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Gauging preference stability under authoritarianism

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Abstract

Do people living under authoritarianism exhibit stable, constrained preferences? Autocrats have incentives to suppress the formation of stable preferences structured by underlying constraints as such preferences can empower challengers and limit policy choices. However, research in political psychology suggests that such preferences may emerge through internal cognitive processes regardless of external conditions. We address this question using three surveys, two of which are longitudinal, in China, a theoretically important case. We find that preferences related to political institutions, economic policies, nationalistic policies, traditional social values, and ethnic policies exhibit relatively high levels of intertemporal stability over month-long and year-long periods, comparable to patterns observed in competitive electoral democracies. Moreover, individuals with higher levels of political knowledge and education exhibit more stable preferences. These findings suggest that, despite autocratic efforts to suppress stable and constrained preferences, such preferences can still take shape. We also offer practical recommendations for measuring preference configuration in authoritarian contexts.

Keywords

policy preferences, preference stability, longitudinal survey, authoritarianism, China, ideology

Introduction

Authoritarian regimes engage in many activities to shape public opinion (Chen and Xu, 2017; Guriev and Treisman, 2019; King et al., 2013; Stockmann, 2013), yet research consistently shows that those living under authoritarian rule have multi-dimensional rather than monolithic preferences (Blaydes and Linzer, 2012; O'Loughlin et al., 2006; Pan and Xu, 2018; Wu, 2013; Wu and Meng, 2017). Multi-dimensional preferences mean that views are diverse and constrained—that is, preferences across policy domains are interconnected and fall into internally coherent patterns within individuals. For example, some people favor free markets, democratic representation, and gender equality, while others favor state control of the economy, centralized political control, and traditional gender roles.

Multi-dimensional preferences present a challenge to authoritarian rule only if these preferences are stable (Converse, 1964). In democratic settings, stable and constrained preferences are sometimes referred to as ideology; we avoid using this term in the authoritarian context to prevent confusion with the state's official ideology. Attitudes and preferences may remain stable in authoritarian contexts due to intrinsic psychological motivations, which include epistemic needs to manage uncertainty, existential motivations for threat minimization, and relational needs for social identification that drive individuals toward coherent belief systems regardless of external pressures (Jost et al., 2003). If these psychological mechanisms operate under authoritarian rule, then individual-level preferences should remain stable over time, with a substantial share of citizens maintaining views that consistently diverge from those favored by the authoritarian regime.

Given this potential challenge, authoritarian regimes, which seek to demobilize rather than mobilize the public

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(Linz, 2000), aim to prevent the formation of stable belief systems that could facilitate opposition (Kitschelt, 1992; Tavits and Letki, 2009; Whitefield, 2002). If authoritarian regimes succeed in destabilizing structured preferences—shifting them with propaganda campaigns, policy changes, or political pressures—then these regimes retain the capacity to realign views of substantial portions of the population on issues critical to the regime, even if preferences appear diverse and constrained at any single point in time.

Stable, constrained preferences challenge authoritarian rule in multiple ways. They can provide opponents with the potential to mobilize the public against incumbents (Tavits and Letki, 2009; Whitefield, 2002), and even in authoritarian regimes lacking meaningful opposition, stable preferences limit policymaking and the effectiveness of propaganda and coercion (Svolik, 2012; Weeks, 2008). When preferences are both stable and constrained, efforts to influence underlying attitudes have limited, short-term effects (Pan et al., 2022). This is consistent with research on authoritarian propaganda, which shows that propaganda can shift *behavior* by deterring dissent (Huang, 2015) or inciting violence (Adena et al., 2015; Yanagizawa-Drott, 2014) while effects on *attitudes and preferences* tend to be short-term (Pan et al., 2022).

Existing research in authoritarian contexts has documented the existence of constrained, multi-dimensional preferences—along religious-secular divisions in Islamic countries (Blaydes and Linzer, 2012), economic cleavages in Putin's Russia (O'Loughlin et al., 2006), and across issue areas in China (Pan and Xu, 2018; Wu, 2013; Wu and Meng, 2017). However, existing studies have relied on cross-sectional data. Because assessing stability requires longitudinal data tracking individual preferences over time, this leaves the crucial question of whether these multi-dimensional preferences remain stable unresolved.

