

# What Explains Popular Support for Government Surveillance in China?

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**Abstract:** Discussions of China's recent massive surveillance initiative often present it as evidence of a path to an Orwellian state with omnipresent fear and discontent among its citizens. However, based on a 2018 survey of a nationally representative sample, this paper finds that a large majority of Chinese citizens support various forms of state surveillance. CCTV surveillance receives the highest support (82.2%), followed by email and Internet monitoring (61.1%). Even the most intrusive policy — collecting intelligence on everyone in the country — receives support from more than 53% of citizens. Further, support for surveillance is positively associated with an individual's preference for social stability, regime satisfaction, and, to a lesser extent, trust in government. Unlike in Western societies, concern about terrorism does not have any significant correlations with citizens' attitudes toward surveillance in China. These findings might help explain why the Chinese state can expand its surveillance capacity without much open resistance from the public.

**Keywords:** Surveillance, public opinion, trust, security concern, China.

## Introduction

In the past decade, governments have increasingly been using information technologies to collect information on and monitor their citizens. Many observers consider China technologically advanced, including in its use of digital surveillance (Walton 2001; Qin et al. 2017). The rapid expansion of its surveillance capacity has led international news outlets to portray it as a nascent dystopian surveillance state in which totalitarian social control is underway.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars refer to China's new surveillance state as digital totalitarianism (Xiao 2019). However, this pessimistic view is in striking contrast to the fact that China's aggressive expansion of state surveillance faces little open resistance from the public. In fact, how much people in China dislike government surveillance remains a largely unanswered question.

The present paper fills this gap in the literature by demonstrating that Chinese citizens are to a large extent supportive of state surveillance — although many do oppose more intrusive surveillance policies. Using a 2018 survey of a nationally representative sample, we find that 82.2% of the public support closed-circuit television camera (CCTV) surveillance and 61.1% support email and Internet monitoring. The most intrusive surveillance policy — collecting intelligence on everyone in the country — receives more than 53% of citizens' support (see Figure 1). Further, the level of support for state surveillance is positively associated with an

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<sup>1</sup> “Inside China's Dystopian Dreams: A.I., Shame and Lots of Cameras,” *New York Times*, July 8, 2018: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/08/business/china-surveillance-technology.html>; “Does China's digital police state have echoes in the West?” *Economist*, May 31, 2018: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/05/31/does-chinas-digital-police-state-have-echoes-in-the-west>.

individual's preference for social stability, regime satisfaction, and, to a lesser extent, trust in government. Unlike in many Western societies, concern about terrorism does not have any significant correlations with citizens' attitudes toward surveillance in China.

This paper makes three contributions. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper to systematically examine Chinese citizens' attitudes toward state surveillance. Since Edward Snowden's disclosure of global surveillance operations by the US government and its allies in 2013, scholars have extensively examined public opinions on state surveillance in Western democracies (Reddick et al. 2015; Potoglou et al. 2017; Trüdinger and Steckermeier 2017). However, few studies focus on public opinion toward surveillance in China, the largest developing country in the world and one with a government that has long been using information technologies to safeguard social stability.

Second, we differentiate between three different types of surveillance policies and find that a citizen's support for surveillance declines with the level of policy intrusiveness, which we define as the extent to which a policy invades a citizen's private sphere. Past surveys often asked general questions on surveillance and privacy (Potoglou et al. 2017; Trüdinger and Steckermeier 2017). This survey, however, asked respondents specifically about their support for 1) CCTV surveillance, 2) email and Internet monitoring, and 3) collecting intelligence on everyone in the country — three common surveillance instruments that rank from low to high in the level of intrusiveness. CCTV surveillance received the greatest support, followed by email and Internet monitoring, while collecting intelligence on everyone received the least support: almost 22% of the respondents are firmly against this most comprehensive and intrusive surveillance policy.<sup>2</sup> At

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<sup>2</sup> Another 25% answered that government “probably should not have the right” to implement the

the same time, only 7% of the respondents are firmly against CCTV surveillance. This suggests that respondents understand the differences between surveillance policies and are not shy about expressing their concerns over the more intrusive types. Notably, this empirical finding also helps to address a common concern regarding self-censorship by survey respondents — if self-censoring were prevalent in our respondents, they would be unlikely to voice opposition to intrusive rather than non-intrusive surveillance.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, this paper reveals significant differences between American/European countries and China with respect to factors that affect surveillance support. For instance, concern about terrorism often increases support for surveillance in American and European contexts (Reddick et al. 2015; Trüdinger and Steckermeier 2017). Yet this had no effect on our respondents. Unlike past studies suggesting that political trust in government increases one’s acceptance of surveillance measures (Davis and Silver 2004; Denmark 2012; Pavone and Degli-Esposti 2012; Nakhaie and Lint 2013), we find a much more nuanced effect: political trust is positively associated with support for CCTV surveillance but is unrelated to email/Internet monitoring and a policy of collecting intelligence on everyone in the country. This finding suggests that even many of the most government-trusting citizens in China feel more intrusive surveillance policies are unacceptable.

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policy.

<sup>3</sup> We thank one reviewer for suggesting this intuitive evidence. In robustness checks, we include two measures of a respondent’s survey sensitivity concern to further control for self-censorship (Table 3).

## **Digital Surveillance in China**

China started to develop its surveillance capacity as early as 1998, when the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) initialized the Golden Shield (GS) project — an all-encompassing informatization platform designed to facilitate police operations. By 2006, the Chinese police had built a nationwide intranet infrastructure that connects all levels of public security bureaus. This GS platform combines a comprehensive population database with information systems for: security management; criminality; immigration administration; detention, prison, and reeducation; and traffic management. The platform incorporates various surveillance tools, including ID scanning and tracking, in areas such as hotels, bus terminals, train stations, ticket centers, and airports.

In the late 2000s, Chinese police started to integrate street surveillance camera systems into the GS platform. The MPS and local public security bureaus launched a series of surveillance camera projects, including the “3111” Initiative, the “Safe Cities” project, the “Skynet” project, and the rural “Sharp Eyes” project. By 2012, more than 660 pilot counties and districts under the “3111” Initiative had built surveillance camera systems in public spaces. In the past decade, big data and artificial intelligence have been integrated into the surveillance platform.

