Oppose Autocracy without Support for Democracy: A Study of Non-Democratic Critics in China

Haemin Jee and Tongtong Zhang

Opponents of authoritarian regimes are often assumed to desire democracy in place of the current regime. In this paper, we show that authoritarian dissidents hold divergent attitudes towards democracy and identify a key bloc within the regime opposition: "non-democratic critics" (NDCs) or those who are dissatisfied with the current regime but resist adopting democracy. We develop the concept of NDCs, theorize why they exist and how they differ from supporters of democracy and the status quo, and test implications of this framework using interviews and an original survey across China. We find that nearly half of respondents who oppose the current Chinese regime are non-democratic critics who also do not support democracy. Compared to democracy and status quo supporters, NDCs have a distinct set of political and socio-economic demands and higher uncertainty about the performance of democracy in meeting these demands. We also find that NDCs are economically better off than democracy supporters, suggesting that unequal access to the benefits of state-led economic development may motivate differing attitudes toward democracy among regime opponents. These findings put forth an important explanation for why the world's largest authoritarian regime endures—those who oppose the regime have divergent and unclear visions of what political system should be adopted in its place.

Historically, autocracy, rather than democracy, has been the predominant political order of the world. Today, autocracies still rule in 94 countries, govern nearly 60% of the world's population, and occupy geopolitically critical regions (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018). A prevailing focus in explaining this authoritarian durability is mass support (Bleck and Michelitch 2017; Geddes and Zaller 1989; Linz 2000). Dissidents, on the other hand, are portrayed as threats to regime survival because they are generally assumed to desire democracy in place of the status quo.[1] Yet prior literature has not extensively explored the political preferences of authoritarian critics.[2] When people say they oppose the status quo authoritarian regime, what (if any) alternative political system do they believe should replace the status quo?

Often, the implicit (or explicit) assumption among academics and policy makers has been that the answer is democracy. Previous research contends that leaders of uprisings, insurgencies, and opposition parties in authoritarian regimes must promise democratization in order to attract mass support (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Kuran 1991; Lohmann 1994). For example, during the Arab Spring, researchers, politicians, and media all emphasized the democratic demands of protesters (CNN 2011; Diamond 2011; Quinn 2012; Sakbani 2011; Stepan and Linz 2013). Similarly, scholarly and media analyses of the 2022 zero-Covid protests in China often focus on the possibility for democratization but rarely delve into the complexities of political demands among the protesters (Davidson 2022; French 2022; Perrigo 2022; Truex 2022; Westfall 2022).

While dissidents may harshly criticize the status quo authoritarian regime, this does not necessarily indicate

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support for democracy. Instead, regime opponents may have divergent visions on what alternative system they desire. Heterogeneous attitudes towards democracy among regime opponents have important implications for authoritarian durability. Dissidents' differing political preferences can contribute to sustained authoritarian rule by dampening prospects for collective action (Frye and Borisova 2019). For regime critics who are democrats, coordination is easier to achieve since they all envision a democratic system in place of the status quo (Przeworski 1991; Weingast 1997). Non-democratic critics, on the other hand, may have little interest in joining a movement for democracy. Even if these two blocs of opponents form a coalition to overthrow the status quo dictatorship, their disagreement over the country's political future can undermine this coalition, leading to post-revolutionary conflicts and even authoritarian backsliding (Beissinger 2013).

In this paper, we examine the existence, size, and characteristics of "non-democratic critics" (NDCs)—people who are dissatisfied with the status quo autocracy but resist adopting democracy in their country. We develop a theoretical framework to explain why authoritarian critics can be reluctant to support democracy and test its implications through qualitative interviews and a nation-wide online survey in China.

We find that among respondents who report opposing the current Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime, nearly half (40%) are NDCs——dissidents who also reject adopting a multi-party democratic system in China. We find support for two sources of NDCs' simultaneous dissatisfaction with democracy and the current autocracy: first, NDCs have a fundamentally different set of demands from government compared to democracy (and CCP) supporters. Compared to democrats, NDCs have lower demand for individual freedom and higher demand for economic growth. Compared to status quo supporters,[3] NDCs desire less social stability and desire more inclusive political institutions. Second, compared to democrats and status quo supporters, NDCs also report higher uncertainty about whether a multi-party democratic system would outperform the current regime in meeting their demands. Evidence from qualitative interviews further suggests that unlike democrats, NDCs in China often have no clear vision about what alternative regime China should adopt if the current regime ends, partly because they approve of some institutional elements of both democracy and the current CCP regime. Finally, we find that differing experiences of China's economic development are most likely to explain the differing attitudes toward democracy among regime opponents. Compared to democrats, non-democratic critics of the regime are economically better off, whereas the two groups do not differ in foreign media consumption or exposure to CCP propaganda.

These results shed new light on the diversity of political preferences among authoritarian critics. Our findings suggest that an authoritarian regime endures not only because of mass support, but also because its opponents within the public have divergent and unclear visions of what should replace the current system. We show that non-democratic critics disagree with democrats not only on whether to adopt democracy in China, but also more fundamentally on what a regime should deliver to its citizens. These disagreements between NDCs and democrats, as well as the inability of NDCs to envision other alternatives they would support, can elongate the current authoritarian rule in China, despite shared opposition among NDCs and democrats.

Additionally, our findings add nuance to the debate around regime type and good governance. We show that authoritarian critics do not consider their status quo autocracy an unsatisfactory government simply because it has no multi-party elections. This differs from the performance legitimacy theory, which often assumes that autocracies must search for other sources of legitimacy due to their lack of democratic institutions (Dickson 2016; Zhao 2016). Rather, our results suggest that citizens evaluate an autocracy's political system using a more complex set of metrics beyond simply the presence of democratic institutions. When people say they dislike the system, they mean it does not meet their standards for a good government (e.g., being transparent and effective), but they are not necessarily expressing an inherent desire for multi-party elections.

The paper proceeds in five sections. We first introduce a theoretical framework of why people living in autocracy may become simultaneously disillusioned with the current regime and democracy. Next we describe the features of NDCs in China using qualitative interview data. The following section details our survey design and sample. We then proceed to show the size and profile of NDCs as well as the source of their political attitudes. The last section concludes and discusses additional implications of this research.

Theoretical Framework and Expectations

We develop the concept of non-democratic critics in authoritarian regimes and lay out testable implications of this framework. To do so, we first make clear our definition of regime support and opposition. Then we theorize that demands and uncertainty are the two sources of NDCs' divergence from both status quo supporters and democracy supporters. Finally, from this framework we derive the socio-economic microfoundations of NDCs' simultaneous opposition to democracy and status quo autocracy.

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Conceptualizing Regime Support

There are different layers to regime support (Chapman et al. 2023). Citizens may approve of the overall regime but dislike the incumbent political leader, or they may reject the basic arrangements of a political system but remain satisfied with the regime's handling of a few policy areas. Varying types of support have different implications for the stability of the regime (Chapman et al. 2023). In a seminal contribution to the concept of political support, Easton (1965) drew a distinction between citizens' diffuse support (affect for the system) versus specific support (affect for incumbent officials). Building on Easton's work, Norris (2011, 2017) decomposes political support into five levels along a diffuse-specific spectrum. The most diffuse level of support is support for national identities, followed by support for the general normative values of the regime. The middle level is approval of the overall performance of the regime. A more specific level is confidence in particular regime institutions and finally, the most specific level of support is approval of incumbent officeholders. Support and opposition on more diffuse levels tend to be more stable over short-term factors such as an economic or public health crisis, and thus more diffuse support is generally expected to be more important for the unity and survival of a regime (Easton 1965; Norris 2017).

Building on these insights, we define regime support and opposition as citizen attitudes regarding the *overall* political system of the regime, analogous to the middle level of support on Norris' diffuse-specific spectrum. More specifically, we measure citizens' overall satisfaction with the current authoritarian system in their country, rather than citizens' support for general values of authoritarianism (e.g., strong leaders) or support for specific incumbent officials. In parallel, we measure citizens' overall support for a multi-party democratic system—the system of government where two or more parties contest to rule in competitive elections,[4] rather than their support for general democratic values (e.g., political accountability) or approval of specific democratic leaders.

We focus on citizens' overall satisfaction with a political system because this level of support is most consequential for regime stability. Support on more specific levels for particular institutions or incumbents are more likely to fluctuate in response to short-term factors. Support for national identity or general values of authoritarianism and democracy are too broad, and we may fail to capture important groups of dissidents against the current regime. For example, if we define dissidents as people who reject the general values of autocracy, people who support these values but want a different authoritarian system in place of the status quo would not be counted as dissidents.

