Does the emerging middle class support democracy?

A comparative analysis of China, countries with authoritarian political regimes and recent post-socialist democracies

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Abstract

Does the emerging middle class support democracy? This study provides a comparative analysis of political attitudes, actions and preferences of the middle class in China, other countries characterised by authoritarian political regimes/tendencies (Russia, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan) and post-socialist countries that have recently established democratic regimes (Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Estonia, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova). Conceptually, the study draws on the insights from the *modernisation* and *critical junctures* theories of economic growth and political development, as well as the neo-Weberian approach to social-economic development. The empirical analysis, based on data from the World Values Survey, shows a positive association between the middle class status and preference for democratic governance in China; this link tends to be stronger than in other countries with authoritarian tendencies, but weaker than in the post-socialist democracies, especially those that are members of the EU. Compared to other country groups, the middle class in China are most likely to support strong leaders and least likely to take part in demonstrations and strikes. Surprisingly, the Chinese middle class who feel worried about their jobs, education for children and state surveillance are more likely to have a preference for strong leaders and army rule, but are also more politically active. Consistently with the neo-Weberian approach, the preferences towards democracy in different countries can be explained by country-wide cultural attitudes.

Keywords: middle class, democracy, Neo-Weberian approach, modernisation theory, critical junctures theory

1. INTRODUCTION

The global middle class is growing fast. It is expected to increase from 1.9 billion people in 2009 to 4.9 billion in 2030, with most of the increase coming from the emerging economies in Asia (Kharaz and Gertz, 2010). This rise in the global middle class is unprecedented, as is the speed of economic transformation of these countries. Despite strong economic growth and the expansion of their middle classes, many emerging economies – China and Russia being prime examples – have not experienced a parallel political and institutional growth, and remain largely authoritarian. Without the emergence of democratic institutions, however, economic growth – however strong and attractive in the short term – may not be sustained in the long term (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2011).

There may exist an expectation, encouraged by regular media reports, that challenges to existing political power structures and pushes for political reforms in emerging economies will come from the middle classes (The Telegraph, 2013; The Economist, 2011; Schenker, 2011; Bloomberg Business Week, 2014). However, evidence based on individual-level data paints a more mixed picture. For example, Lopez-Calva et al. (2012) find that, in Latin America, middle class people are more likely to vote in elections and find political violence unjustifiable, but are also less likely to support individual rights. Lazic and Cvejic (2011) show that, in Serbia, middle class people are supportive of political but not economic liberalism. In Iran, the self-identified social class has no relationship with the support for democracy (Tezcur et al., 2012). Evidence from China suggests that middle class people, and especially those depending on the state for their livelihoods, are less likely to support democracy and democratic change (Chen and Lu, 2011; Xin, 2013). These findings suggest that the relationship between income and preferences for democracy in emerging economies is far from clear-cut and may be country and context-specific.

This paper aims to assess the political attitudes, actions and preferences of the middle class people in China, as well as in other countries characterised by authoritarian political regimes/ tendencies (Russia, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan) and post-socialist countries that have recently established democratic

regimes (Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Estonia, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova), with a broader objective of identifying the role that the middle class might play in contributing to and sustaining democratic and institutional change. The theoretical underpinnings of the study draw on three frameworks: 1) the *modernisation* hypothesis (Lipset, 1959; Moore, 1966), which posits that, in authoritarian societies experiencing rapid economic growth, the emerging middle class will push for democratic reform, and 2) the *critical junctures* hypothesis (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2011), which argues that specific historical events give rise to two types of institutions (*inclusive* and *extractive*) which are associated with different long-term economic and political outcomes, and 3) the neo-Weberian approach/ New Cultural Economics (Guiso et al., 2006) highlighting the role that culture and cultural attitudes play for social, economic, political and institutional outcomes.

