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The civic participation in China survey: key trends in philanthropic and voluntary activities

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ABSTRACT

The Civic Participation in China Survey (CPCS) is a nationwide, randomized online study of urban residents, conducted in four waves between 2018 and 2024. It examines philanthropic and volunteering activities, as well as perceptions of citizenship and civic engagement. This article outlines the survey's methodology and analyzes trends in civic participation in mainland China, exploring connections to democratization and good governance. The study highlights complex dynamics in volunteerism under authoritarian rule. Volunteers acquire 'citizen skills' to navigate social problem solving, but generally reinforce state authority rather than challenge it. By 2024, respondents increasingly believed the state could handle crises independently, reflecting rising political centralization and performance legitimacy under Xi Jinping. Distinctions between state-led and citizen-led volunteerism emerge, with skepticism toward the authenticity of state-driven efforts. While civic participation fosters social trust and governance improvements, resistant 'bad citizens' reveal challenges in promoting philanthropy. These findings emphasize China's delicate balance in managing civil society.

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1. Introduction

Extant research on civic participation – notably in areas such as philanthropy and volunteerism – have explored the causal linkages to democratization¹ and good governance through transparent information sharing and social trust.² Most of this research originated in Western liberal democracies, with civic participation in authoritarian regimes often ignored or viewed with reserved suspect, unless it actively played a role in democratization.³

In recent years, however, scholars have extended this literature to incorporate civic participation in authoritarian regimes. For example, mainland China has experienced

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a dramatic increase in citizen-led⁴ volunteerism in the last decade with the number of registered volunteers growing from approximately 100 million in 2015 to 169 million in 2019.⁵ Conversely, while China has been consistently ranked, in global terms, at the bottom for charitable giving in the 2010s, this trend is on uptake in the 2020s.⁶ This unprecedented growth has catalyzed debates over the potential implications of increased civic participation, especially whether the relationship and interactions between the authoritarian state and civil society are shifting.⁷

Due in large part to challenges to data access in authoritarian polities, many of these studies have relied on limited evidence, and are often unable to generalize findings beyond small, non-representative samples.⁸ In response, we have developed a longitudinal survey project examining important trends in civic participation in China. In this article, we introduce the Civic Participation in China Surveys (CPCS), which occurred in four waves between 2018 and 2024.

The CPCS is a collection of individual-level information on philanthropy and volunteering behavior and paints a picture of authoritarian state-society relationships at a more nuanced level. The survey questions captured respondents' attitudes toward, and experiences with, philanthropy and volunteering (state-led and citizen-initiated), as well as their understanding of which channels should be used to solve different social problems. We describe below results from all four CPCS waves and share the entire dataset with the aim that scholars and practitioners studying civic participation in China and/or other (semi-)authoritarian regimes can incorporate further analytical insights into this burgeoning subfield of enquiry.

2. Data collection

The Civic Participation in China Survey ran in four waves and was administered by an online survey company. The first wave was administered in October 2018 with 1,402 valid responses. Wave 2 ran from December 2019 to February 2020 with 4,999 valid responses. Wave 3 occurred from December 2021 to February 2022 with 5,003 valid responses. Wave 4 data was collected between December 2023 and March 2024 ($N = 5,012$). CPCS utilized stratified, random sampling techniques, and surveyed six urban centers in mainland China: Beijing, Changsha, Kunming, Luzhou, Shanghai, and Wuhan. These urban areas span China's regional spectrum and vary in terms of both population size and local GDP.

CPCS included nearly 40 questions and involved both multiple choice and ranking questions in Mandarin Chinese. Individual demographic information gathered by the survey included: age, gender, number of children, city, and Communist Party membership. Socio-economic information collected included: level of education, occupation, and household income. Some questions asked respondents to choose all answers that were true, for example, asking respondents to choose all types of volunteering in which they have participated. Others asked respondents to rank answer choices, such as the appropriate type of organization to solve social problems.

For all four waves, IP addresses served as unique identifiers to ensure the same individual was not taking the survey more than once, and it reduced the potential for clustering amongst individuals. Although there are concerns about using online surveys, such as the ability to have representative samples, web-based surveys can be

as reliable as face-to-face surveys and might help collect information otherwise inaccessible in an authoritarian context.⁹ Validity was determined based on completeness, meaning that invalid surveys left one or more required questions incomplete. Due to potential sampling variances between CPCS and the national profile of urban residents, models were tested with both weighted and unweighted demographic variables using either Census or Statistical Yearbook data. There were no significant variations stemming from these tests.

