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 inequlity, 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, education especially changes value systems. As a result, those people with higher education 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 success? This study uses a national opinion survey in China to test these mechanisms.

Key Words: Political Support, 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. 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)).

Income inequality is often a by-product of rapid economic growth. 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-rular relations, industrizalization, and even the value systems. Lipset (1959) holds positive views about economic growth, arguing that the development of education, civil-society and pariticipation are the "prerequsites" 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 democracy [1], studies on citizen-government relations in democratic contents show that voters value the economic performance of the government and vote accordingly

[1] some 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.

Clearly existing literature have different predictions of citizens' attitude towards government. Particularly there is a contradiction between modernization theory and the citizen-government linkage argument: while the modernization theory argues that economic development finally leads to a regime transition; the citizen-government linkage argument holds a conditional view: for those who receive benefits from the existing system, they tend to support the government; for those who are relatively worse off, they will hold less supportive opinions.

2 Theory and Hypothesis

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 moderate empirical support (such as Boix and Stokes (2003)), but it has also been criticized for its unclear causal mechanism. Later on 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 (Welzel, Inglehart and Klingmann, 2003).

2.1 Inequality

Inequality is one of the key explanatory variables that drive regime transitions. 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. Consequently, increasing level income inequality will lead to higher demand for political reform and income redistribution in nondemocratic regimes. China's economic boom comes with sharp rise of income gaps. While the overall income of average citizens increased over the last several decades, the gaps between the rich and the poor also enlarged. In the individual level, this can be interpreted as the expected income distance between myself and the rich. Therefore my first hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1 (Inequality): Income inequality leads to less support for the government and higher demand for democracy.

2.2 Education and value changes

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, Inglehart and Klingmann, 2003). This explanation received support in political behavior and political psychology studies e.g. (Geddes and Zaller, 1989, Truex (2014)). A study on Zimbabwe shows that education may decrease political participation in the authoritarian environment: respondents with higher education tend to favor democratic values, and they use the non-participation as 'the weapon of the weaks' (Croke et al., 2016). Overall, they argue that educated citizens experience better economic outcomes, are more interested in politics, and are more supportive of democracy, but are also more likely to criticize the government and support opposition parties. 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)). In Pan and Xu (2015) particularly, their large online survey shows that college students tend be more liberal and pro-market, and less supportive of the authoritarian ruling. Since authoritarian rules highlights obedience and respect to authority, it is inherently incompatible with critical thinking and self-expression values, which is often a result of education. Therefore, we can expect people who receive higher education tend to be less supportive of the Chinese government:

Hypotehsis 2: People with higher education tend to think more critically about the government. In the authoritarian context, people with higher education will view government in a less favorable way.

2.3 Retrospective Evaluation

In the retrospective evaluation model, citizens hold government accountable through their (economic) performance. "Economic voting" literature models political support as a function of government performance, especially on economic and social issues (Anderson, 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. We expect that citizens whose living conditions were better off in the past few years will be more supportive of the CCP government. Consequently we have the following hypothesis:

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

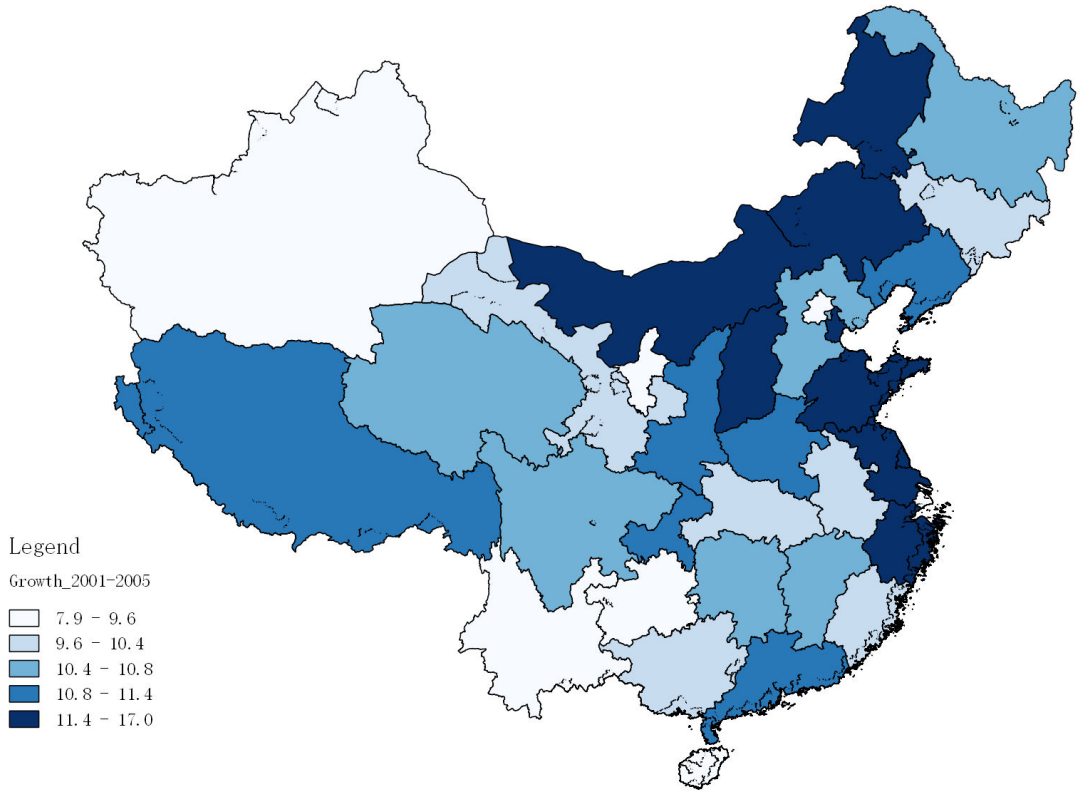

Figure 1: Provincial Level Average GDP Growth Rate, 2001-2005

3 Data and Method

Data in this study comes from two sources: provincial level economic 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 rely heavily on their natural resources. We are modeling the provincial level inequality as one of the measurement of inequality. In particular, we expect citizens from the poorer regions be more unsatisfied with the current regime.

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%. Although released 10 years ago, it is still the most comprehensive general survey of political attitudes. CGSS has different emphases every year, for instance, the 2008 one focuses a lot on population and social-welfare, thus only a few political attitudes questions were asked.

3.1 Dependent Variable

The main dependent variable is a set of variables measuring citizen's attitudes on Chinese government. CGSS 2006 asks many related questions on politics, governance and political reform. We pick questions related with government support, political trust and demand for democracy. These questions are:

> It is always good to follow the government
>
> Law can only be effective with the support of the CCP government
>
> As long as the economy is good, there is no need for democracy

We also include a set questions asking government's credibility of certain aspects.

> 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.

The first set of questions ask people's general view about CCP government, the second set of questions address how credible government reports are. The distributions of these questions are shown in the appendix. One may expect that questions like these are quite sensitive thus we may receive an 'inflated' approval rating of the Chinese government. This certainly brings serious challenge of this project. However, the actual distributions are quite similar to a normal distribution with the most frequent responses in the middle. This adds some credibility of the survey results. We will discuss this problem further in the section "Self-Censorship".

3.2 Independent Variable

The main independent variables in this study are inequality, education, and policy evaluations. The first two variables are directly related to the modernization framework, while the third variable is connected to the citizen-government linkage approach.

To model inequality, we use both the macro-level and micro-level data. Since different provinces have different economic development conditions, the inter-provincial inequality

may impact individual level evaluations of the government. The current provincial inequality is not negligible: coastal provinces can be 4 times richer comparing to inner provinces. Besides, since the Reform and Open policy, Chinese government also put much more investment on coastal provinces. Therefore, we expect people living in inner provinces will on average be less supportive of the government.

In the micro-level, we model inequality 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.

Macro-level indicator like GINI cannot tell us the condition of each respondents. This relative question captures people's perceptions of the relative gaps between survey respondents and 'people in general'. The basic distribution is shown in appendix Figure 2. We expect people who experienced growth income inequality will demand some changes of the current political system. Since the provincial level data is above the individual level, we use a multilevel model first, and then using provincial level fixed effect to evaluate individual-level inequality perceptions.