The empirical analysis of the paper is based on the two rounds (2005-09 and 2010-14) of the Worlds Values Survey, administered in a range of countries across the world. The survey contains information on the political values, attitudes and experiences of the respondents, and the geographical breadth of the survey allows for a comparison of the political stance of middle class people in various countries with authoritarian tendencies, including China. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to analyse the political preferences of the middle class at such a geographical scale, making a contribution to the existing literature on the relationship between economic growth and political change. In addition, the countries included in the analysis are different in terms of culture, allowing to explore the effects of cultural norms and attitudes on the relationship between higher income levels and support for democracy. This analysis adds to the literature on the effects of culture on social/economic/political/institutional development, which is rooted, among other things, in the work of Max Weber on religion and development of capitalism (Weber, 1904-05; 1958). Specifically, by explaining the attitudes towards democratisation of the middle class with the cross-country differences in cultural attitudes, this work aligns with the extroversive (cross-country) dimension of the neo-Weberian approach.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section two reviews theoretical channels linking the growth of the middle class and political change. Section three discusses conceptual and measurement issues related to the identification of the middle class. Section four presents data and variables, and outlines estimation strategy. Section five presents the results, followed by discussion in section six.

2. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, MIDDLE CLASS AND DEMOCRACY: WHAT TO EXPECT?

The classical *modernisation* theory (Lipset, 1959; Moore, 1966) contends that economic development should lead to democracy. According to this approach, the processes of modernisation and urbanisation promote entrepreneurship, innovation, savings, education and socio-economic mobility, increasing the number of relatively wealthy people – the middle class. As the economic prospects of the middle class depend on their professional skills rather than political connections and economic resources, middle class people increasingly value freedom, individual and property rights. Democratic and moderate parties guarantee these rights, and a large middle class is able to reward democratic parties. As a result, authoritarian societies experiencing high economic growth become democratic.

This unilinear effect of economic growth (and the associated rise of the middle class) on democracy has been criticised on both theoretical and empirical grounds. For example, Przeworski and Limongi (1997) distinguish between endogenous and exogenous modernisation theory. The endogenous version of the theory, like its classical counterpart, predicts that higher levels of GDP per capita make democratisation more likely. In the exogenous version, democracy emerges for idiosyncratic reasons which are not related to GDP per capita levels. According to this perspective, the middle class may not necessarily want to challenge an authoritarian regime - given that they have actually done quite well economically. They may favour the status quo, at least as long as it generates good economic performance.

Using advanced econometric techniques, Acemoglu et al. (2008, 2009) show that economic growth has no causal effect on either democracy or transitions to and from democracy. They argue that the positive and significant correlations between the two phenomena, observed in cross-sectional studies, are driven by specific historical events, *critical junctures*, such as the Black Death and the Industrial Revolution.[1] These events place countries onto divergent paths of development, characterised by two types of political and economic institutions: *inclusive* (broad social participation in the process of governing (pluralism), accompanied by the rule of law, incentives for investment and innovation, competition and creative destruction) and *extractive* (powerful political elites extract resources from the rest of population, insecure property rights, widespread monopolies). Countries with inclusive institutions become democratic and rich, while countries with extractive institutions become authoritarian and poor.

Acemoglu and Robinson (2011) note that strong economic growth can occur under extractive institutions. Such growth is likely to be based on 'catching up' with the rest of the world and not on true competition, innovation and creative destruction; examples are the USSR after World War II, and contemporary China. Acemoglu and Robinson (2011) argue that growth under extractive institutions cannot be sustained in the long term unless there is a transition to inclusive institutions. Such transitions, however, are difficult to achieve because of the institutional path dependency: even if there is a regime change, one set of extractive institutions is likely to be replaced with another set of extractive institutions.

What, then, would be the political stance of the middle classes in emerging economies experiencing strong (but, possibly, unsustainable) economic growth? Would the middle class push for democracy if there is a realisation that a new regime may inherit the features of the old one? Kennedy (2010) states that transitions to democracy depend on the ability of specific groups to overturn the current regime and their motivation to support a democratic outcome. Miller (2012) argues that transitions to democracy are

[1] The critical junctures approach echoes the exogenous modernisation theory (Przeworski and Limongi, 1997), where democratic change is driven by idiosyncratic factors.

possible when the regime is vulnerable, yet economic growth makes such periods of vulnerability less common. Focusing on the political preferences of the middle class, Leventoglu (2014) develops a theoretical model showing that, regardless of whether the prevailing regime is authoritarian or democratic, a regime change occurs when the middle class feels insecure and vulnerable about keeping its socio-economic status; there will be no pressure on the regime when the middle class feels secure about the future.

