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Political Support and Participation in a  
Non-Democratic Society: A Study of Chinese Urban  
Residents

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**Political Support and Participation in a Non-Democratic Society:**

**A Study of Chinese Urban Residents\***

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**Political Support and Participation in a Non-Democratic Society:  
A Study of Chinese Urban Residents  
(Abstract)**

Political support includes two attitudinal dimensions, diffuse support and specific support. Studies of the behavioral consequences of political support suggest a lack of consensus on whether and how each dimension of political support influences varieties of behavior. Moreover, most of these studies have thus far been conducted in democratic societies. Based on a unique set of data collected from three representative sample surveys conducted in China, this study seeks to test some controversial arguments about the impacts of both attitudinal dimensions of political support on conventional political behavior in a non-democratic setting. The findings presented here help fill some gaps in the empirical study of the relationship between political support and political behavior in general and shed some light on the role of popular political support in shaping people's behavior in China in particular.

## **Political Support and Participation in a Non-Democratic Society: A Study of Chinese Urban Residents**

Political support includes two attitudinal dimensions, *diffuse support* for the fundamental political system and *specific support* for the incumbent political authorities (see Easton 1965; 1975). The effect of these two attitudinal dimensions on citizens' political behavior has important implications for the stability and viability of an incumbent government and, perhaps, of the political system in any kind of society. A sign of the importance of the behavioral consequences of political support is the many studies of the topic (see, e.g., Lipset 1959 and 1960; Gamson 1968; Muller 1970a and 1970b; Paige 1971; Muller 1972; Citrin 1974; Miller 1974a and 1974b; Muller 1977; Muller and Jukam 1977; Seligson 1980; Craig and Maggiotto 1981; Muller, Jukam and Seligson 1982; Kornberg and Clarke 1983; Muller and Jukam 1983; Karlins 1986; Bahry and Silver 1990; Kornberg, and Clarke 1992; Miller 1993; Chen 2000; Seligson 2002; Ulbig 2002). Among these studies, however, hardly any consensus exists on whether and how each of the two dimensions of political support influences varieties of political behavior. Few of the studies even deal with the behavioral impact of specific support, one of the two conceptual dimensions of political support. Moreover, most of the studies have thus far been conducted in democratic societies, especially in the United States and Western Europe. In research on the relationship between political support and political participation, therefore, a conspicuous need appears for further testing of controversial arguments against data, particularly from non-democratic settings, and for filling the void of the behavioral impact of specific support.

This study seeks to make a contribution to the fulfillment of that need based on a unique set of data collected from three representative sample surveys conducted in Beijing, China in 1995, 1997 and 1999 (see Appendix A). Specifically, we highlight the current theoretical and empirical debates on the relationship between political support and participation, test some hypotheses about such a relationship against our data, and finally draw important theoretical and political implications from empirical findings about the hypotheses. All in all, we hope not only to shed some light on the general theoretical inquiry into the relationship between support and participation, but also to suggest some implications of such a relationship for political stability in China.

## I. Theory and Early Findings

### A. Conceptualization of Political Support

Political support, the key concept used in this and other studies of this sort, originates from David Easton's conceptualization. While this concept has been continuously utilized in the studies of different sociopolitical settings and refined by some other analysts, its basic theoretical tenets have remained relatively intact. Easton's definition of political support begins as follows: "We can say that A supports B either when A acts on behalf of B or when he orients himself favorably toward B. B may be a person or a group; it may be a goal, idea, or institution. I shall designate supportive *actions* as overt support and supportive *attitudes* or sentiments as covert support" (Easton 1965, 159). As to the "covert support," which is referred to as "political support" in this study, Easton further identifies three major objects toward which such support is directed—the *regime*, the *authorities* and the *political community*. According to Easton (1965, Chapters 11-13), the regime, which is usually considered the most important object, refers to the fundamental values, norms and institutions of the government; the authorities incorporate not only the incumbent leaders but the political leadership in general; the political community denotes the group of persons who are bound together in a common political enterprise.

Subsequently, for political support (i.e., "supportive attitudes"), the Eastonian conceptualization makes a distinction between two dimensions—"diffuse support" and "specific support" (see, Easton 1965 and 1975). Diffuse support, often seen as the more influential dimension, represents a person's conviction that the existence and functioning of the government conform to his or her moral or ethical principles about what is right in the political sphere. Of the three political objects mentioned above, the regime is the primary object of diffuse support. It is believed that citizens are linked to the regime by diffuse support, which stems from their assessment of the fundamental values, norms and institutions of the government. As Easton himself (1965, 278) points out, the citizens' support for the regime is "the single most effective device for regulating the flow of diffuse support." Thus, diffuse support for the regime is also regarded as the "belief in [the] legitimacy" of the political regime (Easton 1965, Chapter 18).

As distinct from diffuse support, specific support means a person's satisfaction with specific policies and with the performance of the government. Of the three political objects, the authorities are considered to be the primary object of specific support. Citizens are linked to the

political authorities through their specific support, which derives from their perceptions and evaluations of the actual policy outputs of the authorities. In addition, as Easton (1975, 437) argues, this dimension of support is “object-specific”: “people are or can become aware of the political authorities—those who are responsible for the day-to-day actions taken in the name of a political system.”

In short, within the Eastonian conceptual framework, political support as a subjective entity includes the two dimensions—diffuse support and specific support. And while these two dimensions of support may all be directed toward the three political objects—the regime, the political authorities and the political community—each dimension is designated *primarily* for one political object: diffuse support for the regime and specific support for the political authorities.<sup>1</sup>

#### B. Relationship between Support and Participation

Most analysts of political support in the Eastonian framework agree that political support, with its one or both dimensions mentioned above, influences individuals’ behaviors, which may in turn affect the operation, stability and even survival of the incumbent government or/and the political system as a whole (see, e.g., Lipset 1959 and 1960; Easton 1965 and 1975; Muller 1970a; Miller 1974b; Muller 1977; Muller and Jukam 1977; Kornberg and Clarke 1983 and 1992; Muller, Jukam and Seligson 1982; Miller 1993; Chen 2000). Nonetheless, analysts differ in their analytical focuses, and in their empirical findings as to how each of the two dimensions (diffuse and specific) of political support influences different kinds of political behaviors.