Using this definition of regime support, we theorize four possible groups in an authoritarian public as shown in table 1: those who support the status quo authoritarian system and oppose a multi-party democratic system are true status quo supporters; those who oppose the status quo autocracy and support multi-party democracy (MPD) are true democracy supporters; those who show support for both the current autocracy and MPD are dual supporters; finally, NDCs are the segment of the public who show simultaneous opposition to the status quo autocracy and multi-party democracy.

Table 1
Subgroups in an authoritarian public

	OPPOSE Status Quo Autocracy	**SUPPORT Status Quo Autocracy**
OPPOSE Democracy	NDC	Status quo supporter
SUPPORT Democracy	Democracy supporter	Dual supporter

Note that the definition of regime support in this paper implies that NDCs do not necessarily reject all values of authoritarianism or all values of democracy. Specifically, we conceive of three types of NDCs that could possibly exist in an authoritarian public: 1) NDCs who support a subset of authoritarian values and a subset of democratic values but believe that neither the current autocracy nor a multi-party democracy is able to deliver on this mixed set of values; 2) NDCs who support general authoritarian values but are unhappy with their current political system (e.g., they favor a different type of authoritarian system);[5] 3) NDCs who reject both values of authoritarianism and values of democracy.[6]

Hypothesis 1: Among opponents of an authoritarian regime, there exists a subset who do not support having a multi-party democratic system in their country (i.e., non-democratic critics of the regime).

Explaining the Four Subgroups in an Authoritarian Public

Since we define regime support (opposition) as the attitude on a regime's overall political system, we identify the source of regime views of the four groups in table 1 by reviewing what constitutes an individual's attitude toward a political system. According to Easton (1965), support for a system is the belief that the regime "in some vague or explicit way conform to [a person's] own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere." (278)

This reveals two components that shape an individual's support for a political system. The first factor is the person's "own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere," or in other words, the person's demands

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of a political regime. Demands are what the individual believes a regime *should* and *should not* do for its citizens. The second factor that shapes citizen attitudes is certainty of whether the system in question can "conform to" or satisfy the person's demands. In this way, we theorize that the four groups in an authoritarian public have differing views towards the current regime and multi-party democracy for two reasons. First, the four groups have differing demands or expectations of a political system. Second, they have different levels of uncertainty about whether multi-party democracy—a political system they have little first-hand experience living in—could outperform the status quo system in fulfilling their demands.

Differing demands. The literature on political legitimacy suggests that public support for a regime may rest on the regime's political institutions and procedures (Fishkin 1991; Tang 2016), on its socio-economic performance (Wintrobe 1998; Zhao 2009), or on a combination of both (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2018; Pan and Xu 2018). Based on this, we theorize two major types of demands that citizens make: political institutions and socio-economic outcomes. Figure 1 represents these two types of demands in a two-dimensional space. On the X-axis, a higher value means stronger preference for inclusive political institutions, such as free elections between political parties and institutionalized protection of freedom of expression. On the Y-axis, a higher value means stronger desire for positive socio-economic outcomes such as economic development and social stability. We conceptualize that a citizen's demand of a regime can be represented as a vector of two elements, where each element is a score the person assigns to each of these two dimensions to indicate how important that dimension is to the person.

We expect that the four subgroups of an authoritarian public differ, on average, in their vectors of demands from a political regime. Figure 1 lays out our expectation for the four groups' demands. Previous research suggests that autocracies primarily legitimize their rule based on socio-economic performance (Chu 2013; Dickson 2016; Epstein 1984; Gilley 2006; Holbig and Gilley 2010; Levi 1997; Nathan 2020), while democracies gain public support based mainly on their institutions and procedures (Dahl 1956; Munck 2016; North and Weingast 1989; Schumpeter 1942). Recent work in authoritarian politics also suggests that autocrats use quasi-democratic institutions and procedures (e.g., elections, online participation channels) in an attempt to bolster regime legitimacy (Chapman 2024; Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Guriev and Treisman 2019). Yet to date, the empirical evidence on whether these participatory institutions actually increase regime support is mixed—while some find that participation in or even awareness of these institutions increases regime support for certain subgroups (Chapman 2021; Rhodes-Purdy 2017; Truex 2017), others find that this positive effect may be short-lived (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017; Gueorguiev 2021; Zhang 2022).

Given this, we expect that supporters of the status quo autocracy prioritize the delivery of socio-economic outcomes with a lower demand for inclusive institutions compared to democracy supporters and dual supporters. In contrast, democrats prioritize inclusive political institutions and emphasize less socio-economic benefits. Dual supporters value the merits of both democracy and the current autocracy, so we expect that they have a strong desire for both inclusive institutions and material outcomes. Finally, NDCs dislike both democracy and the status quo autocracy, which implies that they may have a relatively low demand for inclusive institutions and a low demand for socio-economic outcomes.

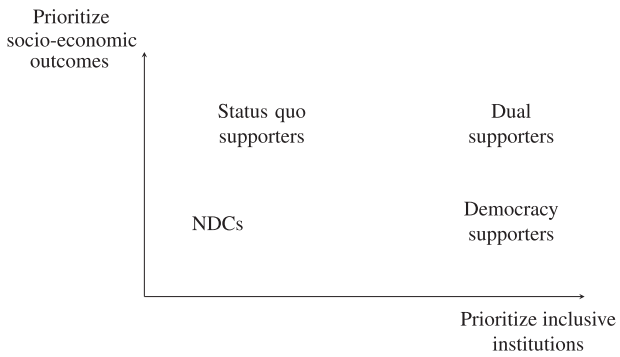
Hypothesis 2a: Compared to status quo supporters, NDCs have, on average, a lower demand for positive socio-economic outcomes.

Hypothesis 2b: Compared to democracy supporters, NDCs have, on average, a lower demand for inclusive political institutions.

Hypothesis 2c: Compared to dual supporters, NDCs have, on average, a lower demand for positive socio-economic outcomes and a lower demand for inclusive institutions.

Uncertainty. Conditioning on an individual's demands, uncertainty about the ability of a regime to satisfy those demands also plays a role in shaping the person's support for the regime. Ordinary citizens may have little uncertainty about whether the status quo authoritarian system meets their expectation since they live in the system every day. However, studies have shown that authoritarian publics often have varying levels of uncertainty regarding the ability of a democratic system to create wealth, exercise fair treatment of citizens, and empower citizens in policy

Figure 1
Theoretical expectation of demands



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formulation (Huang 2015; Mishler and Rose 1997). Research on uncertainty and public opinion suggests that in general, the more uncertain an individual is about the performance of a political system, the less likely the person will prefer that system over alternatives (Van Dalen, De Vreese and Albæk 2016; McGraw, Hasecke and Conger 2003; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Among the four subgroups of an authoritarian public, supporters of the status quo autocracy and supporters of democracy each have a strict regime preference. Thus, we infer that these two groups have low uncertainty regarding the performance of democracy relative to the current autocracy. Status quo supporters believe for certain that democracy does worse than the status quo in delivering their demands, while democrats have high certainty that democracy does better than the status quo. In contrast, NDCs and dual supporters have no clear preference between the two regimes. So, we infer that these two groups have a high level of uncertainty regarding whether a democratic system can outperform the current autocracy in fulfilling their demands.

Hypothesis 3: Compared to status quo supporters and democracy supporters, NDCs and dual supporters each have, on average, a higher level of uncertainty regarding the performance of democracy relative to the status quo regime in satisfying their demands.

Microfoundations of Demands and Uncertainty

We have theorized that the four groups in an authoritarian public diverge in their regime views because they have differing demands and differing levels of uncertainty. Then, what shapes people's demands and uncertainty? In this section, we propose the socio-economic microfoundations that differentiate the political views of the four groups.