Leventoglu's finding is consistent with the *contingent* approach, which contends that the support of the middle class for democratisation hinges on, among other things, their dependence on the state, perception of their own well-being, fear of socio-political instability, alliance with other classes, and class cohesiveness (see Chen and Lu (2011) for a review). In this framework, the middle class does not necessarily support democratisation, but this attitude can change with the social, economic and political conditions.

Yet another theoretical lens that could be used to explore the middle class's attitudes towards democracy in emerging economies is the neo-Weberian approach. Essentially, it argues that within- and between-country cultural differences lead to differences in socio-economic outcomes. Tracing its origins in the Max Weber's famous thesis that the emergence of Protestantism was conducive to the development of capitalism (Weber, 1904-05; 1958), the approach has recently been embraced by economists and is becoming known as New Cultural Economics (Alesina and Guiliano, 2015; Hahn 2014) or Culture-Based Development (Tubadji, 2013). Religion, ethnicity, generalised trust, strength of family ties, importance of individualism etc. have been frequently used to capture or proxy culture, and there is now a large, and growing, literature that culture matters for a wide range of socio-economic outcomes, such as savings and income redistribution, as well as various types of institutions (financial, legal, political).

Several contributions in this field have explored the effects of culture on democracy and democratisation. For example, Gorodnichenko and Roland (2021) develop a model suggesting that societies with strong individualist culture are more likely (despite their potentially lower ability to overcome collective action problems) to adopt democracy than societies with collectivist culture (which, in particular, have a greater aversion for

radical institutional innovation). They provide causal evidence to support this theoretical prediction using the Hofstede measure of individualism-collectivism in a sample of 96 countries. Interestingly, Gorodnichenko and Roland (2021) find that other cross-country measures of cultures - power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and long-term orientation – have no effect on democratisation. Other contributions highlighting the effect of culture on democracy include Nannicini and at al. (2013), who show that in Italy localities with higher social capital are more likely to hold politicians accountable, and Alesina and Guiliano (2015), who show that stronger family ties are negatively associated with political participation.

Returning to the research question of our study and using the neo-Weberian approach, one could argue that, in a particular country, the middle-class people preferences for democratisation are driven by the underlying cultural attitudes. This contention is in stark contrast with the predictions of the modernisation theories, positing that economic development and emergence of middle class informingly lead to democratisation.

Finally, it is also important to note that in most emerging economies the middle class is a relatively recent phenomenon. This is why the attitudes and values of the middle class undergo transformation as the class matures. For example, Hattori et al. (2003) report that the first-generation middle class in Asia shared the values of their classes of origin (peasants and farmers); similarly, middle class people issued from rural-to-urban migration strongly retained their rural values.

In sum, there is no clear expectation that the emerging economies' middle classes are embracing democratic values and striving for democratic reforms. The middle class in in emerging economies, including China, is a relatively recent phenomenon, implying that the political preferences of the middle class, as well as the contours of the class itself, may still be taking shape. It may also be expected that the attitude of the middle classes towards democracy will depend on their countries' recent history of democratisation, satisfaction with prevailing regimes, and feelings of socio-economic insecurity. Finally, in accordance with the neo-Weberian approach, it is possible that the underlying cultural attitudes affect the middle class's preferences for democracy.

Drawing on this discussion, the empirical part of the paper will test the following hypotheses:

H1: Middle class people are more supportive of democracy and more politically active

H2: Middle class people who feel insecure are more supportive of democracy/ politically active

H3: Underlying cultural attitudes of a country determine the preferences for democracy/political activity of its middle class.

3. IDENTIFYING THE MIDDLE CLASS: CONCEPTUAL AND MEASUREMENT ISSUES

'Middle class' is an elusive concept, and there appears to be no single way to define or measure it. The existing definitions are often based on researchers' or policymakers' beliefs of who should be included in the middle class. Definitions used by economists and business analysts have traditionally revolved around income (or expenditure), while sociologists and other social scientists have also relied on occupation, education and subjectively identified class.

