democracy as the best form of government among the Chinese people. 2) I cross-validate the validity of the differentiation between two democratic conceptions that follow different political discourses, i.e., a guardianship discourse vs. a liberal democracy discourse, with identical survey instruments from the Chinese national survey and an American national survey, theorize the possible moderating role of this variable in the relationship between Chinese citizens' regime support and endorsement of democracy, and test this moderating effect systematically.

Regime Support and Endorsement of Democracy in Contemporary China

Political support and trust have been quite popular among students of Chinese politics over the past decade (e.g., Chen 2004; Chen and Dickson 2008; Li 2004, 2008, 2011; Manion 2006; Shi 2001; Tang 2005). Practically, documenting the continuity and change in this critical attitude can help us understand the political dynamics in today's largest authoritarian society with

increasing regional and international influence. Theoretically, knowing how political support has been sustained or challenged in today's China also contributes to the growing literature on authoritarian politics and democratic transition (e.g., Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Boix 2003, 2009; Brownlee 2009; Levitsky and Way 2010; Morse 2012; Przeworski 2000). Researchers of political support in mainland China have actively engaged the studies of mainstream political science on public opinion and political psychology, and effectively borrowed some important theoretical frameworks like the Eastonian one (Easton 1965) to understand this critical political attitude (Chen 2004; Shi 2008; Tang 2005). Despite some very thought-provoking and interesting stories proposed, a satisfying explanation of the persistent and puzzlingly high support that Chinese citizens give to their one-party regime still eludes most China scholars. Moreover, the empirical results from different survey researchers also show that Chinese citizens, comparatively speaking, are also quite open and enthusiastic in embracing democracy as the best form of government. We cannot help but wonder: are the Chinese people simply schizophrenic in their political views?

As a part of the Asian Barometer Surveys III (ABS III), the 2011 national survey in mainland China includes a new battery to evaluate Chinese citizens' regime support, as well as a conventionally used instrument to assess their endorsement of democracy as a political system. Detailed wording and weighted frequencies are presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

As clearly displayed in the upper section of Table 1, Chinese citizens have a very positive view of their one-party regime. About 75% of the Chinese people believe in the system's competence in solving problems; around 76% of them are either proud of the system or prefer this system over any other possible alternatives; and more than 68% of the Chinese people

support the system, despite the problems it runs into. Generally speaking, mainland China's one-party system enjoys a very high level of support among its citizens. And this is compatible with other researchers' findings based on surveys using different samples or implemented at different times (e.g., Chen 2004; Shi 2001, 2008; Wang 2005). Nevertheless, at the same time, the Chinese people are no different from their counterparts in other societies and enthusiastically endorse democracy as the best form of government. As the lower section of Table 1 reveals, more than 76% of the Chinese people recognize democracy as the best form of government, despite its problems. To further make sure that the co-existence of high regime support and enthusiasm for democracy at the societal level is not driven by information aggregation issues, I check the correlation between these two variables at the individual level. And given their ordinal nature, Kendall's Tau-b and Cramer's V are used to gauge the strength of this bi-variable relationship, which are shown in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

As displayed in Table 2, no matter which indicator is used, Kendall's Tau-b and Cramer's V both suggest a medium-level correlation between Chinese citizens' regime support and their endorsement of democracy as the best political system. And the size of the asymptotic standard errors associated with Kendall's Tau-b confirms the statistical significance of these bi-variable correlations. Empirically, these two variables are indeed positively correlated among Chinese citizens: those who regard democracy as the best form of government are also more likely to support to their one-party regime. But how could they support the one-party regime, while loving democracy so much?

One natural and understandable response from those who are not very familiar with the survey research in mainland China is: people simply lie about their regime support. It is because

of their worries about the possible retaliation from the government that Chinese citizens hide their true feelings. Thus, the regime support in mainland China has been inflated significantly. Theoretically, the contaminating effect of preference falsification (Kuran 1995), social pressure (Beatty and Herrmann 2002; Krosnick 2002; Tourangeau et al. 2000), or political concerns (Glynn et al. 1997; Noelle-Neumann 1984) can never be ruled out in survey research, not just in authoritarian societies but even in mature liberal democracies. Psychologically and empirically speaking, if people are really concerned about the possible negative consequences incurred due to revealing their true feelings on sensitive survey questions, non-response, i.e., saying “I don’t know” or “I don’t understand this one,” should be a much easier way out, compared to fabricating their answers. Thus, if political concerns play a significant role in shaping Chinese citizens’ response in political surveys, we should 1) find a significantly high level of non-response rate; and 2) identify some clear pattern in their non-response: more specifically, those who are politically more sophisticated should be more likely to say “I don’t know” or “I don’t understand this one” when approached for their support for the one-party regime. To explore the plausibility of this political-fear-hypothesis, I run some statistical analysis on who are more likely to give DKs in the four indicators for regime support and present the results of Probit models in Table 3.

[Table 3 about here]

The non-response rate for each of the four indicators is listed in the parentheses under their labels. On average, around 13% of the respondents did not answer the questions regarding their regime support; and this number is not significantly higher than that in comparable surveys from democratic developing countries like India (Ren 2009). Moreover, when the patterns of DKs in these four indicators are examined, there is little evidence supporting the political-fear-

hypothesis. On the contrary, better educated males who are more interested in politics, have a higher level of internal political efficacy, or consume political news more frequently are more likely to give meaningful answers to these politically sensitive questions. This group of people is supposed to be cognitively more competent in telling the potential risk in answering these questions; and, thus, if the political-fear-hypothesis is correct, they are supposed to be more likely to dodge these questions rather than giving meaningful answers. This pattern in DKs actually suggests that cognitive deficiency might be the key reason that drives item non-response in these politically sensitive questions, which is compatible with other researchers' findings on item non-response in political surveys in mainland China (Ren 2009; Shi 1996; Yan 2005, 2008). If political fear is not the key factor in driving this co-existence of high regime support and enthusiastic endorsement of democracy among Chinese citizens, what is the possible rational explanation? Are the Chinese people really schizophrenic in their political views?

Democratic Conceptions and Distinct Political Discourses

Before we conclude that a large number of Chinese citizens are simply schizophrenic in their political views, another plausible explanation should be seriously examined: many Chinese citizens may have a specific understanding of democracy; and this democratic conception differs substantially from the one that has been taken for granted by those who have been extensively exposed to and heavily affected by the widely promoted liberal democracy discourse.