Among the previous studies, one can discern at least five distinct types of research, which have different combinations of participation forms<sup>2</sup> and support dimensions as their analytical

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<sup>1</sup> Given the theoretical and political importance, there is a large body of literature on the relationship between the two dimensions of support such a relationship (e.g., Easton 1965; Easton 1975; Muller and Jukam 1977; Gibson and Caldeira 1992; Adamany and Grossman 1983; Finkle, Muller and Seligson 1989; Calderia and Gibson 1995; Chen et al. 1997; Gibson, Caldeira and Baird 1998; Cusack 1999). Nonetheless, we will not discuss this literature here, since this article focuses on the relationship between political support, including both dimensions, on the one hand and political participation on the other.

<sup>2</sup> All types of research make a distinction between conventional and unconventional participation. In most studies, conventional participation refers to a set of behaviors that are considered in a certain society as “standard ways” of political participation (Muller 1977, 456) including, for example, voting and petitioning government officials. On the other hand,

focuses. The five shaded cells of Table 1 summarize these five types of research in terms of their different combinations of participation forms and support dimensions. Specifically, the first type (Cell “h”) of these studies tackles the impacts of the *two* dimensions of political support *only* on unconventional (or aggressive) behavior (e.g., Citrin 1974; Muller and Jukam 1977; Craig and Maggiotto 1981; Muller and Jukam 1983). The second type (Cell “i”) studies the effect of the *two* dimensions on *both* conventional and unconventional behavior (e.g., Kornberg and Clarke 1992), while there are very few, if not none, analyses in this category. The third approach (Cell “c”) investigates the impact of *one* dimension, diffuse support, on *both* conventional and unconventional behaviors (e.g., Muller 1972; Muller 1977; Seligson 1980; Ubig 2002). The fourth approach (Cell “b”) deals with the impact of *one* dimension, diffuse support, *only* on unconventional behavior (e.g., Miller 1974; Muller 1970a and 1970b; Muller, Jukam, and Seligson 1982). And the fifth approach (Cell “a”) studies the effect of *one* dimension, diffuse support, *only* on conventional behavior (e.g., Seligson 2002). It is worth noting that almost all the survey based studies conducted in non-democratic or transitional societies take this approach, focusing on the effect of diffuse support on conventional behavior (e.g., Karklins 1986; Bahry and Silver 1990; Miller 1993; Chen and Zhong 2002).

***Table 1 about here***

In this study, we focus on the impacts of *both* dimensions of political support on *conventional* form of participation. This analytical focus could be placed in Cell “g” in Table 1. There are two major reasons that we focus on conventional form of participation. One is related to the unique sociopolitical environment of China, which significantly affects our choice of conventional participation. All the typical unconventional forms of participation—such as citizen-initiated protest and demonstration including violent behavior—which have been tackled in most studies of democratic societies are not tolerated and have always been brutally suppressed by the government in China. Hence, it would be too politically risky and irresponsible to ask respondents in China any questions about these unconventional acts or even about their intentions to engage in such acts.<sup>3</sup> Due to such a political risk, should we ask

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unconventional participation stands for kinds of behaviors that “exemplify aggressive political protest: action either illegal and disruptive of the normal functioning of government or illegal and explicitly violent” (Muller 1977, 456).

<sup>3</sup> Thus far, almost all the opinion survey studies in China have excluded such unconventional acts as protest, demonstration and violent behavior. In one of the most comprehensive survey

questions about unconventional participation, our respondents would either refuse to answer or give false answers to the questions. Thus, the potential results of those questions would be highly unreliable and untruthful. The other reason deals with some salient gaps in empirical research on this subject, which prompt us to consider *both* dimensions of political support. As mentioned above, almost none of the previous studies addresses the impacts of the two dimensions of political support on conventional behavior, particularly the impact of *specific support* in non-democratic/transitional societies. Thus, our study's focus on the behavioral effects of both dimensions of political support, especially specific support, in such a non-democratic society as China could make a meaningful contribution to scholarship on the behavioral effect of political support.

What are the major findings about support and participation from previous studies in the Eastonian framework? Given the analytical focus mentioned above, we orient our answer to this question toward the impact of the *two* dimensions of political support on *conventional* participation. Most survey studies on the conventional behavioral consequences of political support were conducted in democratic societies, especially those in the West. Of these studies in democratic settings, an overwhelming majority focus on the behavioral effect of *diffuse* support, while very few studies analyze that of *specific* support. In terms of the effect of *diffuse* support on conventional political participation, there is hardly any lasting consensus among these studies. Some studies find a significant, positive relationship between diffuse support and conventional behavior; that is, those who are supportive of the political regime tend to be more likely to engage in conventional acts, such as voting, campaigning, petitioning, and contacting officials (see, e.g., Paige 1971; Muller 1977; Seligson 2002). But other analyses indicate that there is *no* independent (or significant) impact of diffuse support on people's decisions to engage in conventional acts (e.g., Seligson 1980; Ulbig 2002). In terms of the impact of *specific* support,

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studies of political participation in urban China, for example, Tianjian Shi (1997) examines a long list of participatory types. Presumably for the same concern about political sensitivity, however, Shi does not include those unconventional acts. Even the most radical or dramatic political acts included in his study—such as “adversarial activities” (e.g., writing to government officials, writing to newspaper editors, reporting to complaint bureau, and seeking audiences with higher authorities) and “resistance” (e.g., slowing down on the job, whipping up public opinion against leaders in work units, organizing people to fight against leaders in work units) still do not match the yardstick of unconventional participation utilized in most studies of Western or democratic societies.