Education is taken from the question on highest degree. In the previous discussion we hypothesize that education may be related to value system changes. To incorporate this, we include a political efficacy measurement:

> Politics is too complicated that I cannot understand (range from strongly agree to strongly disagree)

We expect political efficacy to be positive related with education. More educated individuals tend to have better knowledge on politics. On the other hand, we expect education to be negatively related to government evaluations.

We model economic evaluation on retrospective evaluation based on two sets of questions. Regarding with personal economic well-beings, we use the following question:

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

The second set of questions are derived on specific questions of the rural social-economic conditions. CCES 2006 asks a lot of questions asking villagers about the village facts, including: rural education, health, social welfare, social security, local village officer evaluations etc. We construct these set of retrospective evaluation of the rural sub-samples.

Other control variables are income, age, ethnicity, CCP members, parents' CCP membership etc.

3.3 Methods for Hypothesis Testing

We use a multilevel structural equation modeling to test the three hypothesis. SEM is preferred than regular OLS due to my data structure. First, the measurements of dependent

variables consisting of different related questions. There questions are related that running separate regressions will ignore the error covariance (Bollen, 1989). Besides, the credibility measurement includes 8 questions, using SEM is helpful in reducing measurement errors. While it is common to add these indicators together and make a new single indicator, this approach is incorrect in the sense that those measurement components may have different loadings. For instance, it could be the case that the first measurement questions account for the most views on credibility while the other two only act as auxiliary measurements. SEM is widely used in Psychology and behavioral science, recently in political science scholars start to use this technique as well (**?**, 2004)).

4 Addressing Self-censorship Problem

Studying public opinion under authoritarian context is often a very challenging task. Since this question ask people's attitude towards government, one concern is that people may perform self-censorship and hide their true preferences (Lorentzen, 2014, Jiang and Yang (2015)). Because political issue is highly censored in China, citizens are reluctant to reveal their true opinion. In survey methodology these issues are often named as ''sensitive question". Sensitive question provides measurement problems in social science research Surveys often has to assume answers are true and there's no liars (Glynn, 2013).

While there is no sufficient mechanism to filter 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 fabricate their preferences to escape from potential punishment (Wintrobe, 1998). 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.

On the other hand, if citizens do censor themselves, we assume that the effect of self-censorship will differ based on individual-level features. We can model the censorship effect with the following equation:

$$TrueAttitude_i = SurveyResponses_i + bias_i + \epsilon i \tag{1}$$

Tourangeau, Rips and Rasinski (2000) frame three different ways in which bias may exist. The first is the social desirability bias, in which researcher ask questions which are contradictory to social norms. For instance, question like 'Will you offer your seat to a handicapped person in a bus' will have social desirability issue, since helping the others is the social norm. The second mechanism is the disclosure to third party. Bias may happen

when a question is sensitive in the case if respondents fear disclosing their answers to agencies or individuals not directly involved in the survey. In this China case, respondents often fear that the survey is not completely confidential and the Chinese government may have the ability to track their answers. The fear of punishment may bias their responses. Third, survey question by itself can be intrusive, some questions are inherently offensive because they invade privacy.

We expect that citizens who are directly related to government may conduct more self-censored activities. Specifically, we expect CCP members and subjects who are currently working in the government-related sectors will answer questions in a favorable way. To deal with this we use a similar strategy in Bagozzi et al. (2015). To perform a zero-inflated count model, we recode the critical thinking questions on a scale from government-favorable to government unfavorable. Also we include the questions asking about citizens trust in government direct. Zero-inflated model is quite popular in recent IR studies, however, so far we did not find any literature using a zero-inflated model studying 'inflated' public opinion under authoritarian regimes [2]. Since this time questions are reversely-code, we expect the 'most-favorable' responses are inflated due to self-censorship. We code the 'most-favorable' responses as zeros and use party membership and occupation to predict the inflated part, and use the other explanatory variables to predict the uninflated ordered outcome.

$$\begin{cases} Pr(y_i = 0|\mathbf{X}) = g_{glm}(\mathbf{X}\eta) \\ Pr(y_i = j, j = 1,2,3,4|\mathbf{Z}) = g_{glm}(\mathbf{Z}\beta) \end{cases} \tag{2}$$

In the Equation (2), the $\mathbf{X}$ is the matrix of CCP membership and a series of occupation dummies. We are expecting that CCP membership and working in government-related sectors will contribute to the inflated zeros. $\mathbf{Z}$ is the matrix of all the other explaining variables including income, age, education, policy evaluations etc.