Given the booming literature on popular understandings of democracy, with increasing evidence from different parts of the world on the existence of distinct democratic conceptions and their consequential implications for people's political behavior and attitudes (e.g., Bratton and Mattes 2001; Canache Forthcoming; Crow 2010; Dalton et al. 2007; Jamal and Tessler 2008;

Miller et al. 1997; Rose et al. 1998; Shi 2009), this distinct-conception-hypothesis is not out of the question and deserve serious examination. In other words, it is likely that given some Chinese people's specific democratic conception, endorsing democracy as the best form of government does not necessarily challenge their support for the one-party regime. They may appear schizophrenic in their political views; nevertheless, their attitudes are actually logically consistent and coherent once their own democratic conception is taken into consideration. As some existing research shows, a democratic conception that follows a guardianship discourse, rather than the liberal democracy discourse, may have effectively penetrated into the Chinese society (Shi 2009, Forthcoming; Shi and Lu 2010).

In his seminal work, *Democracy and Its Critics*, Dahl (1989, p. 52) clearly states that a “perennial alternative to democracy is government by guardians.” And the guardianship model of government has appealed to numerous political thinkers around the world and been systematically practiced by authoritarian leaders over a long period of time: Confucianism and Leninism both are classical examples of the guardianship model of government. It is very likely that contemporary authoritarian leaders in societies with a rich history of the practice of the guardianship model, like mainland China and Singapore, might have intentionally capitalized upon this tradition – repackaging it into an alternate discourse on democracy to disguise their authoritarian nature and even indoctrinating their people with this guardianship discourse. Therefore, it should not be surprising that both Lee Kuan Yew's “democracy embedded in Asian values” and Wu Bangguo's “democracy with Chinese characteristics” echo the idea of “government by guardians.”

Systematic comparison between the guardianship discourse and the liberal democracy discourse reveals that they actually agree on the legitimacy and desirable outcomes of

“democratic governance”: a stable environment for socioeconomic and political activities, and increased, if not maximized collective benefits for the whole society. Nevertheless, when it comes to how “democratic governance” should be practiced, i.e., specific institutional settings to achieve these desirable goals, they suggest diverging routes.

The liberal democracy discourse privileges the use of institutional arrangements to reach decisions on public issues and ensure good governance. At the heart of these arrangements lie open and competitive elections for selecting government leaders, well-established checks and balances, as well as institutionalized protection of liberty and assurance of political rights. In essence, within this discourse, democracy is presented, at the very least, as a set of political institutions that guarantees the liberty of expression, constrains the possible abuse of political power, and ensures people’s rights to participate in politics, choose their leaders, and collectively determine the best policies for their society.

On the contrary, due to its relatively pessimistic view on the average person’s ability to pursue long-term and collective interest, the guardianship discourse maintains that the key to quality governance lies in the identification of high-quality elites, e.g., philosopher-kings trained through systematic education, to act as the guardians of a society. The guardians, given their wisdom, virtue, and mastery of necessary knowledge and skills, can be trusted to effectively resolve the social choice problem, provide public goods, and serve the public interest. This discourse also requires that the guardians be endowed with necessarily discretionary power and authority to make decisions on public issues. Essentially, this discourse tries to present democracy as a government led by well-educated and virtuous politicians with sufficient discretionary power, who are willing to listen to people’s opinions, sincere in taking people’s

interests into consideration when making decisions, and capable of identifying the best policies for the public.

Clearly, once the guardianship discourse is embraced, the Chinese people's democratic conception deviates substantively from the one proposed by the liberal democracy discourse that prioritizes the rule of law, checks and balances, and institutionalized protection and assurance of basic individual rights. Accordingly, their assessment of the democratic nature of a political system is essentially centered on the substance of government policies, especially whether these policies can provide tangible benefits to its people and promote the public interest over the long run. Hence, among these Chinese citizens, their endorsement of democracy as the best form of government is likely to be positively associated with their support of a regime that can continuously deliver and effectively maintain its performance in promoting public welfare, sustaining political order, and ensuring public security, even when the regime is essentially non-democratic. In other words, we are much more likely to see the seemingly schizophrenic views among the Chinese people who have embraced the democratic conception shaped by the guardianship discourse. On the contrary, among the Chinese people who have accepted the liberal democracy discourse and formed their understanding of democracy accordingly, we are much less likely to see this puzzling positive correlation and may even find some negative relationship.

To find out if the guardianship discourse does constitute a meaningful and competitive alternative against the liberal democracy discourse in contemporary China and shape the Chinese people's democratic conceptions, some new survey instruments focusing on people's views of how their government should be organized and operate for democratic politics are included in the 2011 national survey. These instruments were first tested in some local surveys in 2002 and a

national survey in 2008 in mainland China. After numerous validity tests, they were further refined and included in a national survey in mainland China in 2011, as well as a national survey in the US in 2010.¹ The question reads: “In your opinion, which of the following statements *should be* more important to *democratic politics*?”² Then four contrasting pairs were presented one after another, and respondents were instructed to choose one statement in each of the five pairings: 1) “Fair, public, regular and competitive elections to choose government leaders” vs. “A competent government that takes people’s interests into consideration, regardless of how it came into power;” 2) “People enjoy the right to freedom of speech when criticizing the government” vs. “The government has the responsibility to limit the expression of harmful ideas to the public;” 3) “Government follows the wish of the majority when making decisions” vs. “Government follows its own judgment of citizens’ best interests when making decisions;” and 4) “Ensuring the competition among two or more political parties for political power” vs. “The party in power seriously takes into consideration the suggestions and opinions of ordinary people.”

Theoretically, believing that the first statement in each pair should be more important for democratic politics indicates a democratic conception that follows the liberal democracy discourse; while, choosing the second statement suggests a respondent may have understood democracy following the guardianship discourse. Fortunately, I can rely on some comparable data from the US, which is believed to be a best example of liberal democracy with most citizens cherishing democracy for its intrinsic value, as a meaningful benchmark for comparison and

¹ Technical information, including sampling, about the 2011 mainland China survey, as well as the 2010 US national survey, can be found in the appendix.

² Here “should” and “democratic politics” are important. Respondents were asked to (1) tell what they believed the appropriate practice of democracy should be; and (2) focus on the political aspect of democracy.

interpreting the data from mainland China. And Table 4 shows the weighted frequencies of Chinese and American respondents' answers in adjacent columns.