Since CPCS Wave 2 survey was conducted just before and during the COVID-19 outbreak, we disaggregated Wave 2 data into two parts based on when the Chinese government announced that the virus was transmissible through human-to-human contact as a marker of delineation: Wave 2a (before and including 20 January 2020) has 3,114 valid responses; and Wave 2b (after 20 January 2020) has 1,185 valid responses.

In the analyses discussed next, volunteering is measured as both a dichotomous choice and by intensity, and we find that approximately 67% of the respondents have volunteered (ranging from 57% to 78% across all 4 waves), and that most are spending at least one to two hours per month volunteering. Additionally, roughly equal participation through both channels is found – state-led student organizations and government organizations, and citizen-organized international organizations and NGOs. State-led volunteering is done through state- or party-organized groups and is mediated by campus or provincial volunteering centers to match prospective volunteers with these organizations. In contrast, citizen-led volunteering is done through groups organized by concerned citizens and requires the volunteer to identify and apply for the volunteer opportunity directly.

Table 1 provides the summary statistics of all four waves, inclusive of the Wave 2a and Wave 2b. Overall, the demographic composition suggests that the samples are slightly younger and better educated than the general population – consistent with other recent online survey results in China.¹⁰ Thus, this sample allows one to generalize to younger, educated, urban Chinese. We indicate weighting in the individual analyses below, but overall did not find that weighting changed the direction or significance of the observed relationships.

3. Findings

There were several salient trends evident in all four CPCS waves pertaining to the relationships between civic participation and democratization first and then good governance. We first examine our findings relating to democratization, namely developing citizen skills and social trust, and then the relationship between civic participation and good governance.

3.1. Democratization

Most literature on civic participation in Western democracies theorizes a causal relationship between increased civic participation and a stronger democracy. In general, the scholarly debate revolves around the precise causal mechanisms for this relationship: citizens learning “democratic skills” such as collective mobilization and advocacy, or building social capital and trust to overcome the dilemma of collective action.¹¹

Table 1. Summary statistics of waves 1, 2 (2a and 2b), 3 and 4 (CPCS 2018, 2020, 2022, 2024).