Economic beneficiary of the current autocracy. Existing literature on authoritarian public opinion suggests that the more dependent an individual is on material benefits provided by their government, such as through public sector employment, the more emphasis this person will place on material outcomes when evaluating a political system (Chen 2004; Frye 2022; Rosenfeld 2017; Zhao 2009). For example, people living in the most developed region of China (Eastern provinces) are more economically dependent on the regime since the prosperity of this region is largely due to preferential treatment by the government, including subsidies and more liberal economic policies. Hence, when evaluating multi-party democracy, people living in this region tend to be more concerned about their economic payoff under a multi-party system (Yang and Zhao 2015). Accordingly, we theorize that the greater an individual is an economic beneficiary of their status quo regime, the more they will prioritize positive socio-economic outcomes (e.g., economic growth and public goods) when assessing a regime. Since we expect that NDCs demand less from government on socio-economic outcomes compared to supporters of the status quo autocracy and dual supporters, we expect that NDCs are less dependent on regime-provided economic benefits compared to these two groups.

Access to information outside regime control. Conventional wisdom holds that more access to information outside authoritarian control, through foreign media and liberal higher education, leads to more critical assessments of the status quo regime and demand for institutions that check and balance the power of the ruler (Huntington 2006; Levitsky and Way 2006). Relatedly, prior research suggests that exposure to information outside regime control can cultivate liberal values like respect for diversity and hence foster support for protection of individual rights and freedom (Inglehart 1997; Welzel 2013). Therefore, we theorize that an individual's demand for inclusive political institutions increases in their access to outside information. Since we expect that NDCs have a weaker demand for inclusive institutions compared to supporters of democracy and dual supporters, we infer that NDCs have less access to information outside the current regime's control compared to democrats and dual supporters.

Access to free information can also impact the level of uncertainty citizens attach to how well a multi-party democratic system delivers on their demands compared to the status quo. Specifically, we propose that the level of uncertainty has an inverted U-shape relationship with access to information. When an individual has little or no access to outside information, regime propaganda is their only source of information, which can make the person believe for certain that the status quo outperforms democracy in satisfying their demands. Hence, we expect that supporters of the status quo autocracy have low access to free information. On the other hand, when an individual has very high exposure to information outside the dictator's control, prior literature suggests that they will have a deep knowledge of democracy and hence, high certainty that democracy outperforms the status quo in improving their well-being (Huntington 2006; Inglehart 1997). Thus, we expect that democracy supporters have high access to free information.

Finally, when an individual has a middle level of access to free information, we propose that they will have higher uncertainty about the relative performance of democracy versus the status quo. Political psychologists find that when people begin to access new information that contradicts their prior beliefs, they become more uncertain about their political views because they now have opposing considerations on an issue (Barker and Hansen 2005; McGraw, Hasecke and Conger 2003; Turgeon 2009). Similarly, we theorize that some exposure to information outside the autocrat's control can make people become

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more critical of the status quo, yet compared to those with high exposure to free information, this middle group does not receive adequate information that makes them sufficiently confident that democracy is better than the status quo. Since we expect that NDCs and dual supporters have higher uncertainty compared to democrats and regime supporters, we expect that these two groups have more access to outside information than status quo supporters and have less access to outside information than democracy supporters.

Overall, the prior discussion yields three testable implications regarding the socio-economic microfoundations of the four types of people within an authoritarian public:

Hypothesis 4a: Compared to supporters of the status quo autocracy, NDCs have, on average, less economic dependence on the current regime and more access to free information outside of the regime's control.

Hypothesis 4b: Compared to supporters of democracy, NDCs have, on average, less access to free information outside of the regime's control.

Hypothesis 4c: Compared to dual supporters, NDCs have, on average, less economic dependence on the status quo regime and less access to free information outside of the regime's control.

Interviews with Non-Democratic Critics in China

To assess these implications in China, we first leverage qualitative interviews with ordinary Chinese citizens. We also use patterns identified in these interviews to inform the design of our survey. We secured approval from our university's IRB for all elements of this study, including the interviews, the survey, and the research conducted to design the survey. We obtained consent from all participants and did not record any personally identifying information.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 62 Chinese citizens in 2018. Interviewees were aged between 21 and 60 and come from 17 out of 31 provinces in China, representing regions with different levels of economic development. Interview subjects had diverse occupations in government agencies, public institutions, state-owned enterprises, and private and foreign firms. We recruited interviewees through snowball sampling. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and in private, one-on-one settings.[7]

Interviewees were first asked what they think about the current CCP regime. Then, they were asked what they think about China adopting democracy, which was primed to them as a political system that conducts regular and competitive multi-party elections. If an interviewee shows support for the current regime and expresses negative views about China adopting multi-party elections, we categorize the person as a status quo supporter. If an individual expresses negative views to the CCP regime and positive views about adopting multi-party elections, we code this person as a democracy supporter. If one expresses positive views for both the current regime and multi-party elections, we code this person as a dual supporter. Finally, if an interviewee expresses negative views towards both the current regime and multi-party elections, we categorize this person as a NDC. Without telling interviewees their types, we then asked what qualities they expect from a government in general, as well as the extent to which they believe a democracy (characterized as a political system with multi-party elections) would meet their expectations.

We prime all respondents to think of democracy in terms of multi-party elections for two reasons. First, electoral competition is generally considered by political scientists as the most foundational and distinguishing feature of democratic systems (Dahl 1971; Przeworski 2000; Schumpeter 1942). Existing literature suggests a variety of definitions and operationalizations of democracy. Some scholars advocate that democracy includes not only elections but also the rule of law (Carothers 2002; Munck 2016; Coppedge et al. 2023). In addition, prior surveys find that some people also associate democracy with material outcomes, like economic equality.[8] Among these varying conceptualizations, however, free and competitive elections is the most commonly included feature of democracy (for a more detailed review, refer to online appendix A.2.1). Second, since this research focuses on exploring differing attitudes towards democracy among authoritarian opponents, we endeavor to make people's reported views on democracy comparable. To do so, we prime all respondents to think about this one, but foundational, democratic institution—multi-party elections—when they evaluate democracy.

Among the interviewees, nearly half reported dissatisfaction with the overall performance of the CCP regime and among these regime opponents, half were NDCs (refer to online appendix A.1.3). The interviews reveal that NDCs have different demands of a political regime compared to status quo supporters and democrats. When asked what they expect from a government, supporters of the CCP regime mentioned "social stability" most frequently, while supporters of democracy mentioned "real political competition" most often. However, neither of these ranked first among NDCs. The top demand reported by NDCs was "transparency in the ruling party's decision-making." Moreover, NDCs' reported demands show greater diffusion compared to the demands of democrats and CCP supporters. While the most common demands among CCP supporters and democrats were mentioned by more than half of the respective group,

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the most common answer among NDCs was mentioned by less than a quarter of NDCs. Compared to democrats, NDCs' higher level of disagreement on what they desire most from a regime may also impede their collective action when opportunities for regime change arise.

The interviews also reveal that non-democratic critics have higher uncertainty about the performance of a multi-party democratic system compared to CCP supporters and democracy supporters. Among the interviewees, democrats mostly report that multi-party democracy would better deliver what they desire than the current regime, while status quo supporters generally report the opposite. Interviewees who are NDCs, however, are more likely to say they are "unsure" or "ambivalent" about whether multi-party democracy would outperform the CCP regime in meeting their expectations. Multiple NDCs express views in line with the following quote:

> I hope that citizens' opinion matters in policy-making. I know we do not get that under the current regime, but I don't know to what extent multi-party elections can empower citizens in that area. After all, I have never lived under a multi-party democracy. I heard that democratic countries have popular elections and town hall meetings. But I also heard that electoral democracy is money politics where only the rich people get a say in policy-making.

This suggests that the uncertainty of Chinese NDCs may be related to political sophistication and access to information. NDCs are well aware that their impression of life under a multi-party system may be partial or false. When assessing the performance of multi-party democracy, they are also able to recall two-sided information including both pros and cons of the system. Note that these opposing considerations on democracy nevertheless show that NDCs have substantive political preferences rather than being ambivalent about politics. For example, the quote above shows that this NDC demands a political system where citizen opinion has a meaningful impact on government decision-making, but the NDC is uncertain whether a multi-party democracy is able to deliver this quality. In fact, we find that over 90% of NDCs in the interviews gave such two-sided remarks on the ability of democracy in fulfilling their political demands.[9] These opposing considerations can increase uncertainty about the overall performance of multi-party democracy (Zaller and Feldman 1992), making NDCs reluctant to support democracy despite their dissatisfaction with the current regime.

