Corruption and Government Satisfaction in Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of China

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Prepared for delivery on the panel “Political Attitudes and Behavior in a Diverse China” at the 2011 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Seattle, September 1-4
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ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that in established democracies, citizens’ perception of political corruption is corrosive of support for the government and even the regime. What is less clear is that perceived corruption has the same effect in authoritarian regimes, where democratic norms of official behavior are less relevant and there has been scant empirical study of effects of perceived corruption on satisfaction with government and its officials. Using data from a 2008 nationwide survey in China, this study explores the relationship of perceived corruption to government satisfaction in an established totalitarian regime. With nearly two thirds of respondents considering corruption a “serious problem,” blame appears to be assigned more to local governments than to the central level and regime. The paper concludes with speculation that features of authoritarianism and/or of totalitarianism shield central government more than local officials from criticism when negative implications of perceived corruption come into play.

1 Listing of authors’ names is alphabetical; equal co-authorship should be inferred.
INTRODUCTION

In literature on democracies, whether old or new, it is generally accepted that perceptions of government corruption not only breed discontent with government and its officials, but can thereby serve to undermine support for the democratic regime itself (Bailey & Paras, 2006; della Porta, 2000; Diamond, 1999; Evans & Whitefield, 1995; Mishler & Rose, 1997; Pharr, 2000; Rose, Mishler, & Haerpfer, 1998; Wagner, Schneider, & Halla, 2009; Zéphyr, 2008). After all, in the context of democracy, corruption presumably violates the basic norms of public service (i.e., with emphasis on officials serving citizens rather than themselves) and fairness for all.2 Indeed, Anderson and Tverdova studied sixteen established and transitional democracies and concluded that “corruption is likely to be an important component of government performance people use to judge political institutions” (2003, p. 104). While other components such as programmatic efficiency and effectiveness undoubtedly weigh importantly in those evaluations as well, the underlying norms of government responsiveness, honesty, and fairness would be expected to trump even efficiency and effectiveness, and especially so in the more established democracies (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Diamond, 1999; Kaufmann, Kraay, & Zoido, 1999; Klingemann, 1995; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Miller, 1974; Pharr, Putnam, & Dalton, 2000; Putnam, 1993; Schmitter, 2004; Weatherford, 1992).

But what of authoritarian regimes, where democratic norms do not prevail? When it comes to authoritarian regimes, there has been little empirical study of the relationship of corruption to satisfaction with government and its officials. In classically authoritarian or totalitarian regimes -- absent democracies’ preoccupation with public responsiveness – there

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2 We should note that not all studies have reached this same conclusion. For example, Shechtel (2010) has concluded that corruption did not significantly impact satisfaction with democracy in African countries.
would presumably be less reason for government officials to concern themselves with citizens’ evaluations. And for citizens themselves – absent their own civic responsibilities and expectations – it would not be surprising if corruption were evaluated more for its immediate and local rewards than for its amoral/immoral underpinnings.

And yet, in one totalitarian regime, perceptions of corruption have become a significant issue for citizens and government alike. Since the late 1990s, the government of the People’s Republic of China has clamped down on what it has publicly acknowledged to be a significant and widespread corruption problem. In 1999, the central government brought down a local smuggling ring in Fujian Province, involving almost 600 government officials, approximately 300 of whom were prosecuted. In 2007, the central government went so far as to establish the National Bureau of Corruption Prevention of China. And by 2010, President Hu Jintao was quoted as characterizing the corruption fight as a matter of life and death for his party.

While pro-democratic optimists could interpret these reactions by government as signs of political reform/democratization, a more realistic assessment might attribute them more directly to a combination of the “information revolution” and the economic reforms of the 1980s. After all, corruption was well entrenched and widely known to the central government long before it reacted so publicly in the 1990s. What had changed was development of a public that was more aware, both of the problem and of its negative implications for their livelihood. Increasingly available electronic media put a floodlight on the problem; the growing private sector’s creation

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4 [www.bbc.co.uk/news/10595981](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10595981)
of citizens’ “private economies” made them more cognizant of corruption’s negative consequences for them personally.\(^5\)