		Wave 1		Wave 2		Wave 3		Wave 4	
		<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Gender	Male	595	42.44	2,461	49.23	2,418	48.33	2,500	49.88
	Female	807	57.56	2,538	50.77	2,585	51.67	2,512	50.12
Age	18–22	445	31.74	959	19.18	825	16.50	770	15.36
	23–29	568	40.51	981	19.62	1,322	26.43	1,249	24.92
	30–39	251	17.90	1,416	28.33	1,350	26.99	1,629	32.50
	40–49	103	7.35	971	19.42	879	17.58	838	16.72
	50–59	31	2.21	362	7.24	365	7.30	350	6.98
	60+	4	0.29	310	6.20	260	5.20	176	3.51
Marital Status	Single			1,997	39.95	1,427	28.52	1,346	26.86
	Married			2,021	40.43	2,783	55.63	3,006	59.98
	Relationship			864	17.28	612	12.23	559	11.15
	Divorced			117	2.34	181	3.62	101	2.02
<i>N</i> of Children	0	904	64.48	3,077	61.55	2,749	54.95	2,369	47.27
	1	323	23.04	1,386	27.73	1,475	29.48	1,817	36.25
	2	151	10.77	470	9.40	686	13.71	760	15.16
	3+	24	1.71	66	1.32	93	1.86	66	1.32
		335	23.89	674	13.48	632	12.63	690	13.77
Communist Party Membership	Yes								
	No	1,067	76.11	4,325	86.52	4,371	87.37	4,322	86.23
Communist Party Membership (Parents)	Yes	430	30.67	842	16.84	833	16.65	910	18.16
	No	972	69.33	4,157	83.16	4,170	83.35	4,102	81.84
Highest Educational Attainment	Primary	186	13.27	701	14.02	605	12.10	371	7.40
	Secondary	297	21.18	936	18.72	1,199	23.97	821	16.38
	Tertiary	919	65.55	3,362	67.25	3,198	63.94	3,820	76.22
Employment Status	Full Time	710	50.64	3,228	64.57	3,102	62.00	3,681	73.44
	Part Time	135	9.63	416	8.32	658	13.15	424	8.46
	Retired	18	1.28	256	5.12	265	5.30	190	3.79
	Unemployed	136	9.70	359	7.18	428	8.55	194	3.87
	Student	403	28.74	740	14.80	550	10.99	523	10.43
Have you ever volunteered?	Yes	801	57.13	3,343	66.87	3,408	68.12	3,908	77.97
	No	601	42.87	1,656	33.13	1,595	31.88	1,104	22.03
Have you ever donated to an organization or cause?	Yes	951	67.83	3,813	76.28	3,722	74.40	3,854	76.90
	No	451	32.17	1,186	23.72	1,281	25.60	1,158	23.10
Should the social credit system reward volunteering?	Yes	1,012	72.18	3,718	74.37	3,808	76.11	4,091	81.62
	No	390	27.82	1,281	25.63	1,195	23.89	921	18.38
Should the social credit system reward donations?	Yes	1,017	72.54	3,434	68.69	3,584	71.64	3,906	77.93
	No	385	27.46	1,565	31.31	1,419	28.36	1,106	22.07
Total		1,402	100.00	4,999	100.00	5,003	100.00	5,012	100.00
Employment Type	Foreign	87	10.02	332	8.51	290	7.20	419	9.76
	Government	119	13.71	217	5.56	132	3.28	247	5.75
	Private	318	36.64	1,908	48.92	1,366	33.94	1,576	36.69
	Social Organization	92	10.60	140	3.59	242	6.01	192	4.47
	SOE	201	23.16	596	15.28	741	18.41	1,056	24.59
	Other	51	5.88	46	1.18	95	2.36	101	2.35
	Agriculture			47	1.21	149	3.70	62	1.44
	Self-Employed		614	15.74	1,010	25.09	642	14.95	
Individual Income (in RMB)	0–4,999			1,268	32.51	1,228	30.51	752	17.51
	5,000–9,999			1,681	43.10	1,849	45.94	1,756	40.88
	10,000–14,999			669	17.15	659	16.37	1,141	26.57
	15,000–19,999			194	4.97	181	4.50	424	9.87
	20,000+			88	2.26	108	2.68	222	5.17
Household Income (in RMB)	0–4,999	397	45.74	247	6.33	263	6.53	151	3.52
	5,000–9,999	278	32.03	864	22.15	866	21.52	622	14.48
	10,000–14,999	111	12.79	1,208	30.97	1,305	32.42	1,114	25.94
	15,000–19,999	38	4.38	800	20.51	734	18.24	955	22.24
	20,000+	44	5.07	781	20.03	857	21.29	1,453	33.83
Total		868	100.00	3,900	100.00	4,025	100.00	4,295	100.00

Several demographic questions were added or modified in Wave 2, including marital status, employment type, and individual income. Questions about employment type and salary were optional, and therefore, total *N* varies.

This relationship observed in Western democracies have led many to suggest that building civil society and increasing volunteerism can bring about democratic change in authoritarian polities.¹² In fact, increasing controls on civil society and civic activity in (semi-)authoritarian regimes since the 2000s serve as evidence that non-democratic leaders believe in, and are fearful of, the link between civic participation and

Table 2. Multinomial regression analysis of “most useful channel for solving problems” based on volunteering participation (data from 2020 civic participation in China survey).