The interviews further suggest that NDCs in China lack a clear, unified vision for what political system China should adopt if the current CCP regime does end, even though they agree that multi-party democracy is not the answer. At the end of the interview, interviewees were asked how China's political system could be improved. Among interviewees who are NDCs, over 80% wished to strengthen oversight of CCP leaders. However, most NDCs who answered so said they did not know what form this oversight should take and who should exercise it. While NDCs complained that the current government had too much power with too few constraints, they were also concerned that adding limitations on the ruling party may lead to undesired outcomes, such as low administrative efficiency or excessive competition between parties. One NDC said: "I hope to increase checks and balance on the CCP. But I don't know what should be the source of these checks and balances." Another NDC echoed this view and explained the concern in more detail:

> I hope the policy-making process can incorporate more voices from different players, such as the general public and non-CCP elites. But it is tricky how to do this. If a policy-maker is too constrained by public opinion, that may lead to crazy policies because people can be emotional and may lack information. If a policy-maker is too constrained by non-CCP elites or another party, those elites may focus more on inter-party competition rather than the welfare of the general public. I wish there is more oversight, but I'm not sure who should exercise that oversight power and how.

These answers again demonstrate that NDCs may be a politically attentive and sophisticated segment of the Chinese population. It also reveals that NDCs in China appear to hold a combination of some authoritarian values and some democratic values, but believe neither the current regime nor multi-party democracy is able to deliver on this set of mixed values. For example, the NDC interviewee quoted above wants citizens to be able to meaningfully influence government decisions, but also desires a strong leader who is able to act against public sentiment at moments when the mass make "emotional" decisions. These varying and at times conflicting demands may make it difficult for Chinese NDCs to envision a form of government that is able to fulfill their demands. Compared to democrats, NDCs' lack of vision for alternative regimes could decrease their motivation to remove the status quo authoritarian regime.

Survey Design

To systematically test the implications of our theoretical framework, we conducted an online survey in China between February 20 and March 8, 2019. Respondents were recruited across the country through a domestic survey firm in China.[10]

Identifying NDCs

We define NDCs as people who are dissatisfied with the current authoritarian system but also reject adopting multi-party democracy. Specifically, in the survey we code a respondent as a NDC if the person *agrees* with the "Oppose autocracy" statement and *disagrees* with the "Support democracy" statement:

- **Oppose autocracy:** If I could choose the political regime of my country, the status quo authoritarian system (现行的集权制) would *not* be my ideal choice.

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- **Support democracy:** If I could choose the political regime of my country, multi-party democratic system (民主多党制) would be my ideal choice.

Respondents who agree with both the "Oppose autocracy" and the "Support democracy" statements are coded as true supporters of multi-party democracy. Respondents who disagree with both these statements are coded as true supporters of the CCP regime. Those who disagree with "Oppose autocracy" statement and agree with the "Support democracy" statement are coded as dual supporters.

In the "Oppose autocracy" and "Support democracy" statements, we ask respondents if the status quo autocracy (multi-party democracy) is their ideal choice were they free to choose a political regime for China. We give respondents this hypothetical condition to guard against the possibility that people answer these questions based on their expectation of how likely or how costly it will be to establish democracy in China. Also, while "ideal choice" may be a stricter measurement of support compared to other measurements such as "trust" or "respect," it is close to the classic definition of popular legitimacy of a political system. Lipset (1981) defines legitimacy as the belief that the existing political system is *most* appropriate for the society in question. Similarly, Linz (1988) states that legitimacy is the belief that the political system is better than all others that might be established.

We use the phrase "集权制"—the direct translation is "concentration of power"—to describe China's current authoritarian system. Previous research contends that when translated into Chinese, the term "authoritarian" might have a negative ideological connotation that predisposes people to reject statements with this term (Chen 2004, 2013). We assess the potential impact of this concern and confirm that ordinary Chinese citizens consider the phrase "concentration of power (集权制)" a fair description of China's current regime. First, in our pre-survey interviews, over 85% of interviewees reported that "power concentration" is an important feature of China's current system when asked about their view on the regime.[11] Moreover, we conducted two pilot surveys that use the "oppose autocracy" and "support democracy" statements, and we asked pilot participants if any wording in the questionnaire made them feel uncomfortable or was unclear; 411 Chinese citizens with diverse backgrounds participated in these pilots online.[12] None of them raised issue with using "power concentration" (集权) to describe the status quo regime.

On measuring support for democracy, we follow earlier research on China (Li 2011, 2021) and ask respondents about their attitudes toward "multi-party democratic system (民主多党制)" as a proxy of support for democracy. School textbooks and state-owned media in China often use this term to describe multi-party electoral competition and then tell the Chinese public that it is antithetical to China's single-party system. Like in the interviews, we prime all survey participants to conceptualize democracy in terms of multi-party elections because electoral competition is considered the most foundational feature of democracy in the political science literature. Also, by reminding all respondents to think about the same institutional feature when they evaluate democracy, we hope to make valid comparisons of their views on democracy. A potential concern regarding this instrument is that "multi-party" and "democracy" have been separately used by the CCP regime to describe the eight "democratic parties" in China which are under the CCP's political control.[13] Using responses in the interviews and survey, we check and confirm that no respondent associates the term "multi-party democracy" with the CCP regime or those eight "democratic parties" in China (refer to online appendix A.2.1).

The crosswise model. To elicit truthful answers to the "oppose autocracy" and "support democracy" statements, we use an indirect questioning technique that we adapted from the crosswise model (Gingerich et al. 2015). The main advantage of this technique is that it measures *individual-level* attitudes on the two statements of interest, which enables us to analyze the characteristics of NDCs at the individual level. We provide a sample question we used to measure individual attitude towards the "oppose autocracy" statement:

In your opinion, how many of the following statements are true?

1. If I could choose the political regime of my country, the status quo authoritarian system would *not* be my ideal choice.
2. I am currently between 25 and 30 years old (inclusive).

You do not need to answer which statement is true, please select A or B below:

A. Both statements are true OR neither statement is true
B. Only one of the two statements is true

In this modified crosswise model (hereafter "crosswise model"), a politically sensitive statement and a non-sensitive statement are presented to respondents in randomized order. The sensitive statement is randomly selected from the "oppose autocracy" and "support democracy" statements. The non-sensitive statement is independently and randomly selected from the following two statements:

- I am currently between 25 and 30 years old (inclusive).

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- I am currently located in one of the following provinces: Shanghai, Hubei, Gansu, Jiangxi, Inner Mongolia, and Heilongjiang.[14]

Importantly, by choosing A or B, respondents do not reveal whether they agree with the sensitive statement directly. We ask respondents about the "oppose autocracy" and the "support democracy" statements using two separate crosswise model questions, in a randomized order, at the beginning of the survey. To reduce the possibility that responses to the first question affect responses to the second question, we ask three innocuous questions between the two questions. These innocuous questions also use the crosswise model, but they only contain non-political statements and are constructed not to prime respondents to assess the CCP regime or democracy in a particular direction. One of them is also used to screen out inattentive respondents (refer to online appendix A.2.2).

At the end of the survey, people are asked their birth year and provincial location directly. Using responses to these demographic questions and the crosswise model questions, we calculate individual-level support for the "oppose autocracy" statement and for the "support democracy" statement, respectively. To guard against respondents thinking of the crosswise model when answering the demographic questions, we ask a series of other items (detailed in the next two sections) between the crosswise model questions and the demographic questions.

In the two pilots before the actual survey, participants were asked if any question made them feel uncomfortable or was unclear. In their responses, 2 of the 411 pilot participants (0.5%) said they felt worried about answering the political questions truthfully and only one person (0.2%) reported that the format of the crosswise model was puzzling. This suggests that the crosswise model is comprehensible to the Chinese public and people are generally willing to answer these questions truthfully.

Measuring Demands of Government

Our theoretical framework predicts that NDCs have different demands of a political regime compared to status quo supporters, democracy supporters, and dual supporters. To assess this claim, we measure respondents' demands by asking their priorities across different functions a government could provide.

Specifically, after the crosswise model questions, we show respondents 16 qualities of a regime that are conventionally deemed desirable for citizens (e.g., public goods provision, respect for individual liberty). From the 16 qualities, respondents are asked to choose their most desired six and then rank the selected six qualities in the order of importance to them (ties allowed).[15] We also show respondents a different list of 16 qualities that are conventionally deemed undesirable for citizens (e.g., corrupt bureaucrats, economic stagnation). From this list, respondents are asked to choose and rank six qualities that they detest most. We randomize the order between these two questions, as well as the order of the 16 qualities in each question.