And making this more of a potential problem for the party itself is the fact that China is not just “any” authoritarian regime; it is a Communist regime. The Communist party, as “the people’s party,” had – from the beginning – claimed responsibility for dealing with discipline problems internally. Until the introduction of capitalism in the 1980s, the party itself could also claim to stand for the public and to determine its interest when dealing with such problems. But capitalism brought development of a separate “public opinion,” which some leaders feared would be ignored to the party’s peril. Seen in this light, the reaction of the central government was motivated by concern that citizens’ dissatisfaction with corruption would contribute to dissatisfaction with the central government and its party-centered regime. And such loss of regime legitimacy might result even from perceived corruption problems at the local level, since the party and its central authorities claimed responsibility for all levels.\(^6\)

So the government reacted, with anti-corruption campaigns targeted at all levels of government. Chinese officials \textit{assumed} a relationship between perception of corruption and satisfaction with the government. And further, central government officials \textit{feared} that the corruption, even if it involved lower levels of government/officials, could contribute to

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\(^5\) For a review of corruption in China, see He, 2000.

\(^6\) It should be noted that further-reaching implications of local-level corruption would not be unique to China or to authoritarian regimes more generally. In her study of the transitional democracy of Argentina, Weitz-Shapiro (2008) found that “certain measures of local government performance, such as corruption, have ramifications for citizens’ evaluations of the functioning of their democracy and even for citizens’ faith in democracy per se” (285; see also 290). And in their study of Bolivia, Hiskey & Seligson (2003) found that local government performance (quality of services provided) affects systemwide support.
dissatisfaction with the entire regime. To what extent were those assumptions and fears well-grounded?

Using data from The China Survey of 2008, a nationwide survey of 3989 Chinese citizens,\footnote{The data used in these analyses were all developed for The China Survey, a project of the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University in collaboration with the Research Center for Contemporary China (RCCC) at Peking University. The data were produced by Chinese interviewers in eighty-minute face-to-face interviews with 3989 PRC citizens aged 18 or over between April 6 and June 7 of 2008. The nationwide sample was drawn using state-of-the-art GPS/GIS Assistant Area Sampling. [GPS/GIS Assistant Area Sampling, designed to correct bias caused by coverage errors in list-based samples, was developed by the Research Center of Contemporary China at Peking University with Professor Pierre Landry of Yale University. For more on GPS/GIS sampling, see Landry & Shen, 2005.] Within each of the 75 primary sampling units (counties) spread across seven official regions and one metropolitan district, two townships were drawn randomly and then GPS/GIS technology was used to draw two half-square minutes within each township. The intention was to then sample twenty-five dwellings within each township, and finally interview one person per dwelling. The end result was the sample of 3989 nationally (higher than the projected 3750 due to normal over-sampling). For additional details on the sampling and survey procedures of The China Survey, contact Robert Harmel at Texas A&M University.} it is our purposes in this paper to (1) assess the extent to which there is perception of a corruption problem among Chinese citizens, (2) determine the extent of relationship between perception of corruption and satisfaction with government generally, and then (3) determine specifically whether there is relationship between perception of local-level corruption and satisfaction with central-level government. If it is found that there is widespread perception of corruption at the local level and that central-level satisfaction is not tied to perception of local-level corruption, then either central government officials misjudged the extent to which the public would hold the regime accountable for a “local” problem or they reacted appropriately in demonstrating concern and thereby minimized damage to the regime.
PERCEPTION OF CORRUPTION PROBLEM

According to an index based on expert judgment data and reports of experience with corruption, developed by Transparency International (the CPI), China ranked 78th among 178 countries in level of corruption in 2010, and should be considered relatively corrupt with a score of 3.5 on a scale from 10 (highly clean) to 0 (highly corrupt). When asked in The China Survey in 2008 whether they, a friend, or someone in their family had been directly affected by cadre corruption, 18.8% of respondents answering the question answered in the affirmative.

But even more critical than measures of actual corruption (or corruption as perceived by outside experts) for citizens’ satisfaction with government is the extent to which Chinese citizens perceive corruption to be a serious problem. In their study of how actual corruption – using the CPI data – affected citizens’ assessments of government performance across 16 democracies, Anderson and Tverdova report findings of effect, but then caution that the “results cannot show to what extent people are aware of the level of corruption in their country” (2003, p. 104). Furthermore, as also noted by Anderson and Tverdova, “if a country’s cultural context predisposes people to view corruption as acceptable practice and therefore relatively benign, measures of corruption may not coincide with how people … respond to corrupt political practices” (2003, p. 93). To the extent that citizens are unaware of corruption, or that objective corruption is simply accepted and not resented or despised, there would be no reason to expect attitudes toward government at any level to be diminished as a result. Hence, the most appropriate measurement of corruption for a study such as ours is a direct measure of not just the

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8 www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/
9 The China Survey asked two items, one pertaining to “personal experience with cadre corruption” and the other to “a family member or close friend who has experienced or witnessed cadre corruption.” Of those who answered both items, 18.8% answered “yes” to at least one of the two items.
extent to which citizens perceive corruption to exist, but also the extent to which they perceive it to be problematic.