Response (<i>Base Response: Government</i>)	Coefficient (Weighted)	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.
What is the most useful channel for solving natural disasters?			
Family and Personal Networks	.134*	1.15	.071
Private Companies	-.086	0.917	.162
Social Organizations	.085	1.088	.061
Legal System	.072	1.074	.257
Online Promotional Activities and Media	-.088	0.916	.059
Protests and Demonstrations	-1.383***	0.251	.369
What is the most useful channel for solving pollution?			
Family and Personal Networks	.293***	1.341	.079
Private Companies	.425***	1.53	.114
Social Organizations	-.074	0.929	.058
Legal System	.018	1.018	.145
Online Promotional Activities and Media	-.003	0.997	.054
Protests and Demonstrations	-.949***	0.387	.249
What is the most useful channel for solving climate change?			
Family and Personal Networks	.421***	1.524	.078
Private Companies	.594***	1.812	.141
Social Organizations	.174**	1.19	.062
Legal System	.852***	2.344	.209
Online Promotional Activities and Media	.011	1.011	.049
Protests and Demonstrations	-1.226***	0.294	.288
What is the most useful channel for solving income inequality?			
Family and Personal Networks	-.131*	0.877	.058
Private Companies	.03	1.03	.071
Social Organizations	.141	1.152	.073
Legal System	-.169	0.845	.151
Online Promotional Activities and Media	-.026	0.975	.107
Protests and Demonstrations	-.01	0.99	.26
What is the most useful channel for helping “left-behind” children?			
Family and Personal Networks	.059	1.06	.055
Private Companies	.123	1.131	.164
Social Organizations	.044	1.045	.05
Legal System	.045	1.046	.139
Online Promotional Activities and Media	-.23**	0.795	.069
Protests and Demonstrations	-.502	0.607	.324
What is the most useful channel for solving local political corruption?			
Family and Personal Networks	.079	1.082	.15
Private Companies	-.323	0.724	.166
Social Organizations	.187	1.205	.096
Legal System	-.119*	0.888	.054
Online Promotional Activities and Media	-.225***	0.799	.054
Protests and Demonstrations	-.526***	0.591	.117
What is the most useful channel for solving insufficient school infrastructure?			
Family and Personal Networks	-.142	0.868	.132
Private Companies	.469**	1.599	.146
Social Organizations	-.145**	0.866	.052
Legal System	.073	1.076	.178
Online Promotional Activities and Media	-.227***	0.797	.062
Protests and Demonstrations	.100	1.106	.142

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$.

democracy.¹³ Studies looking at this relationship in non-democratic polities provide mixed results.¹⁴ Nevertheless, new findings based on the CPCS data suggest that while civic participation in authoritarian states does facilitate some aspects of democratic learning, the “citizen skills” may differ from those learned in Western democracies.¹⁵ As citizens in authoritarian states volunteer, they do not necessarily hold the government accountable; instead they learn skills that can further consolidate regime control such as joining political faction networks.

Comparing volunteers to the rest of the population, we find that volunteers learn to differentiate channels most appropriate for addressing varying issues as seen in the variation in Table 2; however, volunteers are not more likely to hold the government accountable for societal problems. In fact, when asked about the best channels for solving social problems, half to two-thirds of respondents selected “government” with the exception of “left-behind” children (only 39%). Given this overwhelming preference for government solutions, we try to gain leverage on the impact of volunteering by comparing which options respondents who volunteered ($N=3,343$) selected for solving social problems, relative to respondents who did not volunteer ($N=1,656$) controlling for gender, age, city, Communist Party membership, level of education, employment status, and household income. Table 2 shows how respondents who volunteer answered this question compared to all other respondents with the pattern of the odds that a volunteer would select an option other than government: a positive coefficient indicates that a respondent who volunteers is more likely to select the specified channel than government compared to non-volunteers.¹⁶ Although the multinomial regression analysis suggests a process of civic learning (“citizen skills”) is occurring, the volunteers prefer personal networks and government interventions, and are 75% less likely to select “protests and demonstrations” or “online promotional activities and media” over the base response of government.

As a robustness check, how respondents who volunteered answered two additional survey questions about social issues were tested. Respondents were promoted to answer “yes” or “no” to the following questions: Do you think the government is providing enough assistance to people in need (Question 32)? And should social organizations play a role in providing assistance to people in need (Question 33)? As the dependent variable was a binary variable, difference-in-means testing was used to analyze responses. Participation in volunteer activities did significantly impact how respondents answered both of these questions. Overall, respondents who volunteered were more likely to agree with both statements: that government support is sufficient, and that social organizations should help. For example, only 58.8% of non-volunteers agreed that government support was sufficient, while 67.8% of volunteers agreed.¹⁷ However, the difference was smaller for responses to whether social organizations should assist. Overall, 97.3% of respondents agreed with this statement, and the difference between volunteers and non-volunteers was only 0.011. Logistic regression modeling confirmed these findings in probabilistic terms: respondents who volunteered were 1.599 times (60%) more likely to agree that the government provides sufficient help to disadvantaged groups when the city variable was weighted ($p < 0.001$), and with the education variable weighted, respondents who volunteered were 1.466 times

