

Retreat of Democracy in an Authoritarian Regime: Evidence from China

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Abstract

China, emerging prominently post-Cold War, is a vital lens for understanding authoritarian governance within communist nations. This paper investigates the structure of public sentiment towards democracy in relation to shifts in China's political leadership, utilizing the Asian Barometer Survey data. We distinguish between two conceptions of democracy in China: a regime-supporting satisfaction with democracy in China, and three measures of liberal democracy. State performance (evaluation of the national economy) and nationalism (national pride and anti-US sentiment) are strongly associated with regime-supporting democracy, but inconsistently or negatively associated with liberal democracy. We also find that more educated individuals are more supportive of liberal democratic political systems but less satisfied with the Chinese regime. Liberal democracy receives more support from urban residents, and regime support is more favored by rural residents. Gender and cohort have inconsistent associations with the various measures of democracy. We argue that the Chinese leadership, especially under President Xi Jinping, has sought to use performance and nationalism to promote a non-liberal conception of democracy in China that instead stresses regime support.

Keywords

democracy, public opinion, authoritarian regime, China

In countries that have not experienced democratization, the incumbent often abuses power to consolidate their rule(Magaloni & Kricheli, 2010). This dynamic has been evident in several regions worldwide, with leaders deploying tactics ranging from suppressing dissent to altering constitutions. At the heart of such maneuvers lies an intricate interplay of power politics, national sentiment, and external pressures(Croissant, 2015; Gandhi, 2009; Pavlovsky, 2016).

As the most prominent nation to emerge from the socialist camp after the Cold War, China's political evolution sheds valuable light on the nature of authoritarian governance in communist countries(Nathan, 2003). The Chinese political landscape has long been the subject of scholarly debate, with critics and proponents debating the merits and demerits of its governance style(Keping, 2011; Smith, 2021; Teets, 2013; Zhang & Ginsburg, 2019; D. Zhao, 2001; S. Zhao, 2000). Over the decades, while the nation has witnessed tremendous economic growth and international influence, questions about its political trajectory remain central to understanding its future course(Thornton, 2021). The waxing and waning of democratic sentiment within the country, especially in the wake of shifts in political leadership, presents an area ripe for investigation.

Thus, this paper aims to address two fundamental questions: How does public sentiment towards democracy evolve in response to shifts in political leadership in China? And further, what factors are related to such changes? By delving into these inquiries, we hope to shed light on the nuanced interplay between governance, public sentiment, and the very notion of democracy within an authoritarian framework.

The Form of One-party Rule

Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Communist Party has maintained an unchallenged grip on power in mainland China. Its political, economic, and social development trajectory is marked by a sharp division between the Maoist and post-Mao eras. This isn't just due to Mao Zedong's foundational role in modern China and his charismatic sway over the populace. The divergence also stems from his successor, Deng Xiaoping, who initiated groundbreaking economic reforms, steering China onto a path fundamentally different from its past.

Experts concur that Deng Xiaoping institutionalized a stable, albeit informal, mechanism for political succession following Mao Zedong (Fang, 2018; Vogel, 2011). In China, the pinnacle of political leadership—the General Secretary of the Communist Party—isn't decided by popular vote but is instead selected through a cascading election process within the Party Congress, viewed as a form of "intraparty democracy." Typically, a General Secretary of the Communist Party of China holds office for two terms before passing the baton to the next leader. Yet, this practice isn't formalized in the Party's constitution, leaving the position without legally defined term limits. Starting with Jiang Zemin, who succeeded Deng Xiaoping, the General Secretary has concurrently held the constitutionally-defined role of State President, elected by the National People's Congress, with a term limit of two. Succeeding Jiang Zemin, who vacated his role in 2002, Hu Jintao also followed this unofficial party norm and the constitutional guidelines concerning the State President's term limits, passing the reins of power to Xi Jinping in 2012, who has held the position of Communist Party General Secretary and State President ever since (Cai et al., 2023).