We answer this question through three surveys in China, including two longitudinal studies that track individual preferences across six policy domains: political liberalism, market economy, nationalism, traditionalism, social equality, and minority accommodation. We find substantial intertemporal stability in multi-dimensional preferences, comparable to levels observed in democratic contexts and particularly pronounced among respondents with higher education and political knowledge. These results demonstrate that stability in these multi-dimensional preferences persist even under sustained authoritarian information control, consistent with political psychology theories that emphasize intrinsic drivers of belief structure. Such stability fundamentally constrains authoritarian power: it limits the effectiveness of propaganda (Pan et al., 2022), restricts policy flexibility (Svolik, 2012; Weeks, 2008), and when combined with strong incentives for political conformity (Fan et al., 2025), likely produces widespread preference falsification that denies rulers reliable information about societal attitudes (Kuran, 1987).

Research design and data

We conduct this study in China because it represents a most-likely case for successful authoritarian suppression of stable preferences. First, China lacks electoral competition and tightly controls civil society, leaving little room for organized political opposition (Fu, 2018). Second, China has one of the most expansive and sophisticated systems of information control (Brady, 2009; King et al., 2013). The Chinese Communist Party shapes educational curricula (Cantoni et al., 2017), and engages in media censorship and propaganda, creating an environment designed to move preferences in line with regime interests and suppress the development of independent political attitudes. Third, while prior research has documented multi-dimensional public preferences in China, it remains unclear whether these preferences are stable over time. At the same time, however, political psychology suggests that coherent preferences can emerge from internal psychological needs even under these conditions (Jost et al., 2003). This tension makes China an ideal setting for testing whether stable preferences can form under authoritarian rule.

Surveys

To measure preference stability, we conducted three longitudinal panel surveys, each comprising two waves with measures spanning multiple policy domains. All aspects of this research were IRB-approved. Participants consented, were compensated, and experienced no deception. To protect confidentiality, we separated responses from identifying information. We excluded respondents who failed an embedded attention check or completed the questionnaire faster than plausible reading time.

Our sampling strategy targets two theoretically important populations for assessing the limits of authoritarian information control: *urban adults* and *college students*. Urban residents are central to China's political communication environment—they are economically influential, relatively more politically informed, and primary consumers of both propaganda and online discourse—so their attitudes provide a critical test of whether stable, constrained preferences can persist among the regime's most politically exposed citizens. College students at top Chinese universities and abroad are future elites and opinion leaders who encounter heterogeneous informational contexts; their beliefs offer leverage on whether coherent belief systems can form and endure despite pervasive control. Two surveys (*Sample 1* and *Sample 2*) recruited urban adults via large online panels operated by two US-based vendors, using quota sampling to approximate key urban marginals (age, gender, region, and education where feasible). The third survey, *Sample 3,* is an independently managed longitudinal cohort of Chinese first–

year undergraduates in China and the United States, recruited through university and student–network channels. We do not claim national representativeness; our primary estimand is within–person stability over time, and we show convergence across independent samples collected in distinct settings.

As summarized in Table 1, Sample 1 was implemented between July and September 2018. We recruited urban adults from an online survey panel using quota sampling on age, gender, education, and geography. In the first wave, we obtained a sample of 1,438 respondents. After 2 months, we recontacted these respondents but achieved a low recontact rate of 25%. Given this attrition, we use Sample 1 primarily to validate dimensionality and the measurement of constrained preferences. Sample 2 was conducted between January and February 2019. To increase sample diversity, we partnered with a different online survey company, obtaining 891 adult urban respondents with quota sampling. We recontacted respondents after 1 month and achieved a higher recontact rate of 55%, making Sample 2 suitable for analyzing preference stability and predictability in addition to dimensionality. See the Supplementary Materials for details of the sampling strategies.

Sample 3 was conducted between September 2019 and September 2020. We recruited 377 Chinese first-year undergraduate students studying in the US and 615 studying in China, resurveying them every 6 months. Here, we analyze responses from Wave 1 (Sept. 2019) and Wave 3 (Sept. 2020), which contained policy questions. US-based students were recruited via WeChat and Chinese student networks at five US colleges–two private (one Ivy League) and three public institutions–located across the United States, with assistance from 10 research assistants. Students in China were recruited from three top-tier public universities in North, East, and South China, assisted by eight research assistants. Recruitment methods included online advertisements, student organization outreach, and onsite recruitment at locations such as student canteens. Participants in both groups were Chinese nationals born between 1995 and 2002 (96% between 1999 and 2001), attending their first year at a 4-year college, and had completed high school in mainland China. We achieved a high overall recontact rate of over 80% (73% among US-based students and 86% among students in China).