So, to what extent do Chinese citizens perceive corruption to be a significant problem today? When asked directly in The China Survey how serious of a problem corruption is in China (on a scale from 0 to 10), without specifying a level of government, 67.5% of those responding\(^\text{10}\) said that corruption is a serious problem (values 7-10) and only 11.5% say it is not a problem (values 0-3). And, focusing closer to home, when asked to what extent cadre corruption is a problem “in this locality,” 65.7% of those responding\(^\text{11}\) say a very or somewhat serious problem and just 4.0% say “not serious at all.”\(^\text{12}\)

Without wanting to make too much of the difference in wording of the items on perceived “general” and “local” corruption, and while the relationship between the items’ responses is both significant and substantial, it should be noted that the level of that relationship \(r=.461 (p<.001, \text{with } n=2811)\) – does leave doubt as to whether both are measuring exactly the same thing. While the different response sets (the first an 11-point scale and the second a four-point ordinal choice without a true “center point”) could account for some loss of shared variance, it still seems reasonable to assume that they are in fact measuring somewhat different things: the first focusing on corruption in government “generally” and the second on corruption

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\(^{10}\) 16.7% of the entire sample did not respond to this question, item c1h in The China Survey.

\(^{11}\) 22.0% of the entire sample did not respond to this question, item e9 in The China Survey.

\(^{12}\) When the sample is split between urban and rural subsamples, it is apparent that those living in urban areas are even more likely than their rural counterparts to see corruption as a problem, whether generally (75.8% vs. 62.0%) or locally (77.3% vs. 64.0%). Perhaps this reflects less refined conceptualization of corruption among the less education rural population; perhaps it reflects more acceptance of lesser forms of corruption in the rural areas; or perhaps it simply reflects a lower level of corruption in rural settings. Regardless of the reason, it is urban residents more so than rural citizens who perceive corruption to be a significant problem in China, but with large majorities of both urban and rural residents agreeing that it is indeed a problem.
“locally.” With that in mind, and wishing to know the separate as well as cumulative effects of perceived “general” and “local” corruption, we will treat both as independent variables in the analyses which follow.

PERCEIVED CORRUPTION AND LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT SATISFACTION

In her study of 68 countries, Tavits (2008) found significant effects of the aggregate-level corruption index (CPI) on an individual-level measure of subjective well-being (i.e. general life satisfaction). In their study based on a survey of households in Beijing, Cheung and Leung (2007) found that individuals’ assessments of government accountability (including but not limited to perception of corruption) affects life satisfaction. While it may be reasonable to think that life satisfaction influences government satisfaction, and hence that corruption is likely to impact government satisfaction either indirectly (though life satisfaction) or directly (for similar reasons as for life satisfaction), the fact remains that subjective well-being and life satisfaction are not the same thing as government satisfaction, which is our dependent variable.

With a dependent variable somewhat closer to our own, Anderson and Tverdova (2003, p. 104) concluded from their analysis -- covering 16 democracies and again using the CPI as an indicator of actual corruption – that “corruption is likely to be an important component of government performance people use to judge” their democratic institutions and to assess the trustworthiness of civil servants. But not only are they dealing with democratic and not authoritarian regimes, but the use of actual, aggregate corruption as the independent variable also makes that study different from our own.

So the question remains: to what extent does perception of government corruption affect Chinese citizens’ level of satisfaction with their government? As is evident from Table 1,
perception of corruption generally correlates negatively and significantly with levels of satisfaction toward central, county, and local government, with the relationships appreciably more substantial for the local levels than for the central level. And likewise for perception of cadre corruption, where the correlations with satisfaction toward the two local levels are even stronger yet! At first glance – sans controls – it would appear that perceptions of corruption are indeed related to citizens’ levels of satisfaction with all levels of government, and especially the local levels.