The Reshaping of Political Landscape in Xi's Era

Building on Max Weber's classic forms of legitimacy, Zhao(2009) illustrates the concepts of ideological, performance, and procedural legitimation. Specifically, A government that gains its legitimacy from a widely accepted ideology operates based on ideological legitimation. A regime that earns its legitimacy from its capacity to provide public goods is rooted in performance legitimation. Lastly, when a government is legitimized by procedures that have been accepted by groups with political influence, it is grounded in procedural legitimation. An analysis of various initiatives implemented since Xi Jinping assumed office reveals that his main avenue for legitimization is performance legitimacy. Still, his intent is also to bolster ideological and procedural legitimation.

After taking office, Xi Jinping has garnered favorable public opinion by shaping a populist image, combating corruption, addressing environmental pollution, and supporting the e-commerce economy(Brødsgaard, 2018). At the same time, he emphasized within the Party that "ideological work is extremely important," and subsequently suppressed independent investigative journalism in the media, courted and supported online opinion leaders, and established official media centers online and offline at various levels(Meek, 2021). He disseminated voices that align with the Party's ideology as "mainstream" and "positive energy" through various platforms, successfully suppressing dissenting voices(Cai et al., 2023; King et al., 2013; Yang & Tang, 2018).

Through these strategies, Xi Jinping has further solidified the ideological underpinnings legitimizing the Chinese Communist Party's rule. Under his leadership, the Party has

espoused the "Four Confidences": confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture, which serves to endorse the Party-led socialist trajectory as legitimate, rational, and compliant within China's context. The state's messaging, which posits Western-style democracy as inherently flawed and extols China's own brand of "whole-process democracy" as the only suitable system for the country, paved the way for the elimination of constitutional term limits for the presidency(Xinhua, 2022, 2023). Xi Jinping's re-election for a third term as the General Secretary of the Communist Party in October 2022, followed by another term as President of the People's Republic of China in March 2023, has further consolidated and strengthened authoritarian governance.

Predictors of Democratic Support in China

China is not a liberal democratic country(Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Papada et al., 2023). The conception of democracy within the Chinese polity diverges substantially from liberal democratic ideals, often embodying characteristics unique to its authoritarian governance(Schmitter & Karl, 1991; Zhai, 2023). Despite the inconsistency with Western democratic norms, democratic principles are recognized, albeit from an authoritarian perspective(Chu & Huang, 2010; Zhai, 2022). This article argues that this perception and the extent to which it is accepted or contested by Chinese citizens may be influenced by four main indicators: the generational legacy of the Tiananmen cohort, performance legitimacy, nationalism, and anti-U.S. sentiment. These indicators are a prism for understanding the extent of support for democracy in China, revealing the complex interplay between authoritarian governance and democratic aspirations. By examining these factors, we aim to

shed light on the contours of democratic support in China and gain insights into how democratic support manifests and is measured in authoritarian contexts.

Performance Legitimacy

In his study, Zhai (2023) explores the complex nature of democratic support in China. He distinguishes between a liberal conception of democracy—emphasizing majority rule and civil liberties—and a performance-based conception, which focuses on the state's ability to provide peace and prosperity. Through his analysis of survey data, Zhai finds that when Chinese respondents consider democracy, they tend to view it through a performance lens, prioritizing the state's effectiveness over liberal democratic principles. This tendency is evidenced by their responses to questions about government by a strongman, the military, or experts, which align with liberal democratic ideals but contradict the performance-based understanding that the Chinese government promotes. This reveals an inherent tension between liberal and performance understandings of democracy within Chinese society. Our primary contribution in this paper will be to show that different *causal* processes contribute to citizen support for each dimension of democracy. In particular, we will be interested to examine whether the government's prominent use of nationalism and anti-U.S. propaganda in recent decades contributes more to performance legitimation (as measured by satisfaction with democracy in China) or to a liberal understanding of democracy (as measured by three other variables discussed below). We test the hypothesis here:

- I. Positive evaluation of the national economy is more likely to be associated with performance understandings rather than liberal understandings of democracy of democracy.