We rely on Sample 2 and Sample 3 for the main stability analyses due to their higher recontact rates. Sample 3 arguably provides a harder test of stability because respondents transitioned from freshman to sophomore year, a period when preferences often change. This time window spans the onset of Covid-19, which could affect preferences in opposite ways: this major shock may reduce stability, whereas isolation in dorms or at home, with less exposure to peers and teachers, may increase it.

Policy domains

We designed our survey to measure preferences across six policy domains (dimensions). For each domain, we used multiple questions (7 or 14 per domain) averaged together to reduce measurement error (Ansolabehere et al., 2008; Druckman and Leeper, 2012). To minimize preference falsification and improve reliability, we avoided politically sensitive and current-event questions.

Following prior research (Table 2), the six policy domains are: (1) political liberalism, covering political institutions and individual freedom; (2) market economy, addressing state intervention and resource allocation; (3) nationalism, involving national identity and foreign affairs; (4) traditionalism, concerning traditional Chinese values; (5) social equality, regarding income and social justice; and (6) ethnic accommodation, related to the government's treatment of ethnic minorities (see the Supplementary Materials for full question details). Recent studies of preference configuration in China typically examine preferences related to political institutions, the economy, and traditional social values. Ethnic accommodation is particularly relevant given international

Table 1. Sample overview.

	Characteristics	Analyses
Sample 1	July–September 2018 Online panel of urban adults, quota sampling Wave 1: 1438 respondents Wave 2: 25% recontacted (2 months later)	Dimensionality
Sample 2	January–February 2019 Online panel of urban adults, quota sampling Wave 1: 891 respondents Wave 2: 55% recontacted (1 month later)	Dimensionality Stability Predictability
Sample 3	September 2019–September 2020 College students, snowball sampling Wave 1: 992 respondents Wave 3: 80% recontacted (1 year later)	Stability

Table 2. Policy dimensions in previous research.

Policy dimension	Description	Existing research
Political liberalism	Policies pertaining to liberal democratic values, institutions, and practices	Wu (2013) Pan and Xu (2018) Wu and Meng (2017) Ji and Jiang (2020)
Market economy	Policies related to the economy and trade	Wu (2013) Pan and Xu (2018) Wu and Meng (2017) Ji and Jiang (2020)
Nationalism	Policies concerning national identity and foreign affairs	Wu (2013) Pan and Xu (2018) Ji and Jiang (2020)
Traditionalism	Policies related to traditional social or cultural values	Wu (2013) Pan and Xu (2018) Ji and Jiang (2020)
Social equality	Policies addressing social and economic inequality	Pan and Xu (2018) Ji and Jiang (2020)
Minority accommodation	Policies related to ethnic minorities	None

attention during the study period to China's policies toward minorities, especially in Xinjiang (Greitens et al., 2020).

We designed the survey so that agreement or disagreement with questions signals liberal or conservative tendencies. Questions in the political liberalism domain (14 items) address preferences over political, legal, and media institutions suitable for China. The market economy domain (14 items) covers economic policies and state intervention, such as price controls and the role of state-owned enterprises. Nationalism domain questions (14 items) focus on national identity, sovereignty, and relations with the West. Traditionalism domain questions (7 items) reflect views on traditional Chinese values. Social equality domain questions (7 items) measure views on redistribution and gender equality. Ethnic accommodation domain questions (7 items) focus on ethnic minorities, especially in conflict areas such as Xinjiang.

To enhance construct validity and reduce respondent burden, we prespecified the grouping of questions into these policy domains. Surveys for *Samples 1* and *2* contained all six policy domains with 63 questions across four survey rounds. For *Sample 3*, two survey rounds covered four domains—political liberalism, market economy, nationalism, and traditionalism—with questions selected based on their demonstrated stability and balanced orientation. We ensured that we had a combination of positively and negatively oriented questions to minimize acquiescence bias.