Kornberg and Clarke (1992) find that those who indicate lower support for incumbent authorities are more likely to conduct some types of conventional activities, such as peaceful petition and boycott. As mentioned above, however, the work on the effect of specific support has thus far been too thin to establish a substantial empirical baseline.

On the other hand, almost *all* the emerging studies conducted in non-democratic and transitional societies have focused on the effect of *diffuse* support. There is a discernable consensus<sup>4</sup> within this small number of studies that there is a positive connection between diffuse support for the political regime and conventional political behaviors such as voting and contacting officials (e.g., Karklins 1986; Bahry and Silver 1990; Miller 1993; Chen and Zhong 2002). In addition, some of these studies use only single-item measures when operationalizing the concept of political support in survey studies, which could cause some measurement validity problems.

All in all, there are at least two rather conspicuous limits within the early studies of the conventional behavioral consequences of political support conducted in both democratic and non-democratic settings. One is that the research on the effect of *specific* support on conventional behavior is either too thin for the democratic setting or nonexistent for the non-democratic setting. Thus, this limit has severely prevented us from understanding the relationship between one dimension of political support (i.e., specific support) and political participation in non-democratic as well as democratic societies. The other limit is that the measures of political support used in the studies of non-democratic systems are not quite comparable with those in the analyses of democratic systems. This leads to difficulties in comparing research results across various sociopolitical environments and subsequently in advancing the study as a whole of this subject. This study attempts to contribute to filling these gaps.

## II. Political Support and Participation in Urban China

In order to compare the results from our surveys with others and to help advance the general empirical inquiry into this subject, we operationalize the concept of political support and

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<sup>4</sup> One exception to the consensus is the study by Shi (1999), arguing that those who oppose the regime and support democratic change tend to vote in semi-competitive elections in China.

specify the behavioral impacts of political support, drawing on the Eastonian framework and early empirical studies that apply this framework. We also select some forms of political behavior for this study, which are not only suitable for cross-national comparison but also indicative of political participation in contemporary China.

#### A. Operationalization of Political Support

The two dimensions of political support are operationalized in this study as follows:

*Diffuse support.* To operationalize the concept of diffuse support for the political regime or regime legitimacy, many scholars have identified several major components of the concept. For Lipset (1981), regime legitimacy is tied to affect for the prevalent political institutions in a society. David Easton (1965; 1975) sees regime legitimacy (or “diffuse support” in his original term) as affect *primarily* for values, norms and institutions of the regime. Combining these two approaches, Muller and Jukam (1977, 1566) locate three major operational components for the concept of regime legitimacy: (1) “affect tied to evaluation of how well political institutions conform to a person’s sense of what is right;” (2) “affect tied to evaluation of how well the system of government upholds basic political values in which a person believes;” and (3) “affect tied to evaluation of how well the authorities conform to a person’s sense of what is right and proper behavior [or conduct].”

Following Muller and Jukam’s operationalization of regime legitimacy,<sup>5</sup> we measure popular diffuse support for China’s current political regime by asking the respondents in all three surveys to assess six items (or statements) as follows:

1. I am proud to live under the current political system;
2. I have an obligation to support the current political system;
3. I respect the political institutions in China today;
4. I feel that the basic rights of citizens are protected;
5. I believe that the courts in China guarantee fair trials;
6. I feel that my personal values are the same as those advocated by the government.

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<sup>5</sup> Their operationalized measure of regime legitimacy or diffuse support has been used in several cross-national and single-nation studies of political support (see, e.g., Muller 1977; Muller and Williams 1980; Finkel, Muller, Jukam and Seligson 1982; Seligson and Muller 1987; Muller and Seligson 1989).

Specifically, items 1 and 6 are designed to detect the popular affect for the values/norms of the regime. Items 2 and 3 are intended to tap into affect derived from respondents' generalized feelings about major political institutions and the current political system as a whole. Items 4 and 5 relate to a person's evaluations of political authorities in terms of whether the authorities have functioned and wielded their power in accordance with one's sense of fairness and basic interests. Respondents were asked to rate each of the six items on a 4-point scale, where "1" indicates respondents' strong disagreement with a statement, and "4" indicates their strong agreement with the statement. These six items were then combined to form an additive index to capture a collective profile of a respondent's diffuse support for the political regime. This index is used in the multivariate analyses that follow.<sup>6</sup>

*Specific support.* Drawing upon indicators from some previous cross-country survey studies of political support (see Muller and Jukam, 1977, pp. 1565-1567; Finkel, Muller and Seligson, 1989, pp. 336-337 and 346-347), we have fashioned nine items to capture respondents' evaluations of specific policies and their outcomes. These items are linked to the following public policy areas:

1. Controlling inflation
2. Providing job security
3. Minimizing the gap between rich and poor
4. Improving housing conditions for all
5. Maintaining order in society and community
6. Providing adequate medical care for all
7. Providing welfare services to the needy
8. Fighting official corruption
9. Combating pollution

The relevance of these policy areas to our Beijing samples was assessed in several interviews conducted prior to the administration of formal surveys. The results from these pre-survey interviews indicated widespread interest among interviewees in each of these policy areas.

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<sup>6</sup> Our reliability analysis for these items indicates that the combination of the items for each sample produces quite desirable reliability coefficients (alpha): .80 in 1995, .84 in 1997 and .82 in 1995.

The relevance of the items in this index of specific support has also been proved by some earlier field observations by China observers. From a systemic perspective, for example, Tang and Parish (2000) have correctly noted that since the post-Mao reform, the sociopolitical base of the relationship (or what they call “social contract”) between the state and the population has been transformed from citizens’ acceptance of Maoist idealist goals to constant evaluations by them of government policies dealing with their daily socioeconomic life. In this context of social-contract change, these analysts (Tang and Parish 2000, Chapter 5) have identified fifteen areas of the “government’s outputs” about which the public in urban China was concerned between the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Furthermore, among these fifteen areas, the public was most worried about inflation, housing, medical care, official corruption, and social (or community) order (Tang and Parish 2000, 108). In addition, these issues of most concern to the public during the late 1980s and the early 1990s either persisted or reemerged during the mid 1990s (see, e.g., Baum 1994, Chapter 16 and Epilogue; Lieberthal 1995, 267-291) when our surveys commenced. In short, all these earlier findings from field observations by China scholars indicate that the policy issues covered in our specific support index are at the core of the public’s concerns.