Nationalism and the Anti-U.S. Sentiment

Given the focus on ideological legitimacy and worsening trade relations with a key player like the United States, nationalist sentiments and a sense of national identity have been encouraged by the Chinese government and are soaring among the Chinese public. The widespread agreement against foreign meddling in domestic politics and resistance to Western ideological influence further adds to this climate, Typically, such anti-foreign influence tends to resonate more profoundly among those with lower levels of education, potentially due to limited exposure to diverse political discourses and critical viewpoints.. Within this context, we hypothesize that:

- II. The efforts of the Chinese regime increased the influence of nationalistic sentiments on regime support.
- III. Yet nationalist sentiments are more likely to contribute to the regime's concept of democracy tied to performance legitimacy, and less to liberal understandings of democracy.
- IV. Well-educated individuals tend to be more supportive of both concepts of democracy.

Tiananmen Cohort

Finally, following the initiation of the Reform and Opening-Up policies, China saw the Tiananmen Square Incident, the most significant social movement since the founding of the People's Republic, calling for freedom, liberty, democracy, and anti-corruption. Given the prominence of this political event within the Chinese historical context, there is potential for the existence of cohort effects(Weil, 1987). Our hypothesis posits that those who were young adults during this period are likely to support liberal democratic principles and less likely to support performance understandings of democracy.

- V. The cohort that went through democratic protest tends to be more pro-democratic over time, especially the liberal democratic aspect.

Assumptions of Support for Democracy in China

Data

To test our hypotheses, we employed data from the Asian Barometer Surveys (ABS), which gather concrete information on individuals' social, and political opinions. The dataset on China began with Wave 1 in 2002, during Xi's predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao's rule, and encompasses all variables and questions relevant to our research. We utilized the data of Wave 2 and Wave 5, collected in 2008 and 2019 respectively. Wave 5 marks the eighth year of Xi Jinping's leadership and captures the initial impact of his policies. This wave also follows the National People's Congress' approval of constitutional amendments, including the removal of presidential term limits. We aim to examine whether the general public's support for democracy has changed as a result of strong political leaders exerting control over

performance and ideological legitimation while also identifying plausible explanatory variables.

Response Variables

The response variables we use to measure support for democracy are partly consistent with Zhai(2023). Two statements come from the question, “There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? For each statement, would you say you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove?” The statements are “We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things.”, “The army (military) should come in to govern the country.”

Zhai (2023) also constructs a liberal democracy scale from the following items. “For each statement, would you say you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?” “Government leaders are like the head of a family and we should all follow their decisions”, “ The government should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society”, “When judges decide important cases, they should accept the view of the executive branch”, “If the government is constantly checked by the legislature, it cannot possibly accomplish great things”, and “When the country is facing a difficult situation, it is okay for the government to disregard the law in order to deal with it”. These items load strongly on a single principal component, and we use the factor scores as a scale of “Liberal Democracy.”

Satisfaction with democracy in China is another important response variable that comes from the questions: “On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way

democracy works in China?”, “In your opinion how much of a democracy is China?”, “Where would you place China on a democracy scale under the present government?” and “Do you think democracy is suitable for China?”. These items load strongly on a single principal component, and we use the factor scores as a scale of “Satisfaction with Democracy in China.”

We've recoded these four variables to serve as indicators of pro-democracy sentiments. The newly coded variables are labeled as "Satisfaction with democracy in China," "Against having a strong leader," "Army should not govern," and "Liberal democracy factor."

Explanatory variables

In line with the objectives of our study and the hypotheses we aim to validate, we've chosen six pertinent explanatory variables for both Wave 2 and Wave 5, and one additional variable for Wave 5 models only.

For our main causal hypotheses regarding performance legitimation and nationalism, we use three scales or variables. “Evaluation of national economy factor” is used to measure the performance of current regime. It comes from the questions, “How would you rate the overall economic condition of China today (Very good, Good, So so [not good nor bad], Bad, Very bad)? How would you describe the change in the economic condition of China over the last few years? What do you think will be the state of China’s economic condition a few years from now (Much better, A little better, About the same, A little worse, Much worse)?” Two items measure nationalism. First, we simply use the question “How proud are you to be a citizen of China?” (Not proud at all, not very proud, somewhat proud, and very proud).