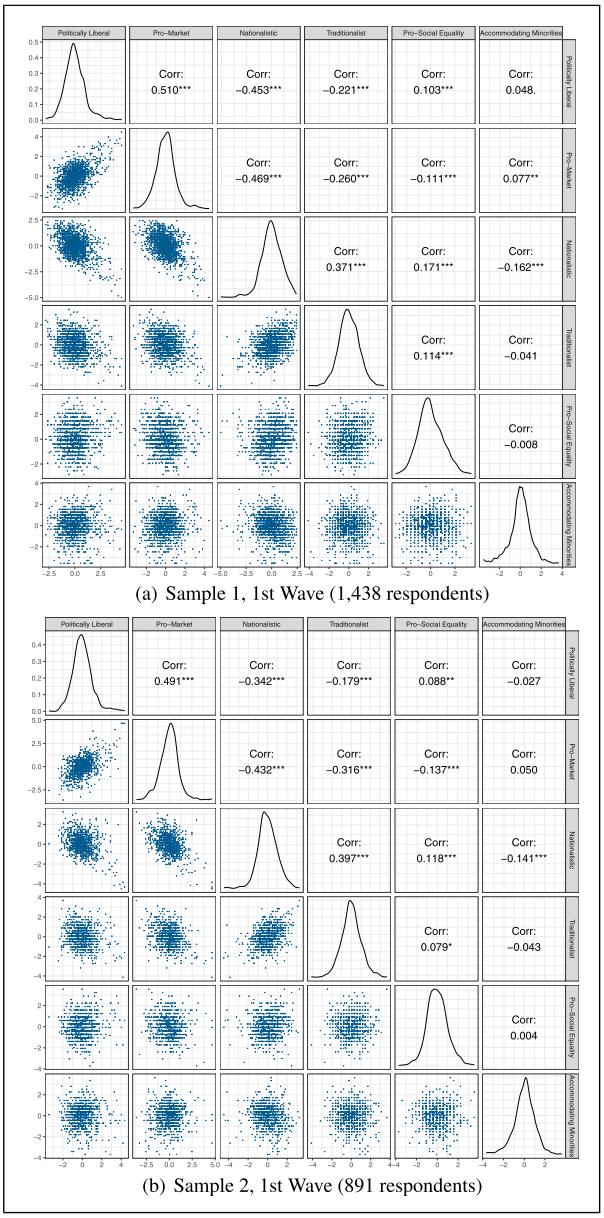
Measurement

Before determining whether preferences are stable, we must first understand whether and how preferences are constrained. Following previous research, we capture preference constraint by examining the correlation between policy domains. For missing values, we use multiple imputation for each dimension and replace missing values with the averages of 100 imputed datasets. Then, we aggregate responses within each domain by averaging items with equal weights, following prespecified liberal-conservative orientations (see Table A1 in the Supplementary Materials for the prespecified signs, which are uncontroversial among China scholars and achieved an 100% intercoder reliability). Finally, we rescale the measures to mean 0 and standard deviation 1. While PCA and IRT-generated measures correlated closely with our indices, we preferred simple averaging for transparency and simplicity.[1]

To capture preference stability, we estimate both intertemporal stability and predictability. *Intertemporal stability* is measured by the correlation between the additive indices of the same set of questions between different waves of the survey. We can think of it as a measure of consistency of responses by respondents who answer the same set of questions one month apart. If preferences are unstable, we would not expect the respondent to select the same or similar response over time on a full Likert scale. *Intertemporal predictability* is measured by the correlation between the additive indices constructed by a subset of questions (starting from one question to the full set) in the first wave and by the full set of questions in the second wave. We can think of it as a measure of coherence among items in the same policy domain. If answers to a set of questions are driven by the same latent preference, aggregating a subset of them should more or less allow for the prediction of the full measure. Intertemporal stability and predictability are equivalent when the full set of questions are being used.[2]

Results

In alignment with prior research, we find that preferences are constrained in a highly multi-dimensional structure.[3] Also similar to prior research (Wu, 2023), we find that respondents cannot self-identify their ideology on the left-right scale, further suggestive of multi-dimensionality (see Supplementary Materials). Figure 1 shows distributions and correlations of preferences from the first waves of Sample 1 (1,438 respondents) and Sample 2 (891 respondents). In both samples, preferences for political liberalism and market economy have right-skewed distributions, indicating some respondents strongly favor democratic institutions, personal freedoms, and pro-market policies. Nationalism shows a left-skewed distribution, meaning some respondents hold relatively strong anti-nationalist views. Preferences are moderately correlated among political liberalism, market economy, nationalism, and traditionalism. However, correlations between these domains and social equality or ethnic accommodation are low, as is the correlation between social equality and ethnic accommodation themselves. The highest correlation in both samples is between political liberalism and market economy, which is 0.51 in Sample 1 and 0.49 in Sample 2. Nationalism is moderately negatively correlated with political liberalism (−0.45 in Sample 1, −0.34 in Sample 2) and pro-market preferences (−0.47 in Sample 1 and −0.43 in Sample 2), but positively correlated with traditionalism (0.37 in Sample 1 and 0.40 in Sample 2). Preferences for ethnic accommodation show minimal correlations with other domains, except with nationalism.