Both absolute and relative income measures have been used to define the middle class. Absolute measures have often incorporated particular countries' poverty lines and mean incomes. For example, Banerjee and Duflo (2008) identified the developing world's middle class as those with daily per capita expenditure between $2 (the international poverty line) and $10. Kharaz and Gertz (2010) used much higher thresholds of $10 and $100. Milanovic and Yitzaki (2002) suggested the mean incomes of Brazil and Italy to capture the lower and upper bounds of the global middle class. Ravallion (2010) observed that the Banerjee-Duflo and Milanovic-Yitzaki definitions are mutually exclusive (the mean daily income in Brazil is $12), and proposed a different measure with a lower bound corresponding to the international poverty line ($2) and an upper bound corresponding to the poverty line in the US ($13). In their *vulnerability* approach to

identifying the middle class, López-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez (2014) argued that the lower bound of the existing absolute-income-based definitions is too close to the poverty line, and suggested that households with expenditures above the poverty line but at risk of falling back into poverty should not be considered middle class. Wietzke (in print) distinguishes between the 'struggling/ vulnerable/lower-income' middle class ($2-4 and $4-10 per day), middle class income levels approaching the living conditions of developed of developed countries ($10-20 and $20-30), and the highest middle-class income bracket of $30-100 characterising middles classes in developed countries.

One disadvantage of the absolute income/expenditure measures is that they may leave entire country populations either below the lower threshold (everyone is poor) or above the upper threshold (everyone is rich). If there is a belief that the middle class exists in every country, relative income measures can be used. A popular proposition has been to classify as 'middle class' people with income ranging from 75% to 125% of the median country income (Pressman, 2007). A fixed-proportion-of-population option would be to assume that the middle class is composed of the 60% of a country's population who are richer than the poorest 20% and poorer than the richest 20% (Atkinson and Brandolini, 2011). While these metrics have a greater chance, relative to the absolute-income-based measures, of finding middle class people in every country, the thresholds chosen to identify the class are again arbitrary.

While the income-based measures have been important to demarcate classes for economists, occupational status has played a more prominent role for other social scientists. For example, Goldthorpe and McKnight (2006) classify routine non-manual employees, lower-grade technicians, supervisors of manual workers, small employers and self-employed workers as the 'intermediate class'; Häusermann et al. (2015) use five occupational categories – capital accumulators, socio-cultural professionals, blue-collar workers, low service functionaries and mixed service functionaries – to identify class; Lazic and Cvejic (2011) define middle class as professionals, lower and middle managers and small entrepreneurs. Education, closely related to occupational status, is another metric of the middle class. In the context of transition economies, education – rather than income – played a major role in differentiating classes in socialist times (Lazic and

Cvejic, 2011). However, education obtained under socialist rule is not a guarantor of either high income or high social status today (Remington, 2011).

Subjectively identified social class has been another popular measure of social stratification (Amorante et al., 2010; Pew Research Centre, 2009). Although the size of the subjectively identified middle class may differ dramatically from the one defined by actual income or expenditure, the mismatch may result from the fact that people associate social class not only with income, but also with personal capabilities, interpersonal relations, financial and material assets, and perceptions of economic insecurity (Fajardo and Lora, 2010).

The choice between the subjective/objective and absolute/relative measures of the middle class may depend both on the academic discipline and data availability. In practical terms, subjective and relative measures may be preferable when the quality of objective and absolute measures is poor. For example, income and expenditure – the natural starting points for identifying middle class respondents in surveys and opinion polls – are often underreported, not reported at all[2] or not asked about. This may be due to respondents' concerns about data anonymity and the problem of recollection, as well as extra costs that researchers incur when they include detailed income and expenditure questions into surveys. Whatever the reasons for missing data, excluding non-respondents from empirical analyses may result in selection bias if people who do not report their income are not randomly selected from the underlying population.

4. DATA AND VARIABLES

4.1. Data

Data come from the World Values Survey (WVS), a publicly available dataset on political, social and cultural values in different parts of the world. The first wave of the

[2] For example, one quarter of respondents did not report their income in the Latin American sub-sample of the Gallup World Poll (Fajardo and Lora, 2010).