The Chinese government and large tech firms such as Tencent and Alibaba are experimenting with social credit systems that reward and punish citizens, companies, and organizations based on their “trustworthiness.” By 2018, 43 local governments had implemented pilot social credit systems. Although no nationally coordinated social credit system yet exists, the government is making great efforts to put it in place soon. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic,

Chinese citizens have been tracked and sorted into color-coded categories corresponding to their health status and level of COVID-19 risk.

Academic work on China's state surveillance is growing rapidly. Studies have found that the government allows some highly sensitive posts to be published on social media and uses the information to gauge public opinion, predict potential protests, and monitor local corruption (Qin et al. 2017). It has been suggested that surveillance enables local governments to use targeted repression instead of universal co-optation (Xu 2021). While the policy background to and potential threats of China's surveillance state have been discussed (Xiao 2019), some find the social credit system in China has successfully changed citizens' behavior (Kostka and Antoine 2018). However, except for a few studies on citizens' attitudes toward the social credit system (e.g., Kostka 2019), the public's opinion on state surveillance in China has not been examined. This paper uses a recent nationwide opinion survey in China to fill this gap.

## **Theoretical Expectations**

### ***Overall support and cross-policy differences***

Most past studies on public opinions of surveillance have been conducted in the US and European countries. They often reveal a significant level of public concern over such policies. For example, Potoglou et al. (2017) found Europeans expressed high levels of concern about individual data protection and information security threats. However, such findings might not be generalizable to the Chinese context because of its different relationship between the state and non-state actors as well as citizens' different expectations and tolerance levels towards government intervention in the private sphere.

Past research has argued that state–civil society relations differ from one country to another because of different economic, political, and socio-cultural factors (Cepel 2012). Indeed, several typologies have been proposed to categorize state–civil society relations across countries. For instance, Karjalainen (2000) presents a classification based on four models: a state-oriented model, a model grounded on the dominance of civil society, a dual model, and a model of cooperation.<sup>4</sup> In the state-oriented model, for example, the public sector makes decisions on the funding and services on offer. Focusing on the Chinese context, Xu (2014) discusses major approaches to studying Chinese civil society. For instance, the corporatism approach focuses on how the state fends off democracy by controlling non-government associations and by developing government-organized non-governmental organizations.<sup>5</sup> In the Chinese context, despite the recent rise of civil associations, civil society is weaker than in developed country counterparts. More recently, government efforts to increase state reach even to the neighborhood level (“Jie Dao”, or 街道) further narrow the space for civil associations. Hence, as a function of the specific type of state–civil society relationship in contemporary China, the Chinese public often has higher expectations about the government’s provision of basic public goods and services, including social stability. We therefore expect them to be more tolerant towards state

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<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Young (2000) proposes three models of the state–civil society relationship: supplementary, complementary, and adversarial.

<sup>5</sup> A more recent approach studies civil associations, which are neither created by the state nor officially incorporated into the state system (Xu 2014). The third, normative neo-Tocquevillean approach focuses on autonomous associations and their potential contributions to democratization; very few Chinese civil associations fit into this ideal type (Xu 2014).

policies that might interfere with citizens' private spheres, as long as the policy in question can bring citizens benefits such as personal safety and social stability.

Moreover, this specific state–civil society relationship is closely related to political regime type. Surveillance does indeed invade individuals' privacy. However, this privacy concern may be less salient among people in authoritarian countries. One robust finding in the human rights literature is an association between democratic institutions and a greater respect for human rights, of which privacy is an important component (Poe et al. 1999; Davenport 2007; Keith et al. 2009; Conrad and Moore 2010). Citizens in autocracies often have low expectations about civil liberties. This understanding also has a long tradition in the literature on state–civil society relations (Keane 1988; Putnam 1993). Thus, in autocracies, citizens' attitudes toward state surveillance are less likely to be constrained by liberty concerns, and they will be more likely to support state surveillance than citizens in democracies.

Finally, in advanced democracies, legal systems are often independent and high functioning since executive discretion is constrained by legislatures and judiciaries. In contrast, authoritarian regimes are reluctant to create well-functioning legal infrastructures because an independent legal system threatens a dictator's privileges or survival (Liu and Weingast 2020). The lack of well-developed legal systems leads to widespread incivility, crime, corruption, fraud, and contract enforcement problems. State surveillance helps maintain social order by monitoring citizens' wrongdoings to prevent crime, incivility, and fraud. With their strong desire for social order, citizens in autocracies thus largely support state surveillance. Recent opinion surveys found that Chinese citizens generally support the social credit system, one recent form of surveillance in China (e.g., Kostka 2019). Thus, we expect:



Hypothesis 1a: Chinese citizens exhibit high levels of support for government surveillance.

Privacy concern is a robust predictor of surveillance support in many countries. Thus, we further anticipate that Chinese citizens' attitudes will vary, depending on the intrusiveness of a surveillance policy. Among the three types of surveillance instruments asked about in the survey, we expect an increasing degree of intrusiveness will result in a decreasing level of public support, going from CCTV surveillance, to email and Internet monitoring, to collecting intelligence on everyone in the country.<sup>6</sup>

Hypothesis 1b: Chinese citizens' support for government surveillance declines with the intrusiveness level of a surveillance policy.

### ***Safety and social stability concerns***

Even though civil liberties are fundamental values of liberal democracies, citizens are willing to forego liberties for personal security and societal well-being when confronting major crises, such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, or global pandemics. This liberty–security tradeoff is at the center of the literature on public opinion about state coercion and surveillance (Davis and Silver 2004). Citizens in democratic countries express concerns about individual data protection and information security threats (Potoglou et al. 2017). Yet scholars have found that public support

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<sup>6</sup> The level of privacy concern also varies by individual. Unfortunately, our survey did not include a question on privacy concern, preventing us from directly testing its effect at the individual level.

for state surveillance is enhanced if surveillance measures target potential criminals rather than all citizens and if a safety threat is salient (Ziller and Helbling 2021). Alsan et al. (2020) show that amid the COVID-19 crisis, people all around the world have also been willing to tolerate surveillance measures for improved health conditions.