(a) Sample 1, 1st Wave (1,438 respondents)

(b) Sample 2, 1st Wave (891 respondents)

Figure 1. Distributions of the measurements and their correlations. (a) Sample 1, 1st Wave (1,438 respondents) and (b) Sample 2, 1st Wave (891 respondents).

These correlations are lower than those in Pan and Xu (2018), likely due to greater sample diversity. However, our observed correlation between political liberalism and market economy is higher than in Wu and Meng (2017), likely due to our use of more survey questions. Additional PCA and factor analyses further confirm multi-dimensionality (Supplementary Materials). Altogether, this analysis shows that while respondents' policy preferences cannot be summarized along a single dimension (such as left-right), preferences across policy dimensions are bound by some constraint.

Stability

Figure 2 plots intertemporal stability (red) and intertemporal predictability (light blue) using Sample 2 data, where urban adults were recontacted after one month. The plot shows the kernel density of stability and predictability (y-axis) and how they change as the number of items increase from one to 14 (x-axis). The dots in the middle of the distributions are the median values. For instance, for intertemporal stability of political liberalism, when aggregating 7 items (out of 14 total), we calculate the correlation between waves for each possible 7-item combination (3432 combinations) and report the median stability, which is around 67%.

Figure 2 shows that measures of responses to questions on political liberalism, economic policies, nationalism, traditional, and minority accommodation are relatively stable over time. As the number of items increases, both intertemporal stability and predictability steadily increase, indicating that answers to the questions in the same policy domain are likely to be mostly driven by a salient latent factor. Notably, intertemporal stability reaches approximately 75% for political liberalism, market economy, nationalism, and traditional when using all available items (14 for the first three domains, 7 for traditionalism).

