American Political Science Review (2022) 1–8
doi:10.1017/S0003055422000946

Letter

Making the List: Reevaluating Political Trust and Social Desirability in China

STEPHEN P. NICHOLSON *University of Georgia, United States*
HAIFENG HUANG *University of California, Merced, United States*

We examined sensitive questions on political trust and regime support in China using indirect methods. We replicated previous list experiment results confirming that a majority trusts the central government despite overreports. We also conducted novel list experiments on trust in local government and support for removal of the presidential term limit and found evidence of over-reporting for both. The point estimate for local government also suggests majority trust, but the central government is both more trusted and feared. However, we did not find evidence of majority support for removing the term limit at the time of the removal, indicating that the public may negatively evaluate government, albeit indirectly, in some circumstances. Last, examining self-monitoring, a personality trait for examining social desirability, we found that it only influenced overreporting trust in the central government. The results reveal meaningful variation in political trust and regime support in the world's largest authoritarian society.

Opinion surveys in authoritarian countries often find high levels of approval of government (Guriev and Treisman 2020). This finding is perhaps most striking in China, where surveys have consistently found substantial majorities expressing political trust, especially for the central government (Dickson 2016; Huang, Intawan, and Nicholson 2022; Tang 2016). In the 2015 Asian Barometer Survey, for example, 86.7% of respondents had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in the Chinese national government, whereas the corresponding percentage for local government was 63.7%. Although the 2018 World Values Survey did not ask about local government, 94.6% reported "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in the Chinese national government. These studies, and others, suggest that political trust is widespread among the Chinese people.

A vexing question about the high levels of political trust in China is whether people living under authoritarian rule provide truthful responses. Recently, scholars have used list experiments, an indirect method to gauge misreporting, to look at potential overreporting. In a pioneering study, Tang (2016) embedded a list experiment in the World Values Survey China of 2012–13, a face-to-face, nationally representative survey, and found 4 percentage points more participants distrust the central government relative to direct questioning. However, using list experiments with online samples, Li, Shi, and Zhu (2018) and Robinson and Tannenberg (2019) found that 28 and 25 percentage points more participants, respectively, distrust national leaders or lack confidence in the central government.

We advance research on political trust and regime support in China by examining the prevalence of misreporting between the central and local governments and for the 2018 removal of the presidential term limit. Our results have important implications for understanding political support and stability in China, the world's most populous authoritarian country. First, we found that the Chinese people consistently overreport political trust and regime support. Nevertheless, even after accounting for overreporting, a majority still trusts government, more so the central than local. Second, majority trust in government does not necessarily mean uniform regime support because we did not find evidence of majority support for the removal of the presidential term limit. Although this result does not necessarily represent long-term public opinion, it does suggest that the Chinese public is willing to express reservations about government, which lends further credence to the finding of persistent majority trust in government. Finally, we examine self-monitoring, a personality trait commonly used for examining social desirability, and find that it only affects the reporting of trust in the central government. This finding suggests that fear is not the only motivating factor behind overreporting trust in the central government.

ANSWERING POLITICALLY SENSITIVE QUESTIONS IN CHINA

Although political scientists have learned a great deal about answering politically sensitive questions in China, inquiry has been primarily limited to trust in

Stephen P. Nicholson, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Georgia, United States, snicholson@uga.edu.
Haifeng Huang, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of California, Merced, United States, hhuang24@ucmerced.edu.

Received: May 06, 2021; revised: October 10, 2021; accepted: August 23, 2022.

the central government. We advance the use of list experiments to examine trust in local government and support for the removal of the constitutional term limit for the state presidency. In China, local governments not only provide public goods and services but also implement national policies (Zhong 2014). Nevertheless, the Chinese people view the two levels differently, with the public expressing greater anger and blame toward local government (Dickson 2016; Li 2016; Zhong 2014). As a result, protests in China occur primarily at the local level and local governments carry out most of the repressions (Cai 2008; Tang 2016). Whereas political trust inquiries are about national and local governments generally, the term limit inquiry gauges support for a dramatic shift away from collective leadership and regularized leadership succession (Shirk 2018), allowing a president to stay in power indefinitely. Because local government is an integral part of China's political system and the term limit removal represents a deepening of authoritarian rule, we expect participants to overreport trust in local government and support for the removal of the presidential term limit in addition to overreporting trust in the central government (H1).