Second, we compute an “Anti-US factor” from a principal components analysis composed of the following items: “Does the United States do more good or harm to Asia (Much more good than harm, Somewhat more good than harm, Somewhat more harm than good, Much more harm than good)?” “Here is a similar scale of 1 to 10 measuring the extent to which people think the influence of the U.S. on world affairs today. If ‘1’ means that the influence of the U.S. is highly negative and ‘10’ means that it is highly positive, where would you place the U.S. today?” “General speaking, the influence the United States has on China is (Very positive, Positive, Somewhat positive, Somewhat negative, Negative, Very negative)?” This “Anti-US factor” is only available for the Wave 5 survey.

For the control variables, we include a “cohort” variable to test if there are any cohort effects in long run. We set the minimum age of the “Tiananmen Movement” generation as 17 years old to 30 years old, which is the age at which most college students enter colleges and universities and the young adult that are socially and politically active. We make the “Tiananmen cohort” a dummy variable with 1 as those who are in the cohort and with 0 as those who are not in the cohort. In addition, gender, education and live in a large city are the related demographic variables. Gender is coded male(1) and female(0). Education was measured by the years of formal education. There are four categories in the variable “live in a large city”: “Village or countryside(1), small city or town(2), regional center or other major cities(3), and capital or megacity(4)”.

Analytical Strategies

Based on the inherent meaning and distribution characteristics of the response variables, we have included the “don't know, NA” option as middle categories within “against strong leader”, “army should not govern”, and “proud to be Chinese” variables. The five options are assigned the following values: “Strongly approve” is coded as 1, “Approve” is coded as 2, “NA, DK” is coded as 3, “Disapprove” is coded as 4, and “Strongly disapprove” is coded as 5. We've included the ‘NA, DK’ option in our measurements for two main reasons: First, it's highly represented in the dataset. Second, some participants may find the political stances suggested by the response variables to be sensitive topics. In such cases, they may dodge answering truthfully due to apprehensions or fears, choosing to abstain from picking any given option.

Given that each of the four response variables can take on at least five values, we performed ordinary least squares multiple linear regression analysis in Wave 2(2008) and Wave 5(2019) respectively. Since the ‘anti-U.S. sentiment’ variable was present solely within the dataset from Wave 5, a comparative analysis of this variable’s evolution from 2008 to 2019 was not possible. Consequently, in the 2019 dataset, this variable was incorporated independently and models were constructed for the four response variables to evaluate its distinct impact.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 juxtaposes the percentage distribution for several key response variables across Wave 2 (2008) and Wave 5 (2019). The table showcases a pronounced change in the ‘NA, DK’ (No

Answer, Don't Know) responses. In 2008, the 'NA, DK' option saw a considerable portion of respondents, reaching up to 28.4% for the variable "against having a strong leader" and had markedly dropping as low as 14.01% in 2019. Similar patterns appear in "army should not govern"(Don't know answers drop from 27.27% in 2008 to 16.54% in 2019) and "Proud to be Chinese" (Don't know answers drop from 4.8% in 2008 to 1.2% in 2019). This indicates a significant shift towards respondents being more decisive or willing to express their views.

Examining the attitudes towards a political strongman, we observed a discernible increase in both approval and disapproval for having a strong leader, with the approval category ('Strongly approve' and 'Approve') rising from a combined total of 9.38% in 2008 to 11.47% in 2019. Disapproval ('Disapprove' and 'Strongly disapprove') also saw an increase from 62.22% to 74.52% during the same period. The reduction in 'NA, DK' responses might imply a clearer stance among the populace on leadership preferences.

The sentiment towards military governance followed a similar trend, with 'Strongly approve' and 'Approve' responses witnessing a slight increase and the 'Disapprove' and 'Strongly disapprove' categories experiencing a more substantial rise. The decrease in 'NA, DK' responses from 28.27% to 16.54% also reflects a more pronounced position on the issue. Notably, there was a reversal in the Liberal Democracy factor, which shifted from a negative to a positive value, suggesting an increased inclination towards liberal democratic principles.