But of course, first glances can be deceiving, so it is incumbent upon us to consider whether, when controlling for other potential contributors to government satisfaction, perceptions of corruption still make significant, independent contributions.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT SATISFACTION

13 For multivariate analyses, we use listwise deletion throughout. In no instance do we use imputation to replace missing data. Using data from *The China Survey* for their research on political trust, Zhang and Jennings (2009) note that “high rates of missing data are quite common in Chinese surveys” and that *The China Survey* “is no outlier in that respect.” Indeed, widespread missing data in surveys on political topics in China have sparked the interest of scholars investigating the nature and sources of the non-response. Zhu (1996) as well as Shi (1996) have argued that cognitive ability rather than political sensitivity is a more decisive explanation for non-response. A missing value should thus be interpreted as indicating “no attitude” rather than reluctance to express one’s attitude, and hence it would be inappropriate to impute attitudes for missing data, e.g. by multiple imputation. Instead, like Zhang and Jennings (2009: 14), our findings can best be interpreted as representing “a population … able to respond to questions of this sort.”

14 In order to establish consistency of direction between the two indicators of perceived corruption, it was necessary to reverse the direction of the original “perceived cadre corruption in this location” variable (c9 in The China Survey data set). Originally, higher values indicated lack of perception of a serious cadre corruption problem; as used throughout this paper, higher values of the recoded variable indicate perception of a serious cadre corruption problem.
Systematic research focused directly on explaining attitudes toward government or government officials has been almost exclusively focused on democratic regimes. Hence, extant literature’s offerings of plausible, alternative explanatory variables (i.e. in addition to perceptions of corruption) – e.g. gender, age, having voted for the party in power, and various measures of government performance (e.g., see Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Weitz-Shapiro, 2008) may or may not have the same relevance for explaining citizens’ attitudes toward units and/or officials of government in authoritarian regimes such as China. However, such variables might at least be suggestive of factors which should be controlled in our analyses, even if for other reasons than would be the case in democracies.

Age, for instance, might have particular relevance for government support in China, as a surrogate for the very different historical circumstances of different generations. Citizens over the age of fifty might well have been socialized into strong commitment to central Communist rule under terror of the Cultural Revolution; younger citizens were socialized during successive stages of “opening” of the economy and reform of the regime, and hence might be more critical toward Communist-controlled government (e.g., see Egri & Ralston, 2004; Li & Bachman, 1989).

In authoritarian as in democratic regimes, formal education may be expected to lead to greater awareness of government and politics. However, to the extent that education is controlled by the government for the purpose of indoctrination, the breadth of that awareness may be limited and its content may be shaped for the specific purpose of generating regime/government support (e.g., see Hahn, 1998; Zaller, 1990, 1992). Hence, in China – where younger citizens are not only more likely to have achieved higher levels of education but also to have done so within an education system that has undergone limited liberalization – it might be
expected that more years of education would increase the likelihood of critical attitudes toward the government, at least for younger citizens (e.g., see Norris, 1999.).

In their study of democracies, Anderson and Tverdova (2003) found that “ownership” of the government – operationalized as having voted for a government party -- affects how corruption influences evaluation of government. While voting for a party in government itself is not a meaningful variable for authoritarian regimes, the broader concept of “ownership” may still have value. In China, for instance, feelings of “government ownership” may attach to Communist Party membership, to regular interactions with those in power, or more broadly to feelings of nationalism. It indeed seems reasonable to expect that Party members, those with “political connections,” and those with strong nationalistic feelings would have (or at least would imagine) more reasons to be satisfied with government and government officials at all levels.

For the above reasons, we will control for the effects of age, education, Communist Party membership, “political connections,” and nationalistic feelings in our assessment of the independent effects of perception of corruption on government satisfaction.

As noted above, it is also reasonable to think that the extent to which one is satisfied with life in general would affect attitudes toward government. Government may get some of the credit when life seems good, and government is at least as likely to share in the blame when life is not going so well. And because corruption is plausibly linked to both life satisfaction and

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15 For these purposes, nationalistic feelings are captured by “strong” or “somewhat” agreement with the statement “I would rather be a citizen of China than of any other country in the world.” [b12a]