Studies of political trust in authoritarian countries typically assume that fear of government retribution is the motivation for overreporting (Blair, Coppock, and Moor 2020). Despite the important role that fear plays, overreporting is also likely due to social norms and cultural traditions in China that require deference toward authority and social hierarchy (Shi 2001), a type of social desirability bias. Indeed, an individual could be motivated by both fear and social desirability. Therefore, we introduce a second indirect measure, self-monitoring, to examine individual differences in susceptibility to social desirability bias (Snyder 1974). Self-monitoring, the degree to which individuals modify their behavior to make positive impressions on others, has been used to examine social desirability bias on sensitive topics including political trust in the United States (Intawan and Nicholson 2018). If there is an element of social desirability to these questions, we expect high self-monitors to be more likely to overreport political trust and regime support (H2).

Last, we look at social and financial well-being as correlates of overreporting. In keeping with previous research (Jiang and Yang 2016; Robinson and Tannenberg 2019), we posit that well-to-do people, such as those with higher income, life satisfaction, and satisfaction with the current national situation, are more likely to overreport trust in government and support for removing the presidential term limit because they have benefited more from the existing political system and have more to lose from sanctions (H3). In addition to being associated with overreporting, previous research has found that social and financial well-being are important correlates of political trust and regime support (Guriev and Treisman 2020; Tang 2016; Zhong 2014).

STUDY DESIGN AND MEASURES

We surveyed a nonprobability internet sample aged 18 or above in China through Qualtrics from April to June of 2018 (Nicholson and Huang 2022), which happened soon after removal of the presidential term limit in March. Altogether, 1,602 individuals participated and, as Appendix A shows, their demographic breakdown is somewhat comparable to that of the internet-active adult subsample of the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), a nationally representative survey. We used quotas to make the sample resemble the Chinese internet population, but due to the characteristics of internet panels (including Qualtrics) our sample was nevertheless younger and more highly educated, which is typical of online surveys in China (Li, Shi, and Zhu 2018).

We use both direct and indirect questions to measure trust in government and support for the presidential term limit removal. Comparing direct questions with indirect questions (using list experiments) helps reveal whether, and to what extent, topics are sensitive. To measure trust in the national and local governments directly, all participants answered the following questions: "To what extent do you trust the central government/your municipal (county) government to do what is right?" The corresponding question to directly measure support for the term limit removal was "Do you support the removal of the term limit for the national leader from the constitution?"

We use list experiments as our primary indirect method. In a typical list experiment, participants are randomly assigned to two conditions, a control group including N nonsensitive items and a treatment group including a sensitive item and the N nonsensitive items. Participants are asked to report how many of the items in the list apply to them without identifying *which* items apply. The difference between the average number reported by each group reveals the prevalence rate for the sensitive item. In the political trust list experiments, we assigned participants to one of three groups: control, central government, and local government. The control group was asked how many of the following items they trust: (a) neighbors, (b) schoolmates/colleagues, (c) drug users, and (d) the police.[1] For the central and local treatments, "the central government" and "county/municipal government" were respectively added as the sensitive item. For the term limit list experiment, the control group was asked how many of the following they supported/approved of: (a) bike sharing, (b) smoking, (c) restricting the celebration of western holidays, and (d) sending children to study abroad. For the treatment group, the sensitive item of "removing the term limit for the national leader" was added. We did not find evidence of ceiling or floor effects.[2] For both political trust and support for the term limit removal, the order of direct questioning and list experiments was randomized.

To explore whether social desirability is an additional source of misreporting, we use an index of three items to construct the self-monitoring scale. Along with standard demographics and other attitudinal controls,

[1] We borrowed some items from Tang (2016).

[2] Shares of respondents choosing 0 or 4 in the control lists of both the trust and term limit experiments were no more than 5.5%.

TABLE 1. Trust in Different Levels of Government by List Experiment and Direct Questioning with Poststratification Weighting

	List experiment	Direct questioning	List–Direct difference
Central government (N = 1,034)	0.767 (0.563, 0.970)***	0.904 (0.874, 0.934)	–0.137
Local government (N = 1,082)	0.670 (0.463, 0.877)***	0.723 (0.681, 0.765)	–0.053

Note: Point estimates of trust in government with 95% confidence intervals in parentheses. The list experiment results are difference-in-means estimates. The sample is weighted by the 2018 CFPS internet active adult sample data on gender, age (below 30 vs. above 30), education (college vs. no college), and CCP membership. ***$p < 0.001$.

the survey included items on social and financial well-being such as income, life satisfaction, and government performance (proxied by China's current situation). Refer to Appendix B for question wording, Appendix C for the balance of covariates, and Appendix D for tests of question order effects.