(47%) more likely to agree with this statement ($p < 0.001$). Interestingly, respondents who volunteered were also 1.771 times (77%) more likely to agree that social organizations are required to assist disadvantaged groups with a weighted city variable ($p < 0.001$), and were 1.309 times as likely, or 31% more likely, to agree with this statement when the education variable was weighted ($p = 0.001$). Volunteers seem to learn “citizen skills” to differentiate appropriate actors across issue areas, and that social organizations may play a role in assisting the state in certain areas; however, volunteers are less likely to hold the government to account for these problems than non-volunteers.

Table 2 model specifications:

$$\log\left(\frac{P(Q_n = C_o)}{P(Q_n = C_r)}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 V_i + \beta_2 X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where $P(Q_n = C_o)$ indicates the probability of the dependent variable, i.e. the most useful channel for addressing different problems, being in category C_o given the predictor V_i as whether the respondent has been a volunteer or not. C_r is the reference category, which we set as the government in all of models. β_1 is the coefficient of interest, as we have reported in Table 2.

In addition to testing the steps in the causal logic linking civic participation to democratization, we directly ask when protest against the government is appropriate. We find that CPCS respondents do not support protest regardless of if they are a Party member or everyday citizens. For example, Table 2 shows that volunteers are more likely to believe that family and personal networks are more useful compared to the government as the reference for solving natural disasters, holding other variables constant (significant at the 5% confidence level). In comparison, volunteers are more likely to believe that protests and demonstrations are less useful than government as the reference facing disasters than non-volunteers, and the difference is highly significant ($p < 0.001$). Although protest is clearly not considered a good solution, one issue that might warrant protest was “insufficient school infrastructure,” perhaps since this problem is directly caused by government corruption and negligence as seen in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake.

We also find some limited support that volunteers are participating to build social trust; although many are volunteering for more instrumental reasons like to send signals to the government and future employers that they possess leadership skills and are emerging local community leaders.¹⁸ Although the survey does not have a direct measure of social trust before and after the volunteer experience, the question about why respondents volunteer shows that most are motivated to participate to increase social trust: a plurality of respondents ranked “have fun” first (40.5%), and ranked “make friends” second (31.0%). The second motivation to volunteer relates to increasing and signaling one’s status as a community leader for promotion or inclusion in political networks (e.g. resume building, or supervisor request); and the third motivation was civic in nature (help others or your nation). This shows some support that volunteers in an authoritarian setting desire gaining social trust, although the study cannot directly measure if they then build this trust by volunteering. Interestingly, when analyzing which type of volunteer selects “protests and demonstrations” as an appropriate channel

Table 3. Multinomial regression analysis of “most useful channel for solving problems?” based on state-led versus citizen-led volunteering channels (weighted by education).

		State-Led Channel		Citizen-Led Channel	
		Children	Inequality	Children	Inequality
Family and Personal Networks	Coef. (Edu. Weight)	−0.099*	0.055	−0.018	−0.127**
	Odds Ratio	0.905	1.057	0.982	0.881
	Std. Err.	0.050	0.053	0.038	0.040
Private Companies	Coef. (Edu. Weight)	−0.359*	−0.088	0.286*	0.022
	Odds Ratio	0.698	0.916	1.331	1.022
	Std. Err.	0.168	0.064	0.118	0.046
Social Organizations	Coef. (Edu. Weight)	−0.143**	−0.071	0.138***	0.174***
	Odds Ratio	0.867	0.931	1.148	1.190
	Std. Err.	0.048	0.066	0.036	0.047
Legal System	Coef. (Edu. Weight)	0.651***	0.899***	−0.022	−0.094
	Odds Ratio	1.917	2.457	0.978	0.910
	Std. Err.	0.099	0.113	0.083	0.100
Online Promotional Activities and Media	Coef. (Edu. Weight)	−0.501***	−0.124	0.011	0.115
	Odds Ratio	0.606	0.883	1.011	1.121
	Std. Err.	0.074	0.097	0.049	0.066
Protests and Demonstrations	Coef. (Edu. Weight)	0.708**	−1.112***	−0.663**	−0.236
	Odds Ratio	2.031	0.329	0.515	0.789
	Std. Err.	0.246	0.319	0.217	0.170

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$.

for dealing with a social issue, the “civic” volunteers are more likely to think that protests are a viable channel than other types of volunteers.