[Table 4 about here]

Clearly, no matter which indicator is used, and as expected, Americans outperform their Chinese counterparts in holding a democratic conception that follows the liberal democracy discourse: compared with the Chinese people, more Americans believe that well established electoral institutions, freedom of speech, majority rule, and institutionalized party politics should be more important for democratic politics. And the differences between mainland China and the US with respect to the percentages of citizens who understand democracy following the liberal democracy discourse ranges from around 17% to about 37%, depending on the specific indicator used. Nevertheless, if we focus on mainland China, the situation actually is quite encouraging. Except for the last indicator on party politics, a majority of Chinese citizens hold an understanding of democracy shaped by the liberal democracy discourse; and, thus, identify democratic institutions, procedures, and freedom as essential characteristics of democracy.

Of course, in both mainland China and the US, there are also a large number of citizens whose democratic conception deviates from the liberal democracy discourse, with more emphasis on identifying well-educated and virtuous politicians who are willing to listen to people's opinions, sincere in taking people's interests into consideration when making decisions, and capable of identifying the best policies for the public. For instance, in the US, when it comes to party politics, more than 58% of its citizens believe that having the party in power take

people's views seriously should be more important than institutionalized party competition for democratic politics. And this percentage is even higher in China, i.e., more than 68%.³

To make clearer interpretations of the results in Table 4 and reduce the possible influence of measurement errors, I explore the underlying structure of this new battery with a statistical modeling technique called Latent Class Analysis (LCA). LCA basically tries to establish a typology for all respondents using their responses to a group of specified questions. Similar to the conventional factor analysis or Item Response Theory (IRT) factor analysis, LCA is interested in the latent data structure of respondents' answers. Nevertheless, instead of assuming a latent continuous construct that shapes people's response to survey questions, LCA assumes a latent categorical construct that determines people's pertinent response. And using this latent categorical construct, researchers can build a typology that places individuals in specific groups with statistical justification.

Theoretically, I expect these four indicators to tap a latent dichotomous variable that differentiates the individuals who understand democracy primarily following the liberal democracy discourse from those whose democratic conception is mainly shaped by the guardianship discourse. In other words, a two-class LCA model should perform better than a one-class or three-class LCA model. And the results of LCA models with two and three latent classes for mainland China are presented in Table 5.

³ It is important to point out that the possible implications of different democratic conceptions for domestic politics could be contingent upon the surrounding political context. In other words, the same measure of democratic conception may show high measurement validity; however, its consequences could vary across political systems. Due to limited space, I cannot address this issue in this paper. Here, I simply compare the results of identical survey questions from mainland China and the US to make more meaningful interpretations. And the consequences of different democratic conceptions for regime support are only explored in the context of mainland China.

[Table 5 about here]

First of all, the LCA model with two latent classes fits the data well, given its insignificant Chi-square statistic. And the three-class LCA model does not fit the data as well as the two-class LCA model, given the former's significant Chi-square statistic. And the relatively smaller AIC and BIC of the two-class LCA model also suggest its better fit. Second, model comparison statistics further confirm that the two-class LCA model statistically outperforms the one-class LCA model, as indicated by the two significant likelihood ratio tests. Moreover, despite more parameters specified in the three-class LCA model, there is no statistically significant improvement regarding its performance compared with the two-class LCA model, as suggested by the two insignificant likelihood ratio tests. In a summary, the two-class LCA model does fit the data very well; and the four indicators do effectively place Chinese citizens into two groups with distinct democratic conceptions. And the same results are found using the US survey data.

According to the final results of classification, as reported in the lower section of Table 5, around 44% of the Chinese people hold a democratic conception primarily shaped by the guardianship discourse that emphasizes the identification of well-educated, competent, and virtuous political leaders who serve the public with their wisdom, diligence, and foresight; and about 27% of American citizens share a similar understanding of democracy. Meanwhile, about 73% of the American people understand democracy primarily following the liberal democracy discourse that prioritizes the establishment of institutions and procedures to ensure and protect people's basic rights, freedom, and liberty, and to constrain the possible abuse of political power; while, in mainland China, the corresponding percentage is about 46%.⁴

⁴ About 10% of the respondents cannot be classified due to their non-response to all four questions.

Clearly, a large majority of American citizens indeed have internalized the liberal democracy discourse, which is not surprising given the rich history of liberal democracy, as well as its dominant status in the political discourse, in the US. In mainland China, the liberal democracy discourse and the guardianship discourse seem to have roughly equally won the hearts and minds of the Chinese people, with the democratic conception prioritizing institutions and procedures taking the lead with a small margin. As the largest transition society in today's world, mainland China also seems to be a battleground of ideas and political discourses that have consequential implications for its political future.

Regime Support and Democratic Conceptions

The previous section offers detailed evidence on distinct democratic conceptions among the Chinese people. And, theoretically, for those who have accepted the guardianship discourse and formed a corresponding democratic conception, the positive correlation between their high support of the one-party regime in mainland China and their enthusiastic endorsement of democracy as the best form of government, instead of being a puzzle, is actually logically consistent and empirically plausible. Does the differentiation between these two democratic conceptions help at all to understand the puzzling results reported in Table 1 and 2?

Endorsement of democracy: One key and straightforward hypothesis, given previously discussions, is simply that the correlation between Chinese citizens' support for their one-party regime and their endorsement of democracy as the best form of government is conditional upon their respective democratic conceptions. More specifically, the following two hypotheses are tested in subsequent statistical exercise:

H1: Among the Chinese citizens who understand democracy following the guardianship discourse, their support for the one-party regime is positively correlated with their endorsement of democracy as the best form of government.

H2: Among the Chinese citizens who understand democracy following the liberal democracy discourse, their support for the one-party regime is not correlated or even negatively correlated with their endorsement of democracy as the best form of government.

System performance: Theoretically, the possible impacts of democratic conception on regime support in mainland China can go beyond the aforementioned relationship between Chinese citizens' views of their regime and their democratic orientation. Since the liberal democracy discourse and the guardianship discourse offer different prescriptions for how democracy should be practiced in reality, it is quite reasonable to conceive that Chinese citizens, who have embraced distinct democratic conceptions shaped by these discourses, may respond to similar information or stimuli in different ways when assessing their political regime.