16 Our “social networking with politicians” variable is operationalized as often having had contact with employees of party/state organizations, deputies of the People’s Congress, or commissioners of the People’s Consultative Conference. [b4s1, b4s3, b4s9]
satisfaction with government (also see Table 1), it is particularly important to control for life satisfaction when assessing effects of corruption on government satisfaction, i.e. to gauge whether there is a significant effect of perceived corruption even when life satisfaction is controlled. Though referring to actual rather than perceived corruption, Tavits’ arguments (2008, p. 161) concerning the relevance of corruption to life satisfaction are nonetheless relevant for perceived corruption as well:

Personal experience with corruption, more likely in countries with higher level of corruption, is likely to have a negative effect on someone’s well-being. If public goods are available only to some through personal connections or money, those without these resources are significantly disadvantaged. People are likely to be unhappy when they are involved in extorted corrupt exchanges, thus not being independent in pursuing their goals (Chrikov and Ryan, 2001; Ryan and Deci, 2001). Corruption can also reduce subjective well-being as a result of its significant negative consequences on economic and policy performance, increased crime, and inequality (Mauro, 1995; Montinola and Jackman, 2002; Rose-Ackerman, 1999; also see Seligson, 2002, p. 410).

Since perverted distribution of public goods, personal-goal deprivation, increased crime, and poor economic and policy performance are likely factors in life satisfaction which might well be factors in government satisfaction as well, we will not only control for life satisfaction in our initial assessment of independent effects of perceived corruption on government satisfaction, but will also run simultaneous equation models to gauge both the direct effects of perceived corruption and any indirect effects through corruption’s influence on life satisfaction.\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\) Though we do not directly control for effects of economic circumstances, we are doing so indirectly through controlling for life satisfaction. In their search for explanation of life
CORRUPTION’S INFLUENCE ON GOVERNMENT SATISFACTION: MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

Table 2 reports the results of multivariate regression analysis (weighted least squares),\(^{18}\)

![Table 2 about here](image)

which indicate a significant contribution of perceived corruption to local government satisfaction (both for the county/city and village/neighborhood levels) even when controlling for all of the alternative explanatory factors identified above.\(^{19}\) With both dimensions of perceived corruption – “general” and “local cadre” – in the analysis simultaneously, both make substantial, significant, independent contributions. Of the control variables, only the contributions of life satisfaction are significant (p<.05) for both local levels, with education also significant for the county level.

While these results suggest that perceived corruption may indeed affect satisfaction with local levels of government, such is not the case for satisfaction with the central level. Neither perceived corruption generally nor perceived cadre corruption contribute significantly to explanation of central government satisfaction, whether included together in multivariate analysis (as reported in Table 2), or entered separately (in analyses not reported here). However, the alternative explanatory variables of age, education, Communist Party membership,

\(^{18}\) All regression results reported here are based on weighted estimates. Weighting reflects the probability of each case to be selected into the sample. We also estimated our models with the ordinary least squares (OLS) method, with robust standard errors, and with bootstrap standard errors. The results from these alternative estimations are statistically identical to the estimation of the weighted least squares method, whose results are reported in Table 2.

\(^{19}\) For these analyses, all independent/control variables except age and education have been converted to the range of 0 to 1 to ease interpretation of coefficients.
nationalistic feelings, and life satisfaction all make significant contributions – in the expected directions – to satisfaction with central government.

Because life satisfaction is found to make significant contributions to satisfaction with all three levels of government, and because perceived corruption correlates significantly with life satisfaction (see Table 1), it is conceivable that the full effects of the corruption indicators are discounted when life satisfaction is included as well in standard weighted least squares analysis. Simultaneous equation modeling has the advantage of allowing discernment of both direct and indirect effects, as reported in Figures 1, 2 and 3. As evident there, the bulk of the contributions of the corruption variables are direct, with only insubstantial (though admittedly statistically significant in some cases) indirect contributions of perceived cadre corruption through life satisfaction.

Cumulatively, the results of these analyses establish a clear bottom line: perceived corruption appears to substantially impact levels of satisfaction with local government, while not markedly altering satisfaction with central government. Unlike for the local levels, satisfaction with the central government is significantly related to both Communist Party membership and nationalistic feelings.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATION

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20 All control variables in Table 2 are included in computing the simultaneous equation models, but for simplification of display, only the control variables reaching statistical significance at the 0.05 level are reported in the figures.
It has been widely established and is generally accepted today that in established democracies, citizens’ perception of political corruption is corrosive of support for the government and even the regime. What has been less clear or obvious is that perceived corruption would have the same effect in authoritarian regimes, where democratic norms of official behavior are less immediately relevant and where there has until now been scant empirical study of effects of perceived corruption on citizens’ satisfaction with government and its officials.