To further explore this idea, an analysis of whether the type of volunteer experience mattered was conducted by dividing volunteering channels into state-led and citizen-led for two social problems. According to the authoritarian literature, one would expect that volunteers using state-led channels would be trying to build closer ties to the state; however, as illustrated in Table 3, those who signed up to volunteer through state-led methods were less likely to select government as their top choice. This finding supports studies have found that volunteers who sign up for state-led experiences complain that these are not “authentic” and are mostly “photo-ops,” which might explain this counter-intuitive finding.¹⁹

3.2. Good governance

Theories linking civic participation to “good governance” usually operate through transparent information sharing and social trust. In the seminal literature, civic participation is theorized to increase policymaking effectiveness by supplying more accurate information of citizen needs and building social trust to enable redistributive policies.²⁰ Recent research on governance in authoritarian states emphasizes that they do not simply rely on coercion and repression to maintain control, but employ sophisticated means of generating a degree of popular legitimacy.²¹ In fact, amongst a wide range of legitimating claims, autocratic regimes generally present themselves as the vanguard of citizens’ socio-economic well-being.²²

Although “instrumental legitimacy” has helped some authoritarian states (e.g. China, Singapore), it does not make them immune from instability: national crisis like natural disasters or pandemics can create new vulnerabilities and/or expose existing problems in society. Crises can disrupt routines of bureaucratic control,²³ become “tipping points” for

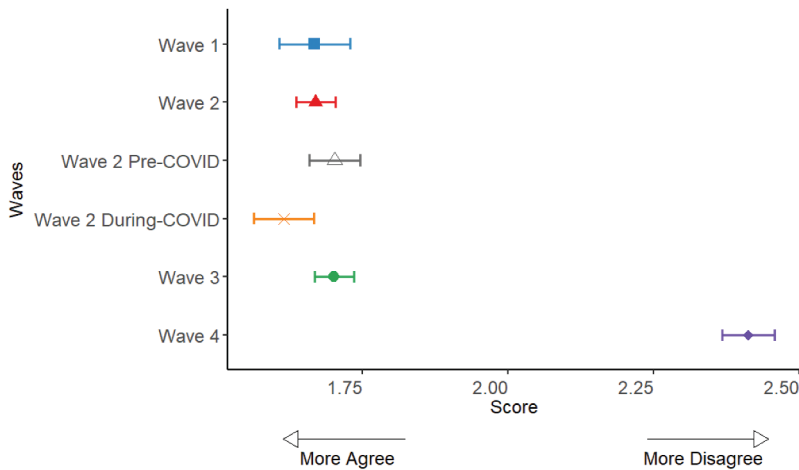


Figure 1. Longitudinal comparison of “does the government need help from social organizations for emergency and disaster responses?”. Two sample t-tests with pre and post COVID samples distinguished in Wave 2; the t-test between the pre and post COVID part in wave 2 is significant at 5% level, and t-test between wave 4 and other waves are highly significant at 0.001 level; t-tests between other waves (wave 1, 2, 3) are not statistically different.

the contestation of social contracts,²⁴ and increase the risk of civil conflicts.²⁵ Crises can alter citizens’ perceptions of the costs and benefits of authoritarian rule, thereby engendering divisions within the ruling elite and creating political instability.²⁶

We find that although Chinese citizens are generally satisfied with the state’s management of national disasters and emergencies, they concluded that the state cannot manage them alone in waves 1–3 (2018–2022).²⁷ As Figure 1 denotes, Chinese citizens envisioned a complementary role for civil society organizations (CSOs) in times of crisis from 2018 to 2022. In fact, the two parts of wave 2 shows that in response to the outbreak of COVID, respondents were more likely to agree that the state needed CSO help. In spite of this belief in a complementary role, volunteers are more skeptical than non-volunteers about CSOs’ ability to fulfill a crisis management function, suggesting that the political legitimacy of the Communist Party of China is not necessarily challenged by allowing CSOs a greater role in crisis management. Notably, civic participation enhances, or at least does not reduce, CCP popular legitimacy. Volunteers are more likely to believe that the government is trying its best to resolve social issues, but also that civil society can amplify that work by partnering with the state. In the 2018 wave, linear regression analysis of the question “what type of citizen serves China the most?” found that volunteers were less likely to select the passive “Support the Communist Party” response (coefficient -0.239 , standard error 0.117 , significance at $p < 0.001$), and more likely to select the active “Education and Expertise” response (0.166 , 0.073 , $p < 0.05$).²⁸ These are engaged citizens who want to help the government resolve social problems and who recognize the complexity and challenges involved.