For each of the items in the specific-support index, respondents were asked to “grade” government-policy performance based on the grading scheme commonly used in China’s schools: that is, on a 5-point scale, where “1” stands for failure and “5” stands for excellence. In order to capture a collective profile of the respondents’ evaluation of government performance, the nine items were then combined to form an additive index. This index serves as one single measure of government-policy evaluation and is employed in the multivariate analyses that follow.<sup>7</sup>

#### B. Forms of Conventional Participation in China

Since the outset of post-Mao economic and political reforms in the late 1970s, more and more ordinary citizens have been reportedly participating in public affairs and politics in both urban and rural areas of China (e.g., Shi 1997; Jennings 1997; Manion 1996, Chen 2000; Tang

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<sup>7</sup> Our reliability analysis for these items indicates that the combination of the items for each sample produces quite desirable reliability coefficients (alpha): .84 in 1995, .87 in 1997 and .85 in 1995.

and Parish 2000; Chen and Zhong 2002), even though China's political system has never been democratic—especially by Western standards. In order to grasp the major trends of mass political participation in urban China, we fashioned four questions to measure four rather common political acts: (1) voting for deputies to local people's congresses, (2) complaining to leaders at various levels, (3) voicing concerns to local people's deputies, and (4) writing letters to the authorities at any level. While all these four political acts are considered conventional political participation especially by the classification used in previous studies mentioned above, they can be further grouped into two conceptual categories: voting behavior that consists of Item 1 itself, and contacting behavior that includes Items 2-4.<sup>8</sup> There were two major reasons for us to choose these two categories of mass political participation. One was that, although these forms of participation did not exhaust all political acts conducted by citizens, they were the *most common* political acts in China (see, e.g., Manion 1996; Shi 1997; Jennings 1997; Tang and Parish 2000). Thus, they were most likely to represent the fundamental trends of mass political participation in that country. The other reason was that, as a China scholar noted, these acts were “legitimate in China, at least in theory” (though not all risk-free), so that questions about these acts were “unlikely to make respondents give interviewers false answers” (Shi 1997, 27). Consequently, the responses to these questions were expected to be reliable. All in all, therefore, we believe that these participatory forms will provide a good test of the behavioral impact of political support in urban China. We now turn to a brief examination of the sociopolitical background and characteristics of each of these two categories.

*Voting Behavior.* In the late 1970s and the early 1980s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Deng Xiaoping amended the electoral law for the elections of people's congresses—Chinese “legislatures”—at various levels. Specifically, the new law introduced direct elections for local people's congresses.<sup>9</sup> According to this law, in theory, voters could nominate candidates and have a choice among multiple candidates for each contested seat.

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<sup>8</sup> These two conceptual categories were confirmed by the results from an exploratory factor analysis. From the analysis, two factors emerged for each sample: voting behavior was composed of voting in local people's congress elections, and contacting behavior consisted of complaining to leaders at various levels, voicing concerns to local people's deputies, and writing letters to the authority at any level. These two factors together explained 58%, 49% and 52% of the variance among the four political acts for the 1995, 1997 and 1999 samples, respectively.

<sup>9</sup> *Article 97 of the 1982 Constitution of the People's Republic China* provides that “deputies to the people's congresses of counties, cities not divided into districts, municipal districts,

The fundamental motive of the CCP leadership for introducing and maintaining the new electoral law has been twofold. First and foremost, the CCP leadership intended to regain and reinforce the legitimacy of its one-party rule through liberalized yet limited local elections (e.g. O'Brien 1990, 126; McCormick 1996, 31). By allowing people to elect deputies *directly* to the lowest level of people's congresses, the post-Mao leaders expected to create an image of the government's "representativeness" among the citizens (McCormick 1996). Secondly, and only secondly, these electoral reforms were also intended to heighten the efficiency of the government (O'Brien 1990, 126), ideally as the "popularly" elected deputies act on behalf of their constituencies to advocate sensible policies and stop unpopular governmental decisions at various legislative levels. Whether and how well this second objective has been achieved through local elections remains questionable. But it must be noted that since the outset of the electoral reforms, the CCP leaders have always linked this objective to their ultimate political goal: strengthening the legitimacy of the "party leadership" (*dang de lingdao*) (see, e.g. Archive Research Office 1994, Chapter 10). In short, it is very clear that all these limited electoral reforms were not designed to initiate democratic competition across political and ideological divides.

In the light of this fundamental motive, the CCP leaderships have firmly imposed at least two formidable constraints on the local people's congress elections. One is political. In order to prevent challenges from other individuals or groups to its absolute rule, the CCP has directly or indirectly controlled virtually the entire process of local people's congress elections: from the nomination of candidates, electorate deliberation to the determination of final candidates on the ballot (Halpern 1991, 38; Burns 1999, 591). No opposition parties or organizations are allowed in these elections, although the so-called "democratic parties" that have long been co-opted by the CCP may participate in the elections, serving only as window-dressing for "democracy with Chinese characteristics," as the government puts it. As a result, with few exceptions,<sup>10</sup> "people's congress deputies are mainly politically reliable cadres, intellectuals, workers, peasants, and

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townships, nationality townships and towns are elected directly by their constituencies" (see National People's Congress 1982).