Using data from a 2008 nationwide survey of citizens in China, this study has explored the relationship of perceived corruption to government satisfaction in an established authoritarian regime. That China has had a serious corruption problem has in recent years been recognized by the central government itself. Fearing possible erosion of support for the party-centered regime, even from citizens’ perceptions of local-level corruption, central government officials developed a very public stance and program in opposition to corruption at all levels. Whether that program has had its intended effect on actual corruption is, of course, well beyond the scope of this study. Instead, we have focused on the degree to which citizens’ perceptions of corruption affect their feelings of satisfaction toward government.

We set out first to assess the extent to which there is, in fact, perception of a corruption problem among Chinese citizens, and found that – whether asked about corruption generally or about local cadre corruption more specifically – nearly two thirds of those responding to The China Survey considered corruption to be a “serious problem.”

Further justifying the central government’s concerns could be the additional finding that perceived corruption (whether general or location-specific) is negatively correlated – and significantly so -- with citizens’ satisfaction with all levels of government. However, this
relationship is much less substantial for the central government than for the local levels. And in multivariate analysis, controlling for a number of alternative factors, the contributions of both corruption variables are negligible for the central level, while remaining significant and substantial for satisfaction with both local levels.

To the extent that perceived corruption in China results in lowered satisfaction with government, it would appear that blame for the problem is assigned more to local government than to the central level. This could be interpreted as casting doubt on the central government’s concerns that its own popularity could suffer as a result of corruption, even at the local level. From the findings of this study, evaluation of local government appears to involve, in significant part, performance evaluation (of which corruption is part), while satisfaction with central government appears to be based more on politico-emotive ties (captured in our study by Communist Party membership and nationalistic feelings). This, in turn, may reflect the fact that in authoritarian regimes, central governments are expected to set all policy direction. But that does not necessarily mean that the central government will be held accountable for implementation, and hence for performance. In that sense, the Chinese central government might have been held accountable for not setting a “clean government” direction, if that had been the case. But it would still be the local levels of government that would be held accountable for bad performance, including corruption. In his earlier study of political trust in rural China, Li (2004, p. 228) reported similarly that:

\[21\] While trust in government officials and satisfaction with government may have conceptual overlap, our own analysis using data from The China Survey of 2008 suggest that the overlap is not sufficient to consider them to be synonymous. In correlating four measures of trust with three measures of satisfaction, the highest resulting bivariate coefficient is .44 (for trust in local cadres/supervisors with satisfaction toward village/neighborhood officials), which is highly significant but not sufficiently substantial to suggest that both are measuring the same concept.
Among those who perceive a divided state, most appear to have more trust in higher levels than in lower levels and distinguish between the intent and the capacity of the central government (“the Center”). They trust that the Center’s intent is beneficent but distrust its capacity to ensure faithful implementation of its policies.

(See also Li & O’Brien 1996; Shi 2001.)

But an equally plausible interpretation might be that by their own statements and actions, central government officials have effectively limited blame for the corruption problem to local governments. After all, the central government has articulated, and loudly so, a “clean government” program. While it would certainly be interesting to know how much the central government’s anti-corruption rhetoric and policies have actually affected attitudes toward the various levels of government, that would, of course, require longitudinal data which unfortunately do not exist.

Regardless of the ultimate reason, it would appear from our findings that citizen satisfaction with local government has been negatively impacted by perceptions of corruption, with no such consequence for the central level. Though it is far beyond our purpose in this paper to attempt full explanation for different degrees of satisfaction with different levels of government in China, it is nonetheless relevant here to note the extent to which the different levels have achieved citizen approval/disapproval. Fully 72.2% of respondents to The China Survey indicated satisfaction with the central government, while just 41.4% and 33.7% did so for the county/city and village/neighborhood levels respectively. Correspondingly, 2.9% indicated dissatisfaction with the central government, 8.8% with the county government, and 17.4% with
the village government. While it is beyond our ability to gauge the exact impact of perceived corruption on these different levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, it is interesting to at least speculate that the “corruption problem,” and its variant impacts on the different levels of government, has contributed to the satisfaction deficit at the local levels.