RESULTS FOR POLITICAL TRUST

We begin with the results for trust in the national and local governments. Table 1 shows the proportions of participants trusting the central and local governments, as measured by list experiments and direct questioning, and the differences between the two measures. As our sample was not nationally representative, we weight it by the internet active sample of 2018 CFPS to facilitate comparisons to previous research (refer to Appendix D for the unweighted results). The list experiment shows 76.7% trust the central government, compared with 90.4% in direct questioning. The difference between these values suggests that 13.7 percentage points more people reported trusting the central government in direct questioning than in the list experiment. Nevertheless, even after accounting for overreporting in direct questioning, majority trust in the central government persists.

To better situate our findings, we compare these results with Tang's (2016) seminal study, which offers the only list experiment on political trust in China with a nationally representative sample. Our direct questioning result on trust in the central government is similar to the direct questioning result in Tang's study (92%) as well as those from many other major, nationally representative surveys. But the level of trust in our list experiment is somewhat lower than that in Tang's list experiment (76.7% versus 88%), and the level of overreporting is higher (13.7 versus 4 percentage points). Although the dissimilarity may be partly due to the differences in survey modes (online versus face to face) and timing (2012–13 versus 2018), they also suggest that despite that reported trust in the central government has been fairly stable, the level of actual trust may have decreased somewhat during this time (but still a majority).[3] In addition, our findings suggest that the sensitive nature of the question has increased in recent years, although perhaps not as much as the unweighted results of Li, Shi, and Zhu (2018) and Robinson and Tannenberg (2019) suggest. Table 1 also shows that the level of trust in local government was 67%, compared with 72.3% in direct questioning. In other words, 5.3 percentage points more people reported trusting local governments in direct questioning than in the list experiment.

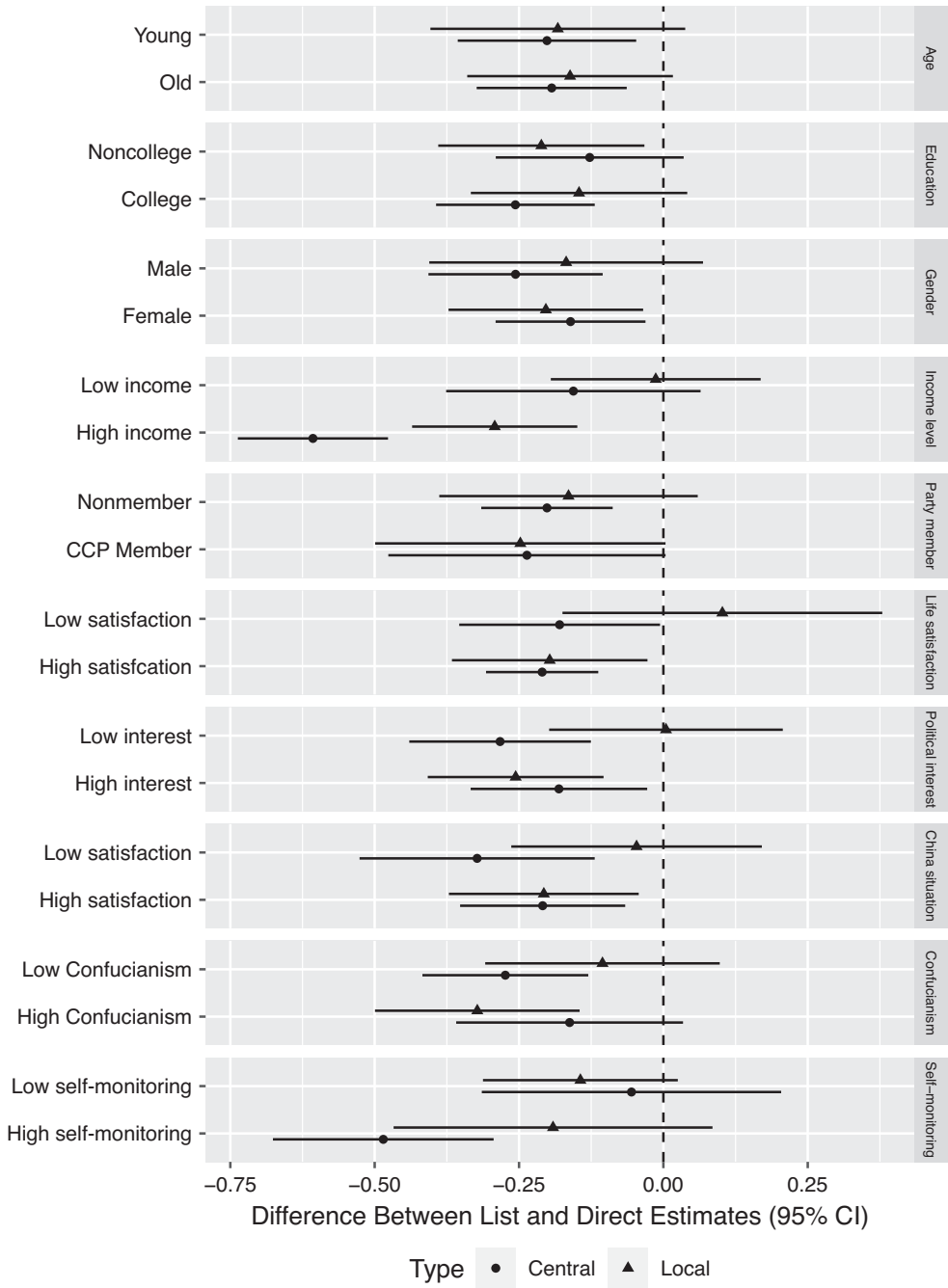
In summary, comparing trust in the central and local governments provides new insight into the nature of political trust in China. First, participants trust the central government more than they do local governments whether measured by direct questioning or list experiments (the 95% confidence interval for the level of trust in local government in the list experiment crosses 50% even though the point estimate suggests majority trust). Second, the degree of overreporting trust in direct questioning is higher with the central government than with the local government. This finding suggests that the central government is more trusted, feared, and as we find below, apparently more revered.