Since the key issue for this paper is the Chinese people's support for their political regime, rather than political incumbents, I argue that the general performance of the political system as a whole should be much more relevant. More specifically, given the salience of institutions and procedures for the liberal democracy discourse, the Chinese citizens who hold a democratic conception primarily shaped by this discourse are expected to be more sensitive to the one-party system's effectiveness in establishing institutionalized mechanisms that can hold the government accountable, supervise its performance, and constrain its possible abuse of power. Due to lack of meaningful elections in mainland China in choosing top government leaders, the rule of law and some within-party mechanisms of checks and balances are of particular significance in this regard.

On the contrary, for the guardianship discourse, some discretionary power is necessary for political leaders to take advantage of their wisdom and foresight for the public interest. Thus, the

Chinese citizens who hold a democratic conception mainly shaped by the guardianship discourse are expected to be much less sensitive to the aforementioned institutionalized mechanisms of accountability, supervision or political power constraint when assessing their political regime. However, this group of citizens is expected to be particularly astute in telling the system's competence in generating sufficient tangible benefits for its people; and, thus, factor this into their evaluations of the system much more than their counterparts who understand democracy following the liberal democracy discourse.

To measure the situation of rule of law in mainland China, I use Chinese citizens' response to the following statement: "Do officials who commit crimes go unpunished?"⁵ To measure the situation of possible checks and balances in Chinese politics, I use their response to the following statement: "To what extent is the legislature capable of keeping government leaders in check?"⁶ To measure the system's competence in providing tangible benefits for the Chinese people, I use their response to the following statement: "People have basic necessities like food, clothes, and shelter."⁷ Meanwhile, to more rigorously examine the possible moderating effect of democratic conception on Chinese citizens' regime support, I intentionally select one specific aspect of system performance to which all Chinese citizens, regardless of their respective democratic conceptions, are expected to be equally sensitive when assessing their political regime, i.e., the extent to which the government hide important information from its public: "How often do

⁵ Respondents' answers are coded into a dichotomous variable, with "Always/Most of the time" coded as 1 and "Sometimes/Rarely" coded as 0.

⁶ Respondents' answers are coded into a dichotomous variable, with "Very capable/Capable" coded as 1 and "Not capable/Not at all capable" coded as 0.

⁷ Respondents' answers are coded into a dichotomous variable, with "Completely agree/Agree" coded as 1 and "Disagree/Completely disagree" coded as 0.

government officials withhold important information from the public view?”⁸ Then the following hypotheses are tested in subsequent statistical analyses.

H3: When assessing their political regime, Chinese citizens who understand democracy following the liberal democracy discourse are much more sensitive to the situation of rule of law, as well as that of checks and balances.

H4: When assessing their political regime, Chinese citizens who understand democracy following the guardianship discourse are much more sensitive to the situation of the provision of basic necessities.

H5: When assessing their political regime, Chinese citizens, regardless of their democratic conceptions, are equally sensitive to how the government withholds importation information from the public.

Other critical controls: Following contemporary literature on political trust and support in mainland China, I also include necessary controls in multiple regressions to account for the possible influence of confounding variables.

Respondents’ demographic features, including their age,⁹ gender,¹⁰ educational attainment,¹¹ and location of residence,¹² as well as their socio-psychological characteristics like official affiliation with the CCP,¹³ general interest in politics,¹⁴ and internal political efficacy¹⁵ are

⁸ Respondents’ answers are coded into a dichotomous variable, with “Always/Most of the time” coded as 1 and “Sometimes/Rarely” coded as 0.

⁹ This is measured with respondents’ real ages in years.

¹⁰ Males are coded as 1.

¹¹ This is a 10-point ordinal scale, ranging from “No formal education” to “Post-graduate degree.”

¹² Rural residents are coded as 1.

¹³ CCP members are coded as 1.

¹⁴ Political interest is measured with a 4-point ordinal scale: “How interested would you say you are in politics?”

¹⁵ Internal political efficacy is measured with a 4-point ordinal scale: “Sometimes politics and government seems so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what is going on.”

incorporated into the statistical models to control for some possible individual distinctions driven by cognitive and generational differentiations (Chen 2004; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Norris and Inglehart 2009; Tang 2005).

Given the well-documented media control in mainland China (Chen and Shi 2001; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Zhu et al. Forthcoming), as well as the critical role of information in public opinion (Sniderman et al. 2004; Zaller 1992), respondents' accessing varying sources of information is also incorporated. Their general exposure to political news through newspapers, TV programs, and radio programs is used as a proxy for their accessing domestic controlled information;¹⁶ while, their use of the Internet,¹⁷ as well as their accessing grapevine news through word-of-mouth,¹⁸ is used as a proxy for their accessing uncontrolled information.

The quality of governance is also included to capture the possible performance-based legitimacy for the one-party regime in mainland China (Nathan 2003), including Chinese citizens' evaluations of their national economy,¹⁹ their family income,²⁰ and their personal

¹⁶ Exposure to domestic political news is measured with a 5-point ordinal scale: "How often do you follow news about politics and government?"

¹⁷ Frequency of using the Internet is measured with a 6-point ordinal scale: "How often do you use the internet?" Respondents' accessing foreign programs is measured with a 6-point ordinal scale: "How often do you watch or listen to foreign programs (television, DVDs, movies, radio)?"

¹⁸ Respondents giving a positive answer to either of the following questions are coded as 1: "Over the past month, have you heard of grapevine news on socioeconomic or political issues?" and "Over the past month, have you talked to other people about grapevine news on socioeconomic or political issues?"

¹⁹ Respondents were asked to evaluate China's current economic situation, as well as assessing it retrospectively (change over the past years) and prospectively (possible change in the forthcoming years), using a 5-point scale.

²⁰ This is a 4-point ordinal scale: "Does the total income of your household allow you to satisfactorily cover your needs?"

experience of corruption.²¹ A key difference between this group of indicators of governance quality and the aforementioned group of indicators for system performance lies in the extent to which the political regime in mainland China is more likely to be held responsible. National economic performance may be affected by the policies adopted by specific incumbents, as well as relevant international environment. Family income could be heavily affected by idiosyncratic personal endowments and skills, as well as local economic contexts. And personal experience of corruption might also be significantly shaped by specific incumbents' misdemeanor. Doubtlessly, all these could be of significance for Chinese citizens' political attitudes, particularly those regarding political incumbents. Nevertheless, compared with the system's performance in providing basic necessities, punishing officials for their committed crimes, and checking government leaders through its legislature, these indicators of governance quality have limited, and in many cases ambiguous implications for how Chinese citizens may evaluate their political system.