<sup>10</sup> In his recent works, Shi has noted these exceptions by citing two "famous cases" of two princelings, Chen Yuan and Chen Haosu, who lost in their local elections (see Shi 1997, 36; Shi 1999, nt. 6, 1120). But, as other China analysts argue (e.g. O'Brien 1994, 85; McCormick 1996, 39; Nathan 1997, 235), these exceptions still remain *exceptions* after all and have not yet led to a fundamental (or qualitative) change in the political orientation of winning candidates as a whole.

minority representatives who accept the contour of the regime” (O’Brien 1994, 85). Thus, under the CCP’s tight political control, these elections “rarely challenge party power or government decisions” (O’Brien 1994, 85).

The other constraint imposed by the CCP in these elections is an ideological one. The CCP has implemented a list of measures to prevent the local people’s congress elections from becoming a forum spreading “bourgeois liberal thoughts” or political views contrary to the official ideology. First of all, the party prohibits any large-scale or “publicized” electoral campaign that is considered part of “bourgeois democracy” (as opposed to “socialist democracy”), and it requires that all electoral activities and deliberations be carried out within a limited scope (e.g., work unit or *danwei*) under firm control by the party-dominated election committee (Wang 1998; Shi and Lei 1999, 23 and 28-30). Not only has the CCP severely limited the scope and format of electoral activities and deliberations, but it has made relentless efforts to control the *substance* of the activities and deliberations in order to make sure that no political view contrary to the CCP’s “four cardinal principles”<sup>11</sup> sneaks into the local elections. The CCP has instructed all local governments to watch for and prevent any speeches “threatening the party’s leadership” and the nation’s “stability and unity” during the election (Wang 1998, 279).

Moreover, it is worth noting that, while according to the PRC constitution, the local people’s congresses should play an important role in representing citizens’ interests and supervising governments and their officials in their respective areas,<sup>12</sup> they in reality have not met such constitutional “expectations” due to strict one-party control. The local people’s congresses therefore become more or less a facade of “democracy,” which simply gives “substance to the Party’s claim to have established a democracy” (McCormick 1996, 41).

*Contacting Behavior.* As mentioned above, this category of political participation consists of three specific political acts: complaining to leaders at various levels, voicing concerns to local people’s deputies, and writing letters to the authorities at any level. This category of political act can be regarded as “particularistic” political activities (see, Tang and Parish 2000,

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<sup>11</sup> The “four cardinal principles” include: (1) supporting the CCP’s leadership, (2) adhering to socialism, (3) upholding Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought, and (4) maintaining the proletarian dictatorship (see Wang 1999, 57).

<sup>12</sup> See, *Chapter One, General Principles of the 1982 Constitution of the People’s Republic* (National People’s Congress 1982).

187-199). By engaging in such acts, people express their concerns about and interests in *concrete* personal and, sometimes, community issues, such as employment, wages, housing, welfare, education, medical care, community order, and the local environment. Thus, the issues dealt with in this category of political act by and large do not directly relate to the fundamental norms and structures of the political system.

Why do people in China need to contact *government officials* at various levels through different channels to fulfill their everyday needs? As Tang and Parish (2000, 189) have argued, in contemporary China “the government still controls resource allocation and provides extensive social services in urban areas, such as employment, income, housing, education, and health care.” Although such government controls have gradually declined since the post-Mao reform, most ordinary people still depend on the government for a large part of their everyday needs.

### C. Impact of Political Support on Participation

It is assumed in this study that both specific support and diffuse support should *variably* affect different forms of political behavior within this broad classification of conventional participation. Theoretically, this is mainly because, according to the Eastonian framework, these two dimensions of attitudinal political support have distinct socio-psychological characteristics that inevitably bring about variable impacts on different types of political acts. Table 2 summarizes the hypothesized, diverse relationships between the two dimensions of political support and the two categories of conventional political acts discussed above. The sign indicates the expected direction or existence of each relationship: positive, negative, or none. Specifically, we expect that, in urban China, diffuse support should be positively associated with voting behavior and not related to contacting behavior; specific support should not be correlated with voting behavior but negatively linked with contacting behavior. The theoretical rationales behind each of these expected relationships are explained as follows.

#### ***Table 2 about here***

*Impact of diffuse support.* In their study of Soviet mass participation, Bahry and Silver (1990, 828) suggest that “people who concur with fundamental values of the Soviet regime should be more involved in *compliant* political and social activity, since they would have more of a normative stake in the system.” Of the political activities examined in this study, voting in local people’s congress elections seems to be the best candidate for such a “compliant” act. This

is because, as our earlier discussion indicates, the CCP's normative values and political leadership still prevail in these elections, and such elections in effect only legitimize "the Party's claim to have established a democracy" (McCormick 1996, 41). Thus, voting in the elections can be considered compliance with these norms and the political leadership and help the Party legitimize its rule, especially when *voting is not coerced by the government*. Consequently, we expect that those who have strong diffuse support for the current political regime are more likely to vote in these local elections.

As mentioned earlier, contacting behaviors in urban China are engaged in to fulfill particularistic personal material needs. These activities are "typically personalized and nonideological" (Bahry and Silver 1990, 828) and hence not a suitable channel for people to express their normative values, such as their fundamental beliefs about the regime. Thus, we expect that diffuse support for the current political regime should *not* be related to the contacting behavior.

*Impact of specific support.* We hypothesize that those who report lower evaluations of incumbent policies are more likely to contact officials and authorities at various levels through different channels. There are two reasons for this hypothesis. One is that those who have a lower evaluation of incumbent policies are more motivated to ask the officials and authorities to correct specific policies or at least to have some explanations for the shortfalls/shortcomings of the policies (Jennings 1997). The other reason is that the Chinese government allows and very often encourages citizens to contact officials about their concerns regarding specific policy issues related to citizens' personal and communal life, since such concerns hardly pose any serious threat to the political system. Moreover, an empirical finding from a study of mass participation in the former Soviet Union apparently supports this hypothesis: that is, the complaints about government policies tend to be expressed by contacting specific government officials or agencies (Kaplan 1993).