The longitudinal nature of the surveys allows us to observe how this conception of state versus citizen responsibilities changes over time. After remaining fairly constant from 2018 to 2022, we observe that respondents are now less likely to agree that the government needs help from social organizations in emergencies and disasters by wave 4

in 2024. That is to say, respondents increasingly believe that help from social organizations is not necessary for the government to handle emergencies and disasters, contrary to previous responses. This could either indicate performance legitimacy earned by the government or general trends toward political centralization under Xi Jinping.

Examining the relationship between civic participation and perceptions of governance, we find that volunteers in an authoritarian context such as China present mixed evidence for theories derived from a Western liberal democratic context. In sum, while citizens who volunteer in China learn and differentiate channels most appropriate for addressing specific social problems as found in democracies, Chinese volunteers generally do not seem to believe CSOs can solve major problems and do not hold their government accountable for poor performance in resolving these, as discussed previously.²⁹ By 2024, volunteers believe that the state is best positioned to handle crises without assistance from CSOs. Survey data seem to highlight the complementarities between volunteering and supporting government efforts to resolve social problems rather than the expected Tocquevillian substitution effect where volunteers expect to solve problems without the state.

4. Implications and conclusion

Insights drawn from the CPCS surveys suggests that the Chinese state might face multiple balancing dilemmas in the near future. First and foremost, citizen-led volunteerism has largely increased in popularity due to the perception that state-led volunteerism is overly formalistic.³⁰ To combat this perception, it will be worthwhile for the state to partner with civil society organizations (including government-organized NGOs or GONGOS³¹) to rethink the volunteering experience in these state-led channels.

Second, the CPCS findings indicate that civil society organizations and citizen-led volunteerism can strengthen the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China by enhancing greater social trust and improving governance outcomes. However, civil society organizations and citizen-led volunteerism can present a threat to the legitimacy of the Party if they are perceived by the citizenry as being more capable than the state in handling key issues. In order to increase state-led volunteerism and mitigate perceived risks from citizen-led volunteerism, the state can empower the China Youth League,³² which for the last decade, has had its autonomy and funding reduced. Additionally, the CCP must resolve pressing social problems like inequality faced by rural youth in its Common Prosperity social contract.

Finally, despite increasing trends of volunteerism and philanthropy, the CPCS data have suggested the continued existence of a “bad citizen” who chooses not to donate or volunteer.³³ The behavior of such “bad citizens” indicate a disposition for heightened agency amongst a select citizenry cohort. This, in turn, points to the conceptual underpinnings of a “skeptical citizen” who does not necessarily fully subscribe to the state’s image of the current model citizen, similar to how people refused to be mobilized after the collapse of the Soviet Union to show independence from the state rather than lack of support for resolving social problems.³⁴ In fact, initial analysis highlights that bad citizens’ decisions are influenced by their level of support for the state, along with those in their immediate social circle and their general view of the act of volunteering and donating. Overall, this casts doubt on the ability of state rhetoric alone – e.g. the

current “common prosperity” agenda’s reliance on “tertiary distribution”³⁵ – to foster greater philanthropy and voluntary activity to reduce increase socio-economic inequalities in the 2020s.