In authoritarian countries, the liberty–security tradeoff may not be a major rationale behind public support for state surveillance. As discussed earlier, the public in autocracies often has low expectations about civil liberties (Keane 1988; Putnam 1993). This lack of liberty concerns not only implies that citizens in autocracies will be more likely to support state surveillance but also suggests that other factors, such as social stability and personal security, are more important predictors for public surveillance support. The salience of such security concerns, we argue, can also be attributed to the lack of social order inherent in autocratic systems. As noted above, because an independent legal system threatens a dictator’s privileges or outright survival, authoritarian regimes are reluctant to create well-functioning legal infrastructures, leading to problems such as widespread incivility, crime, and corruption. State surveillance monitors citizens for wrongdoings, helping the government maintain social order and personal security. The lack of order and security inherent in autocratic systems thus fosters strong citizen support for state surveillance.

Not every citizen shares the same level of stability and security concerns, though. Some prioritize social stability and personal safety more than others and are more likely to support government surveillance policies. We therefore expect that the more a citizen is concerned about safety issues and the more they prioritize social stability, the more likely they are to support government surveillance.

Hypothesis 2: Preferences for social stability and personal security are positively associated with support for state surveillance in China.

***Political and social trust***

Political trust implies a citizen's expectation that political actors will not misuse their power, even if they are not constantly scrutinized (Gamson 1968). Some scholars advance the argument that the more trustworthy a citizen perceives a government to be, the more likely they are to consent to its policies (Levi 1997). Political trust is often a resource used by authorities to implement binding decisions. It has been found that political trust fosters popular support for anti-terrorism policies (Denemark 2012). Nakhaie and de Lint (2013) showed that trust in government is among the key predictors of surveillance and security legislation in Canada and the United States. Trüdinger and Steckermeier (2017) estimated the effects of political trust and policy-specific information on the acceptance of surveillance in Germany and found that political trust was particularly important for surveillance policy evaluations. Therefore, we expect:

Hypothesis 3a: A Chinese citizen's support for government surveillance is a positive function of their trust in government.

Closely related to trust in government is social trust, which some scholars have also linked to support for surveillance. For instance, Davis (2007) has shown that trusting people are often more likely to have faith in authorities' ability to ensure that things do not get out of hand. Therefore, in addition to trust in government, social trust — that is, the extent to which an individual trusts other people in society — might be another factor increasing their acceptance of government surveillance.

Hypothesis 3b: A Chinese citizen's support for government surveillance is a positive function of their social trust.

### *Information available to citizens*

Government surveillance policies are often justified as necessary means to ensure public order and safety. They are designed to deter people from committing crimes, including violence and terrorist attacks. Frequently, the intrusive nature of surveillance programs goes unpublicized. Past studies have often conceptualized government surveillance as the one-sided (i.e., by the government), systematic, and routine monitoring of individuals or groups for a given purpose (Jenkins 2014; Lyon 2014). Measures such as the introduction of biometric data into passports, monitoring and recording of telecommunications, and facial recognition through artificial intelligence can limit individuals' civil rights. Citizens simply do not have the time and means to control and regulate access to their personal information.

Not every citizen is well informed and aware of the potentially detrimental effects of surveillance programs. Hence, we suspect that the information available to citizens on the nature of surveillance programs affects their support for government surveillance. In general, we expect that:

Hypothesis 4: A well-informed citizen is more likely to perceive government surveillance as increasing the risk of jeopardizing individual rights and therefore is less likely to support surveillance policies.

In the Chinese context, though, the effect of information on surveillance support might be more complicated. This is a function of the nature of its media system, which remains at least

partly controlled by the government. Traditional media such as TV, radio, and newspapers are largely owned and operated by various levels of government and often play a propaganda role.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the recent government effort to build a social credit system to better collect personal data and monitor movements has been advertised by state media as a means to increase social stability and honesty. One might therefore expect state-controlled media exposure to increase support for government surveillance.

On the other hand, information on the true nature of surveillance policies — i.e., government collecting personal information to better control society — is more likely to circulate in new media such as the Internet and other social media platforms (e.g., Weibo and WeChat), despite consistent government online censorship. Some have refuted the popular view that the Chinese government relentlessly censors or even bans social media. For instance, by analyzing 13.2 billion blogposts on Sina-Weibo from 2009–2013, Qin et al. (2017) showed that a shockingly large number of posts on highly sensitive topics were published and circulated. King et al. (2013) revealed that the government mainly deletes online posts that incite collective action, while ignoring others, even those expressing grievances and involving sensitive topics. As a result, we suspect that exposure to new media platforms controlled less by government increases a citizen's knowledge of the invasive nature of surveillance and therefore decreases their support.

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<sup>7</sup> In the 1990s, the government redefined the primary role of media as agenda-setting, allowing greater public expression, though priority is still given to the party (Chan 2002).

## Data

We use data from the China 2018 World Values Survey (WVS), a nationally representative survey implemented between July and October 2018 by a joint research team from several Chinese universities. The targeted respondents were citizens 18–70 years old who had lived in mainland China for more than six months in the past year. The research team applied GPS/GIS assistant sampling with stratified, multi-stage probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling to get a nationally representative sample.<sup>8</sup> A sample of 3,036 respondents from 29 provinces with a valid response was obtained (61.7%) (see Table C-1 in the online appendix for more details). Answers were collected through face-to-face interviews by well-trained graduate and undergraduate students under the guidance of field supervisors.<sup>9</sup>

### *Dependent variables*

During the survey, we asked about respondents' attitudes toward three different types of government surveillance policies:

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<sup>8</sup> Fifty out of 2,855 counties were chosen as primary sampling units (PSUs) by stratified PPS sampling. Using night-light data, two half-square minutes (HSM) of latitude and longitude were chosen within each PSU. Two spatial square seconds, approximately 90 by 90 meters, within each HSM were randomly chosen. Investigators randomly drew 50 dwellings in each HSM and selected respondents using the Kish Grid method.

<sup>9</sup> Section C in the online appendix has detailed information on the distribution of respondents by province (Table C-1), as well as the breakdown of answers to the three surveillance policy questions by geographical region (Tables C2–C4) and Hukou type (Tables C5–C7).