[2] often survey experiments like list experiment or conjoint experiment are used to detect the magnitude of bias in sensitive questions Corstange (2009)

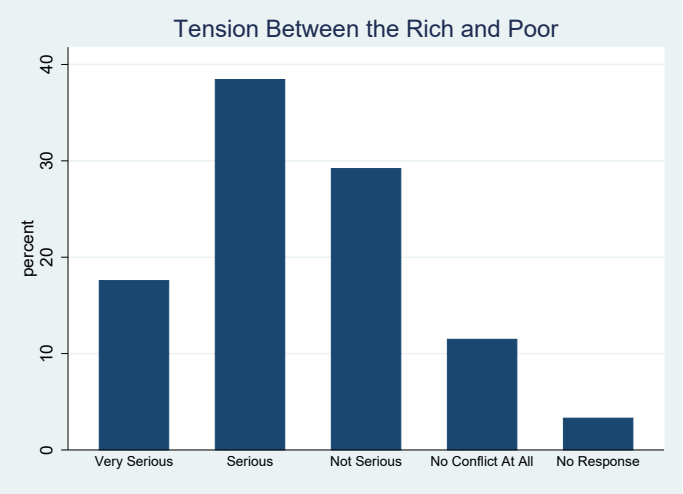

Figure 2: Tension Between the Rich and Poor

5 Appendix

5.1 Attitudes Questions

Figure **??**(Critical) reports the distribution of political attitudes questions.

5.2 Political trust questions

> 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". We reversed the coding scale to make it positively related to trust in government. The raw distributions of responses on government trust are shown in Figure 4:

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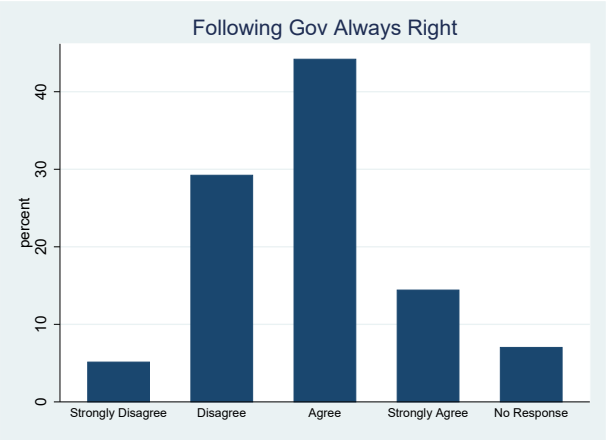
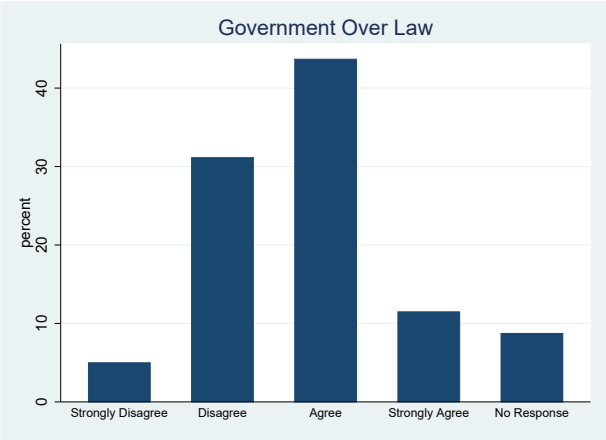
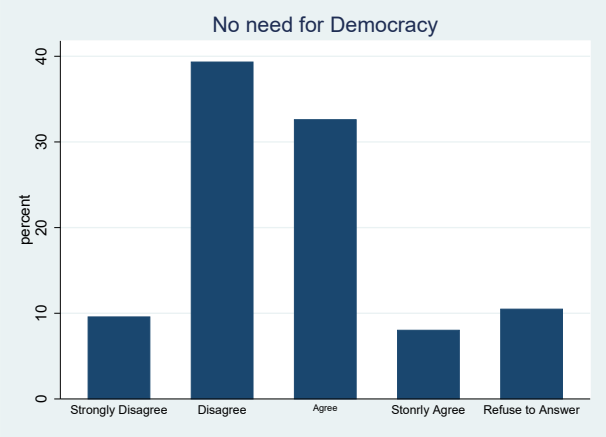