Furthermore, in addition to the Chinese people's endorsement of democracy as the best form of government, two additional normative orientations are also included following pertinent research on political support in mainland China: individualism and conditional obedience toward authority (Shi 2001, 2008, Forthcoming).²²

²¹ Respondents reporting personal experience of corruption are coded as 1.

²² The 4-point Likert-scale for following four statements is collapsed into a binary scale, with 1 standing for an individualistic orientation: 1) "The state is like a big machine and the individual is but a small cog, with no independent status." 2) "For the sake of the family, the individual should put his personal interests second." 3) "In a group, we should sacrifice our individual interest for the sake of the group's collective interest." 4) "For the sake of national interest, individual interest could be sacrificed." Then the latent continuous IRT score of individualism is used for analysis. The 4-point Likert-scale for following four statements is collapsed in to a binary scale, with 1 standing for a conditional obedience toward authority: 1) "When there is unsolved conflict, we should ask the seniors to uphold justice." 2) "Even if parents' demands are

Statistically, instead of using the four indicators of regime support separately for multiple regressions, I use the IRT measurement model to identify the latent continuous construct that captures Chinese citizens' propensity in supporting their one-party regime (Embretson and Reise 2000; Reise et al. 1993; Treier and Jackman 2008).²³ And the results of the IRT measurement model are shown in Table 6.

[Table 6 about here]

As displayed in Table 6, the four dichotomous indicators effectively tap a uni-dimensional continuous latent construct. And the standardized factor loadings are substantively and statistically significant. When the model fit statistics are checked, the large values of CFI and TLI (larger than 0.9) and the small value of RMSEA (less than 0.05) all indicate that the specified IRT measurement model satisfactorily matches the underlying structure of the raw data (Bentler 1990, 2000; Hu and Bentler 1999; Kline 2005). Thus, and to minimize the possible influence of measurement errors, the latent continuous IRT score of Chinese citizens' regime support is used in subsequent multiple regressions; and given the continuous nature of this dependent variable, OLS regressions are adopted.

A conventional way to examine the moderating effect of democratic conception on regime support is to include as many interaction items as possible and check the statistical performance of these interaction items. However, due to the binary or ordinal nature of many independent variables included in the model, too many interaction items are going to generate a serious

unreasonable, children still should do what they ask.” 3) “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.” 4) “Being a student, one should not question the authority of their teacher.” Then the latent continuous IRT score of conditional obedience toward authority is used for analysis.

²³ The 4-point Likert-scale is collapsed into a dichotomous variable with 1 coded for supporting the regime and 0 coded for lack of regime support.

multicollinearity problem and, thus, impede effective statistical inference. To avoid this kind of challenge, I take advantage of the LCA results reported in Table 5 and estimate two identical OLS models for the Chinese people with distinct democratic conceptions. Running identical OLS models on subsamples and juxtaposing the results, I can easily tell whether different dynamics are involved in the formation of regime support for these two groups of Chinese citizens, as moderated by their distinct democratic conceptions. And the results of the OLS regressions are presented in Table 7.

[Table 7 about here]

First of all, among the three value variables included in the analysis, Chinese citizens' endorsement of democracy as the best form of government is the only one showing significant variance in its correlation with regime support, as expectedly moderated by democratic conception. It is only among the Chinese people who hold a democratic conception primarily shaped by the guardianship discourse that their endorsement of democracy is positively associated with their support for the one-party regime. On the contrary, among the Chinese citizens who hold a democratic conception that primarily follows the liberal democracy discourse, the association between their endorsement of democracy and regime support is statistically insignificant, i.e., practically a null relationship. Thus, given the roughly equal share of the Chinese citizens with these two democratic conceptions, the positive correlation reported in Table 2 is no longer a puzzle. This positive correlation is likely to have been primarily driven by those who are wooed by the CCP regime's satisfying performance, while prioritizing having well-educated and virtuous elites rule the society with their wisdom and foresight as a defining feature of democracy. Thus, H1 and H2 receive some empirical support in the 2011 national survey.

Second, all four indicators of system performance behave as expected as well. Chinese citizens' regime support is significantly shaped by their evaluations of their government's propensity in withholding critical information from the public; and, as argued previously, this impact does not vary between those who have distinct democratic conceptions.²⁴ Basically, H5 is supported by the survey data. However, when it comes to other aspects of system performance to which Chinese citizens with distinct democratic conceptions are expected to respond in different ways, I do find some varying relationships.

The CCP regime's performance in securing basic necessities is only statistically significant in shaping the regime support among those who understand democracy following the guardianship discourse. Given this group of people's sensitivity to the regime's competence in delivering tangible material benefits, their better assessment of the provision of basic necessities significantly boosts their support for the one-party regime. However, when it comes to the situation of rule of law in mainland China – approximated by the extent to which Chinese government officials are unpunished for their committed crimes – the dynamic is reversed: it is among those who identify institutions and procedures as essential characteristics of democracy that their assessment of the situation of rule of law significantly shapes their regime support. And the worse their evaluations, the lower regime support they offer. H3 and H4 both receive some support from the 2011 survey data.

When Chinese citizens' assessment of the checks and balances in their political system is examined, this variable is significantly associated with their regime support for both groups: the better evaluations they have on the legislature's effectiveness in checking government leaders, the higher support they offer to the one-party regime. Nevertheless, the size of the coefficient for

²⁴ This difference between coefficients is not statistically significant even at the 0.1 level.

those who understand democracy following the guardianship discourse is about half of that for those who hold a democratic conception mainly shaped by the liberal democracy discourse.²⁵ In other words, Chinese citizens' better evaluations of their legislature's effectiveness in constraining the possible abuse of power among their political leaders significantly increase their support for the regime; and, this impact is substantively much more significant among those who emphasize the indispensability of institutions and procedures in democratic politics. To help readers visualize this difference in the substantive impact, I run some simulations and present the results in Figure 1a-1b for illustration.