Who Overreports Political Trust?

We also explored whether individual characteristics are associated with misreporting political trust by using Blair and Imai's (2012) multivariate regression method, a procedure that allows for the estimation of relationships between preferences over the sensitive item and personal characteristics. Figure 1 depicts the differences between estimates from direct questioning and list experiments by demographic and attitudinal covariates (refer to Appendix E for numerical results). To begin with our inquiry into social desirability bias, high self-monitors overreport trust in the central government significantly more than do low self-monitors, whereas the level of self-monitoring does not affect overreporting trust in local government. It appears that expressing distrust in the central government might violate a social norm in China. Although fear is likely to be the dominant factor in explaining overreports in

[3] Tang (2016) also analyzed the 2001 and 2007 waves of World Value Survey China where he averages different levels of trust rather than dichotomizing the trust scale (as is done in the analysis of list experiments). This approach yields a level of trust around mid-70%, similar to our list experiment result.

FIGURE 1. Individual Characteristics and Overreporting Trust in Government



trust in the national government, self-monitoring has the second largest effect among the individual covariates, suggesting that social desirability may play a prominent role in overreporting.

In terms of financial and social well-being, Figure 1 also shows that people with high income overreport trust in both the central and local governments, whereas those with low income do not, and the differences are statistically significant. Additionally, people with high life satisfaction overreport trust in both the central and local governments but those with low life satisfaction do not overreport trust in local government. Overall, people with more comfortable life situations or perspectives are more likely to overreport political trust. Last, Figure 1 suggests differences in life satisfaction, political interest, and Confucian values matter more in evaluations of the local government than in those of the central government. This is consistent with the above finding that expressing trust in the central government is likely a social norm in China.

TABLE 2. Support for the Term Limit Removal by List Experiment and Direct Questioning with Poststratification Weighting

	List experiment	Direct questioning	List–Direct difference
Nonneutral respondents in direct questioning (N = 1,138)	0.370 (0.175, 0.565)***	0.596 (0.552, 0.640)	−0.226
Neutral respondents in direct questioning (N = 464)	0.442 (0.186, 0.698)**		

Note: Point estimates of support for the term limit removal with 95% confidence intervals in parentheses. The list experiment results are difference-in-means estimates. The sample is weighted by the 2018 CFPS internet active adult sample data. **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Results for the Term Limit Removal

The direct question about the presidential term limit removal allows five choices ranging from "support" to "oppose." Because the survey was conducted immediately after the removal, we provided a neutral response in the middle of the scale, "neither support nor oppose," to reduce its sensitivity.[4] To make the direct questioning analysis comparable with that for the list experiment (which does not have a neutral option), we dropped participants who chose the neutral response in direct questioning in our first analysis.[5] However, we also conduct a separate analysis looking at neutral responders.