*“Do you think that the Chinese government should or should not have the right to:*

*1) keep people under video surveillance in public areas?*

*2) monitor all e-mails and any other information exchanged on the Internet?*

*3) collect intelligence about anyone living in China without his/her knowledge?”*

The answer choices for each question are “1 = Definitely should have the right, 2 = Probably should have the right, 3 = Probably should not have the right, 4 = Definitely should not have the right.” Neither neutral nor “Don’t know” answers are options. For a better interpretation of our results, we reverse the order of the responses so that a higher number indicates a higher level of support for surveillance.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Key independent variables***

We used three variables to measure security concerns and preference for social stability. First, we asked about a respondent’s evaluation of their personal safety, *Feeling of security*. The answers are “Very secure, Quite secure, Not very secure, Not at all secure.” We reverse the order so that a higher value represents a stronger sense of personal safety. Second, since September 11, 2001, many societies perceive terrorism as a major threat. Our survey asked a respondent to indicate their concern about a potential future terrorist attack; we again reverse the order of

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<sup>10</sup> We have further divided the sample into subgroups to explore whether there are differences in attitudes across different regions and between urban and rural residents. See Tables C-2 to C-7 of the online appendix for frequency distributions.

answers so that a higher value corresponds to a higher concern about terrorism (*Fear of terrorism*). We use an *Importance of stability* variable to identify respondents (coded as 1, and 0 otherwise) who chose “Maintain order in the nation” as the first priority above all other options listed in the survey, including “Giving people more say in important government decisions,” “Fighting rising prices,” and “Protecting freedom of speech.”

Trust in government (*Trust in administration*) is based on a question asking how much confidence one has in government administrative organizations. The answers are: None (1), Not very much (2), Some (3), and A great deal (4). There are other questions regarding trust in other branches of the government — *Trust in court* and *Trust in police* — and we test their effects in robustness checks. In addition, we construct an overall trust index (*Trust in government*) based on the trust in administration, in courts, and in police;<sup>11</sup> the results, reported in Table B-1 of the online appendix, are very similar to those when we separately test the effects associated with trust in administration (Table 1) and in courts and police (Table 3).

To measure *Social trust*, we use the question that asked respondents whether they think most people can be trusted; this is a dichotomous answer (1 = Yes; 0 = No). Answers to all trust questions are ordered with higher values representing higher levels of trust.

Regarding information exposure, we first construct an *Information index* to measure a respondent’s overall information exposure. For each of the seven information sources —

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<sup>11</sup> We conducted principal component analysis on *Trust in administration*, *Trust in court*, and *Trust in police* and identified a very strong first factor with an eigenvalue of 2.23, explaining 74.4% of the total variation in the three variables. We use this first factor as the *Trust in government* variable.



newspapers, television, radio, mobile phone, e-mails, Internet, and social media — the survey asked respondents whether they use it to obtain information daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly, or never. After reordering these variables so that higher values indicate higher frequencies, we conducted a principal component analysis. The result identifies a very strong first factor/component with an eigenvalue of 2.73 and explaining 39% of the total variation in the data.<sup>12</sup> This strong first factor suits our purpose, which is to create one indicator to capture overall information exposure.<sup>13</sup> We standardized it to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, with higher values indicating more exposure.<sup>14</sup>

For robustness checks, we added three more information variables. First, *Information and chatting* is a comprehensive index of information exposure based on the aforementioned seven news sources *plus* a new source — “talking with friends or colleagues” — following the same procedure used to create the *Information index*.<sup>15</sup> Among the seven information sources,

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<sup>12</sup> The factor loadings matrix shows that all seven information sources have strong loadings on the first factor/component. The second and third factors have eigenvalues of 1.28 (18% of the total variation) and 1.02 (15%).

<sup>13</sup> We apply a regression-based approach to get the first predicted factor score of the latent variable.

<sup>14</sup> This variable attains a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of 0.72: Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  measure’s the reliability of multiple-question Likert scales in surveys. A value above 0.7 suggests that a set of variables measures well a single, one-dimensional latent aspect of the respondents.

<sup>15</sup> A strong first factor was identified, with an eigenvalue of 3.09, and explained 39% of the total variation; the Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  is 0.76.

newspaper, television, and radio are tightly controlled by the government and serve a propaganda role. We combine them to generate a *Propaganda exposure index*, also following the same procedure as for the *Information index*.<sup>16</sup> Mobile phones, e-mails, Internet, and social media fit into the category that is less government controlled; based on these information sources, we create a *New media exposure index*.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Control variables***

We control for *Party membership*, indicating Chinese Communist Party membership. We consider satisfaction with the political system using a 1 to 10 scale (least to most satisfied), as *Regime satisfaction* might lead to acceptance of policies (Chen 2004; Tang, 2016). A person's *Political interest* is included because those who care more about politics might spend more time obtaining policy-related information and thus have a better understanding of surveillance polices.<sup>18</sup> The second category of control variables are demographic and socioeconomic, including age, gender, education level, self-reported family income, and urban household

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<sup>16</sup> The eigenvalue of the first factor is 1.47, 49% variance explained; the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  is 0.47.

<sup>17</sup> It has a high one-dimensionality (eigenvalue of 2.51, 63% explained variance) and a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.80.

<sup>18</sup> For a simple interpretation of the result, we coded the original four-point scale into a dichotomous variable: interested in politics (1) or not (0). This coding decision does not affect our results. Those using the four-point scale are almost identical (see Table B-4, online appendix).

registration (hukou). Often, well-educated, high-income urban dwellers are associated with higher levels of privacy concern and are therefore less likely to support government surveillance.

Lastly, to address survey respondents' potential self-censorship, in robustness checks we include two measures of a respondent's sensitivity about the survey. *Concern about survey* is not a survey question answered by a respondent but a three-scale item rated by the investigator at the end of the interview, regarding whether the investigator is "Not at all concerned (about the respondent's potential self-censorship), A bit concerned, or Very concerned." In a face-to-face survey where a potential leakage of personal data may occur, an investigator's judgement is based on their observation of a respondent's reactions. This judgement is, of course, subjective. We therefore also include a second measure: the *Self-censorship index* calculates the difference between the nonresponse rate for sensitive questions and for non-sensitive questions for each respondent (Shen and Truex Forthcoming). If a respondent answered a smaller proportion of sensitive questions than non-sensitive questions, they are likely more careful and hence reluctant to reveal their true preferences.<sup>19</sup>

## Empirical Findings

### *Support across policy types*

Aggregated (using survey weights) answers with the relative percentages of response options are in Figure 1.<sup>20</sup> We see high levels of overall support for surveillance. If we consider answering

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<sup>19</sup> Questionnaire and coding rules are in Table A1; descriptive and correlation statistics are in Table A2 and Table A3 in the online appendix.