Regarding the main causal factors, people's evaluation of nation's economy factor saw a surprising shift from 2008 to 2019, the average evaluation became negative(-.062) in 2019, in contrast with the positive outcome(0.060) in 2008. When we consider national pride, there is a

clear surge in those expressing a strong sense of pride in being Chinese ('Very proud'), which nearly doubled from 24.7% to 43.4%. Correspondingly, there was a decline in those who were 'Not proud at all' or 'Not very proud', suggesting a growing sense of national cohesion and pride. As noted, "Anti-US" sentiment is only available for wave 5 in 2019, and as a factor score, its mean is near zero.

Dimensions of Democracy

Following Zhai (2023), we examined the dimensionality of our four questions about democracy in China with a principal components factor analysis. The results in Table 2 show that we find a similar dimensionality as Zhai: the three items measuring opposition to a strong leader, army rule, and Zhai's own liberal democracy factor are positively associated with each other in one factor, which we interpret as a liberal democracy dimension. Satisfaction with democracy in China, and – to a lesser extent - opposition to the liberal democracy factor, are in a separate dimension. And notably, the items load in opposite directions: satisfaction positively and liberal democracy negatively. Like Zhai, we interpret this second dimension as a Chinese regime-supporting understanding of democracy and it contains opposition to liberal democracy. As we will see, the causal structure of support for these four indicators also differs along the lines of their dimensionality.

Modelling Results

Table 3 shows the regression models for our four response variables. The standardized coefficients represent the change in one unit of the response variable for a one-unit change in the explanatory variable while holding all other variables constant. Also, in order to test

whether regression coefficients changed over time, 2008-2019, we tested interaction terms of each variable by year in models merged over the two waves. We do not show these many tables (they are available from the authors on request), but in the lower panel of Table 2, we indicate whether any changes in coefficients were statistically significant for each independent variable. We note any significant changes in the descriptions below.

We begin with the demographic factors. The 'Tiananmen Cohort' variable, a marker for assessing generational shifts in political attitudes, ostensibly plays a critical role. However, the results reveal that its influence on democratic support is statistically insignificant for most measures. The one exception is the 2008 data pertaining to opposition to strong leadership, where the Tiananmen cohort exhibited a significantly positive effect. In 2019, this specific influence was no longer evident, but the test of the interaction term in the lower panel shows that this change over time was not statistically significant. Since the coefficient in 2008 was only weakly significant, we might argue that the Tiananmen Cohort shows little, if any, statistical impact on our democracy measures.

The influence of 'Years of Formal Education' is negatively associated with regime-supporting satisfaction with democracy in China, but positively associated with the three measures of liberal democracy. Thus, in 2008 and 2019, the coefficient for 'Satisfaction with Democracy' is -0.100^{**} and -0.065^{**} , respectively, suggesting a correlation between higher education levels and lower satisfaction with Chinese democracy. This negative association, significant at both time points, points to a potentially critical perspective fostered by formal education. For against having a strong leader, army should not govern and the liberal

democracy factor, education significantly exerts positive roles on them across time, indicating that with the increase of schooling years, the tendency for a liberal democracy also increases.

Gender, represented by the 'Male' variable, demonstrates varied effects on political attitudes. There is no effect of gender on the "satisfaction with democracy" variable or "liberal democracy factor". Moreover, it shifted from significantly negative to positive from 2008 to 2019, on "against having a strong leader" and "army should not govern" variables - and the bottom panel shows that this change in parameters is statistically significant - meaning that in 2008, females are more liberal than males, while in 2019, males are more liberal than females. This evolution might reflect shifting gender roles and societal changes impacting political beliefs.

The size of the city in which individuals reside also impacts their political attitudes. Residents of larger cities express less satisfaction with the state of democracy in China and are more opposed to military governance over time. However, there is no significant correlation with attitudes towards strongman leadership. In 2008, residing in larger cities had a positive but not significant effect on liberal democratic attitudes, while by 2019, this positive effect had become statistically significant. As the bottom panel indicates, the change over time in parameter strength was statistically significant for Satisfaction with Democracy and the Liberal Democracy factor.

