

Evaluating Political Support in Authoritarian Regimes: evidence from China

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Abstract

This manuscript checks two mechanisms of political support in China. Redistribution literature argues that income inequality, especially relative deprivation will increase the demand for political reform and redistribution in an authoritarian country ([Acemoglu et al., 2013](#), [Yitzhaki \(1979\)](#)). On the other hand, socio-economic development changes value systems and people's ability to think critically. As a result, those people with higher levels of cognitive ability and political awareness will favor democracy in an authoritarian context ([Croke et al., 2016](#)). This leads to a different prediction of with the accountability literature: which predicts that citizens will reward the government if the economy is good ([Anderson, 2000](#)). Considering China's recent rapid economic growth, can Chinese government circumvent demand for liberalization due to the economic performance? This study uses a national opinion survey in China to test these mechanisms.

Key Words: Political Support, Economic Growth, Government Performance, China

1 Introduction

Since the Reform and Opening policy in 1978, China has undergone remarkably changes in economy, social structures and political structures. According to World Bank, China's GDP per capita increases from 154.97 USD in 1978 to 6807.43 USD in 2013, and World Bank has classified China as a middle income country. Dramatically changes in economic development secures Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) dominance in the post-Mao era ([Holbig and Gilley, 2010](#)), many Chinese citizens express "special gratitude" to CCP for the remarkable increase of economy as well as their living standards ([Pei, 2012](#)). On the other hand, CCP justifies the authoritarian rule as "the only possible and correct path" for Chinese people's sake, "Western Democracies are not suitable in China" ([Zhong and Chen, 2013](#)).

Stable authoritarian ruling accompanied by rapid economic growth makes China a unique case in comparative politics. On one hand, economic development have dramatically shifted people's lifestyles: ordinary citizens can now afford modern appliances such as TV sets, computers, washing machines, automobiles etc., and many Chinese families can even send their children abroad for better education. Many scholars thus conclude that Chinese people are in favor of the strong nondemocratic governance because of rapid economic growth ([Chen and Dickson, 2008](#)). On the other hand, economic growth does not unilaterally increase political support. [Huntington \(2008\)](#) made the famous argument that rapid economic growth often comes with dramatically changes of society, which brings about regime instability. With respect to the China case, economic growth brings about noticeable gaps between the rich and poor, government officials and the common citizens. Many Chinese citizens express their dissatisfaction of inequality, limited degrees of political rights and freedom of speech online ([King, Pan and Roberts, 2013](#), [Mackinnon \(2011\)](#) [Pan and Xu \(2015\)](#)). Protests on land reform and housing are not unusual titles in Chinese media ([Li, 2008](#), [Kennedy \(2010\)](#)).

On one hand, China's rapid economic growth broadens the inter-class gaps. The GINI coefficient increases from 30 in 1980 to about 50 in 2010 ([Solt, 2009](#)). Scholars emphasize that income inequality is often the cause of regime transition. [Boix \(2003\)](#) for example, argues that income inequality increases the demand for redistribution of the poor, which is an important factor explaining democratization. On the other hand, economic growth also changes the urban-rural relations, industrialization, and even the value systems. [Lipset \(1959\)](#) holds positive views about economic growth, arguing that the "by-product" of development like education, civil-society and participation are the "prerequisites" of democracy. Since economic development not only changed Chinese citizen's physical well-beings but also cognitive ideas, it is worthwhile to test the relation between economic development and political attitudes towards a nondemocratic government ([Zhai, 2015](#)).

While the democratization literature holds a general positive link between development and democracy¹, studies on citizen-government relations in democratic contents show that voters value the economic performance of the government and vote accordingly

¹some hold more nuanced arguments like [Przeworski and Limongi \(1997\)](#)

(Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000). Although previous economic voting studies are based on democratic elections, there is no particular reason that citizens living in authoritarian countries would NOT value government performance. In fact, Lewis-Beck, Tang and Martini (2014) show that the vote-popularity function can be applied to nondemocratic settings like China. Therefore, instead of the negative relationship between economic development and demand for democracy; retrospective evaluation theory holds that good government performance will yield solid political support.