<sup>20</sup> We also calculated the percentages without using survey weights: they are almost identical to

“definitely should” or “probably should have the right” as being supportive, 82.2% of respondents agree with CCTV surveillance and 61.1% with email and Internet monitoring. Even the most intrusive type of surveillance, “Collect intelligence about anyone living in China without their knowledge,” was supported by 53.2% of the respondents.

[Figure 1]

However, Chinese citizens responded differently to surveillance policies as a function of levels of intrusiveness. Respondents were quite supportive of CCTV surveillance: 42.95% said the government “definitely should” use it. If CCTV surveillance is a necessary means to fight crime, monitoring emails and any other information exchanged on the Internet, on the other hand, grants the government power that might go too far in restricting civil liberties. Accordingly, the percentage of strong supporters (“definitely should have the right”) of email and Internet monitoring decreased to 23.8%. Meanwhile, the proportions of people who were skeptical (“probably should not”) or strongly opposed (“definitely should not”) increased to 24.06 and 14.87%.

Even less popular was “collecting intelligence about anyone that lives in China, without their knowledge.” For this policy, we observe a considerable amount of public concern: only 20.38% of the respondents were strongly supportive and 32.85% probably supportive, while 25.34% were skeptical and 21.43% strongly opposed the policy. This pattern of declining

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the weighted ones (see Figure A1 in the online appendix).

support as a function of a policy's intrusiveness suggests the respondents were carefully thinking about the nature of each surveillance policy.

### ***Main regression results***

We estimate ordered logit regressions, with provincial fixed effects included in all models (Table 1).<sup>21</sup> For each dependent variable, we present three model specifications. The first two report estimates from ordered logit models without survey weights, using robust standard error and clustered standard error (at the provincial level). The third model specification reports results from an ordered logit model using survey weights.<sup>22</sup>

*Explaining Support for CCTV Surveillance:* In the first three columns in Table 1, the coefficient estimates of support for CCTV are consistent, even though the statistical significance levels of some vary. The standard errors are larger when clustering at the provincial level or when survey weights are applied. In the following, we focus our discussion using results from the weighted model (Model 3), even though all three models yield similar results. Here, the coefficient for trust in government is 0.252, significant at the 0.01 level, indicating a positive and statistically significant association with supporting CCTV. The odds ratios of 1.29 suggest that the odds of being above a given category of supporting CCTV increases by 29% for a one-unit increase in

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<sup>21</sup> To control unobservable/unmeasured provincial characteristics.

<sup>22</sup> Survey weight is calculated based on household size, age, gender, education, and population distribution from the 1% National Population Sample Survey in 2015.

the respondent's trust in the government, holding all other variables constant.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the coefficient of social trust is not statistically significant.

For information available to the respondent (*Information index*), the mean coefficient estimate is 0.002 and does not attain statistical significance. Variables that measure a respondent's security concerns seem to have different effects. On the one hand, the coefficient of subjective security (*Feeling of security*) is 0.168 and significant almost at the 0.1 level ( $t=1.66$ ,  $p=0.103$ ; OR=1.24), suggesting that those who feel more secure tend to be more supportive of CCTV surveillance. On the other hand, worry about terrorist attacks (*Fear of terrorism*), although it has a positive coefficient, does not have a statistically significant effect. The coefficient of *Importance of stability* is 0.229 and significant at the 0.01 level, indicating that those who assign more importance to maintaining social stability (versus other priorities) tend to be more supportive of CCTV surveillance.

Among control variables, regime satisfaction deserves special attention. Its coefficient is 0.074, significant at the 0.01 level, suggesting a positive association with supporting CCTV surveillance. According to Easton (1975), regime satisfaction often leads to diffuse, durable support that is independent of policy outputs and performance. Higher regime satisfaction represents an attachment to the political objects and decreases social resistance, making it easier for government to implement less-favorable policies.

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<sup>23</sup> An odds ratio in ordinal logistic regression is the change in the odds (of being above vs. at/below that category) for a one-unit increase of a variable. It equals the exponentiated logit coefficient.

The coefficients of party membership and political interest are significant in the unweighted models (models 1 and 2) but do not attain statistical significance in the weighted model (model 3). Finally, most of the demographic and socioeconomic controls, such as age, gender, education, and urban hukou, do not have any effect, as suggested by the weighted model; the only exception is household income. Its negative coefficient, significant at the 0.01 level, suggests that wealthier people are less supportive of CCTV.

*Explaining Support for Email and Internet Monitoring:* The models on support for e-mail and Internet monitoring (columns 4–6 in Table 1) yield different results. Among the key independent variables, only a preference for social stability (*Importance of stability*) is found to be associated with a higher support for Internet monitoring. The coefficient is 0.367, significant at the 0.01 level. An odds ratio of 1.44 suggests that a one-unit increase in *Importance of stability* will lead to a 44% increase in the odds of being supportive. While remaining positive, the effect of trust in government (*Trust in administration*) on support for Internet monitoring is not significant. Social trust also does not have a significant effect. Furthermore, the coefficients of the *Information index* and of security concerns about personal safety (*Feeling of security*) and terrorist attacks (*Fear of terrorism*) are also not statistically different from zero.

Regarding the effects of control variables, while regime satisfaction (a coefficient of 0.12, significant at the 0.01 level) remains a strong predictor, people with higher family income tend to be less supportive (a coefficient of  $-0.07$  at the 0.1 level). Other variables do not have statistically significant coefficients. The effects of political interest are significant in the unweighted models but not in the weighted one.

*Explaining Support for Intelligence Collecting:* The results from unweighted and weighted models (models 7–9) are almost identical, so we use model 9. First, we find that neither trust in government nor social trust affects support for intelligence collection, nor does the *Information index*. The factors that matter are the two variables measuring a respondent’s security concerns: with a one-unit increase in subjective security (*Feeling of security*, a coefficient of 0.23, significant at the 0.05 level; OR=1.26) and a preference for stability (*Importance of stability*, a coefficient of 0.27, significant at the 0.05 level; OR=1.31), a respondent is 26% and 31% more likely to support intelligence collection.