We continue with the central causal factors we describe above, beginning with performance, namely, evaluation of the national economy. Individuals who have a positive evaluation of China's national economy are more likely to be satisfied with democracy in

China (0.188** in 2008 and 0.135** in 2019) and are more opposed to having a strong leader and the army governing the country in 2008 (0.062** and 0.046** respectively), although these relationships are not significant in 2019. The evaluation has a negative impact on the liberal democracy factor in 2019 (-0.082**), with more positive views of the economy associated with less support for liberal democracy. However, in 2008, the negative association is not significant for the liberal democracy factor. The bottom panel indicates that this performance legitimacy was constant over time for the regime-supporting satisfaction with democracy in China, but the effect of performance legitimacy on the three liberal democracy measures weakened over time or even became negative.

National pride is strongly associated with satisfaction with democracy in China (0.158** in 2008 and 0.266** in 2019), opposition to a strong leader (0.086** in 2008 and 0.035* in 2019), and opposition to army rule (0.074** in 2008, but insignificant in 2019). By contrast, national pride is negatively associated with the liberal democracy factor (-0.064** in 2008 and -0.099** in 2019), indicating that a stronger national pride corresponds to lower support for liberal democracy. The bottom panel of Table 3 indicates that all changes in the effect parameters are significant over time. That is, nationalism's impact on the regime-supporting concept of democracy increased during Xi's rule, while nationalism's impact on our measures of liberal democracy either weakened or became more negative during this time period.

In 2019 a separate test for each response variable with the anti-US sentiment variable was added. (Recall that the variable was not available for the 2008 survey wave.) Those with stronger anti-US sentiments are more satisfied with Chinese democracy (0.051**) and more opposed to having a strong leader (0.070**). However, anti-US sentiment is not associated

with opposition to army rule or with the liberal democracy factor. Thus, ideological support for this form of nationalism is also associated with the regime-supporting understanding of democracy, but only inconsistently associated with our three measures of liberal democracy.

Discussion

In this study, we have examined the causal factors that promoted two different dimensions of support for democracy, as measured by our four response variables. We interpreted three items as measuring a liberal concept of democracy, namely, opposition to a strong leader or army rule and the liberal democracy factor. A second dimension was measured mainly by satisfaction with democracy in China, but also with opposition to the liberal democracy factor. We suspected that this second dimension represents either a performance-based understanding of democracy, or at least, a Chinese regime-supporting understanding of democracy. Moreover, since the item is to the same as those which Zhai (2023) validated, we find validation in this interpretation.

Our findings show support for some of our hypotheses, but not others. For performance legitimacy, the effects of evaluation of national economy were consistently positively associated with satisfaction with democracy in China. The effects on the strong leader and army rule variables become insignificant in 2019, and for the liberal democracy scale, they change from insignificant to significantly negative in 2019. This could be explained that through effective ideological campaigns, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has successfully reshaped the public's understanding of democracy to fit its narrative, emphasizing a 'Chinese-style democracy' and dismissing Western values as inapplicable in

China(Ngeow, 2014; Perry, 2015; Zhai, 2023). As a result, the ‘democracy’ that the Chinese public endorses diverges substantially from democratic norms recognized in more liberal countries(Chu & Huang, 2010). It has effectively become two separate notions: one that aligns with the CCP’s vision for China and another rooted in conventional liberal democratic principles based on public elections, civil liberties, and separation of powers. Hence, “satisfaction with democracy in China” is not a good indicator for predicting Chinese people’s tendency toward Western liberal democracy, but rather, a useful indicator for support for the regime.