2 Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 Inequality

Modernization theory holds that social-economic development includes a multi-stage process towards democracy. Accordingly, economic development will bring about higher levels of literacy, education, higher income and better living standards. It is argued that when people are economically better off, they will engage in many political activities and struggle for more political rights. This general pattern received some weak empirical support (such as Boix and Stokes 2003), but it has also been criticized for its unclear causal mechanism. Later Scholars refine modernization theory and propose two general causal mechanisms linking modernization and democratization together: through inequality and redistribution of wealth and through the transition of culture and values.

In the elite-citizen game-theory model, inequality plays the pivotal role in determining the potential probability of democratic transition (Acemoglu and Robinson 2005. Boix 2003). Boix (2003) argues that high inequality levels will increase citizens' dissatisfaction on government and increase demand for political reform. According to Kuznets (1955), rapid economic growth often comes with increasing gap of income inequality. And as a result of enlarging income inequality, people will demand political reform and redistribution. Therefore, we have:

Hypothesis 1 (Inequality): Rapid economic growth increases income gap, and consequently triggers people's demand for political democracy.

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2.2 Education and critical capacities

Cultural explanations of modernization theory focus on the changes in the social and cultural realms. It argues that modernization process enhances people's cognitive ability and critical thinking. Besides, the dramatic social-economic changes may influence previous value systems as well (Welzel et al. 2003). This explanation received support in political behavior and political psychology studies (e.g. Geddes and Zaller 1989, Zaller

1992, Truex 2014). With respect to the China case, Scholars also found empirical support for the Changing pattern of Chinese value system and ideology (Pan and Xu 2015, Yang and Tang 2010, Zhong and Chen 2013). Since authoritarian rules highlights obedience and respect to authority, it is inherently incompatible with critical thinking and self-expression values. A natural consequence is that people who think critically tend to be dissatisfied with authoritarian ruling:

Hypothesis 2 (Critical Thinking): Modernization process increases citizens' ability of thinking critically (about politics), consequently they will demand more political rights and higher levels of liberty.

2.3 Retrospective Evaluation

Unlike modernization theory which depicts the path to democracy as a unidimensional route, "economic voting" literature model political support as a function of government performance, especially on economic and social issues (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000). Although citizens in a authoritarian country do not vote the way in democracies, they can express their opinions in informal ways. For instance, in a village-level field Lily Tsai identifies that accountability exists in rural China (Tsai 2007). Therefore, a natural hypothesis is that people who highly evaluate government performance in socio-economic issues tend to support the incumbent elites. Unfortunately, the data structure I have does not contain important questions on socio-tropic evaluation; nevertheless, the CGSS 2003 survey includes related questions on 'pocket book' voting, respondents were asked to compare their income and living condition to 3 years ago/5 years ago and 10 years ago, as well as prospective evaluation (compare with what it may be 3 years/5 year/10 years later). Consequently we have the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3 (Retrospective Evaluation): Citizens whose economic condition increased/decreased over the past years tend to support incumbent governance/political reforms

Hypothesis 4 (Prospective Evaluation): Citizens who expect their economic condition will increase/decrease in the future years tend to support incumbent governance/political reforms

Overall, I highlight four possible mechanisms linking economic development with political support. On the other hand, 'Economic Voting' literature comes from experiences in Western democracies. According to Przeworski and Limongi (1997), China should be in transition to democracy as it has passed the "transition bar" of \$4000. However, China seems to be a stable autocracy now and since CCP is in control of the military, a coup is unlikely. On the other hand, one might doubt the applicability of "Economic Voting" theory in a nondemocratic context: can authoritarian leaders generate political support by rapid economic development? This study provides a test for both theories based on survey data in China as well as provincial level economic growth indicators.

