The Washington Post
Democracy Dies in Darkness

MONKEY CAGE

The U.S. is using harsh language about the Chinese Communist Party. Who joins the CCP — and why?

The motivations for becoming a party member have changed over time

Analysis by Jessica Chen Weiss
December 3, 2020 at 9:40 a.m. EST

Note to readers: The Trump administration issued new visa restrictions for Chinese Communist Party members this week. In light of this development, we have republished this recent interview with China expert Bruce Dickson.

In a July 23 speech at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expanded on the Trump administration's hard line on China, drawing a distinction between the Chinese people and the Chinese Communist Party.

Earlier this month, the Trump administration reportedly considered a travel ban on Chinese Communist Party members. What do we know about the CCP, and the power of party membership? I contacted Bruce Dickson, an expert on Chinese politics and the author of "The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival," for his insights into who joins the Chinese Communist Party and how the party has changed over time.

Jessica Chen Weiss: From your survey research, what do we know about why Chinese citizens join the Communist Party?

Bruce Dickson: The motivations for joining the CCP have changed over time. My surveys found that people who joined the party during the Maoist era (1949-1976) were more likely to report ideological reasons for joining the party. Those who joined later — especially the post-1989 cohort — mostly joined for the career benefits, and not just to work for the party or the government.

Even private firms see party membership as advantageous. It indicates that someone has already been vetted and found to have a clean background. Moreover, party members are more likely to have higher education and skills seen as useful in business.

This material incentive for joining the party created questions about party loyalty. Once Xi Jinping became CCP General Secretary in 2013, the pace of admitting new members slowed down dramatically. Party membership grew by around 1 percent a year because Xi thought too many people who were not necessarily loyal to the party

The rate of growth in CCP membership bottomed out in 2017 and has increased slightly in the past two years. Under Xi, there has been renewed emphasis on political study for all party members. This does not necessarily change hearts and minds, but does convey what is expected of party members in Xi's China.

JCW: How have CCP ideological requirements changed over time, including the party's attitude toward private entrepreneurs and what you term "red capitalists?"

BD: Soon after the 1989 demonstrations in Tiananmen Square and elsewhere in China, the party instituted an official ban on recruiting private entrepreneurs into the CCP. This made good ideological sense: Capitalists are supposed to be the class enemies of communists, and small-scale entrepreneurs supported the demonstrators by delivering food and other supplies during the 1989 protests.

But the ban soon ran into conflict with local political realities because party and government officials needed cooperation from private entrepreneurs. Officials needed to produce economic growth to get promoted, and the private sector was the source of almost all new growth, new jobs and, above all, new tax revenue. These officials tried to circumvent the ban by claiming that they were not, technically speaking, capitalists because their firms were not registered as private enterprises but as joint-stock or collective enterprises.

Eventually, CCP leaders recognized the need to update the official ideology to match the unofficial practice of co-opting entrepreneurs into the party. That's where the "three represents" theory came into play. So the CCP now represents not just the three "revolutionary" classes — workers, farmers and soldiers — but also the advanced productive forces (a euphemism for entrepreneurs), advanced culture and the interests of the vast majority of the Chinese people. Many in China mocked this expansive definition as self-serving, but the move reflected the CCP's need to justify its actions with an ideological gloss, even if it meant rewriting its ideology.

This ideological change did not lead to a surge of capitalists joining the CCP, however. For the most part, those who wanted to join had already done so. And many nonmembers remained keen to limit the party's interference in their businesses.

China's red capitalists have not promoted democracy, as the party once feared. Recent research shows that those who get co-opted into China's legislative institutions do so to protect their firms from official predation, rather than promote political reform.

JCW: Officially, the Chinese Communist Party has 92 million members. Are there ways to disaggregate and differentiate who among these party members or leaders are more involved with policymaking?

BD: Very few CCP members would be considered policymakers. According to the most recent statistics released by the CCP about its members, only 8.4 percent worked for party and government organs. The rest have jobs outside the state bureaucracy or are retired (20.3 percent).

However, the flip side tells a different story: Anyone who holds a position of authority is almost certainly a party member. That includes not just within the party and government bureaucracies, but also in the military, state-owned enterprises, universities and schools, and hospitals.

organizations, it has only been interested in co-opting private entrepreneurs into the party, paying little attention to recruiting leaders of social organizations.

JCW: Demographically, only 16 percent of Communist Party members joined under Xi Jinping. Are there meaningful differences — in terms of ideological commitment, unquestioning loyalty or deference — among different cohorts of CCP members?

BD: Not surprisingly, those who joined in the post-Mao era and were most likely to say they saw party membership as helpful to their careers don't have a particularly strong ideological commitment. When controlling for education, gender, income, ethnicity and urban-rural status, our surveys found these younger cohorts of CCP members had levels of regime support that were not statistically different from nonparty members, including others of their same cohort.

However, that is still a good deal of support: On a 0-10 scale (where 10 shows the highest level of support), the youngest cohort of CCP members averaged 7.7. This was not as high as those who joined during the Maoist era, who averaged 8.6, but still relatively high.

In short, being a party member does not necessarily make you a cheerleader for the regime.

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