The question of opposing military rule is straightforward to gauge support for democracy. However, the situation in China is shaped by the military being under the direct control of the CCP. The phrase ‘The Party commands the gun’ is well-known to nearly all Chinese citizens, having been introduced by Mao Zedong even before the CCP came into power. This perspective is widely embraced in China. As a result, when people express opposition to military rule, part of what they may actually be rejecting is the idea of the military governing without the oversight of the Communist Party. Meanwhile, it could also indicate the well-accepted idea that letting the army rule is not a violation of the rule of law, which lacks legitimacy for most of people.

The effects of the explanatory variables on people opposing a strong leader has diminished in 2019 compared to 2008, except for education, which can largely be attributed to the CCP’s messaging. Although this trend might seem incongruent with democratic ideals, if you consider the concept of performance legitimacy, a strong leader—just as the CCP

promotes—could usher in a prosperous, stable, and fulfilling life for the people. So, what's there to oppose?

Our study set forth five additional hypotheses, and our most notable findings are the support we find for hypothesis II, on the effects of nationalism on the four democracy variables. National pride is positively associated with “satisfaction with democracy in China”—which we suspect measures regime support – but is inconsistently related to the three measures of liberal understandings of democracy. We can validate that satisfaction with democracy in China measures regime support or performance legitimacy., As we have noted, this variable is the same as one that Zhai (2023) validated this way, and our analyses show that this item is in a separate dimension from the three liberal democracy measures. It implies that the regime’s attempt to use nationalism to shore up support for itself bore fruit, but it had inconsistent effect on support for liberal understandings of democracy. National pride’s impact on the strong leader and army rules variables statistically weakened over the period 2008-2019 and became even more strongly negative for the liberal democracy factor. Likewise, anti-US sentiment (only measured in 2019) was associated with the regime-supporting satisfaction with democracy in China, but only inconsistently associated with our three measures of liberal democracy. Thus, this effect indicates a rallying effect, where criticism of the U.S. strengthens in-group solidarity and support for the national government, regardless of its democratic nature. This phenomenon is often observed in international relations and political psychology as citizens unite in the face of perceived external threats or criticism (Huddy & Feldman, 2006)(Brittingham, 2007; Jaworsky & Qiaoan, 2021).

With respect to the control variables, our analysis confirmed part of Hypothesis IV, which states that Individuals with higher education levels are more likely to favor democratic ideals, even in the face of authoritarian messages. Essentially, the more educated someone is, the more likely they are to support liberal democratic principles, but not regime-supporting satisfaction with Chinese democracy. One possible explanation is that well-educated people know what the true meaning of each democracy-related statements are, so their options are consistent based on this assumption, and it is also been verified by other studies about Chinese politics(Xu & Zhao, 2023; Zhai, 2023).

Considering the coefficients of the gender variable, we can only find gender's mixed effect on four explicit dimensions of democracy. They are not significant for satisfaction with democracy and for liberal values. The shift of impact between males and females may reflect societal changes over time, more studies should be done concerning this topic with the gender role shift in China.

Our data analysis does not confirm hypothesis V "The cohort who has been through democratic protest tends to be more pro-democratic over time."

Taken together, our findings show (a) little support for a cohort or generational effect, (b) conventional support for the liberal democratic effects of education, but opposition to the regime-supporting satisfaction with democracy in China, (c) rather inconsistent gender effects, (d) a performance legitimization (as measured by a positive evaluation of the national economy) of the regime-supporting satisfaction with democracy in China, but inconsistent or negative association with our three liberal democracy measures, and two measures of

nationalism that strike us as very important for the evolution of democratic views in China:

(e) national pride, which the regime sought to increase as a bulwark against Western liberal democratic notions, indeed strengthened regime support and grew over time, but associated inconsistently or negatively with the three liberal democracy measures, and (f) the anti-US sentiment is positively related to satisfaction with democracy in China, but inconsistently with the three liberal democracy measures. If the Chinese regime is successfully using nationalism as a diversion from movement toward liberal democracy, they have taken a page from a very old playbook that goes back at least to the conservative European regimes after 1848 who successfully used nationalism to resist or redirect the democratic revolutions of that era.