Table 2 shows the proportions of nonneutral respondents supporting the term limit removal measured by the list experiment and direct questioning and the difference between the two measures. Participants overreported support for the removal of the term limit in direct questioning: Although 59.6% explicitly support it, the point estimate in the list experiment percentage is lower than 50%. However, as the 95% confidence interval crosses 50%, we cannot conclude that only a minority supported the term limit removal. Nevertheless, it is clear that we do not find evidence of majority support for the removal, in contrast to our results on trust in the central government. Furthermore, the differences between the list measure and direct questioning on the term limit removal was 22.6 percentage points, higher than the differences in overreporting political trust. This comparison suggests that the term limit removal was especially sensitive.

Next, we examine the list experiment results for the neutral responders in direct questioning. The last row of Table 2 shows that the proportion of neutral responders in direct questioning who supported the term limit removal in the list experiment was also lower than 50% (44.2%). Thus, most neutral responses appeared to be tacit opposers by the list measure. Taken together, our results suggest that there was a substantial reservation about the term limit removal. Previous research suggests that the Chinese people are relatively uncritical of the national government, reserving most of their blame for local government (Chen 2017; Dickson 2016; Li 2016; Zhong 2014). The lack of evidence for majority support for the term limit removal indicates the Chinese public is not unquestioning or naïve; they are capable of expressing reservations about government, at least indirectly. This finding further suggests the relatively high level of trust in the national government is largely genuine.

Who Supports the Removal of the Presidential Term Limit?

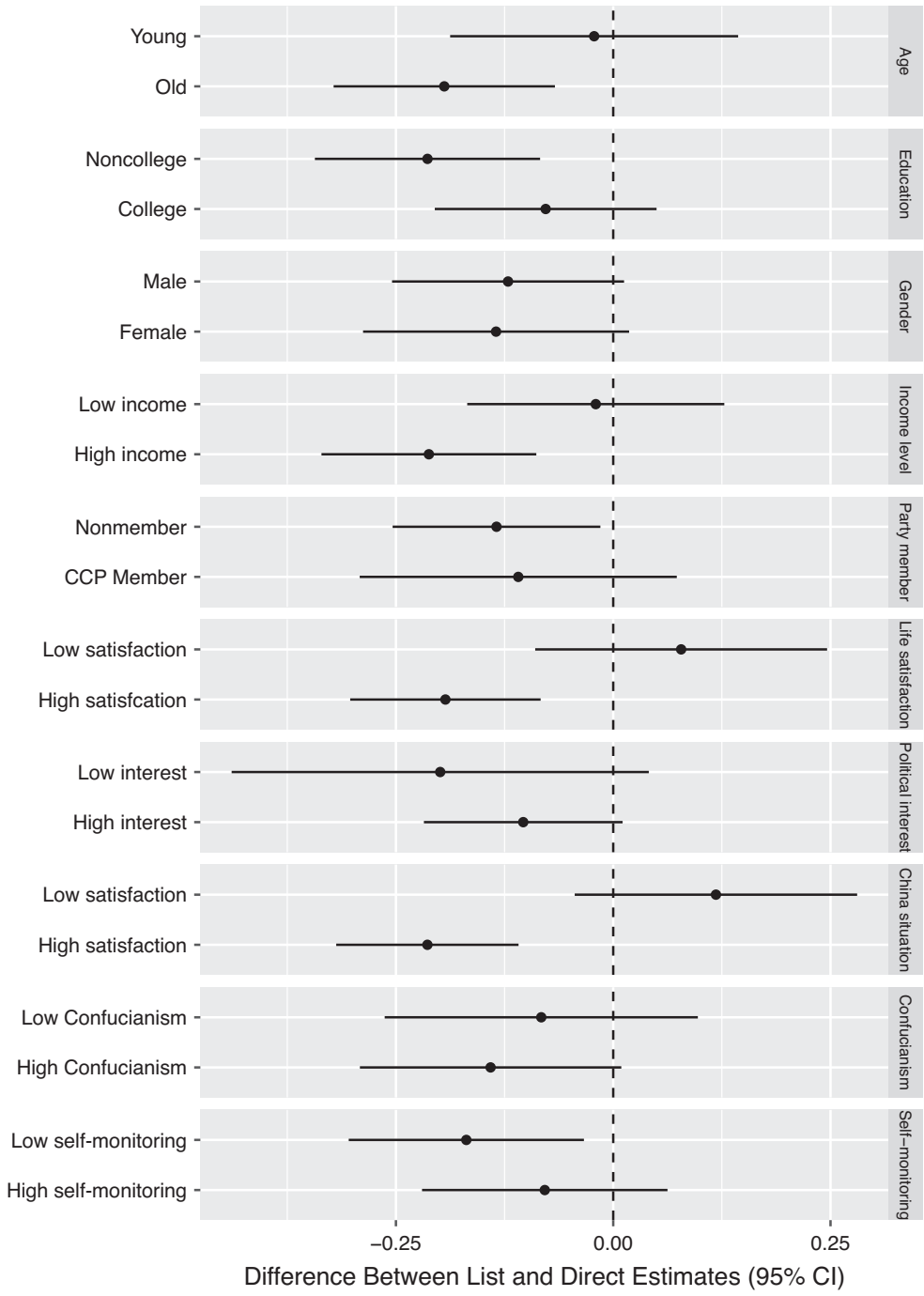
We also explored subgroup differences between the list and direct measures for the presidential term limit removal again using Blair and Imai's (2012) multivariate regression method. Figure 2 shows people low in self-monitoring overreport support, but the difference between them and high self-monitors is not significant, suggesting that social desirability is not a factor, different from our expectation. One likely reason is that the political sensitivity of the term limit removal question is notably higher than that of trust in government, and therefore the effect of fear dominates. With respect to financial and social well-being, people with high life satisfaction, high satisfaction with China's current situation, and high income (i.e., those leading a more comfortable life) are more likely to overreport support for the term limit removal in direct questioning than those with opposite characteristics.[6]