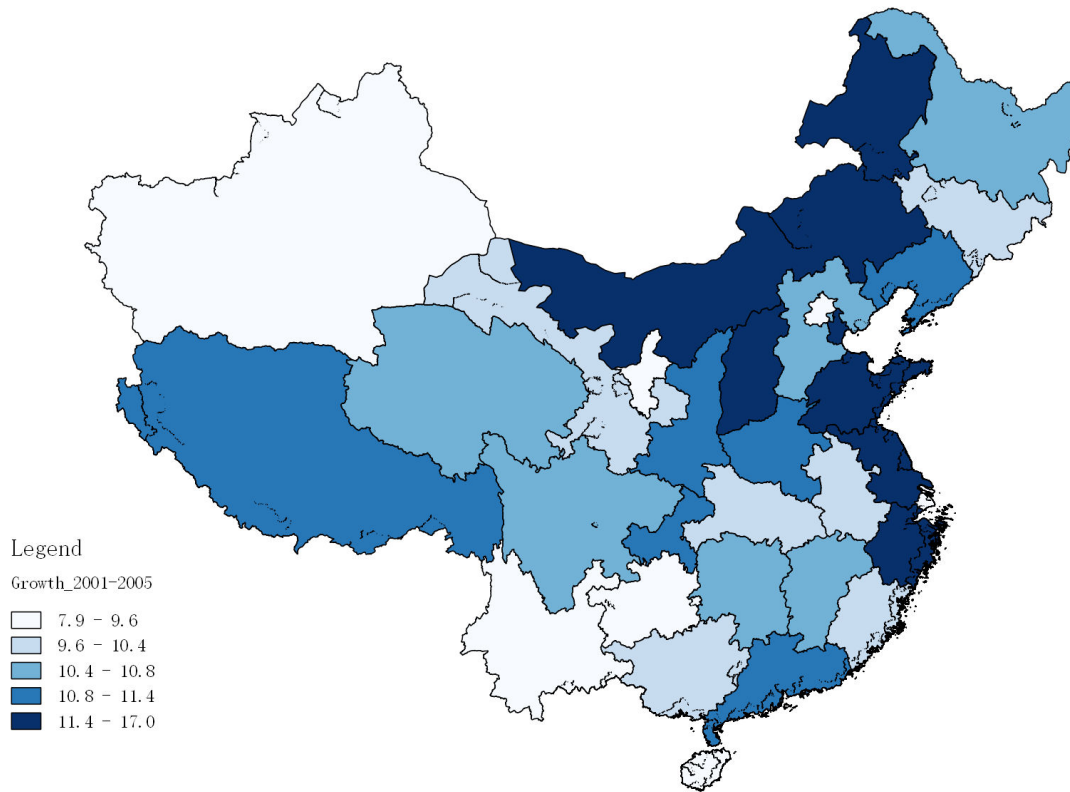


Figure 1: Provincial Level Average GDP Growth Rate, 2001-2005

3 Data

Data in this study comes from two sources: provincial level economic growth data is collected from China Compendium of Statistics (1950-2009), Figure 1 shows the average provincial level growth rate from year 2001 to year 2005. As shown in the map, there are noticeable provincial level variations in economic growth. In general, coastal provinces tend to grow faster than inner provinces. Inner Mongolia and Shanxi Province also have a high GDP growth rate, however these provinces heavily rely on their natural resources.

Individual level data is from the 2006 China General Social Survey (CGSS). CGSS is a annual/biannual survey of China's urban and rural households and it started at 2003. Comparing with other surveys such as China Value and Ethnic Survey (featured in Yang and Tang 2010) and World Value Survey, CGSS comes with a more representative sample and much larger observations. The survey was administered by Renmin University and other regional institutions in China. In 2006, the survey was conducted between September and November, 10151 households in 28 provinces (out of 31) were interviewed. Although this survey did not focus on citizens' political opinion, it nevertheless provide questions

directly and indirectly reflecting people's political preferences (Jiang and Yang 2015). Response rate in the 2006 survey was about 51.10% and the missing value rate was about 3.41%.