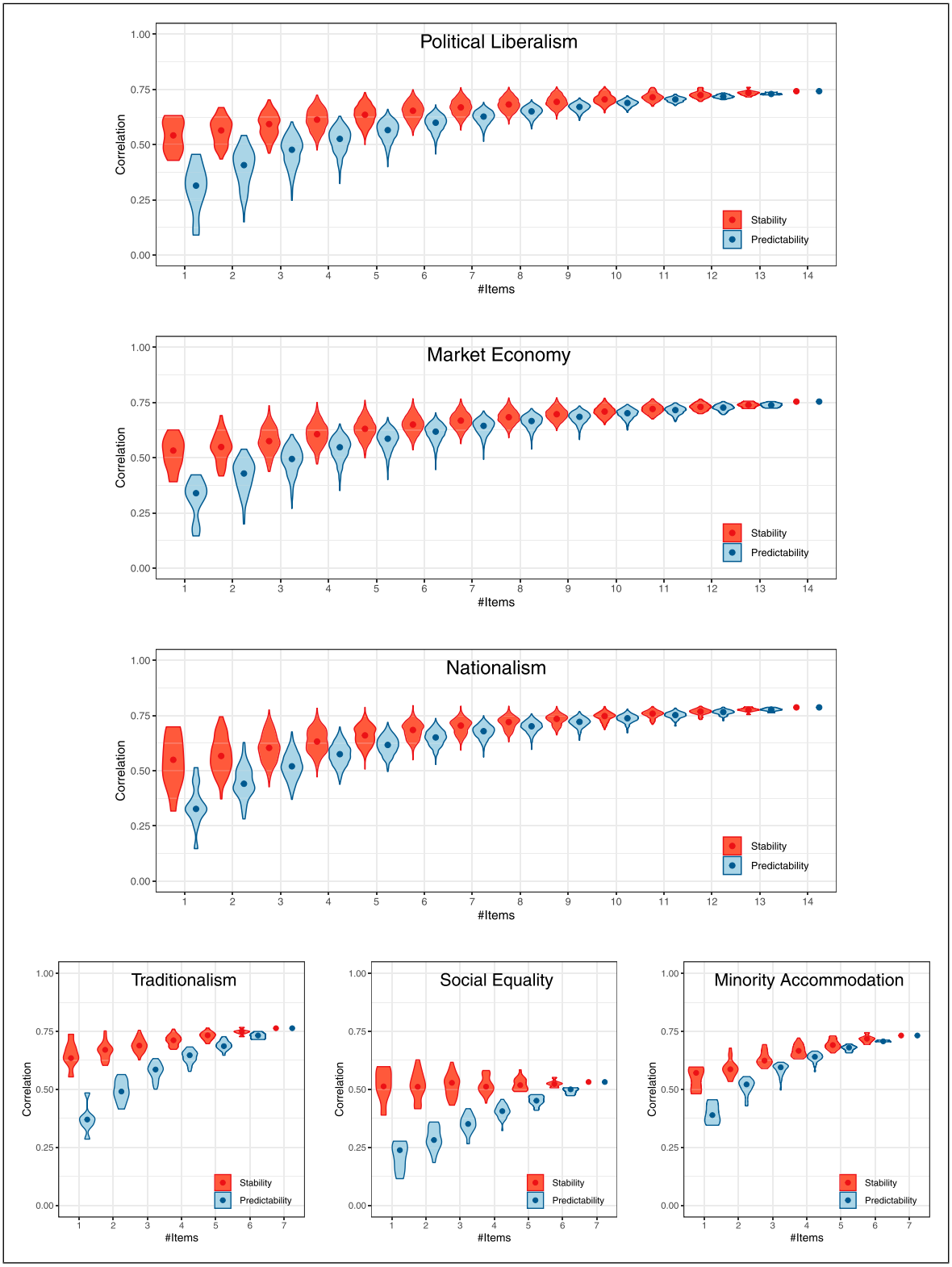


Figure 2. Intertemporal stability and predictability.

Note. Intertemporal stability (red) gauges how a measure based on $n \leq 14$ items (first three rows) and $n \leq 7$ items (bottom row) in Wave 1 is correlated with the same items in Wave 2. Intertemporal predictability (light blue) is measured by correlating a subset of items (from one up to the full set) from Wave 1 with the complete 14-item measure from Wave 2.