[Figure 1 about here]

The bold line and two dotted lines in the middle of Figure 1a and 1b stand for the population mean of the IRT score of regime support, as well as its 95% confidence interval. The bold line at the top stands for the maximum value of the IRT score of regime support in the population. And the black dots with error bars stand for predicted IRT scores of regime support for a typical Chinese citizen with distinct democratic conceptions, as well as their 95% confidence intervals.²⁶ As shown in Figure 1a, for a typical Chinese citizen who understands democracy following the liberal democracy discourse, as his/her assessment of the legislature's effectiveness in checking government leaders deteriorates, the regime support witnesses a drop from 0.057 to -0.323. Given the same scenario, but for a typical Chinese citizen who holds a democratic conception primarily shaped by the guardianship discourse, as shown in Figure 1b, the corresponding drop in regime support is about half of the size reported in Figure 1a, from 0.022 to -0.162. And the difference is statistically significant. H3 receives some support from the 2011 survey data.

²⁵ This difference between coefficients is statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

²⁶ Other variables are set to their population mean/median respectively.

Third, some control variables' varying performance further confirms the moderating effect of democratic conception on Chinese citizens' regime support. It is only among those who understand democracy following the guardianship discourse that their more frequent exposure to the controlled domestic media, as well their CCP affiliation, significantly boosts their regime support. However, if these people, *ceteris paribus*, are politically more sophisticated, i.e., with a higher level of internal political efficacy, or more frequent access to less controlled or uncontrolled information through the Internet, their enthusiasm for the one-party regime is significantly depressed. In other words, as the Chinese people are attracted to the guardianship discourse, they are more effectively manipulated by the CCP's propaganda through various channels to cultivate and sustain a high support for its political regime; however, the politically more sophisticated ones with access to alternative sources of information, to some extent, might be able to thwart such propaganda. Meanwhile, all these effects are insignificant among those who have formed their views of democracy following the liberal democracy discourse.

And finally, the Confucian/Leninism cultural tradition also affects the regime support among Chinese citizens, as previous research suggests (Shi 2001, 2008, Forthcoming): those who are more individualistically oriented or more likely to reject blind obedience toward authority offer less support to their one-party regime. And these cultural impacts do not vary among the Chinese people with distinct democratic conceptions.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Different surveys in mainland China repeatedly show the high support its authoritarian regime boasts. Surprisingly, accompanying this authoritarian resilience, students of Chinese politics also find a prevailing enthusiasm among the Chinese people for democracy and even

endorsement of democracy as the best form of government. The most recent national survey from mainland China confirms both findings and further reveals some puzzling medium-level significant association between these two political attitudes among Chinese citizens. Are the Chinese people schizophrenic in their political views?

This paper argues that the seemingly strange positive correlation between Chinese citizens' support for their one-party regime and their endorsement of democracy as the best form of government actually is logically consistent and coherent if their distinct democratic conceptions are taken into consideration. Like their counterparts in many other developing societies, a large number of Chinese citizens understand democracy in a way that deviates from the liberal democracy discourse. More specifically, in mainland China, a guardianship discourse on democracy appeals to lots of people. And within this discourse, the effective and appropriate practice of democracy is hinged upon identifying well-educated and virtuous political leaders equipped with sufficient discretionary power, who can take advantage of their wisdom, competence, and foresight to deliver quality governance. And these public-interest oriented political leaders serve their people as guardians. Once this specific discourse of democracy is accepted, Chinese citizens' high support for their one-party regime and their enthusiasm over democracy do not necessarily go against each other, as long as the regime performs satisfactorily and continuously delivers quality governance.

To explore the situation of popular understandings of democracy in mainland China, I use a new survey battery on distinct democratic conceptions and compare it to the situation in the US based on identical survey instruments. LCA models reveal that there are indeed two groups of people in mainland China with distinct democratic conceptions: one group understands democracy mainly following the guardianship discourse; while the other group identifies

institutions and procedures as essential characteristics of democracy, primarily shaped by the liberal democracy discourse. Compared to the situation in the US, where the second group takes the lion's share of its population, these two groups take roughly equal shares in mainland China, with the second group taking the lead with a small margin.

And these two groups of Chinese citizens do respond distinctly to various information and stimuli, when forming their assessment of China's one-party regime. Identical OLS regressions for each group of Chinese citizens reveal that, and as expected, the positive relationship between their regime support and their endorsement of democracy as the best form of government is only statistically meaningful among those who hold a democratic conception primarily shaped by the guardianship discourse. Moreover, democratic conception indeed moderates Chinese citizens' responses to the performance of their political system on various aspects. Among the Chinese people who understand democracy following the guardianship discourse, the system's competence in providing basic necessities to its citizens significantly shapes their regime support. For those who emphasize institutions and procedures more in understanding democracy, the system's effectiveness in enforcing the law on government officials for their committed crimes is of significance in shifting their regime support. Though the two groups both respond to their legislature's capability in checking government leaders, those who hold a democratic conception mainly shaped by the liberal democracy discourse respond in a much more dramatic way when assessing their one-party regime.

Given the documented significant moderating effect of democratic conception on regime support in mainland China, many more questions are raised, which merit further examination: How are these democratic conceptions formed? What are the channels for the cultivation and indoctrination of the competing political discourses on democracy? How is the distribution of

democratic conceptions among Chinese citizens change as a result of its ongoing reforms in mass media, the increasing penetration of new information technologies, most recently revealed political scandals, or the forthcoming power transition in the CCP? Regardless of which questions are examined, being sensitive to their own internal logic, as well as the dynamics embedded in China's political context, rather than simply fitting a procrustean framework, is always the key to fruitful research and meaningful explanations. In many cases, the development of general theories does not necessarily reject contextualized arguments (Falleti and Lynch 2009). In this way, students of Chinese politics can actively engage the studies of mainstream political science and contribute to our understanding of politics in the world, not just simply because around 20% of the world population speak Chinese and live under the one-party regime.