WVS (1981-1984) covered 10 countries, with more countries participating in subsequent waves: 18 in 1989-93; 54 in 1994-98; 40 in 1999-2004; 57 in 2005-09; and 60 in 2010-14. Given that the countries I am interested in were not surveyed/did not exist in the earlier waves of the survey, I concentrate on the two last waves of the WVS, covering time period 2005–2014. The minimum sample size for each country-wave is 1,000 (with larger countries tending to have larger sample sizes). Multistage stratified random sampling was employed to obtain nationally representative samples. In the initial stages, the primary sampling units were selected using information from population and electoral registers, national statistics and population censuses. In the subsequent stages, households and respondents within households were selected using random sampling methods (random route, nearest birthday) or random drawing from population registers. In many cases, gender, education and age-group quotas were applied to respondent selection within households. In all cases, the data were collected through face-to-face interviews with adult individuals in their native language.[3]

4.2. Variables

4.2.1. Outcome variables: political attitudes, preferences and activism

The questions capturing attitudes towards different political regimes and political activism include:

[3] Detailed information of survey design and implementation is available on the World Values Survey website www.worldvaluessurvey.org

1) "How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?" (from 1 "not at all important" to 10 "absolutely important")
2) "How would you assess the following ways of governing a country ("very good", "fairly good", "bad", "very bad"):
    - Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections;
    - Having the army rule;
    - Having a democratic political system"
3) Political action: "Have you:
    - Signed a petition?
    - Joined a boycott?
    - Attended a peaceful protest/demonstration?
    - Joined a strike?" ("have done", "might do", "would never do")

I use this information to construct categorical (ordered or multinomial variables). For ordered categorical variables, higher values always correspond to a greater importance or better assessment.

4.2.2. Main explanatory variable: middle class

Based on the conceptual discussion in Section 3, will use three alternate measures to capture middle class: 1) subjective/self-perceived social class (upper, upper middle, lower middle, lower, working); 2) self-perceived position on a 1-to-10 income ladder, based on a question, "On this card is an income scale on which 1 indicates the lowest income group and 10 the highest income group in your country. We would like to know in what group your household is. Please, specify the appropriate number, counting all wages, salaries, pensions and other incomes that come in", and 3) education level. In addition, using information on these three measures I construct, using principal components, a within-country social class index.

4.2.3. Feelings of insecurity

To capture the respondents' feelings of socio-economic insecurity, I use answers for the following questions:

To what degree are you worried about the following situations? ("Not at all", "Not much", "A great deal", "Very much"):

- Losing my job or not finding a job
- Not being able to give one's children a good education
- Government wire-tapping or reading my mail or email

I combine the answers to the three questions to create, using principal components, an index of socio-economics insecurity (higher values corresponding to greater levels of worry).

4.2.4. Control variables

The following control variables, potentially affecting both political attitudes/activism and the middle class status, are included in all regressions: gender, age and its square, marital status (married/living together; single; other), and employment status (employed full time, employed part-time, self-employed, retired, housewife, student, unemployed, other).

To control for all possible country-level influences and time effects, I include dummy variables for each country (country-fixed effects) in multi-country regressions. This ensures that the estimated coefficients reflect within- and not between-country associations between the variables of interest. To capture temporal effects, I include survey-wave-fixed-effects.

4.3. Estimation strategy

The general model explaining the political preferences and behaviour of individual *i* living in country *j* can be expressed as follows:

$$Y_{ijw} = \beta_1(middle\ class)_{ijw} + \beta_2 X_{ijw} + u_j + \gamma_w + \varepsilon_{ijw}, \qquad (1)$$

where *Y*, the dependent variable, stands for the outcomes to be explained (political attitudes and activism), *X* is a set of individual-level control variables, *u* is a set of country dummies (in multi-country regressions), γ is survey-wave fixed effects, and *ε* is the unobserved error term.