However, we expect that citizens' specific support for the incumbent authorities should *not* significantly affect their voting behavior one way or another. Voters or nonvoters acquire only *spiritual gains*<sup>13</sup> from elections for local people's congresses, because the congresses and elected deputies are generally not able to deal with concrete policy issues effectively or to

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<sup>13</sup> The "spiritual gains" here refer to the individual's satisfaction from expression of values through voting or nonvoting.

change political leaderships under the current political system. Thus, people's evaluations of incumbent policies should not be associated with their voting behavior in local people's congress elections.

### III. The Multivariate Analyses

To test the hypothesized relationships between the two dimensions of attitudinal political support, on the one hand, and the two major categories of political acts, on the other hand, we have conducted two sets of multivariate analyses. One set consists of *logistic* regression models<sup>14</sup> to estimate the impacts of two political-support dimensions on respondents' *voting* behavior in the three surveys (see Table 3). The other set includes multiple regression models (OLS) to capture the effects of the two political-support dimensions on respondents' *contacting* behavior (see Table 4). In order to assess whether the two dimensions of political support *independently* affect each of the two behavioral categories, we have included in each statistical model two sets of control variables: (1) socio-demographic attributes including age, sex, education, income and Party membership and (2) subjective orientations (see Appendix B for measurement of these orientations) other rather political support, including democratic values, interest in politics, life satisfaction and assessment of local public policies. Overall, the results from these two sets of multivariate statistical analyses are supportive of the earlier expectations regarding the relationship between attitudinal political support and political behavior in our samples.

#### *Tables 3 and 4 about here*

First, as the results in Table 3 indicate, even when the control variables were taken into account, diffuse support still had an independent and positive impact on respondents' voting behavior in all three surveys, and specific support did not exert such an impact. In other words, those who strongly supported the current regime, defined as a set of normative values and fundamental institutions, were more likely to vote in the elections for local people's congresses; a person's evaluation of incumbent policies however did *not* affect his or her decision on

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<sup>14</sup> Since the dependent variable, voting, in each survey is a *dichotomous* variable, the logistic regression analysis is an appropriate statistical technique.

whether to vote in such elections. These results are consistent with our expectations explained above.

It is also worth noting that other sociopolitical characteristics of most likely voters, which are revealed by the results of some of the control variables in Table 3, may supplement the findings on the behavioral impact of diffuse support. These characteristics include being a Party member, less supportive of democratic values, more interested in politics, and more satisfied with one's personal material and social life. To a certain extent, these characteristics serve as the sociopolitical context in which diffuse support affects voting behavior in urban China: those who support the current political regime are more likely to vote, perhaps also because most of them are Party members, less democratic, more interested in politics and more contented with their personal lives.

Second, as Table 4 shows, when other variables were controlled for, respondents' specific support for incumbent authorities still had a significant and *negative* impact on their contacting behavior in all three surveys, and diffuse support had little independent impact. These results suggest that those who had lower evaluations of incumbent policies tended to contact leaders and government agencies at various levels, while people's attitudes toward the current political regime did not seem to influence their decisions to contact authorities. The findings are in accordance with our expectations regarding different effects of the two dimensions of political support on people's contacting behavior.

Moreover, the results of some control variables included in Table 4 can help us understand the sociopolitical conditions under which specific support affects people's contacting behavior in contemporary China: people contact government officials also because they are less satisfied with their personal material and social lives, less democratically-oriented, and have lower evaluations of local public policies.

#### IV. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has reported an attempt to investigate the relationship between political support and conventional forms of political participation in a non-democratic setting based on longitudinal data collected in Beijing, China in the second half of the 1990s. The findings presented above help fill some gaps in the empirical study of such a relationship in general and

shed some light on the role of popular political support in shaping people's behavior in China in particular.

First of all, the potential contributions made by this study to the general empirical inquiry into the relationship between support and conventional participation are of two kinds. On the one hand, our findings on the impact of diffuse support on voting and contacting behaviors have both confirmed and contradicted those from early studies. For example, the finding that diffuse support independently and positively affects voting behavior has confirmed the studies in Costa Rica (Seligson 2002), the former Soviet Union (Bahry and Silver 1990; Karklins 1986) and the United States (Paige 1971); but our finding that diffuse support does not exert any significant impact on contacting behavior contradicts some survey studies in the former Soviet Union (Bahry and Silver 1990; Miller 1993). These mixed results from the comparison of our findings and others simply imply that all the empirical studies on the behavioral impact of support have thus far been inconclusive, even as they have accumulated useful data. Apparently, therefore, more empirical studies are needed to test key Eastonian hypotheses about the behavioral impact of political support and to experiment with various measurements for such key concepts as the two dimensions of political support and diverse forms of participation. On the other hand, the findings from this study about the impact of specific support on both voting and contacting behavior have likely filled a void in this field, since, as mentioned above, survey-based studies on the behavioral impact of *specific* support are very scarce in both democratic and non-democratic environments. Particularly, our findings about the behavioral impact of specific support could help establish some sort of empirical baseline against which other studies of this kind in the future could be compared.

Secondly, our findings have at least one important, general implication for the behavioral consequences of political support in contemporary China. Given that “the overwhelming net outcomes of [the local people's congress elections] have been very much in accordance with the CCP's expectations” (Chen and Zhong 2002, 183) and the Party no longer coerces people to vote, the finding that those with strong diffuse support for the current political regime tend to vote in these elections implies that such elections still work to boost the legitimacy of the current political regime. Therefore, the voter turnout rate in local People's Congress elections may serve as an “overt” indicator of popular support for the current political regime in China.