The 16 desirable qualities and 16 undesirable qualities each encompass five major aspects of a regime: political institutions, societal-political outcomes, political leaders, individual rights and freedom, and socio-economic outcomes. We include regime qualities that the political legitimacy literature demonstrates can influence public support for a regime. We also confirm that these qualities are substantively relevant for contemporary Chinese citizens by conducting a separate pre-test. For details, refer to online appendix A.2.3.

Measuring Uncertainty about the Performance of Democracy

In our theoretical framework, the second source of NDCs' rejection of both democracy and the current autocracy is that they have higher uncertainty than democrats and status quo supporters about whether multi-party democracy would outperform the current regime in satisfying their demands. After respondents select and rank their desired and undesired qualities of a regime, they are asked to assess the relative performance of multi-party democracy versus the current regime in delivering their most desired quality and in avoiding their most undesired quality, respectively, by choosing one option from the following:[16]

1. Both the current autocracy and multi-party democracy do a satisfactory job.
2. Neither the current autocracy nor multi-party democracy does a satisfactory job.
3. Cannot tell which regime does better.
4. The current autocracy does a better job.
5. Multi-party democracy does a better job.

Our framework predicts that compared to CCP supporters and democracy supporters, NDCs are more likely to choose that they cannot tell which regime does better.

Survey Sample

Respondents are Chinese nationals aged 18 or above and were residing in China at the time of the survey. In total, 1,532 people completed the survey and 1,354 of them (88%) passed the attention filter described in online appendix A.2.2.

Respondents have diverse sociodemographic backgrounds. We use a quota sampling strategy such that the sample is representative on the age of China's general

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population and encompasses residents of all 31 provinces in China. As shown in online appendix A.3, respondents vary in educational backgrounds and have occupations across government agencies, state-owned enterprises, private firms, and foreign firms. Similar to previous online surveys in China, our respondents are more likely to come from urban areas, economically developed regions, and to have higher education levels than the general population (Huang 2015; Huang and Yeh 2019). Thus, we urge caution in generalizing the empirical estimates to the entire Chinese population. That said, the breadth of the sample's socio-demographic backgrounds suggests that findings about the respondents' political preferences would nonetheless have some representativeness. In particular, our sample is similar to the Chinese Internet user population on multiple key socio-economic attributes.[17] To achieve better representativeness, we also construct a reweighted sample of 400 respondents who are representative of China's urban population on province, age, and gender. We find that all the main results (e.g., size of NDCs) are statistically undifferentiated between the original sample versus the reweighted sample, indicating that findings of the survey may be generalizable to the Chinese urban population (for details, refer to online appendix A.3.2).

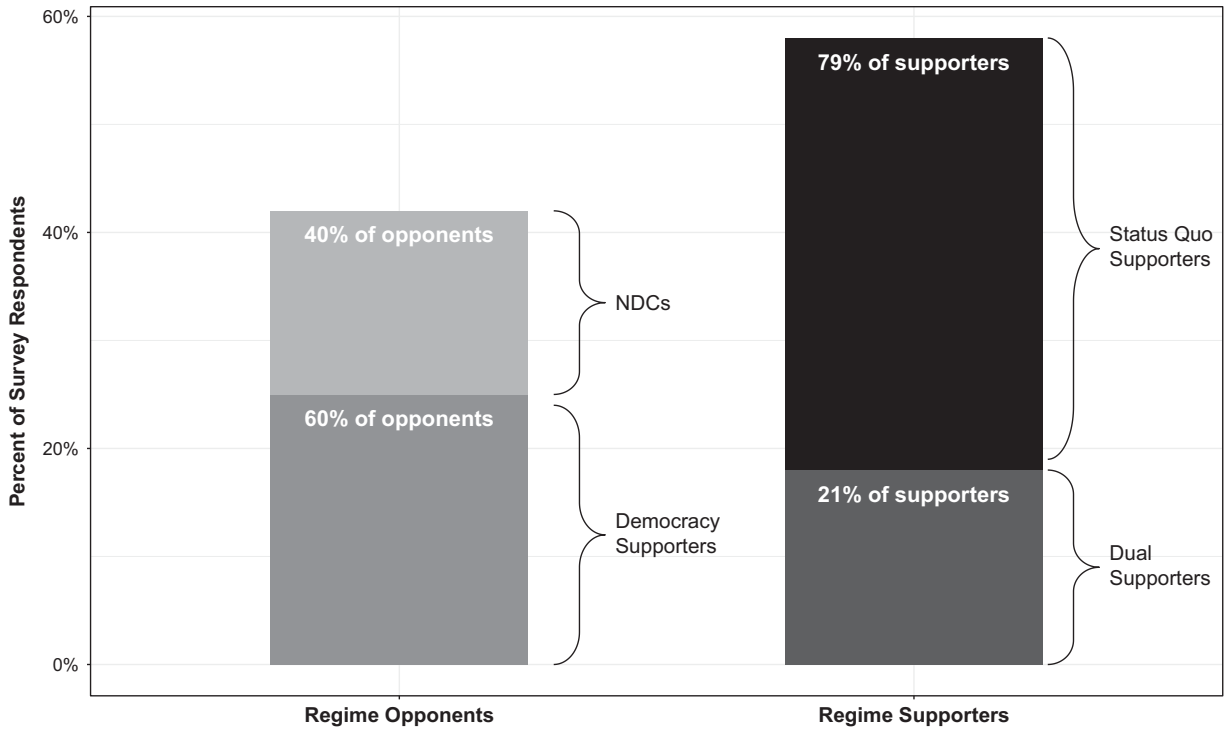
Furthermore, we compare the online survey sample with our interview sample and confirm that they do not differ significantly across key sociodemographic characteristics, such as geographic location and occupational sectors (refer to online appendix A.3.3). Since we use findings from the interviews to guide and validate our survey design, the similarity between these two samples increases the credibility of our survey results.

Results

We find that nearly half of regime opponents also reject adopting democracy in China. Figure 2 presents the distribution of responses to the crosswise model questions. The left bar represents respondents who oppose the current CCP autocracy, agreeing that "the status quo authoritarian system would *not* be my ideal choice if I could choose the political regime of my country." The right bar represents respondents who disagree with this same statement. Of all the 1,354 respondents who passed the attention filter, 564 (42%) report opposing the status quo autocracy in China and the remaining 790 (58%) respondents report supporting the status quo regime.

Among the 564 respondents who report opposing the current authoritarian system, 226 (40%) are non-democratic critics—they also disagree with the statement that "multi-party democratic system would be my ideal choice if I could choose the regime of my country." The

Figure 2
Distribution of political attitudes



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remaining 338 regime opponents agree that multi-party democracy is their ideal form of government, making them true supporters of democracy. Non-democratic critics constitute 17% of all respondents and democrats constitute 25%. In line with our first hypothesis, nearly half of regime opponents are NDCs.

Among the 790 respondents who report supporting the current regime, 553 are true status quo supporters as they also reject multi-party democracy. The remaining 237 respondents are dual supporters. Dual supporters constitute 18% of all respondents and status quo supporters constitute 40%. We conduct extensive checks for preference falsification and find no evidence that people lie in their political responses (refer to online appendix A.2.4).

Decomposing NDCs' Political Attitude

Our theoretical framework predicts two sources of NDCs' simultaneous disillusionment with autocracy and multi-party democracy: 1) NDCs have different demands of a regime compared to status quo supporters, democracy supporters, and dual supporters, respectively; 2) NDCs are more likely to be uncertain than democrats and status quo supporters regarding the performance of multi-party democracy at satisfying their demands. The empirical results in part support these expectations.