3.1 Dependent Variable

I use two different dependent variables in this manuscript to measure trust in government and demand for democracy. CGSS 2006 asks many related questions on politics, governance and political reform. With respect to political trust, CGSS asks respondents to rate the credibility of government official announcements based on the following question setting:

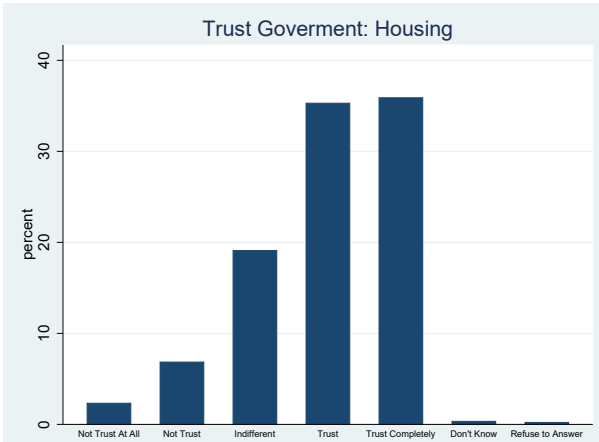
To what degree do you trust government reports/announcements on: housing; stock market; employment situation for college graduates; corruption; income inequality; domestic security; deaths in mining industry; deaths in earthquake

Ratings range from "Not trust at all" to "completely trust". I reversed the coding scale to make it positively related to trust in government. Since this question ask people's attitude towards government, one concern is that people may perform self-censorship and hide their responses (Lozenren 2014, Jiang and Yang 2015). While there is no sufficient mechanism to tease out the 'inflated' support for government, the unresponsive rates of these questions are as low as 1%. Self-censorship and social desirability bias is a real challenge in conducting opinion research in nondemocracies. Scholars point out that citizens tend to fake their preferences to escape from potential punishment (Wintrobe 1998, Li 2008). In an extreme condition when everyone hides his true ideas, we may observe uniformly high levels of political trust and political support. Fortunately the responses of trust question have a good amount of variation. Since we assume the survey data on political trust will be inflated, statistically it will show less variations of dependent variable and make it less likely to display statistically significant patterns. In other words, if we can detect significant results when dependent variable is inflated, our results should be robust under 'true' conditions. The raw distributions of responses on government trust are shown in Figure 2:

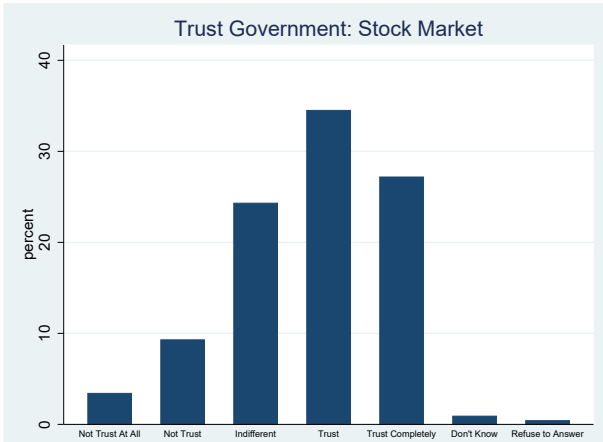
3.2 Independent Variable

The main independent variables in this study is economic growth, critical thinking ability and economic evaluation. Economic growth is models as provincial-level average GDP growth rate before 2006 (which is the survey year), I calculated 3-year average, 5-year average and 10-year average respectively. This is the level-2 data in my analysis, and based on modernization theory, we should have the following two paths:

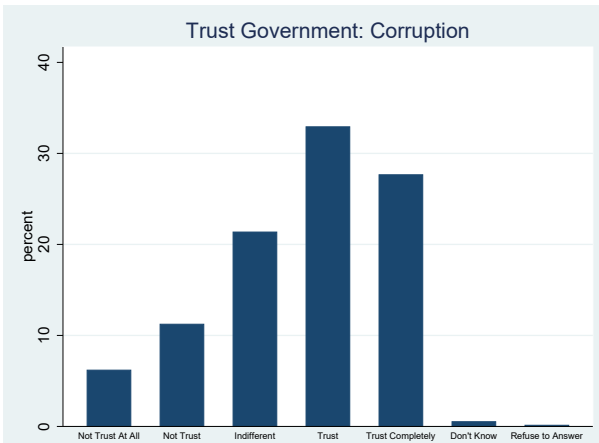
- Path 1: Economic growth \Rightarrow Increased Income Inequality \Rightarrow less support for the CCP government and demand for democracy