Regime satisfaction and political interests are both associated with higher support for collecting intelligence; party membership, however, is not. Age, gender, income, and urban hukou do not matter either. Education attains statistical significance with a coefficient of  $-0.28$  ( $p < 0.05$ , OR=0.89) for high-school education and  $-0.26$  ( $p < 0.1$ ; OR=0.86) for college graduates, suggesting that compared to those who did not receive formal education or who attended only primary school, the odds of being supportive of intelligence collecting decrease by 11% if the respondent attended high school and by 14% if the respondent attended college.

[Table 1]

### ***Robustness checks***

First, we test whether exposure to new media platforms might have a different influence from traditional, government-controlled media, such as newspapers, TV, and radio. We replace the overall *Information index* variable with one measure for *New media exposure*, one for *Propaganda exposure*, and one for all seven available information sources, plus whether a



respondent receives information via chatting with friends and colleagues (*Information and chatting*). The empirical results are in Table 2. Using these new measures of information exposure does not affect regression estimates for other key independent variables. Information, whether measured by exposure to new media, propaganda, or all media sources plus chatting with friends and colleagues, does not have a significant effect on popular support for surveillance.

[Table 2]

In Table 3, we present results using alternative measures of trust in government, and results after adding variables that measure a respondent's social desirability concerns. In Columns 1 to 6, we use *Trust in court* and *Trust in police* as alternative measures for trust in government. Their coefficients are only statistically significant for CCTV; this is consistent with *Trust in administration* in Table 1. In Columns 7 to 9 and 10 to 12, we include the respondent's concern about the survey — rated by the investigator after the interview — and the *Self-censorship index* as controls for self-censoring/social desirability bias. The respondent's desirability bias concern (*Concern about survey*) has a negative coefficient but only attains statistical significance in support for CCTV. The *Self-censorship index* (models 10 to 12) does not have a significant effect.

[Table 3]

Finally, we have controlled for regime satisfaction in all models. One might ask whether this variable overlaps conceptually with trust in government, and these two variables are indeed correlated at 0.26 (Table A3, online appendix). We think a citizen can be satisfied with government performance even when they are skeptical of the government as a political institution. Therefore, as an additional robustness check, we re-ran the models in Table 1 without the regime satisfaction variable. The results are provided in Table B-2 of the online appendix: the effects of other variables hardly change; the coefficient signs for the trust in administration variable do not change, but now those for email/Internet monitoring and intelligence collecting also become statistically significant, likely picking up the effect previously associated with regime satisfaction.<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Drawing on a 2018 survey data from a nationally representative sample, this paper shows that Chinese citizens largely support state surveillance, and their support for a surveillance policy varies as a function of its level of intrusiveness. We further test whether key determinants of popular support for surveillance as suggested by studies conducted in other countries — trust in government, information exposure, and security concerns — affect surveillance support in China. The results are mixed. Security concerns matter much more than trust and information exposure, suggesting that security concerns are an important reason the public largely embrace state surveillance in China.

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<sup>24</sup> Also, in our online appendix, we present a table without including the control variables (Table B-3).

Interestingly, we find that popular support for surveillance is mainly explained by a preference for social stability rather than concerns about terrorism. It is understandable that those who prioritize social stability are more willing to sacrifice privacy. The lack of effect of terrorism concerns might be explained by the fact that for most Chinese citizens, terrorist attacks are unlikely to occur in their cities. The most recent large-scale event categorized by the Chinese government as a terrorist attack was the July 5<sup>th</sup> Event in 2009 in Xinjiang, almost ten years before our survey. As a result of numerous government security measures implemented after the July 5<sup>th</sup> Event, the level of violence in Xinjiang has decreased dramatically. Another reason this event does not have a large psychological impact on most Chinese citizens is that Xinjiang is on the western frontier of China, a place often considered far away from “China proper.”

We find that trust in government only increases people’s support for CCTV surveillance, not for Internet monitoring or intelligence collection. One possible explanation has to do with people’s perception of the difference between public and private spaces. It is easier for people to tolerate loss of privacy in public spaces. This is especially the case when one trusts that the authority will not abuse information collected via CCTV. Regarding email and Internet surveillance, it is not a government’s job to monitor or intervene in people’s private activities. Accordingly, people’s trust in government does not affect their support for Internet surveillance. Similarly, since obtaining private information and intelligence without consent is not perceived as a government duty, trusting government has nothing to do with one’s support of this most intrusive policy.

Finally, we find that information exposure does not affect support for surveillance policies. However, based on our data, we cannot claim that information does not matter. It is difficult to gauge a respondent’s knowledge of surveillance policies only by measuring their

exposure to various media sources. Different types of media may frame surveillance policies differently; it is possible that the more information sources a respondent accesses, the more they are subject to different framings about surveillance. In our robustness checks, we differentiate state-controlled media (*Propaganda exposure*) from new media platforms (*New media exposure*). Our assumption is that in the former, the coverage of government surveillance is more likely to be dominated by state propaganda, whereas the latter may include voices revealing the invasiveness of surveillance. We did not find a significant relationship between new media consumption and disapproval of surveillance policies. However, this null result does not necessarily mean that information exposure effect does not exist. Maybe our assumption of new media platforms revealing the intrusiveness of surveillance does not hold empirically: future research should take a closer look at the contents of different media sources with respect to their presentation of government surveillance programs.<sup>25</sup>

Another limitation is that as an observational study using survey data, this study is not able to provide strong empirical evidence for causal relationships between the variables. This shortcoming might be overcome in future studies via other experimental designs. We also believe that comparative studies of popular support in other countries may be fruitful guides for shaping public policies and government activities. While more research is certainly needed to better understand popular support for surveillance policies in China, we hope this article provides a solid foundation for this new and exciting area of research.

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<sup>25</sup> Xu et al. (2021) show that Chinese citizens' support for Social Credit Systems (SCS) is higher if they *obtained information about SCSs* from state media; revealing information on SCSs' repressive potential significantly reduces public support.