(a) Following Government

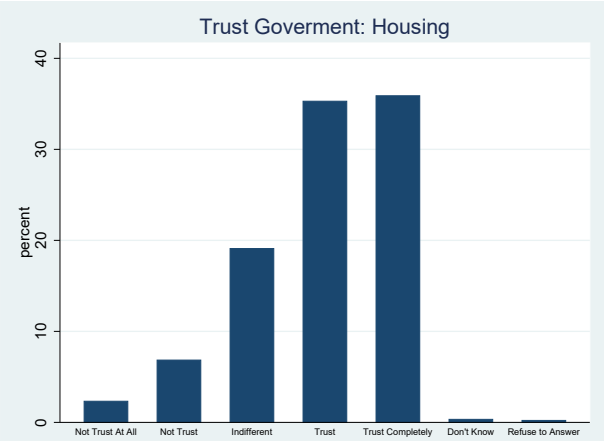


(b) Government Over Law

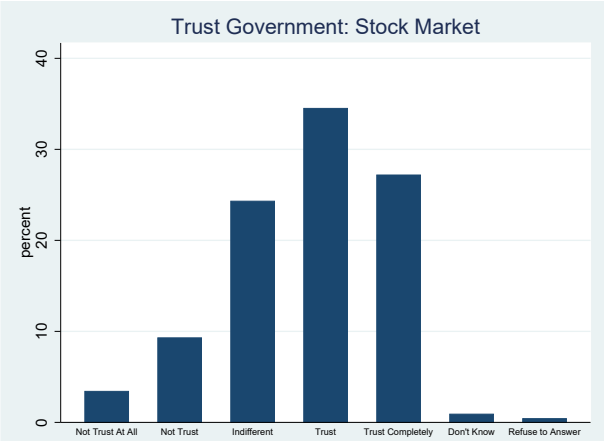


(c) No Need for Democracy

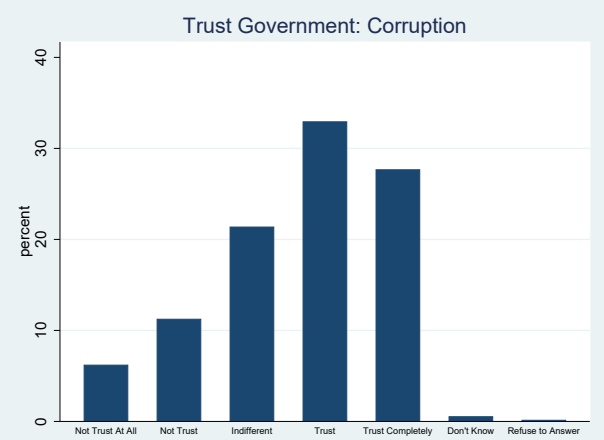
Figure 3: Political Attitudes



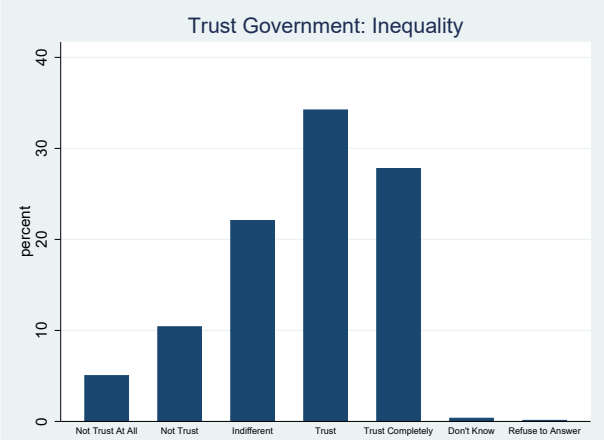
(a) Housing



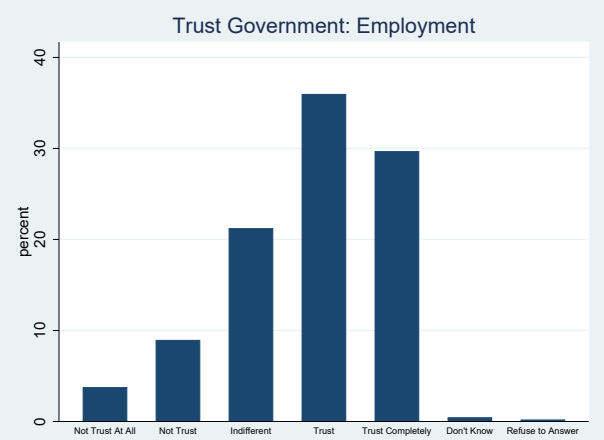