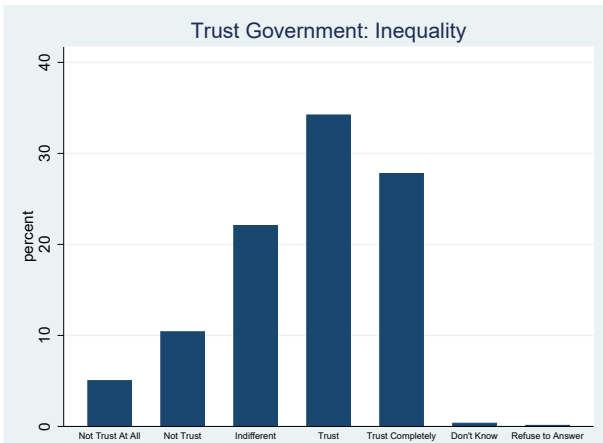
(a) Housing



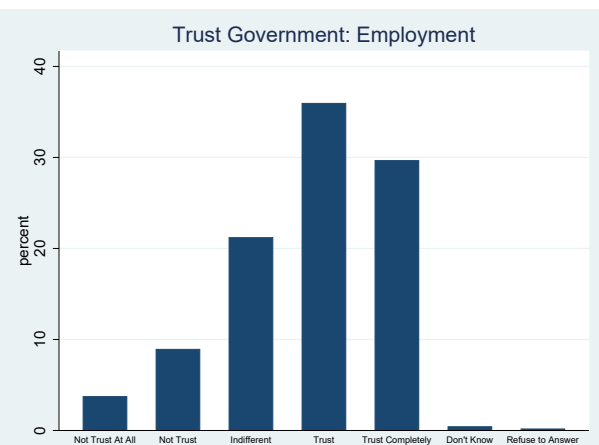
(b) Stock Market



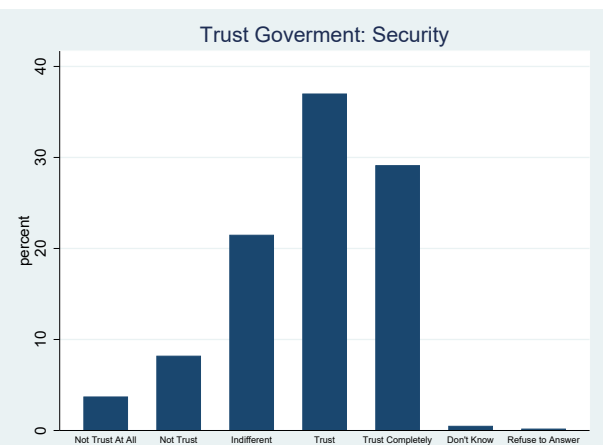
(c) Corruption



(d) Inequality



(e) Employment



(f) Security

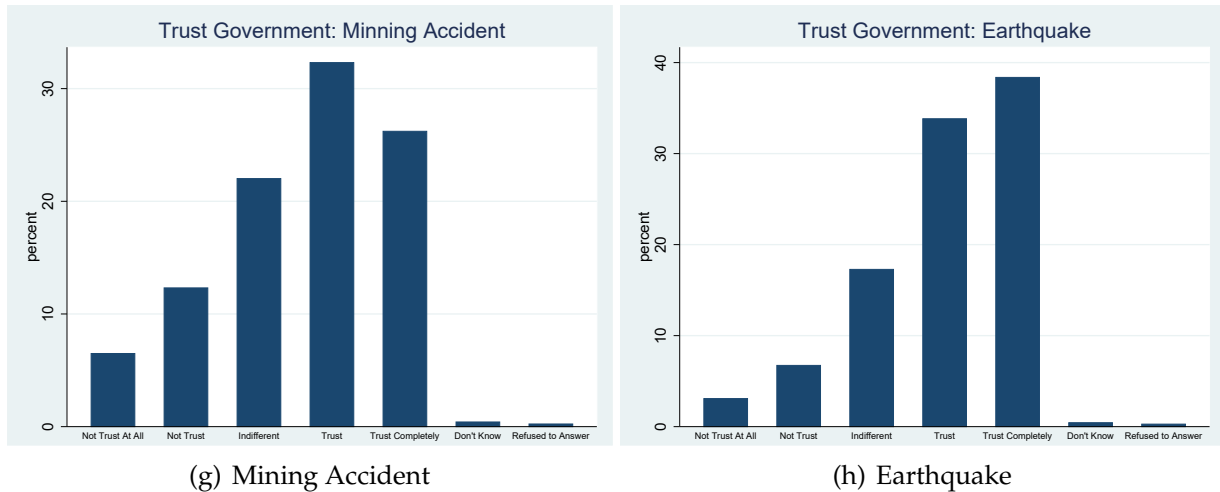


Figure 2: Distribution of Trust in Government (Continued)

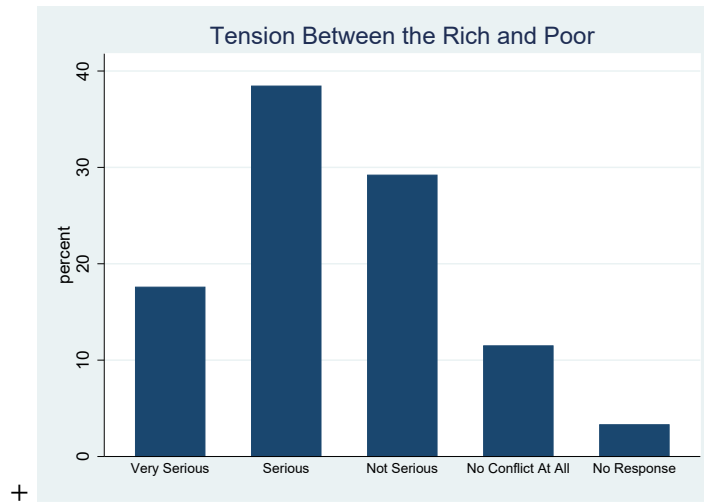


Figure 3: Tension Between the Rich and Poor

- Path 2: Economic growth \Rightarrow Ability to Think Critically \Rightarrow less support for the CCP government and demand for democracy

Income inequality is based on the following question:

What do you think of the tension between the rich and the poor: very serious; serious; not that much; no conflict at all.

The basic distribution is shown in Figure 3

Critical Thinking is based on the following 3 questions, distributions are shown in Figure 4.