## Appendix A: Beijing Surveys and Data

In general, the second half of the 1990s witnessed the emergence of the so-called “third-generation” of the CCP leadership under Jiang Zemin, the gradual consolidation of power of this leadership at least at the national level, and the deepening of the post-Mao reforms that had both positive and negative effects on Chinese citizens’ lives. These were the underlying sociopolitical circumstances under which the data used in this study were collected. Specifically, the data came from three longitudinal representative-sample surveys conducted in Beijing in cooperation with the Public Opinion Research Institute (PORI) of the People's University.<sup>15</sup>

The three longitudinal surveys were cross-sectional *trend studies*, instead of *panel studies*,<sup>16</sup> which drew three random samples from the *same population* of the adult residents in Beijing at three different times. Although different persons could be included in each of the three samples, the results from all these samples were representative of trends in the same population in Beijing because each properly selected sample was equivalent to every other sample from that population. The main reason to choose trend studies over panel studies in Beijing was that, since the early 1990s, people’s residences in Beijing had become increasingly mobile due to the unprecedented pace of urban housing development in that city. Such high mobility made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to track many household respondents and therefore *very high attrition* from the same sample could have occurred had panel studies been implemented. This kind of high attrition could severely compromise the validity of potential panel studies. Therefore, trend studies seemed to be the best survey strategy to cope with these special circumstances in Beijing. In addition, the methods of cross-sectional trend study have been successfully applied in some earlier analyses of political attitudes for various sociopolitical settings (see, e.g., McDonough, Barnes and Pina 1986; Seligson and Muller 1987; Miller, Hesli, and Reisinger 1994; Miller, Reisinger, and Hesli 1996; Gibson, Caldeira and Baird 1998; Tang and Parish 2000).

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<sup>15</sup>. The Public Opinion Research Institute of the People's University in Beijing, which was set up in 1986 as the first of its kind in the People’s Republic of China, has done numerous surveys for both Chinese and foreign organizations.

<sup>16</sup> In theory, trend studies draw random samples from the *same population* at different times and each of the samples may include different respondents. By contrast, panel studies require interviews of (or at least most of) the *same sample* at different times. For a more detailed discussion on the differences between trend studies and panel studies, see, for example, Manheim and Rich (1986).

The first survey with a sample of 700 respondents was completed between November and December 1995. The second and third surveys, with equivalent sample sizes of 720 each, were conducted in December 1997 and December 1999, respectively. The response rates for the three surveys range from 93% to 96%.<sup>17</sup> Most of the questions in all three surveys were identical, which enabled us to detect changes in variables and relationships between and among the variables in a span of about four years.

Respondents in the three surveys were chosen through a multistage random sampling procedure. In the 1995 survey, five urban districts and two rural counties were randomly chosen in the first stage of sampling. Five residential neighborhoods (*juweihui*) or village committees (*cunming weiyuanhui*) were randomly chosen in the second stage of sampling. The third stage of random sampling produced a sample of 20 households from each of the five residential neighborhoods or villages of the seven urban districts or rural counties. One individual was randomly chosen from each household as the respondent in the final stage of sampling in our 1995 survey. The 1997 and 1999 surveys were both conducted in eight randomly-selected *urban* districts of Beijing. Thirty-six residential neighborhoods (*juweihui*) were randomly chosen in the second stage of sampling. The second stage of random sampling produced a sample of 20 households from each of the 36 residential neighborhoods of the eight urban districts. One individual was randomly chosen from each household as the respondent in the final stage of sampling in these two surveys.

The three samples were divided almost evenly between the two sexes (51.7%, 51.6%, and 50.8% males in the 1995, 1997, and 1999 samples, respectively). All age groups (from 18 years old to over 65) and major urban occupation sectors are represented in the samples. The education levels of the respondents ranged from elementary, middle school, high school, to college. The sampling error is less than 4% for all three surveys.

In these surveys, college students of journalism and sociology were employed as field interviewers. Before each of the actual surveys was carried out, the interviewers were trained by the project leaders in field interviewing techniques. Each field interviewer delivered the

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<sup>17</sup> These response rates are considered high by Western standards but are quite similar to the response rates from some other surveys conducted in China and the former Soviet Union (see, e.g., Gibson, Duch, and Tedin 1992; Nathan and Shi 1996; Shi 2001).

questionnaire to the randomly chosen individual respondent, who filled it out. Then the field interviewer brought the questionnaire back to the survey center.

Care was taken to minimize linguistic misinterpretations and respondent effects. The original wording of our questionnaire (which was first designed in the United States) was reviewed by the PORI to fit the Chinese social and cultural context and to provide for seamless translation from English to Chinese. Respondents were offered confidentiality and encouraged to provide answers that best captured their true feelings. In general, circumstantial evidence and evidence from other similar surveys (e.g. Shi 1997) suggest that Chinese respondents feel much freer to express their views in such public opinion surveys as ours than is typically assumed in the West. This is partly because, since the reforms, the Chinese government has not effectively censored or regulated public research, owing to relaxed party control at the grassroots level and the lack of any consistent, applicable official rules governing survey research.

## **Appendix B: Measurement of Subjective Orientations**

### *Democratic Values* (additive index)\*

Do you agree with the following statements? (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree.)

- (1). Elections to governmental positions should be conducted in such a way that there is more than one candidate for each post.
- (2). Regardless of one's political belief, he or she is entitled to the same rights and protections as anyone else.
- (3). The media should be free to expose government wrongdoing, such as official corruption.

\* The reliability analyses of this index yield reliability coefficients (alphas) of .76, .81 and .79 for the 1995, 1997, and 1999 surveys, respectively.

### *Interest in Politics* (additive index)

Please rate your response to each of the following questions according to a 4-point scale: 1 = not at all; 2 = not much; 3 = somewhat; 4 = very much.

- (1) How much are you interested in politics?

(2) How much do you care about national affairs?

*Life Satisfaction* (additive index)

Do you agree with the following statements? (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree.)

(1) I am satisfied with my overall living conditions (e.g., housing, income, food, clothing, etc).

(2) I am satisfied with my overall social status (e.g., job prestige, respect from others, etc).

*Assessment of Local Public Policies*

Overall, how would you rate the municipal government in terms of its policies dealing with local issues with which you are most concerned (e.g., community's order, traffic, hygiene, and etc.)?

(1 = very poor; 2 = poor; 3 = good; 4 = very good; 5 = excellent.)