[4] The direct questions for political trust did not include a neutral response.

[5] We do not believe dropping neutral respondents here is likely to bias results, potentially narrowing the gap between direct and indirect questioning. Even if neutral responders revealed true attitudes in direct questioning, it will increase both the number of people who directly express opposition and the number of participants who oppose the removal in the list experiment, so the gap between the two measures would not necessarily decrease. Additionally, we cannot know which way the neutral responders would choose if forced to take sides, but we know that neutral responses are typically chosen to avoid expressing unpopular/unsafe opinions (Johns 2005), as we show. To facilitate a direction comparison with the list experiment, future research should consider excluding the neutral response in direct questioning.

[6] Neutral responders in direct questioning are excluded from Figure 2.

FIGURE 2. Individual Characteristics and Overreporting Support for the Term Limit Removal



DISCUSSION

Our results indicate that the Chinese public consistently exaggerates political trust and regime support in direct questioning. Accounting for overreporting with list experiments, a majority nevertheless trusts both levels of government, although less so for local government. The difference between the central and local governments in levels of trust is consistent with previous findings using direct surveys, but our list measures provide reassurance. Furthermore, our list experiments show that the central government is both more trusted and more feared than is local government, a novel finding in the literature. We also found from the list experiments that the term limit removal had less than majority support, suggesting that the Chinese public is willing to critically evaluate the government, albeit indirectly. It also reveals considerable variation about

political trust and regime support in China, lending greater credence to results that show consistently high levels of favorable government evaluations.

We also offered an innovation to the study of list experiments by examining whether overreporting varied by self-monitoring. High self-monitors were more likely to overreport trust in the central government, suggesting a social norm, although fear is still likely the dominant factor. Furthermore, the null effect of self-monitoring in the analysis of trust in local government or support for the term limit removal suggests that overreporting is largely driven by fear.

Last, people with better life circumstances and greater satisfaction were more likely to overreport political trust and regime support. For example, people with high income overreported trust in both levels of government and support for the term limit removal, whereas those with low income do not. Yet not all the findings were uniform. People holding low satisfaction with China's current situation and life in general also overreport trust in the central government, similar to those with high satisfaction. However, these less satisfied individuals do not overreport trust in local government or support of the term limit removal, unlike those with high satisfaction. Although not uniform, the picture that emerges is that people with more comfortable life situations more often overreport political trust and regime support.