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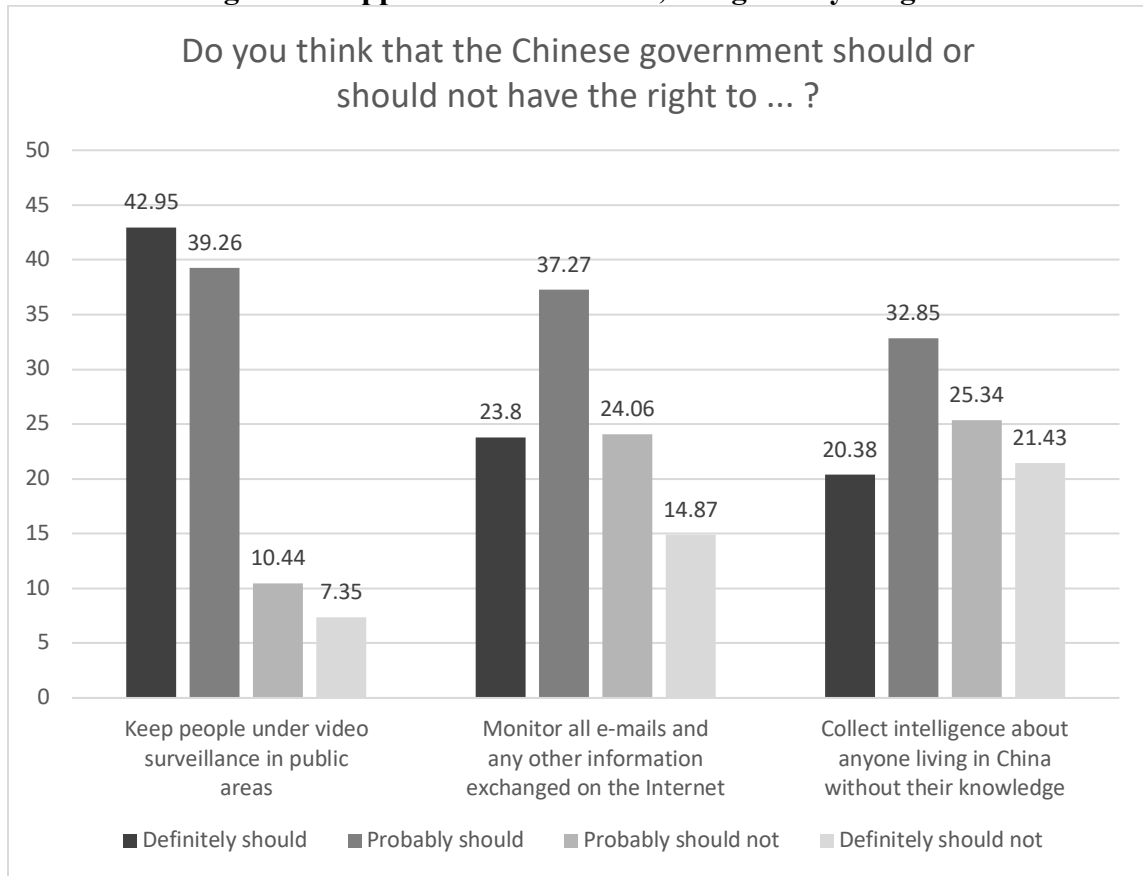
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**Figure 1. Support for surveillance, using survey weights.**



**Table 1: Main Results from ordered logit models.**

	(1) CCTV	(2) CCTV	(3) CCTV	(4) Email/Internet monitoring	(5) Email/Internet monitoring	(6) Email/Internet monitoring	(7) Intelligence collecting	(8) Intelligence collecting	(9) Intelligence collecting
Trust in administration	0.202*** (0.061)	0.202*** (0.065)	0.252*** (0.079)	0.060 (0.058)	0.060 (0.080)	0.115 (0.073)	0.079 (0.058)	0.079 (0.076)	0.107 (0.074)
Social trust	-0.101 (0.080)	-0.101 (0.087)	-0.124 (0.104)	-0.002 (0.077)	-0.002 (0.067)	0.022 (0.089)	-0.089 (0.075)	-0.089 (0.092)	-0.054 (0.084)
Information index	0.014 (0.050)	0.014 (0.063)	0.002 (0.060)	-0.021 (0.048)	-0.021 (0.055)	0.018 (0.058)	0.014 (0.047)	0.014 (0.057)	0.042 (0.061)
Feeling of security	0.196*** (0.073)	0.196** (0.078)	0.168* (0.101)	0.117 (0.072)	0.117 (0.108)	0.148 (0.100)	0.177** (0.070)	0.177* (0.098)	0.231** (0.109)
Fear of terrorism	0.031 (0.042)	0.031 (0.050)	0.047 (0.063)	-0.044 (0.041)	-0.044 (0.046)	-0.024 (0.057)	-0.015 (0.041)	-0.015 (0.050)	0.018 (0.051)
Importance of stability	0.236*** (0.074)	0.236 (0.157)	0.229* (0.114)	0.337*** (0.072)	0.337** (0.162)	0.367*** (0.130)	0.288*** (0.072)	0.288* (0.160)	0.267** (0.121)
Party membership	-0.185* (0.102)	-0.185* (0.099)	-0.152 (0.122)	0.008 (0.095)	0.008 (0.103)	0.141 (0.113)	0.010 (0.094)	0.010 (0.111)	-0.052 (0.121)
Regime satisfaction	0.074*** (0.021)	0.074*** (0.026)	0.074*** (0.027)	0.132*** (0.019)	0.132*** (0.020)	0.117*** (0.021)	0.071*** (0.020)	0.071*** (0.023)	0.050* (0.025)
Political interest	0.130* (0.076)	0.130* (0.078)	0.058 (0.083)	0.168** (0.073)	0.168*** (0.062)	0.108 (0.075)	0.178** (0.072)	0.178** (0.078)	0.172** (0.078)
Age	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.005)	0.007** (0.003)	0.007 (0.005)	0.007 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.004)
Gender (male=1)	0.071 (0.075)	0.071 (0.071)	0.020 (0.080)	0.035 (0.074)	0.035 (0.092)	0.014 (0.095)	0.059 (0.073)	0.059 (0.074)	0.046 (0.081)
High school	-0.178* (0.108)	-0.178* (0.103)	-0.140 (0.106)	-0.053 (0.103)	-0.053 (0.090)	-0.115 (0.111)	-0.287*** (0.101)	-0.287*** (0.107)	-0.283** (0.106)
College and above	-0.164 (0.153)	-0.164 (0.138)	-0.236 (0.170)	-0.032 (0.141)	-0.032 (0.154)	-0.156 (0.162)	-0.196 (0.142)	-0.196 (0.176)	-0.257* (0.151)
Household income	-0.075*** (0.022)	-0.075** (0.029)	-0.074** (0.034)	-0.062*** (0.022)	-0.062 (0.039)	-0.074* (0.039)	-0.036* (0.022)	-0.036 (0.040)	-0.047 (0.038)
Urban hukou	0.054 (0.090)	0.054 (0.100)	0.121 (0.109)	-0.007 (0.087)	-0.007 (0.085)	0.021 (0.109)	0.002 (0.088)	0.002 (0.130)	0.066 (0.148)
Provincial Fixed effects	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Robust standard errors	√			√			√		
Cluster stand. Er. (prov.)		√			√			√	
Using survey weights			√			√			√
Obs.	2822	2822	2822	2813	2813	2813	2814	2814	2814
Model Fit	170.71***	162.95***	2.14**	208.82***	248.05***	6.88***	143.11***	295.33***	2.47**