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Table 1: Regime Support and Endorsement of Democracy

<i>Regime support (Agree or Completely Agree)</i>	
Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces (RS1)	75.06%
Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government (RS2)	76.58%
A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people's support (RS3)	68.12%
I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of (RS4)	76.18%
<i>Democratic orientation (Agree or Completely Agree)</i>	
Democracy may have its problems, but it is still the best form of government.	76.18%

Source: 2011 ABS III Mainland China Survey (N = 3413)

Weighted percentages in cells

Table 2: Bi-Variable Correlations

<i>Regime support</i>	Democratic orientation	
	Cramer's V	Kendall's Tau-b
RS1	0.129	0.129 (0.025)
RS2	0.129	0.129 (0.024)
RS3	0.110	0.110 (0.021)
RS4	0.100	0.100 (0.023)

Source: 2011 ABS III Mainland China Survey (N = 3413)

Asymptotic standard errors in parentheses

Table 3: Results of Probit Models on DKs

	RS1	RS2	RS3	RS4
<i>Demographic features</i>	█ (14.81%)	█ (13.07%)	█ (11.55%)	█ (12.85%)
Age	0.007 (0.003)*	0.004 (0.003)	0.002 (0.004)	0.002 (0.004)
Male	-0.297 (0.073)**	-0.271 (0.085)**	-0.323 (0.081)**	-0.269 (0.084)**
Education	-0.076 (0.024)**	-0.086 (0.024)**	-0.084 (0.027)**	-0.073 (0.024)**
Rural residency	-0.065 (0.112)	-0.143 (0.127)	-0.177 (0.130)	-0.233 (0.139)
<i>Socio-psychological features</i>				
CCP affiliation	-0.049 (0.094)	-0.044 (0.104)	-0.016 (0.117)	0.049 (0.110)
Political interest	-0.312 (0.045)**	-0.314 (0.045)**	-0.288 (0.055)**	-0.288 (0.051)**
Internal political efficacy	-0.303 (0.071)**	-0.287 (0.080)**	-0.199 (0.071)**	-0.140 (0.072)*
<i>Information access</i>				
Exposure to political news	-0.086 (0.026)**	-0.067 (0.027)*	-0.062 (0.027)*	-0.063 (0.029)*
Internet usage	-0.008 (0.022)	0.003 (0.023)	-0.029 (0.024)	-0.038 (0.023)
Accessing grapevine news	-0.012 (0.084)	0.063 (0.087)	-0.012 (0.095)	0.019 (0.083)
Intercept	0.585 (0.304)	0.553 (0.347)	0.402 (0.368)	0.349 (0.343)
<i>Model fit statistics</i>				
F-statistics	14.04**	14.15**	8.57**	8.88**
Used Obs.	3096	3096	3096	3096
N	3414	3414	3414	3414

Source: 2011 ABS III Mainland China Survey (N = 3413)

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Standard errors corrected for complex sampling, using SVY commands in STATA 11, in parentheses

Table 4: Popular Understandings of Democracy

	Mainland China	USA
<i>LD1</i>		
Fair, public, regular and competitive elections to choose government leaders.	53.57%	73.58%
A competent government that takes people's interests into consideration, regardless of how it came into power.	34.00%	26.17%
DK	12.44%	0.25%
<i>LD2</i>		
People enjoy the right to freedom of speech when criticizing the government.	51.09%	87.90%
The government has the responsibility to limit the expression of harmful ideas to the public.	32.40%	11.98%
DK	16.51%	0.12%
<i>LD3</i>		
Government follows the wish of the majority when making decisions.	48.80%	65.56%
Government follows its own judgment of citizens' best interests when making decisions.	37.88%	33.58%
DK	13.32%	0.86%
<i>LD4</i>		
Ensuring the competition among two or more political parties for political power.	15.36%	39.75%
The party in power seriously takes into consideration the suggestions and opinions of ordinary people.	68.03%	58.89%
DK	16.61%	1.36%

Source: 2011 ABS III Mainland China Survey (N = 3419); 2010 USA National Survey (N = 810)

Weighted percentages in cells

Table 5: Results of Latent Class Analysis (LCA)

<i>Model fit statistics</i>	Two latent classes	Three latent classes
AIC	14220.906	14225.236
BIC	14275.221	14309.725
Adjusted BIC	14246.624	14265.242
Pearson Chi-square	(8.769, 6)	(3.033, 1) [#]
Likelihood ratio Chi-square	(8.692, 6)	(3.022, 1) [#]
Used observations	3087	3087
<i>Model comparison statistics</i>	Two vs. One	Three vs. Two
Lo-Mendell-Rubin adjusted LRT	(351.954, 5)*	(5.533, 5)
Parametric bootstrapped LRT	(360.715, 5)*	(5.670, 5)
<i>Classification results</i>	Mainland China	USA
Guardianship discourse	44.32%	26.79%
Liberal democracy discourse	46.04%	73.21%
Missing	9.64%	

Source: 2011 ABS III Mainland China Survey (N = 3419)

p < 0.1 for Chi-square statistics

* p < 0.05 for Likelihood ratio tests

Missing values are addressed by Mplus with the MAR assumption (only observations with missing values for all indicators are dropped)

Table 6: IRT Measurement Model Results

<i>Factor loadings</i>	Regime support
RP1	0.868*
RP2	0.933*
RP3	0.609*
RP4	0.862*
<i>Model fit statistics</i>	
Chi-square	(5.285, 2) [#]
CFI	0.998
TLI	0.995
RMSA	0.023
Used observations	3114

Source: 2011 ABS III Mainland China Survey (N = 3413)

* $p < 0.05$ for two-tailed t-statistics

[#] $p < 0.1$ for Chi-square statistics

Complex sampling incorporated for estimation

Standardized factor loadings with WLSMV estimators

Missing values are addressed by Mplus with the MAR assumption (only observations with missing values for all indicators are dropped)

Table 7: OLS Results on Regime Support

	Regime support	
	Guardianship discourse	Liberal democracy discourse
<i>Demographic features</i>		
Age	0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)
Male	-0.007 (0.030)	0.037 (0.030)
Education	-0.011 (0.012)	-0.001 (0.011)
Rural residency	0.018 (0.039)	0.003 (0.038)
<i>Socio-psychological features</i>		
CCP affiliation	0.122 (0.040)**	-0.030 (0.041)
Political interest	0.006 (0.022)	-0.008 (0.021)
Internal political efficacy	-0.074 (0.027)**	-0.045 (0.029)
<i>Information access</i>		
Exposure to political news	0.025 (0.013)*	0.004 (0.012)
Internet usage	-0.020 (0.010)*	-0.012 (0.012)
Accessing grapevine news	0.012 (0.028)	0.014 (0.037)
<i>Governance quality</i>		
National economy now	-0.007 (0.020)	0.077 (0.029)**
National economy retrospective evaluation	0.061 (0.026)*	0.053 (0.034)
National economy prospective evaluation	0.029 (0.028)	0.008 (0.033)
Family income	0.006 (0.022)	-0.009 (0.024)
Personal experience of corruption	-0.062 (0.041)	-0.020 (0.045)
<i>System performance</i>		
Accessing basic necessities	0.142 (0.051)**	0.071 (0.071)
Officials unpunished for crimes	-0.060 (0.043)	-0.128 (0.044)**
Legislature checking government leaders	0.185 (0.075)*	0.382 (0.066)**
Government withholding important information	-0.121 (0.039)**	-0.139 (0.039)**
<i>Values</i>		
Endorsement of democracy	0.172 (0.057)**	0.100 (0.067)
Individualism	-0.230 (0.085)**	-0.306 (0.094)**
Conditional obedience to authority	-0.109 (0.055)*	-0.120 (0.052)*
Intercept	-0.972 (0.194)**	-1.309 (0.177)**
<i>Model fit statistics</i>		
F-statistics	9.43**	18.57**
R-square	27.99%	34.33%
Used Obs.	908	938
N	1531	1556