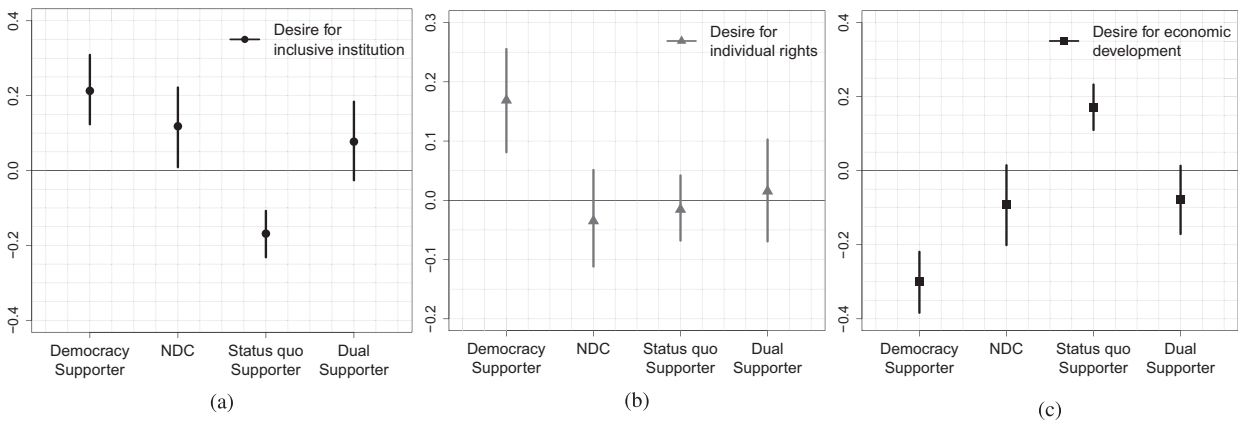
A distinct profile of demands. Respondents are asked to read 16 desirable qualities of a regime, choose their most desired six, and rank the six qualities in order of importance. They are also asked to read a different list of 16 undesirable qualities and to choose and rank the six they detest most in order of undesirability. We map responses for each quality onto a seven-point scale: 6 if the respondent ranked that quality as their most desired (undesired) quality, 1 if the respondent ranked that quality as their sixth desired (undesired) quality, and 0 if the respondent did not select that quality into their top six. In this way, the re-coded response indicates the priority of each quality to respondents.

We first conduct principal component analysis (PCA) of the observed rankings for the 32 regime qualities and confirm that there are systematic groupings between these reported priorities. We then use confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to identify latent factors underlying the observed rankings (Brown 2014; Pan and Xu 2018) and find that a model of three latent factors best characterizes respondents' reported demands for a political regime. For details, refer to online appendix A.4.1.

Figure 3 presents the mean values as well as the 95% confidence intervals of NDCs, status quo supporters, democracy supporters, and dual supporters on each latent factor identified in the CFA model. The first dimension, which we refer to as *desire for inclusive institutions* (shown in figure 3a), includes regime qualities in three areas: political institutions, societal-political outcomes, and political leaders. Higher values along this dimension indicate that the respondent places higher priority on inclusive political institutions, such as legislative oversight over the executive and an independent court, and lower priority on social stability. Figure 3a shows that NDCs, democrats, and dual supporters all report a stronger demand for inclusive institutions compared to status quo supporters. There is no statistically significant difference between NDC versus democrats or between NDC versus dual supporters on this dimension. On the other hand, supporters of the CCP regime place the highest priority on social stability among the four groups.

The second dimension is *desire for individual rights and freedom* (shown in figure 3b). Higher values on this latent trait mean stronger demand for individual liberty, such as institutionalized protection of freedom of speech. In our theory (figure 1), this dimension is included in the

Figure 3
Values on three latent factors of demands



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demand for inclusive political institutions. The results show that supporters of democracy put the highest priority on individual rights and liberty among the four groups. In contrast, NDCs, status quo supporters, and dual supporters report a similarly weak demand on this dimension.

The third dimension, which we call *desire for economic development* (shown in figure 3c), includes regime qualities in the area of socio-economic outcomes. Higher values on this dimension mean stronger priority for economic growth and better public goods. The figure reveals that supporters of the CCP regime desire good economic outcomes most, followed by NDCs, dual supporters, and democrats. NDCs do not differ from dual supporters in this regard, but NDCs differ significantly from both status quo supporters and democracy supporters along this dimension.

Overall, these findings in part support our hypotheses regarding the demands of the four groups in authoritarian public. As we expected, the results show that NDCs hold a distinct profile of demands compared to status quo supporters and democracy supporters. Compared to CCP supporters, NDCs differ on 2 out of 3 dimensions in their demands—they report a stronger demand for inclusive political institutions and in line with our HYPOTHESIS 2A, a weaker demand for socio-economic outcomes. Compared to democrats, NDCs also differ on 2 of the 3 dimensions—they have weaker demands for individual liberty and demand more economic growth. These results echo our interview finding that NDCs hold opposing considerations about democracy—they like inclusive political representation but may dislike the emphasis on individual freedom, which can contribute to their overall ambivalence towards democracy. Importantly, since NDCs disagree with democrats on what they expect from a regime, this can make it hard for the two groups to coordinate on collective action when opportunity for regime change arises.

On the other hand, the results suggest that NDCs have a stronger demand for inclusive political institutions and a stronger demand for positive socio-economic outcomes than what we theoretically expected. More specifically, while we hypothesized that NDCs would have a weaker demand for inclusive institutions compared to democracy supporters (HYPOTHESIS 2B) and dual supporters (HYPOTHESIS 2C), we find that NDCs demand inclusive institutions as strongly as democrats and dual supporters do.[18] Also, we expected that NDCs would emphasize socio-economic outcomes less compared to dual supporters (HYPOTHESIS 2C). However, the results show that NDCs demand economic development as strongly as dual supporters and that NDCs have a significantly stronger demand than democrats in this regard. To understand these unexpected findings, we explore the socio-economic microfoundations of the demands of the four groups.

Higher uncertainty. After respondents select and rank their most desired and undesired qualities of a political regime, they are asked which system of government (multi-party democracy or current autocracy) could better deliver their most desired quality and which system could better avoid their most undesired quality, respectively. In line with our HYPOTHESIS 3, NDCs and dual supporters both report a higher level of uncertainty about whether democracy can outperform the current regime at meeting their demands, compared to democracy supporters and status quo supporters. 44% of NDCs and 49% of dual supporters chose "cannot tell which regime does better" at delivering their most desired quality or avoiding their most undesired quality. Compared to NDCs, the corresponding percentage is significantly lower among status quo supporters (32%) and democracy supporters (35%) at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level.

Socio-Economic Microfoundations of Regime Attitudes

What shapes the four groups' demands from the regime and uncertainty regarding the performance of democracy? Our theoretical framework suggests that a citizen's demand for good socio-economic outcomes increases with the economic benefits they receive from the current regime, and that a person's demand for inclusive political institutions increases with their access to free information. We also theorize that access to free information has an inverted U-shaped relationship with uncertainty regarding democracy.[19] From these, we hypothesize that NDCs differ on these two microfoundations from democracy supporters, status quo supporters, and dual supporters, respectively. These hypotheses are in part supported by the empirical results.

We operationalize regime-generated economic benefits using three measures: 1) whether a respondent lives in the most economically developed region (Eastern provinces) of China; 2) whether a respondent works in the public sector, including government bureaucracy and state-owned enterprises (SOE); and 3) whether a respondent was born after China's economic reform and opening up in 1980. China has experienced spectacular yet unequal state-led economic growth since 1980, with Eastern provinces receiving substantially more subsidies and liberal economic policies from the regime (Yang and Zhao 2015; Zhao 2009). Thus, people living in Eastern China, as well as those who have grown up in the reform era, are greater beneficiaries of state-led economic development.

We also operationalize access to free information outside CCP control using three measures: 1) whether a respondent consumes any information from foreign media several times a day; 2) whether a respondent consumes political news from foreign media several times a day; and 3) whether a respondent has a bachelor's degree. On the last measure, previous research shows that higher education motivates more consumption of foreign information

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Table 2
Microfoundations of NDC and democracy supporter

Measures	NDC	Democrat	p-value
Economic beneficiary of the CCP regime			
Live in economically developed region	0.77	0.71	0.072*
Work in public sector	0.38	0.31	0.095*
Born after economic reform (1980)	0.64	0.51	<0.01***
Access to free information outside China			
Frequent consumption of foreign media	0.42	0.48	0.14
Frequent consumption of political news via foreign media	0.19	0.20	0.85
Bachelor's degree	0.87	0.89	0.44

Notes: Entries are proportions. P-values are from two-sample t-tests. Economically developed region means Eastern China. Public sector includes government and state-owned enterprises. Frequent media consumption means several times per day.
* p<0.1
** p<0.05
*** p<0.01.

Table 3
Microfoundations of NDC and status quo supporter

Measures	NDC	CCP supporter	p-value
Economic beneficiary of the CCP regime			
Live in economically developed region	0.77	0.68	<0.01***
Work in public sector	0.38	0.38	0.99
Born after economic reform (1980)	0.64	0.43	<0.01***
Access to free information outside China			
Frequent consumption of foreign media	0.42	0.25	<0.01***
Frequent consumption of political news via foreign media	0.19	0.12	0.02**
Bachelor's degree	0.87	0.82	0.06*

Notes: Entries are proportions. P-values are from two-sample t-tests. Economically developed region means Eastern China. Public sector includes government and state-owned enterprises. Frequent media consumption means several times per day.
* p<0.1
** p<0.05
*** p<0.01.

by increasing knowledge of information sources and cultivating liberal values like respect for diversity (Inglehart 1997; Welzel 2013).

