Sources of Regime Legitimacy and the Debate over the Chinese Model*

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Abstract

This article reexamines the ongoing debate over the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party regime through a rigorous analysis of a recent Asian Barometer Survey data from mainland China. It evaluates the empirical evidences related to three key issues—to what extent the CCP regime is facing a legitimacy crisis, what factors help sustain the regime’s political support, and whether the regime can defy the gravitation toward liberal democracy in the process of rapid socioeconomic modernization. There is no strong evidence suggesting that the regime’s popular foundation is highly or exclusively dependent on its superior economic performance or its manipulation of nationalist zeal. Our analysis lends its support to the culturalist argument about the

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prevailing influence of the traditional concepts of political legitimacy as well as the institutionalist argument about the importance of perceived characteristics of the political system.

1. Introduction

This article reexamines the ongoing debate over the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime through a rigorous analysis of a recent Asian Barometer Survey data from mainland China. It evaluates a variety of competing explanatory accounts of what constitutes and sustains the CCP regime’s political support. We examine the empirical validity of these competing explanatory accounts within a synthetic framework that takes into account many relevant elements identified by the existing literature that are supposed to motivate citizens in China to support (or reject) the incumbent regime and believe in (or suspect) the trustworthiness of the key political institutions under the current system of government.

The ongoing debate over the issue of regime legitimacy is central to the intellectual discourse over the so-called Chinese model. The proponents of the Chinese model take the position that this ancient nation has traversed its own trajectory of anti-imperialist struggle, state building, late industrialization, and cultural revitalization and will continue to make its own history. The country not only has thus far carved out a unique (and presumably superior to other models of transition from socialism) path to economic modernization under the rubric of market socialism but also is poised to carve out an alternative path to political modernization. It is conceivable, desirable, or even imperative that China will accomplish this by crafting and institutionalizing an effective system of government that fits the country’s historical context and social conditions as well as adequately addresses the functional requirements of voice and representation, accountability, conflict resolution, social integration, consensus building, and goal attainment. This China-specific political model can acquire its legitimacy without the standard institutional fixtures of a representative democracy (such as regular election, multiparty competition, and free media), as it will be buttressed by a set of shared symbolisms and values that are embedded in the country’s own revolutionary legacy and cultural heritage and are significantly different from the Western norms and values built around individual freedom and rights. In a nutshell, China is well placed to develop its