Source: 2011 ABS III Mainland China Survey (N = 3413)

* p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01

Standard errors corrected for complex sampling, using SVY commands in STATA 11, in parentheses

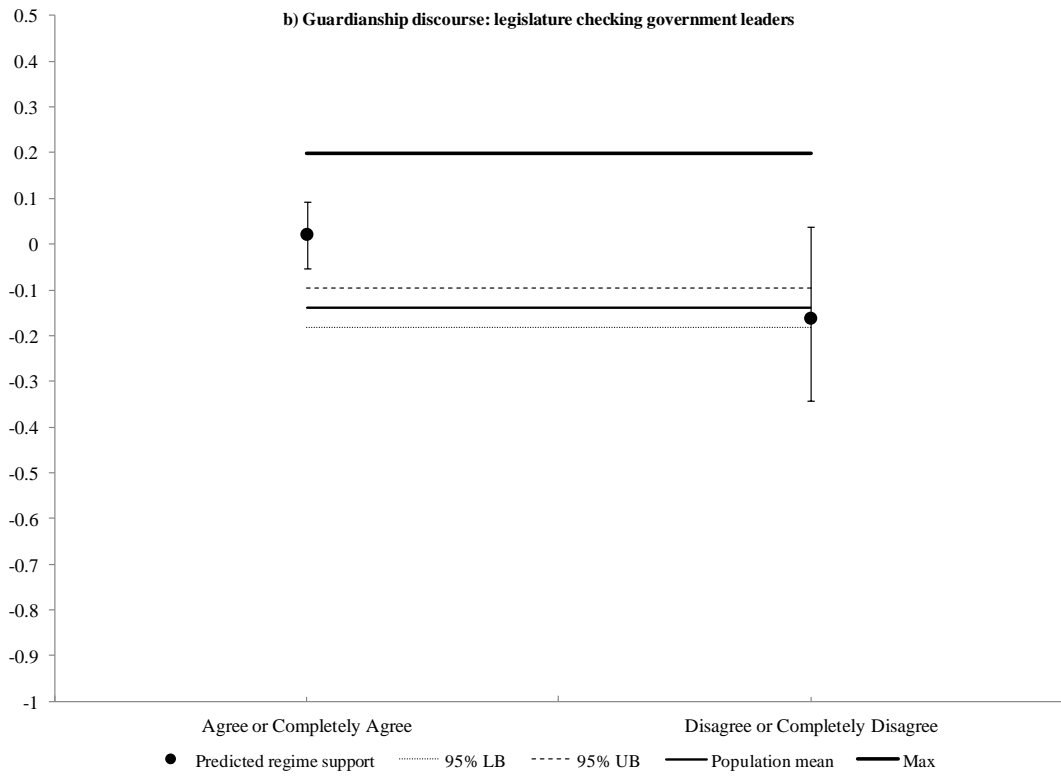
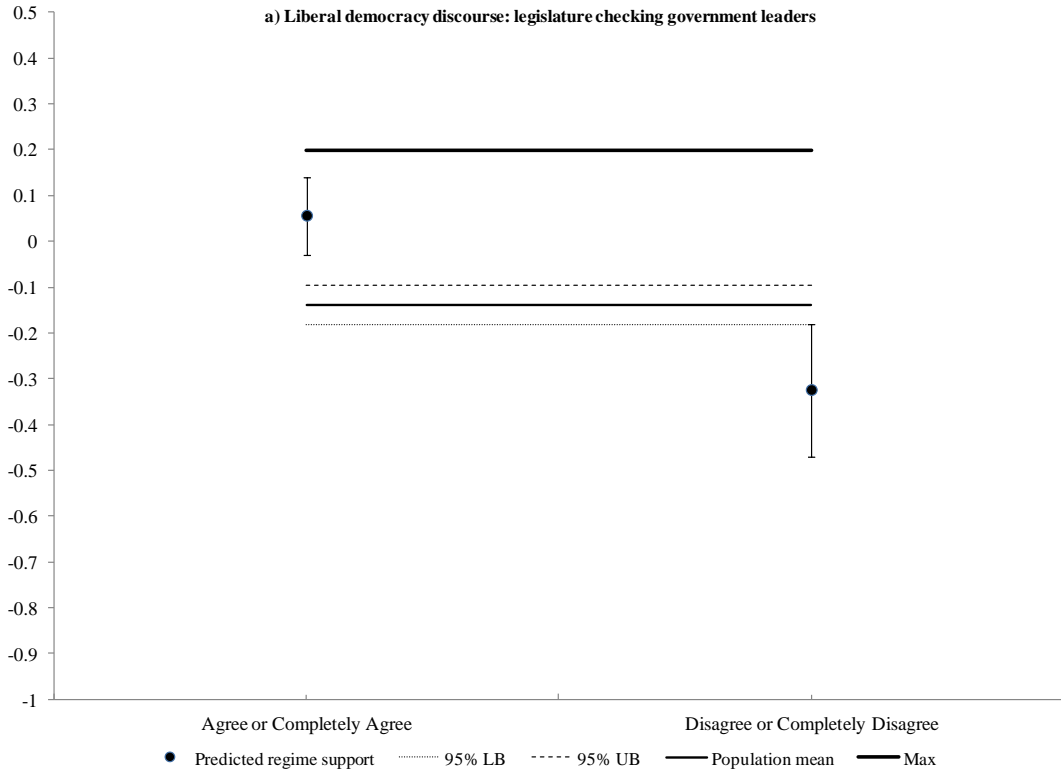


Figure 1: Predicted Changes in Regime Support