Notes

1. Lipset, “The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited”; Diamond, “Toward Democratic Consolidation”; Tocqueville et al., *Democracy in America*; Ulfelder and Lustik, “Modeling Transitions to and from Democracy.”
2. Putnam, “Bowling Alone”; Putnam et al., *Making Democracy Work*; Verba et al., *Voice and Equality*.
3. O’Brien, “Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China”.
4. Citizen-led volunteering is generally conducted through groups organized by concerned citizens, and requires the volunteer to identify and apply for the volunteer opportunity directly. This contrasts to state-led volunteering, which is done through state- or party-organized groups, and is often mediated by campus or provincial volunteering centers to match prospective volunteers with these organizations.
5. Ministry of Civil Affairs, *Social Service Development Report*.
6. Hasmath and Wei, “Getting Rich but Not Giving”.
7. The greater philanthropic and voluntary activities observed in the 2020s are partially due to the fact the Chinese state can no longer support the necessary social welfare provisions for the citizenry on its own and requires assistance from non-state actors to fulfill this role. For instance, the state has increasingly encouraged Chinese citizens to engage in philanthropy by reviving the language of “common prosperity” and “tertiary distribution” to argue that it is the responsibility of wealthier citizens to contribute money to those who are less well off. The state has also signaled that it expects citizens to do more in the realm of volunteerism. In a 2017 speech delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Xi Jinping sought to promote and affirm the Party-state’s support for building and institutionalizing volunteer services and enhancing citizens’ sense of social responsibility. For further information, see Hsu et al. “Creating a Culture of Philanthropy and Volunteerism in Contemporary China”; Sidel, “The Future of Civil Society Research in China, Hong Kong and Vietnam”.
8. Yang et al., “Alienation of Civic Engagement in China”.
9. Simmons and Bobo, “Can Non-Full-Probability Internet Surveys Yield Useful Data”; Mei and Brown, “Conducting Online Surveys in China”.
10. See for example, Eaton and Hasmath, “Economic Legitimation in a New Era”; Pan and Xu, “China’s Ideological Spectrum”.
11. Tocqueville et al., *Democracy in America*; Lipset, “The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited”; Verba et al., *Voice and Equality*.
12. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*; Putnam, “Bowling Alone”; Putnam et al., *Making Democracy*.
13. Diamond, “Toward Democratic Consolidation.”
14. Krasnopolskaya et al., “The Relationship Between Corporate Volunteering and Employee Civic Engagement Outside the Workplace in Russia”; Cakmak, “Active Citizenship in Turkey”; and Yabanci, “Turkey’s Tamed Civil Society.”
15. For further information, see Hsu et al., “The Construction and Performance of Citizenship in Contemporary China.”
16. For full analysis, see Teets et al., “Volunteerism and Democratic Learning in an Authoritarian State.”
17. Ibid.
18. For further information, see Teets et al., “Volunteerism and Democratic Learning in an Authoritarian State.”

19. Spires, "Chinese Youth and Alternative Narratives."
20. Putnam et al., *Making Democracy Work*.
21. Levitsky and Way, "Beyond Patronage"; Levitsky and Way, "The Durability of Revolutionary Regimes"; and Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*.
22. Eaton and Hasmath, "Economic Legitimation in a New Era"; von Soest and Grauvogel, "Comparing Legitimation Strategies in Post-Soviet Countries"; Weiss and Dafoe, "Authoritarian Audiences, Rhetoric, and Propaganda in International Crises"; and Zhu, "Performance legitimacy."
23. Drury and Olson, "Disasters and Political Unrest."
24. Pelling and Dill, "Disaster Politics."
25. Nel and Righarts, "Natural Disasters and the Risk of Violent Civil Conflict."
26. Gasiorowski, "Economic Crisis and Political Regime Change"; and Ulfelder and Lustik, "Modeling Transitions to and from Democracy."
27. For further information, see Hasmath et al., "Citizens' Expectations for Crisis Management and the Involvement of Civil Society Organisations in China."
28. For full analysis, see Hsu et al., "Creating a Culture of Philanthropy and Volunteerism in Contemporary China."
29. This should be tempered by the CPCS findings that the more years of citizenship education a Chinese citizen is exposed too, the less likely that citizens are influenced by a state-led conception of citizenship characterized by passive obedience and loyalty to the state. Namely, greater exposure to citizenship education is positively correlated with a more active and participatory view of citizenship. See Hsu et al., "The construction and performance of citizenship in contemporary China."
30. Spires. *Everyday Democracy*.
31. Hasmath et al., "Conceptualizing Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations."
32. Xi, "China's Volunteers Face Challenges."
33. For further information, see the working paper by Hildebrandt et al., "What Makes a 'Bad Citizen'?"
34. Howard, *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*.
35. Hsu et al., "Creating a Culture of Philanthropy and Volunteerism in Contemporary China."

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