Future research might look beyond fear and social desirability to other factors for understanding overreporting political trust in authoritarian regimes. A promising area of inquiry would be to examine the relationship between implicit political trust, an automatic, gut-level trust in government (see Huang, Intawan, and Nicholson 2022), and the thoughtful, conscious choices people make answering questions in the context of a list experiment. Implicit attitudes precede, and therefore often shape, reported opinions but can be overridden by conscious, deliberative reasoning processes. How this happens is likely to vary according to topic and across individual characteristics. As the use of indirect methods to gauge opinion expands, scholars will better understand the nature and origins of political support and stability in China and other countries.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000946.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KAHHWQ.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Both authors contributed equally to the article and are listed in reverse alphabetical order. We would like to thank Alex Theodoridis and three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions on the manuscript and Brad Bilsback for research assistance.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The authors declare the human subjects research in this article was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Merced, and the certificate number is provided in the appendix. The authors affirm that this article adheres to the APSA's Principles and Guidance on Human Subject Research.

REFERENCES

Blair, Graeme, Alexander Coppock, and Margaret Moor. 2020. "When to Worry about Sensitivity Bias: A Social Reference Theory and Evidence from 30 Years of List Experiments." *American Political Science Review* 11 (4): 1297–315.

Blair, Graeme, and Kosuke Imai. 2012. "Statistical Analysis of List Experiments." *Political Analysis* 20 (1): 47–77.

Cai, Yongshun. 2008. "Power Structure and Regime Resilience: Contentious Politics in China." *British Journal of Political Science* 38 (3): 411–32.

Chen, Dan. 2017. "Local Distrust and Regime Support: Sources and Effects of Political Trust in China." *Political Research Quarterly* 70 (2): 314–26.

Dickson, Bruce. 2016. *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Guriev, Sergei, and Daniel Treisman. 2020. "The Popularity of Authoritarian Leaders: A Cross-National Investigation." *World Politics* 72 (4): 601–38.

Huang, Haifeng, Chanita Intawan, and Stephen P. Nicholson. 2022. "In Government We Trust: Implicit Political Trust and Regime Support in China." *Perspectives on Politics*, 1–19. doi:10.1017/S1537592722001037.

Intawan, Chanita, and Stephen P. Nicholson. 2018. "My Trust in Government is Implicit: Automatic Trust in Government and System Support." *Journal of Politics* 80 (2): 601–14.

Jiang, Junyan, and Dali L. Yang. 2016. "Lying or Believing? Measuring Preference Falsification from a Political Purge in China." *Comparative Political Studies* 49 (5): 600–34.

Johns, Robert. 2005. "One Size Doesn't Fit All: Selecting Response Scales for Attitude Items." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 15 (2): 237–64.

Li, Lianjiang. 2016. "Reassessing Trust in the Central Government: Evidence from Five National Surveys." *The China Quarterly* 225 (February): 100–21.

Li, Xiaojun, Weiyi Shi, and Boliang Zhu. 2018. "The Face of Internet Recruitment: Evaluating the Labor Markets of Online Crowdsourcing Platforms in China." *Research & Politics* 5 (1): 1–8.

Nicholson, Stephen P., and Haifeng Huang. 2022. "Replication Data for: Making the List: Reevaluating Political Trust and Social

Desirability in China." Harvard Dataverse. Dataset. https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/KAHHWQ.
Robinson, Darrel, and Marcus Tannenberg. 2019. "Self-Censorship of Regime Support in Authoritarian States: Evidence from List Experiments in China." *Research & Politics* 6 (3): 1–9.
Shi, Tianjian. 2001. "Cultural Values and Political Trust: A Comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan." *Comparative Politics* 33 (4): 401–19.
Snyder, Mark. 1974. "Self-Monitoring of Expressive Behavior." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 30 (4): 526–37.
Tang, Wenfang. 2016. *Populist Authoritarianism: Chinese Political Culture and Regime Sustainability*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Shirk, Susan L. 2018. "China in Xi's 'New Era': The Return to Personalistic Rule." *Journal of Democracy* 29 (2): 22–36.
Zhong, Yang. 2014. "Do Chinese People Trust Their Local Government, and Why? An Empirical Study of Political Trust in Urban China." *Problems of Post-Communism* 61 (3): 31–44.