As to implications for other societies, it would of course be foolhardy to simply generalize beyond totalitarian China to the entire class of authoritarian regimes, but there are some potentially broader implications nonetheless. Anderson and Tverdova concluded that for democracies “corruption is likely to be an important component of government performance people use to judge political institutions” (2003, p. 104); now we can conclude the same for at least China’s totalitarian system. But rather than affecting satisfaction with the regime, as is true for democracies, the deflation of satisfaction in China is focused on the local levels of government while satisfaction with the central government (which in an authoritarian situation can effectively be equated with regime) is largely unaffected. Strategic decisions of Chinese leaders may well have something to do with this distinction, and indeed, it seems reasonable to conclude that wherever in authoritarian regimes a popular distinction exists between policy

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22 Percentages are based on frequency distributions excluding missing values. In other words, these are percentages of those responding to the items in The China Survey (3763 for central, 3702 for county, and 3699 for village). “Satisfied” is operationalized as values 8-10 for each of the 11-point scales, while “dissatisfied” is operationalized as values 0-2.

23 It is reasonable to think that while central government and regime are largely synonymous in authoritarian regimes, the concepts of regime and central government are more separable in democracy. Especially in fledgling new democracies, unhappiness with performance of government officials or policies at any level may be blamed on the democratic form. There, establishment of good, well-intentioned policies at the central level would not be likely to shield the regime from dissatisfaction in the face of poor and/or “unclean” implementation at any level. It is only where central government is less distinguishable from regime that dissatisfaction with local officials could effectively be isolated at that level.
making at the central level and implementation at the local level, the potential exists for effectively keeping blame for local-level corruption focused locally.

But it is also true for totalitarian regimes such as China that narrower features of totalitarianism – especially indoctrination into allegiance to the party/regime – might shield central government (where broad policy is made) more so than local officials (who are responsible for implementing policy) from criticism when negative implications of perceived corruption come into play. The decision of central leaders to step forward with strong denouncement of corruption, coupled with highly-publicized examples of punishment for wrong-doers at all levels, would only have enhanced this inclination to focus dissatisfaction at local-level bureaucrats.

Sorting out the relative importance of regime attributes – some applicable to authoritarian systems generally and others to totalitarian regimes in particular -- and leader’s policy decisions would of course require analysis of additional cases. For now, we must be content in gaining the knowledge that while the citizens of totalitarian China join citizens of democracies in using perceived corruption as “an important component of government performance” in judging political institutions, they distinguish among levels of government when doing so.

REFERENCES


Table 1: Bivariate correlations of the variables

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<th>Satisfaction (county)</th>
<th>Satisfaction (village)</th>
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<th>Corruption (General)</th>
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<th>Education</th>
<th>Communist</th>
<th>Connection</th>
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<td>-0.309***</td>
<td>-0.345***</td>
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<td>Corruption (General)</td>
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<td>0.461***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>0.090***</td>
<td>0.073***</td>
<td>-0.042*</td>
<td>-0.018</td>
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<td>(3322)</td>
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<td>-0.112***</td>
<td>-0.066***</td>
<td>0.070***</td>
<td>0.118***</td>
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<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>-0.024</td>
<td>0.027</td>
<td>0.114***</td>
<td>0.201***</td>
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<td>Connection</td>
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<td>-0.019</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>0.036*</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.204***</td>
<td>0.222***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>0.177***</td>
<td>0.083***</td>
<td>0.039*</td>
<td>-0.034</td>
<td>-0.041*</td>
<td>0.073***</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>0.061***</td>
<td>0.085***</td>
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<td>(3683)</td>
<td>(3687)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>0.175***</td>
<td>0.222***</td>
<td>0.175***</td>
<td>-0.120***</td>
<td>-0.055**</td>
<td>0.071***</td>
<td>0.068***</td>
<td>0.071***</td>
<td>0.105***</td>
<td>0.137***</td>
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<td>(3068)</td>
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<td>(3908)</td>
<td>(3912)</td>
<td>(3633)</td>
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*p≦.05,  **p≦.01,  ***≦.001. The number of observations of each correlation pair is shown in parentheses.