Note: Model fit reports the log likelihood chi-square test ( $\chi^2$  value) of the unweighted model and adjusted Wald test ( $F$ -value) for all variables of the weighted model. Standard errors in parenthesis; \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.

**Table 2: Results with alternative measures of information exposure, ordered logit models with survey weights.**

	(1) CCTV	(2) Email/Internet monitoring	(3) Intelligence collecting	(4) CCTV	(5) Email/Internet monitoring	(6) Intelligence collecting	(7) CCTV	(8) Email/Internet monitoring	(9) Intelligence collecting
Trust in administration	0.251*** (0.079)	0.115 (0.073)	0.108 (0.073)	0.250*** (0.079)	0.114 (0.072)	0.110 (0.073)	0.240*** (0.078)	0.112 (0.072)	0.103 (0.072)
Social trust	-0.124 (0.103)	0.023 (0.088)	-0.056 (0.084)	-0.126 (0.104)	0.024 (0.089)	-0.055 (0.084)	-0.118 (0.101)	0.023 (0.089)	-0.054 (0.084)
Information & chatting	0.027 (0.059)	0.053 (0.059)	0.084 (0.058)						
New media exposure				-0.010 (0.065)	0.013 (0.062)	0.054 (0.064)			
Propaganda exposure							0.005 (0.057)	0.063 (0.053)	0.024 (0.052)
Feeling of security	0.166* (0.101)	0.145 (0.099)	0.228** (0.109)	0.170* (0.101)	0.153 (0.100)	0.234** (0.109)	0.178* (0.099)	0.141 (0.100)	0.229** (0.109)
Fear of terrorism	0.047 (0.063)	-0.023 (0.058)	0.018 (0.050)	0.046 (0.062)	-0.026 (0.058)	0.015 (0.050)	0.046 (0.063)	-0.032 (0.057)	0.015 (0.050)
Importance of stability	0.228* (0.113)	0.367*** (0.129)	0.266** (0.120)	0.226* (0.114)	0.362*** (0.130)	0.261** (0.121)	0.222* (0.113)	0.357*** (0.128)	0.261** (0.120)
Control variables	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Provincial Fixed Effect	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Obs.	2819	2810	2811	2834	2825	2826	2845	2835	2836
Model Fit	2.15**	6.91***	2.32**	2.12**	6.82***	2.47**	2.27**	7.02***	2.98***

Note: Control variables included but not reported because of space limit. Standard errors in parenthesis. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Table 3: Results with alternative measures for trust in government and social desirability/concern, ordered logit models with survey weights.**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
	CCTV	Email/ Internet monitoring	Intelligence collecting	CCTV	Email/ Internet monitoring	Intelligence collecting	CCTV	Email/ Internet monitoring	Intelligence collecting	CCTV	Email/ Internet monitoring	Intelligence collecting
Trust in court	0.153* (0.084)	0.098 (0.066)	0.047 (0.070)									
Trust in police				0.140* (0.081)	0.093 (0.065)	-0.026 (0.072)						
Trust in administration							0.254*** (0.078)	0.103 (0.072)	0.095 (0.069)	0.252*** (0.079)	0.114 (0.074)	0.107 (0.073)
Social trust	-0.114 (0.105)	0.029 (0.088)	-0.046 (0.083)	-0.107 (0.105)	0.037 (0.087)	-0.027 (0.081)	-0.105 (0.106)	0.078 (0.086)	-0.007 (0.086)	0.252*** (0.086)	0.114 (0.089)	0.107 (0.084)
Information index	0.008 (0.058)	0.014 (0.058)	0.037 (0.061)	0.005 (0.058)	0.014 (0.057)	0.034 (0.061)	0.027 (0.058)	0.025 (0.056)	0.050 (0.064)	0.002 (0.060)	0.016 (0.058)	0.042 (0.061)
Feeling of security	0.179* (0.101)	0.148 (0.101)	0.233** (0.110)	0.168* (0.099)	0.141 (0.099)	0.241** (0.109)	0.165* (0.096)	0.113 (0.092)	0.202** (0.105)	0.168 (0.101)	0.145 (0.099)	0.230** (0.109)
Fear of terrorism	0.053 (0.062)	-0.022 (0.057)	0.021 (0.051)	0.053 (0.062)	-0.025 (0.058)	0.024 (0.051)	-0.009 (0.052)	-0.077 (0.111)	0.009 (0.045)	0.047 (0.063)	-0.025 (0.058)	0.018 (0.051)
Importance of stability	0.226* (0.115)	0.356*** (0.130)	0.257** (0.121)	0.217* (0.116)	0.348** (0.132)	0.254** (0.122)	0.192* (0.106)	0.347*** (0.124)	0.245** (0.114)	0.229* (0.114)	0.366*** (0.130)	0.266** (0.121)
Concern about survey							-0.194** (0.090)	-0.074 (0.113)	-0.186 (0.122)			
Self-censorship index										0.103 (1.255)	-1.028 (1.148)	-0.458 (1.623)
Control variables	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Provincial Fixed Effect	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Obs.	2821	2814	2811	2825	2817	2815	2806	2797	2799	2822	2813	2814
Model Fit	2.05**	6.87***	2.49**	1.87*	7.82***	2.50**	2.51**	7.23***	2.67**	2.03**	6.62***	2.29**

Note: Control variables included but not reported because of space limit. Standard errors in parenthesis. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1.