NDCs are greater economic beneficiaries of the CCP regime than democrats, regime supporters, and dual supporters. Table 2 shows that the differing attitudes towards democracy between NDCs and democrats may be related to differing access to the benefits of state-led economic development. Compared to supporters of democracy, NDCs are greater economic beneficiaries of the CCP regime—NDCs are, on average, more likely to live in the most developed region of China, grow up in the era of rapid economic growth, and earn their income from the public sector. This greater economic dependence on the regime may contribute to NDCs' greater demand for positive economic outcomes from government as compared to democracy supporters (figure 3c).

Contrary to our expectation that NDCs consume less information outside of the regime's control than democrats (Hypothesis 4b), table 2 shows that there are no statistically significant differences in their access to foreign media, foreign political news, or higher education. This suggests that NDCs consume free information about foreign regimes as actively as democrats, which may explain why the two groups report an equally strong demand for inclusive political institutions (figure 3a).

Table 3 indicates that NDCs' opposition to the current CCP regime may be related to their access to free information and high economic status in China. As we expected in Hypothesis 4a, NDCs consume more foreign media, more political news via foreign outlets, and have higher educational attainment than supporters of the CCP regime. However, though we hypothesized that CCP supporters are greater economic beneficiaries than NDCs, the results show the opposite. Compared to regime supporters, NDCs are more likely to reside in an economically developed region and to grow up during the period of state-led growth. The two groups do not differ in their likelihood of working in government and SOEs. These results suggest that public sector employment and high economic status in China are not necessarily associated with support for the CCP regime.

Table 4 presents the difference in microfoundations between NDCs versus dual supporters. These results do not support our Hypothesis 4c: while we expected that NDCs receive less economic benefits from the CCP regime than dual supporters, we find that NDCs are more likely to hail from the most developed Eastern provinces and to grow up in the era of reform compared to dual supporters. Also, while we hypothesized that NDCs have less access to free information than dual supporters, the table shows that NDCs are as highly educated as dual supporters and that NDCs consume media and political news outside of China as frequently as dual supporters do. Their equal access to free information might explain why NDCs demand inclusive political institutions as strongly as dual supporters do (figure 3a). Overall, these results indicate that NDCs' simultaneous rejection of

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Table 4
Microfoundations of NDC and dual supporter

Measures	NDC	Dual supporter	p-value
Economic beneficiary of the CCP regime			
Live in economically developed region	0.77	0.70	0.088*
Work in public sector	0.38	0.34	0.39
Born after economic reform (1980)	0.64	0.49	<0.01***
Access to free information outside China			
Frequent consumption of foreign media	0.42	0.36	0.21
Frequent consumption of political news via foreign media	0.19	0.17	0.55
Bachelor's degree	0.87	0.88	0.74

Notes: Entries are proportions. P-values are from two-sample t-tests. Economically developed region means Eastern China. Public sector includes government and state-owned enterprises. Frequent media consumption means several times per day.
* p<0.1
** p<0.05
*** p<0.01.

Table 5
Predictors of NDC

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Live in economically developed region	0.054*** (0.020)	—	0.05*** (0.023)
Frequent consumption of foreign media	—	0.037 (0.024)	0.034 (0.021)
Controls	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1354	1354	1354

Notes: Outcome is a 4-level nominal variable. All columns use multinomial logistic regression and coefficients are average marginal effects on the probability of being a NDC. Democrat is the reference category. Economically developed region means Eastern China. Frequent media consumption means several times per day. Controls include respondents' gender, age, education level, CCP membership, employment sector, and frequency of consuming CCP-controlled media.
* p<0.1
** p<0.05
*** p<0.01.

democracy and status quo autocracy may be related to their high economic status.

Altogether, the pairwise comparisons just provided suggest that NDCs have a higher economic status and consume more information outside of the regime's control than what we theoretically expected. We then use multinomial logistic regressions to explore the impact of these two microfoundations—economic status and access to free information—on the probability of being a non-democratic critic among all respondents. Table 5 presents the results. The outcome is a four-level nominal variable representing the four categories of respondents with democrat being the baseline category. Coefficients are marginal effects on the probability of being a NDC.

The table shows that high economic status outperforms free information consumption in explaining the likelihood of becoming a NDC. In the most complete model (column 3), when holding all other predictors at their median,[20] moving from other regions to the most developed Eastern China region increases the likelihood of becoming a NDC by 42% (5.5 percentage points). Breaking down this difference, 18% of respondents who live in the most developed region are NDCs, while this proportion is 13% among those living in other, less developed regions. In contrast, frequent consumption of foreign media has no statistically significant effect. We conduct extensive robustness checks on these results. We also check and confirm that consumption of CCP propaganda has no effect on the probability of being a NDC. For details, refer to online appendix A.4.3.

Discussion. The results in table 5 suggest that having a high economic status in China may simultaneously foster criticism against multi-party democracy and the current autocracy. On one hand, among the four groups within the authoritarian public, NDCs benefit most from state-led economic growth under the current single-party system, which can make this group skeptical about the ability of a multi-party system to deliver high growth. On the other hand, compared to the other three groups, NDCs' greater wealth can also make them become more vulnerable to economic expropriation by the CCP regime since there are no institutions that can credibly commit to protecting individuals' wealth. This could make NDCs worry more about the security of their economic fortune and hence, motivate their opposition to the current CCP regime.

These considerations are reflected in our interviews with NDCs. When asked about their views on the CCP regime and multi-party democracy, over three-quarters of NDCs express worry about their economic well-being under both systems. On one hand, these people believe that multi-party competition will hurt the economy by increasing political cleavages and wasting resources on excessive electoral campaigns. On the other hand, they criticize the current regime for being too centralized and not prioritizing the interests of ordinary citizens. According to these NDC interviewees, Chinese officials today face little public oversight when formulating important socio-economic policies (e.g., taxes, housing, social security), leading to massive corruption. Thus, these people believe that the policy-making process should be more transparent so they can monitor whether citizens' welfare is well considered. Our survey findings also show that

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compared to supporters of the CCP regime, NDCs more strongly demand inclusive political institutions, which include "transparent decision-making processes" and "consulting societal professionals in policy formulation" (see figure 3).

The high economic status of NDCs has implications for how economic development shapes support for democracy and support for autocracy. A longstanding view rooted in modernization theory holds that economic development will foster democratization by creating a middle class that supports democracy (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Lipset 1959; Welzel and Inglehart 2008). Hence, modernization theory predicts that economically well-off citizens like NDCs would support democracy and oppose the CCP regime. However, NDCs partly reject this view—they do not support democracy because their high economic status largely depends on state-led development in China. This implies that in autocracies, state-led economic growth does not necessarily lead to support for democracy.

On the other hand, the high economic status of NDCs also suggests that being a material beneficiary of autocracy does not necessarily lead to support for the regime. The performance legitimacy literature largely holds the view that authoritarian rulers are able to gain public support by providing material benefits to citizens (Chu 2013; Dickson 2016; Holbig and Gilley 2010). Relatedly, Rosenfeld (2017) writes that people who work in the public sector and are economically well off would support the ruling autocrats and reject democracy since their material well-being is highly dependent on the regime. However, NDCs challenge these expectations. Our results show that among the four groups within the authoritarian public, NDCs and CCP supporters both have the highest likelihood (38%) of working in the public sector, and NDCs are economically better off than CCP supporters. Yet NDCs do not support the CCP regime—their economic affluence motivates their dissatisfaction with the underrepresentation of citizen interests in the current autocratic system.

Finally, in addition to being economically well off, our survey reveals that an average NDC is highly educated and frequently consumes information about foreign governments from sources outside of China. This socioeconomic profile echoes our interview finding that NDCs are politically attentive and sophisticated. While conventional wisdom holds that consuming information outside of the autocrat's control will cultivate support for democracy (Huntington 2006; Levitsky and Way 2006), we find that non-democratic critics consume foreign media as actively as democracy supporters do. Access to outside information does not necessarily lead to support for democracy. Instead, the socioeconomic characteristics associated with NDCs imply that access to outside information, when combined with high economic status in the current autocracy, can inform simultaneous disillusionment with democracy and the status quo regime.