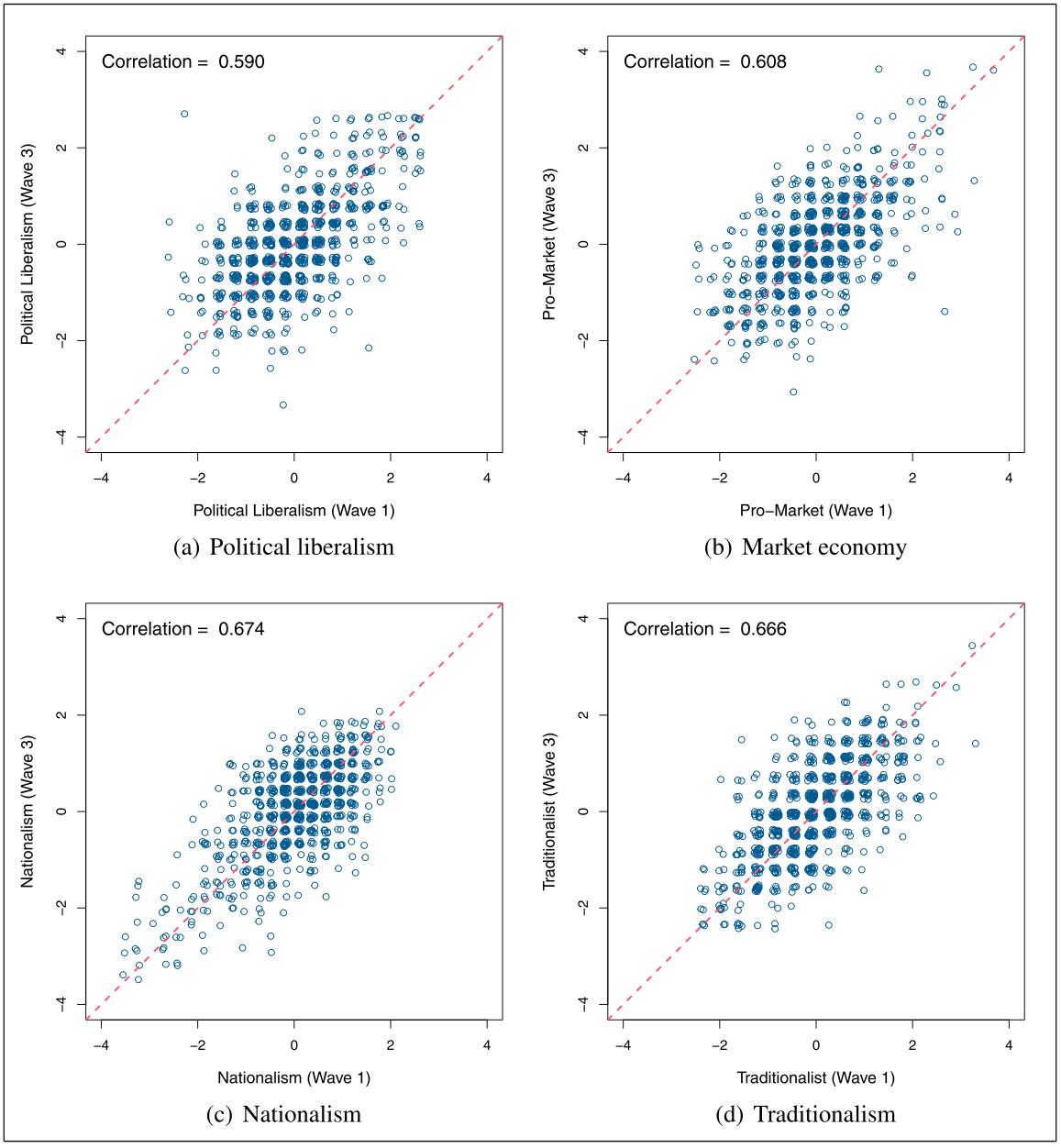


Figure 3. Intertemporal stability 2019–2020. (a) Political liberalism, (b) Market economy, (c) Nationalism, and (d) Traditionalism.
Note. The above figures show the correlations of the measures between Wave 1 and Wave 3 of Sample 3 for political liberalism (four questions), market economy (five questions), nationalism (five questions), and traditionalism (five questions); values are standardized for ease of plotting but this does not affect correlation.

This level of stability is comparable to correlations observed in data from competitive democracies, such as the US National Election Survey (Ansolabehere et al., 2008); note, however, the time duration of their study is longer and the questions are specific to the U.S. political contexts.

However, preferences related to social and economic equality are less stable, with correlation just over 50% when all 7 items are being used. Because the level of intertemporal stability for each individual item is comparable to questions in other policy domains (around 50%), this must be due to the fact that these 7 questions are not driven a single salient latent factor. For example, agreeing to a higher quota of women in the government and disagreeing with reducing the taxes for the wealthy may be determined by different motives rather than a single, coherent preference dimension for more equality. In other words, rather than concluding that preferences for equality are not predictable, it is more likely that the multiple measures used to capture equality lack construct validity. Other than preferences for equality, which consistently exhibits low construct validity, using four to five questions achieves predictability of 60% or higher.