(b) Stock Market



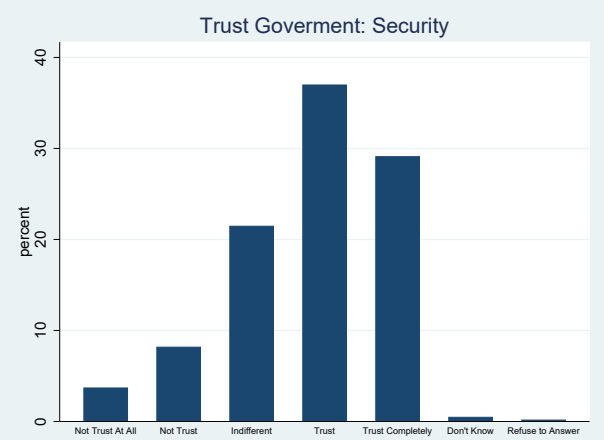
(c) Corruption



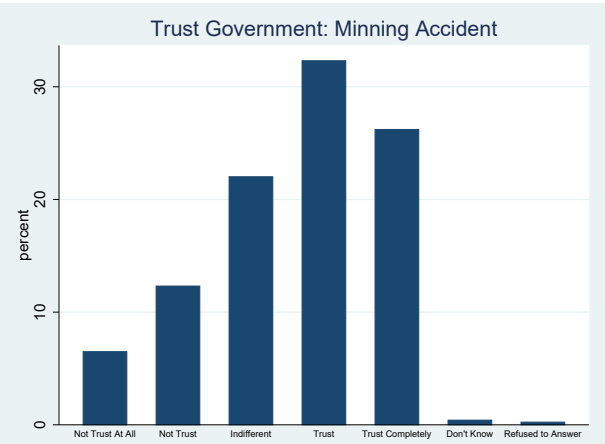
(d) Inequality



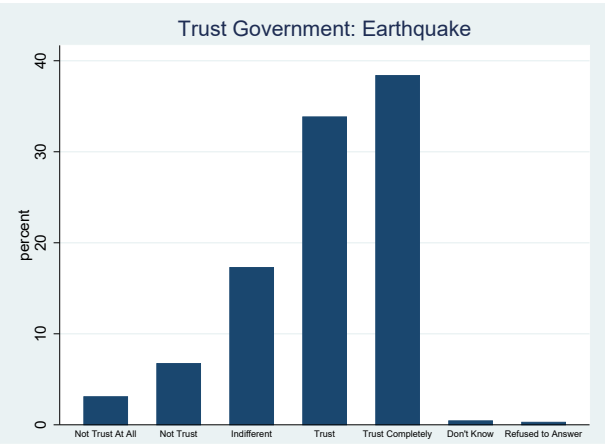
(e) Employment



(f) Security



(g) Mining Accident



(h) Earthquake

Figure 4: Distribution of Trust in Government (Continued)