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**TABLE 1**  
**Analytical Focuses of the Studies of the Relationships between Political Support and Participation**

<i>Support Dimension</i>	<i>Behavioral Type</i>		
	Conventional behavior	Unconventional behavior	Both Conventional and unconventional behavior
Diffuse support	(a) Some	(b) Some	(c) Some
Specific support	(d)	(e)	(f)
Both diffuse and specific support	(g) Our focus	(h) Some	(i) Scarce

*Note:* For Cell (a), see, for example, Karklins (1986), Bahry and Silver (1990), Miller (1993), Seligson (2002), and Chen and Zhong (2002). For Cell (b) see, for example, Miller (1974), Muller (1970a and 1970b), and Muller, Jukam, and Seligson (1982). For Cell (c), see, for example, Muller (1972), Muller (1977), Seligson (1980), and Ubig (2002). For Cell (h), see, for example, Citrin (1974), Muller and Jukam (1977), Craig and Maggionto (1981), and Muller and Jukam (1983). For Cell (i), see, for example, Kornberg and Clarke (1992).

**TABLE 2**  
**The Expected Relationships between the Two Dimensions of Political Support and the Two Major Forms of Political Acts**

<i>Subjective Motivation</i>	<i>Voting Behavior</i>	<i>Contacting Behavior</i>
Diffuse Support	+	0
Specific Support	0	-

**TABLE 3**  
**Estimated Coefficients of Logistic Regressions of Voting Behavior by Diffuse Support and Specific Support Beijing, China: 1995, 1997 and 1999**

<i>Independent Variable</i>	<i>Voting at Local Elections</i>		
	<i>1995</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1999</i>
Diffuse support	.39* (.11)	.19* (.07)	.26* (.10)
Specific support	.08 (.10)	.02 (.02)	.03 (.05)
Age	.04* (.01)	.05* (.00)	.03* (.00)
Age squared	-.01* (.00)	-.00* (.00)	-.00* (.00)
Sex <sup>a</sup>	-.17 (.18)	-.31 (.20)	-.16 (.14)
Education <sup>b</sup>	.13 (.16)	.23 (.24)	.18 (.14)
Income (x 10 <sup>-4</sup> ) <sup>c</sup>	-.03 (.02)	.00 (.00)	.01 (.06)
Party member <sup>d</sup>	.58* (.33)	.16* (.09)	.23* (.12)
Political interest	.19* (.09)	.21* (.05)	.23 (.18)
Democratic values	-.29* (.08)	-.34* (.11)	-.41* (.18)
Life satisfaction	.41* (.18)	.23* (.07)	.19* (.10)
Local policies	-.17 (.15)	-.08 (.10)	-.12 (.14)
Constant	-2.87* (.66)	-4.63*(1.06)	-3.67* (1.10)
-2 Log likelihood	553.69	573.41	488.23
Model chi-square	56.68*	63.85*	53.44*
Degrees of freedom	11	11	11
N	590	591	610

*Note:* The dependent variable is measured by the same question in all three surveys: "Have you voted in the most recent district or county election?" The most recent elections here refer to those held in 1993, 1996, and 1999. Thus, eligible voters in the 1995, 1997, and 1999 samples presumably had a chance to vote, respectively, in the 1993, 1996, and 1999 elections. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. \* $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>a</sup> Male = 1; female = 2.

<sup>b</sup> Illiterate or elementary = 1; junior high = 2; senior high = 3; college or higher = 4.

<sup>c</sup> Income is measured by Chinese currency, *yuan*.

<sup>d</sup> CCP member = 1; non-CCP member = 0.

**TABLE 4**  
**Multiple Regression (OLS) of Contacting Behavior by Diffuse Support and Specific Support, Beijing, China: 1995, 1997 and 1999**

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>Contacting Behavior</i>								
	<i>1995</i>			<i>1997</i>			<i>1999</i>		
	<i>b</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Diffuse support	.13	.20	.04	.11	.18	.03	.29	.31	.06
Specific support	-.29*	.08	-.18	-.32*	.09	-.22	-.36*	.14	.21
Age	.00	.02	.03	.00	.03	.02	.01	.02	.02
Age squared	-.01	.00	-.04	-.02	.02	-.03	-.00	.00	-.02
Sex <sup>a</sup>	-.21*	.12	-.09	-.23	.21	-.06	-.37*	.24	-.11
Education <sup>b</sup>	.18	.22	.04	.07	.15	.03	.14	.12	.06
Income (x 10 <sup>-4</sup> ) <sup>c</sup>	-.03	.02	-.03	-.00	.00	-.02	-.10	.11	-.05
Party member <sup>d</sup>	.21	.15	.07	.08	.12	.04	.31	.26	.06
Interest in politics	.30	.35	.07	.29*	.18	.09	.21	.17	.07
Democratic values	-.41*	.22	-.16	-.33*	.12	-.14	-.37*	.20	-.17
Life satisfaction	-.32*	.21	-.11	-.20*	.10	-.09	-.22*	.09	-.11
Local policies	-.45*	.27	-.15	-.38*	.16	-.17	-.34*	.12	-.16
Constant	.91*	.23		-1.12*	.44		-1.04*	.51	
R <sup>2</sup>		.15			.18			.16	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		.14			.16			.14	
N		60			595			61	
		2						1	

*Note:* The dependent variable, contacting behavior, for each survey is the factor score derived from the factor analysis of three contacting acts (complaining to leaders at various levels, voicing concerns to local people's deputies, and writing letters to the authority at any level). In their study of mass participation in the former Soviet Union, Bahry and Silver (1990) have also used factor scores to measure various clusters of political acts. \* $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>a</sup> Male = 1; female = 2.

<sup>b</sup> Illiterate or elementary = 1; junior high = 2; senior high = 3; college or higher = 4.

<sup>c</sup> Income is measured by Chinese currency, *yuan*.

<sup>d</sup> CCP member = 1; non-CCP member = 0.