Conclusion

This paper shows that opposition to autocracy does not necessarily mean support for democracy. We find that nearly half of individuals who oppose the current authoritarian regime in China also reject adopting democracy. Interviews with NDCs suggest that though they are critical of the status quo, they are not proponents of an alternative political system in China. This implies that NDCs are less likely to actively push for meaningful regime change. Additionally, we find that uneven access to the benefits of China's economic development most likely explains the divergent attitudes towards democracy between NDCs and democrats.

To explain authoritarian resilience, political scientists have typically focused on regime supporters (Geddes and Zaller 1989; Huang, Intawan, and Nicholson 2022). Our findings shift the conversation to regime opponents and suggest another important reason for authoritarian durability: regime opponents have divergent and unclear visions of what political system should be adopted in place of the status quo. When opportunities for regime change emerge, the disagreement between non-democratic critics and democrats on whether their country should transition to democracy and more fundamentally, on what they demand from a regime, can dampen prospects for broad and durable collective action.

This implies that the splintering preferences between NDCs and democrats can help existing autocracies endure political crisis. For example, when the Chinese regime's COVID-19 lockdown policies sparked unprecedented mass resistance in late 2022, interviews with protesters revealed that although they were all frustrated with the government, they had different visions for what change should occur. While some called for multi-party democracy, many others aimed for ending the lockdown, reducing unemployment, or relaxing control over expression rather than full democratic transition.[21] The lack of a unified political agenda explains in part why these protests did not evolve into a durable, national movements for regime change.[22]

Our findings also have implications for democratic consolidation in former authoritarian countries. The divergent preferences between NDCs and democrats imply that even if they jointly overthrow the current dictator, there could be splits after the revolution. For instance, while mass protests during the Arab Spring initially generated optimism for democratization, later on these protests led to political turmoil in many countries rather than stable democracies because the newly formed governments were not able to accommodate differing political and economic demands from the protesters

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(Bradley et al. 2011; Robinson and Merrow 2020). Similarly, many post-Soviet countries suffered from extended social unrest and even authoritarian backlash. Research shows that this instability may be due to the hastily convened opposition at the time of revolution, which lacked consensus over political visions for the future (Beissinger 2013).

Moreover, the findings about NDCs' characteristics in China, combined with institutional differences between China and other autocracies, have several implications for the profile of NDCs outside of China. First, our results show that compared to regime supporters and democracy supporters, NDCs enjoy the highest economic well-being under state-led development in China. Compared to China, most other authoritarian regimes achieve less and slower economic growth, which could reduce regime opponents' skepticism of democracy and hence reduce the size of NDCs. That said, among the public in other autocracies, our findings imply that those who have the highest economic status are most likely to become opposed to democracy and also to the status quo. Second, our results suggest that access to foreign media, when combined with high economic status, informs simultaneous disillusionment with democracy and the status quo in China. This indicates that democracies may have a public image problem today—consuming more information about their current events can motivate rejection of democracy. Compared to the CCP regime, other autocracies generally possess a less sophisticated apparatus of information control. This could allow more of their citizens to access outside information and hence, increase the share of NDCs in their public. Third, unlike China, other autocracies allow opposition political parties to compete in elections. In our interviews, NDCs recognized that the absence of an opposition party in China increases their uncertainty about the performance of a multi-party system. We posit that if opposition parties in an autocracy are perceived as effective by their citizens, there may be more certainty regarding the benefits of a multi-party system and thus fewer NDCs. However, if opposition parties in an autocracy are perceived as corrupt or useless by their citizens, they may become disillusioned with multi-party elections, leading to fewer democrats and more NDCs. Additionally, all participants in our study were primed to conceptualize democracy specifically as multi-party elections. Future research could explore how priming different definitions of democracy may vary the size of NDCs in a variety of authoritarian contexts.

Finally, our findings suggest that for those living under authoritarian rule, multi-party elections are not necessarily considered a must-have or sufficient condition of good government even among opponents of the status quo autocracy. Instead, we find that ordinary citizens evaluate a regime using a more diverse set of metrics. For example, Chinese NDCs report a strong demand for economic growth and a strong demand for inclusive political institutions. This indicates that in their definition, a good government should possess institutions that represent citizens' interests and also deliver positive material benefits. This definition of good government is more complex than simply the presence of multi-party elections, implying that both academics and policy-makers may need to think more carefully about conceptualizations of democracy and good government when they use those terms and avoid equating (bad) good government simply with (the lack of) multi-party elections. For example, U.S.- and Europe-led democracy promotion campaigns primarily focus on establishing multi-party elections and achieving electoral accountability. Our findings imply that democracy or good government promotion campaigns should expand their definition of "democracy" by understanding and addressing the specific demands of local populations. Overall, given the substantial size of NDCs among regime opponents in China and their many political differences with democracy supporters, studying heterogeneous preferences among regime opponents in a wide variety of authoritarian systems is likely to advance our understanding of authoritarian durability and regime transition.

Supplementary material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001798.

Data replication

Data replication sets are available in Harvard Dataverse at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/LQX3EQ

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Notes

1 Exceptions are Beissinger (2013) and Rosenfeld (2017), who note that protesters against authoritarian leaders in post-Soviet countries hold differing regime preferences. Our study differs from these works by focusing on the preferences among all authoritarian critics rather than only on those who protest.
2 This paper uses "critics," "opponents," and "dissidents" interchangeably. It also uses "democrats" and "democracy supporters" interchangeably.

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3 This paper uses "status quo supporter," "CCP supporter," and "regime supporter" interchangeably.
4 While democratic systems take a variety of forms, multi-party elections are generally considered the imperative institutional arrangement for a functioning democratic system (Dahl 1971; Huntington 2006).
5 Note that this type of NDC differs from the internal reformist in Przeworski's framework in that these NDCs oppose the overall political system of the current regime.
6 One example of this type of NDC is an anarchist, who opposes all systems of government.
7 For details of interviewee demographics and interview questions and responses, refer to online appendix A.1.
8 In the 2014 Asian Barometer survey, 23% of Chinese participants listed "economic equality" as the primary feature of democracy. See asianbarometer.org.
9 We code an indicator variable at the individual level that equals 1 if the interviewee gave two-sided, substantive comments on multi-party democracy (e.g., "While I think democracy is good in X, I also think the system is bad in Y"), and equals 0 otherwise.
10 The firm is one of the largest private survey firms in China and is not affiliated with any government agencies. To keep the confidentiality of respondent identities and to protect future researchers who hope to work with the firm, we do not disclose the name of the firm.
11 Refer to online appendix A.1.3.
12 Pilot participants were recruited through snowball sampling. They were aged between 17 and 65. Similar to the sample of the final survey, the majority of pilot participants come from economically developed Eastern China and have a Bachelor's degree or above.
13 For details, refer to https://bit.ly/3xu23Cp.
14 We chose these non-sensitive statements because they do not make respondents feel they can be personally identified. Also, these statements do not prime respondents to evaluate the CCP regime or democracy in a particular direction. When asking about a respondent's current location, we list two randomly selected provinces from the East, Central, and Western parts of China respectively, which represent varying levels of socio-economic development in China.
15 To make it easier for respondents to evaluate each quality, we randomly split the 16 qualities into two groups of 8 qualities, show one group at a time and ask respondents to give us their top three in that group. We then ask respondents to rank the selected six qualities in the order of importance.
16 We randomize the order of these options and the order between the two questions asking about relative performance on the respondent's most desired and most undesired qualities.
17 Refer to table A6 in the online appendix.
18 NDCs also demand inclusive political institutions more than status quo supporters do. This finding is in contrast to the expectation grounded in existing works on authoritarian legitimation that NDCs may demand inclusive institutions less than status quo supporters (see the explanation on differing demands in figure 1).
19 An alternative explanation for NDCs' higher uncertainty is that they define democracy in terms of socio-economic outcomes. We check and find that NDC respondents associate democracy with electoral institutions rather than outcomes as we had primed (for details, refer to online appendix A.1.3).
20 Since most predictors are dummies (e.g., gender, CCP membership, frequent consumption of media), we hold them at their median rather than mean to represent the "median" person in our sample.
21 See https://bit.ly/3rc95fe and https://bit.ly/3XJ22Y1.
22 See *Ai Weiwei on China's Protests* 2022.

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