i Age is indicated by the number of years from birth through the date of the interview; education as the total number of years of formal education;
Communist Party membership as indicating current or previous membership; political connections as indicating having contacts with employees of the party/state organizations, deputies of the People’s Congress, or commissioners of the People’s Consultative Conference; nationalistic feelings as degree of agreement/disagreement with the statement “I would rather be a citizen of China than of any other country in the world;” and life satisfaction by answer to the question “how satisfied are you with your life?”
**Table 2.** Satisfaction toward different levels of the government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Central</th>
<th>County-city</th>
<th>Village/neighborhood</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coeff.</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Coeff.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Corruption (Cadre)</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>(0.209)</td>
<td>-2.167***</td>
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<td>Corruption (General)</td>
<td>-0.307</td>
<td>(0.206)</td>
<td>-1.099***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.016***</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
<td>0.008</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.042**</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
<td>-0.033*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist</td>
<td>0.334*</td>
<td>(0.157)</td>
<td>0.011</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connection</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>(0.132)</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>1.943***</td>
<td>(0.280)</td>
<td>0.383</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>1.305***</td>
<td>(0.230)</td>
<td>2.220***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.374***</td>
<td>(0.344)</td>
<td>6.710***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Observations</td>
<td>2606</td>
<td>2585</td>
<td>2563</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>0.157</td>
<td>0.152</td>
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Entries are regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001.
Figure 1. Direct and indirect effect of corruption to satisfaction toward central government

(Values beside the lines are regression coefficients. *p≤.05, **p≤.01, ***p≤.001.)
Figure 2. Direct and indirect effect of corruption to satisfaction toward county/local government

(Values beside the lines are regression coefficients. *p≤.05, **p≤.01, ***p≤.001.)
Figure 3. Direct and indirect effect of corruption to satisfaction toward Village/neighborhood government

(Values beside the lines are regression coefficients. *p≤.05, **p≤.01, ***p≤.001.)
**APPENDIX**: Questionnaire Items  (from *The China Survey*, 2008; see footnote #6)

*Satisfaction toward the central government* (The China Survey: variable c9a)

Please tell us how satisfied or unsatisfied you are with each of the following. (Card is shown with 11-point scale, ranging from 0 for “not satisfied at all” to 10 for “satisfied very much.”): Central government

*Satisfaction toward the county/city government* (The China Survey: variable c9b)

Please tell us how satisfied or unsatisfied you are with each of the following. (Card is shown with 11-point scale, ranging from 0 for “not satisfied at all” to 10 for “satisfied very much.”): County/city government

*Satisfaction toward the village/neighborhood committee* (The China Survey: variable c9c)

Please tell us how satisfied or unsatisfied you are with each of the following. (Card is shown with 11-point scale, ranging from 0 for “not satisfied at all” to 10 for “satisfied very much.”): Village/neighborhood committee/CRC officials

*Corruption (cadre)* (The China Survey: variable e9)

There has been a lot of talk recently about corruption. How serious is the problem of cadre corruption in this locality? Would you say it is

<01> very serious
<02> somewhat serious
<03> not too serious
<04> not serious at all
<08> don’t know
<09> refuse to answer

*Corruption (general)* (The China Survey: variable c1h)

On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 indicating this is not a problem at all in China and 10 indicating this is an extremely serious problem, how serious do you think these problems are in China today? Corruption
Age (The China Survey: variable a1)

When were you born? (year)

Education (The China Survey: the sum of variable f16a to f16h)

How many years of education have you had at each of the following levels?

[f16a] elementary school _____?
[f16b] middle school _____?
[f16c] high school _____?
[f16d] high school equivalent _____?
[f16e] college _____?
[f16f] university _____?
[f16g] master degree _____?
[f16h] doctoral degree _____?

Communist (The China Survey: variable e6_a)

Do you now belong or have you belonged to the Communist Party?

<1> belong now
<3> not now, but have belonged sometime
<5> have never belonged
<9> no answer

Connection (The China Survey: variable b4s1, b4s3, and b4s9)

Among the people with whom you had a personal contact and communication (from the above questions), in which occupations do some of them work?

[b4s1] leaders in the party/state organization
[b4s3] deputies in the People’s Congress
[b4s9] commissioners in the People’s Political Consultative
Conference

Nationalism (The China Survey: variable b12a)

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

I would rather be a citizen of China than of any other country in the world

<01> agree strongly
<02> somewhat agree
<03> neither agree nor disagree
<04> somewhat disagree
<05> disagree strongly
<08> don’t know
<09> refuse to answer

Life satisfaction (The China Survey: variable h2b)

How satisfied are you with your life? (Card is shown with 11-point scale, ranging from 0 for “not satisfied at all” to 10 for “satisfied very much.”)