1. It is always good to follow the government decisions (range from strongly agree to strongly disagree)

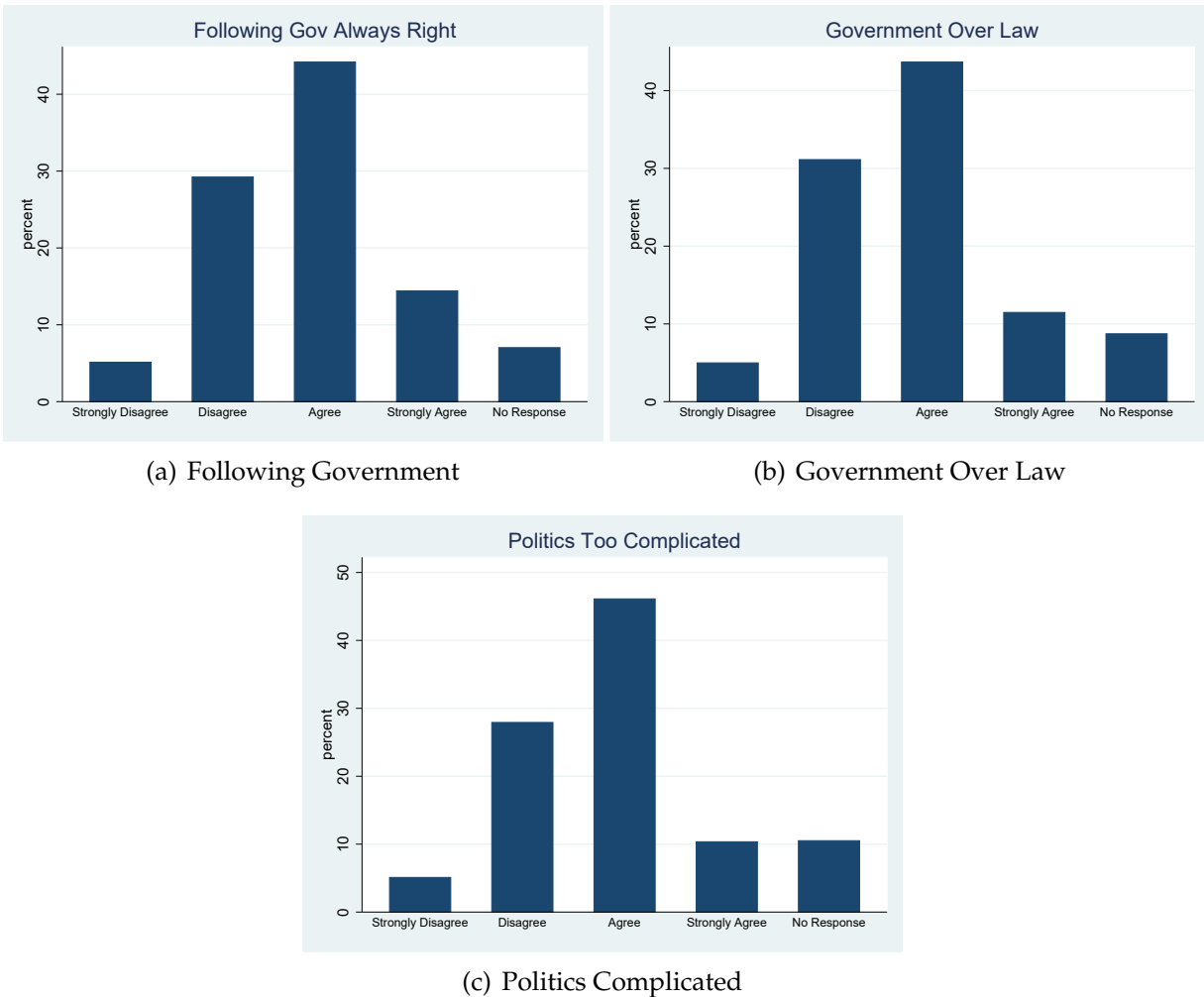


Figure 4: Distribution of Critical Thinking Components

2. Law should be based on government decisions (range from strongly agree to strongly disagree)
3. Politics is too complicated that I cannot understand (range from strongly agree to strongly disagree)

I model economic evaluation on retrospective evaluation and prospective evaluation. Retrospective evaluation is based on the following questions from CGSS 2006:

Compare to 3 years ago, your income/asset/position/working condition/social class has: increased/no changes/decreased

Prospective self-evaluation is based on similar questions but respondents were asked about their expectations in the future.

What is your expectation of your income/asset/position/working condition/social class after 3 years: increase/no changes/decrease

According to retrospective evaluation theory, we will have the following patterns:

- Positive retrospective evaluation is related to positive attitude towards government and less demand for democracy.
- Negative retrospective evaluation is related to negative attitude towards government and more demand for democracy.
- Positive Prospective evaluation is related to positive attitude towards government and less demand for democracy.
- Negative Prospective evaluation is related to negative attitude towards government and more demand for democracy.

I also include other demographic variables like CCP party membership, gender, age, household income and education.

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