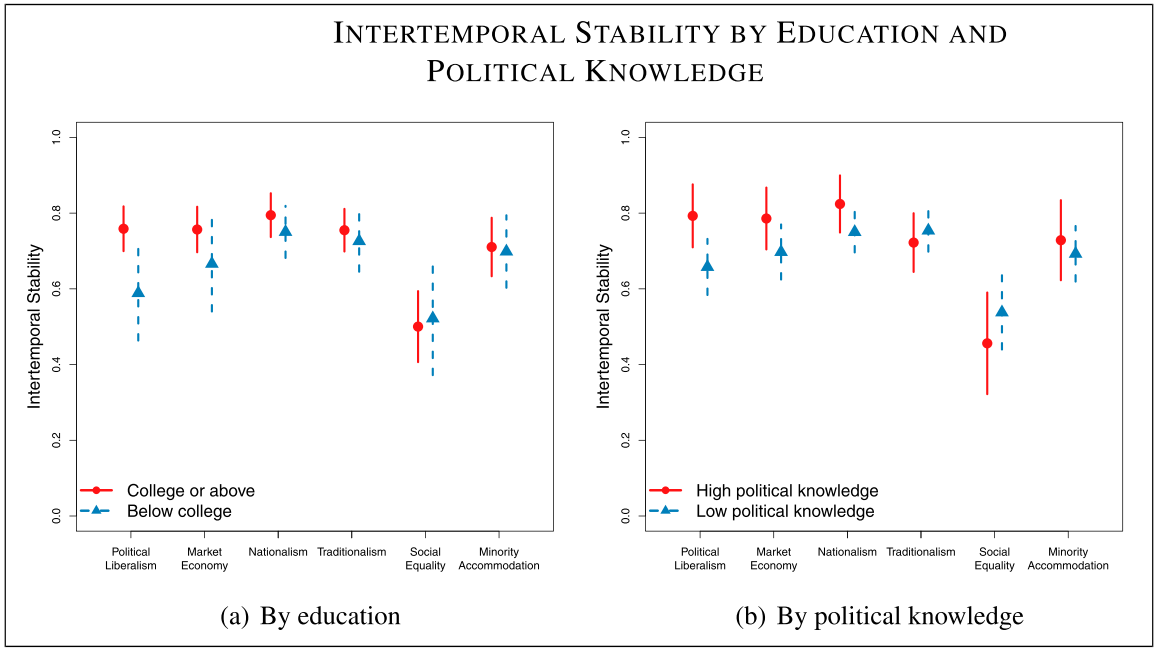


Figure 4. Intertemporal stability by education and political knowledge. (a) By education. (b) By political knowledge.
Note. The above figures show the correlations of the measures between Wave 1 and Wave 2 of Sample 2 across all six issue domains and their 95% confidence intervals. Political liberalism, market economy, and nationalism are measured using 14 items each; traditionalism, social equality, and minority accommodation are measured using 7 items each.

Longer-term stability

Using *Sample 3*, we examine preference stability between Wave 1 (September 2019) and Wave 3 (September 2020), a one-year period, for political liberalism, market economy, nationalism, and traditionalism. Figure 3 shows correlations between responses from these two waves, indicating stability levels similar to those observed in Sample 2. Specifically, stability correlations in *Sample 3* over a year are 59% for political liberalism, 60% for market economy, 67% for nationalism, and 67% for traditionalism, closely matching month-long stability observed in Sample 2 (60%–70% using comparable numbers of questions). These findings are striking, as they demonstrate substantial intertemporal stability even among college students transitioning from freshman to sophomore year, a life stage typically marked by preference shifts and further complicated by the significant disruptions caused by the global Covid-19 pandemic.

Stability, education, and knowledge

Panel (a) of Figure 4 compares preference stability across each dimension for respondents with at least a college degree (red circles with solid lines) and those without (blue triangles with dashed lines). Estimates represent stability measures, and lines denote 95% confidence intervals. Panel (b) of Figure 4 compares stability between respondents with high political knowledge (circles with solid lines) and those with lower political knowledge (triangles with dashed lines).

Preferences in political liberalism, market economy, and nationalism exhibit greater intertemporal stability among respondents with higher education and greater political knowledge, suggesting these respondents have more clearly formed and stable preferences. These differences are statistically significant at the 5% level for political liberalism and market economy, as shown in Figure 4. We do not observe significant differences by education or knowledge for traditionalism, social equality, or minority accommodation. Preferences regarding social equality remain notably less stable across all respondents, further reinforcing the conclusion that this domain is less clearly measured.

Discussion and recommendations

The results show that policy preferences among the Chinese urban adults, as well as college students in China and overseas, are stable and constrained within a multi-dimensional structure, particularly among individuals with higher education and political knowledge. Two important limitations should be considered when interpreting these results. First, the samples are not representative of the broader Chinese population, though still informative given their diversity. Second, although our study spans a broader range of policy domains than most existing work, it still does not encompass all possible domains, such as policies regarding gender equality and legality.

These findings have broader implications for understanding cleavages in authoritarian contexts and the constraints that leaders face. If stable preferences are aligned with the regimes goal, they may affirm the goals of the regime.

However, when such preferences run counter to the regime's aims, they instead become problematic. For instance, if an authoritarian regime aims to boost nationalism and economic growth tied to market capitalism, the negative correlation between nationalism and pro-market preferences can reinforce regime priorities. However, if the same regime aims to engage in state-led market allocation of resource, this stable preference configuration may become problematic as it can incur anger among those who value the market as the main mechanism of resource allocation while not completely satisfying those who have strong nationalistic preferences. Understanding preference structures and stability can thus provide insights into regime stability, policy constraints, and the conditions under which authoritarian leaders might successfully mobilize public support or face backlash.

Methodologically, we recommend researchers explicitly define relevant policy domains, use multiple questions per domain for reliability, and balance positively and negatively oriented questions to reduce bias (see the Supplementary Materials for survey items identified as stable and predictive for the study of preference configuration in China).

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Supplemental Material

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The replication files are available at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZMXNER.

Notes

1. Missing values were minimal and did not significantly increase uncertainty. Measures created using PCA or IRT methods are highly correlated with the simple indices. Replication data can be found on the journal's Dataverse (Pan and Xu, 2025).
2. When computing both stability and predictability, missing data in the subset of questions are imputed only within the domain to avoid artificially inflating the measures.
3. Also similar to prior research (Wu, 2023), we find that respondents cannot self-identify their ideology on the left-right scale, further suggestive of multi-dimensionality (see Appendix A4).

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