Conclusion

To sum up, we find solid evidence that performance legitimation (as measured by a positive evaluation of the national economy) and nationalist propaganda (as measured by national pride and anti- US sentiment) are positively associated with regime-supporting satisfaction with democracy in China, but inconsistently or negatively associated with our three measures of liberal democracy. Our study also showed that individuals who are more educated and living in the larger cities tend to be more supportive of liberal democratic political systems, but not of the regime-supporting satisfaction with democracy in China. While there are limitations to what survey data can show us about causality, our findings are consistent with the proposition that the Chinese regime under President Xi Jinping has successfully used performance legitimation and nationalism to promote its own definition of democracy in China and reduce popular support for liberal definitions of democracy.

Appendix

Table 1 Descriptive sample statistics of variables by wave (percent of means)

Variable Names/ Waves		Wave2 (2008)	Wave7 (2019)
Satisfaction with democracy in China		0.174	-0.179
Against having a strong leader	Strongly approve	0.67%	1.09%
	Approve	8.71%	10.38%
	NA, DK	28.4%	14.01%
	Disapprove	51.86%	64.32%
	Strongly disapprove	10.36%	10.2%
Army should not govern	Strongly approve	0.80%	1.74%
	Approve	13.04%	13.48%
	NA, DK	28.27%	16.54%
	Disapprove	50.45%	58.73%
	Strongly disapprove	7.43%	9.51%
Liberal Democracy factor		-0.101	0.104
Tiananmen Cohort	Yes	34.11%	25.36%
	No	65.89%	74.64%
Education		7	9
Male	Yes	48.81%	47.26%
	No	51.19%	52.74%
Live in a large city	Village or countryside	78.49%	36.53%
	Small city or town	11.36%	35.31%

	Regional center or other major cities	5.75%	22.91%
	Capital or megacity	4.41%	5.25%
Evaluation of National Economy factor		0.060	-0.062
Proud to be Chinese	Not proud at all	4.0%	0.7%
	Not very proud	13.2%	6.3%
	NA, DK	4.8%	1.2%
	Somewhat proud	53.3%	48.4%
	Very proud	24.7%	43.4%
Anti- U.S. Scale		NA	0.018

Table 2 Factor analysis of the dependent variables

Response Variables	Liberal Democracy	Regime Democracy
Satisfaction with democracy in China factor	-.192	.844
We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things	.765	.366
The army should govern the country	.800	.220
Liberal Democratic Values factor	.588	-.499

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 2 components extracted.

Table 3 Multiple linear regression on support for democracy statements in 2008 and 2019

	Satisfaction with democracy in China			Against strong leader			Army should not govern			Liberal democracy factor		
	2008	2019		2008	2019		2008	2019		2008	2019	
Tiananmen Cohort	.003	-.006	-.008	.030*	-.004	-.007	.014	-.019	-.019	.012	.003	.004
Years of formal education	-.100**	-.065**	-.062**	.163**	.180**	.184**	.179**	.195**	.195**	.146**	.218**	.217**
Male	.022	-.016	-.020	-.065**	.025+	.020	-.043**	.063**	.062**	-.016	.009	.010
Live in a Large City	-.128**	-.072**	-.071**	.011	.014	.015	.058**	.069**	.069**	.018	.059**	.059**
Evaluation of National Economy	.188**	.135**	.135**	.062**	.002	.003	.046**	.021	.021	-.023	-.082**	-.082**
Proud to be Chinese	.158**	.266**	.261**	.086**	.035*	.029+	.074**	-.003	-.004	-.064**	-.099**	-.097**
Anti-US factor			.051**			.070**			.010			-.017
Adjusted R Square	.121	.104	.106	.049	.037	.041	.055	.061	.060	.028	.070	.071

Significant change in coefficients, 2008-2019	Satisfaction with Democracy in China	Against Strong leader	Army should not govern	Liberal Democracy factor
Tiananmen Cohort	no	no	no	no
Years of formal education	yes	no	no	yes
Male	no	yes	yes	yes
Live in a Large City	yes	no	no	yes
Evaluation of National Economy	no	yes	yes	yes
Proud to be Chinese	yes	yes	yes	yes

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