Depending of the nature of the dependent variable (categorical ordered or multinomial), the models will be estimated with either ordered or multinomial logit. All four models are estimated for China, the sample of countries with authoritarian regimes, post-socialist countries with democratic regimes that are not part of the EU, and the post-socialist countries with democratic regimes that are part of the EU. To test for the effects of insecurity and culture the relationship between the middle class and preference for democracy/democratic action, Model 1 will be augmented with the interaction terms of the middle class and insecurity and culture, respectively.

5. RESULTS

Table 1 reports the estimates of the variables of interest for the model explaining the importance of living democratically governed country. Specifications 1.1-1.5 estimate the model for China and specification 1.1 includes only the self-reported social class status as a measure of class. The results suggest that, relative to people identifying themselves as lower middle class, those in the lower class are less likely to consider that it is important to live a democratically governed country; the coefficient is significant at the 90% level. The coefficients of other classes are statistically insignificant, although their signs are in line with the conjecture that people identifying themselves with higher social class value democratic governance more. In specification 1.2 I replace the subjective social class with the self-reported income ladder. Relative to people in the middle of the income distribution (step 5), those at with lower income levels (step 2 and 4) are less likely to consider democratic governance important, while those at the very top of the income distribution (step 10) are more likely to do so. Next, specification 1.3 uses education as a measure of class. The results suggest that, relative to respondents with secondary

vocational education, those with no and primary education are less likely to consider democratic governance important, while people with secondary and tertiary education are no different from the reference group (secondary vocational). All in all, the three social class measures support the conjecture that middle class people in China are more supportive of democracy, although the statistical significance of the estimates is always lower than 99%.

Specification 1.4 uses jointly the three measures of the social class. Education level appears the most significant predictor of valuing democratic governance and is in line with the hypothesis that idle class (more educated) people are more supportive of democracy. The self-reported social class is statistically insignificant and several self-reported income ladder dummies show unexpected results: respondents at the bottom of the ladder (1st step) are more likely to value democratic governance relative to the middle of the income distribution (step 5), while those at steps 6 and 7 are less likely to do so. It is important, however, to take into account potential multicollinearity between the three social class measures, which could explain the counterintuitive signs of the income ladder dummies. Next, specification 1.5 replaces individual specific measures of the social class with the social class index (common variation of the self-reported social class, self-reported step on the income ladder and education level). The results show that the index is positive and significant ta the 99% level, meaning that in China middle class people are more likely to consider that it is important to govern their country democratically.

How does this result compare with other country groups? Specifications 1.6-1.8 of Table 1 report the coefficients of the middle class index for countries with strong authoritarian tendencies (Russia, Turkey, Iran, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan), democratic non-EU countries (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova), democratic EU countries (Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Estonia). In the authoritarian countries, the estimate of the middle class index is statistically insignificant, meaning that the middle class people are no different from their no middle class counterparts in supporting democratic governance. In the democratic non-EU countries – relatively recent East European, post-Communist democracies – the coefficient is positive and significant at the 99% and its magnitude is very similar to the that of the case of China (specification 1.5). Finally, in the East

European democracies that have recently joined the EU, the coefficient is positive, significant at the 99% level; its magnitude, however, is three times higher than in the China specification.

Overall, the middle class in China appear more likely to consider democratic governance important than their no-middle-less counterparts. This link is be stronger than in other countries with authoritarian tendencies, but weaker than in the recent post-socialist democracies that are members of the EU.

Table 1. Middle class and importance of being democratically governed, ordered logit coefficients, by country/country group

	Dependent variable: How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?" (from 1 "Not at all important" to 10 "Absolutely important")							
	China	China	China	China	China	Authoritarian	Democratic non-EU	Democratic EU
	(1.1)	(1.2)	(1.3)	(1.4)	(1.5)	(1.6)	(1.7)	(1.8)
Subjective social class								
Lower	-0.145*	-	-	-0.187	-	-	-	-
Working	-0.102	-	-	-0.117	-	-	-	-
Lower middle	Ref.	-	-	Ref.	-	-	-	-
Upper middle	0.054	-	-	0.141	-	-	-	-
Upper	0.848	-	-	0.622	-	-	-	-
Income ladder								
Income ladder 1	-	0.155	-	0.316*	-	-	-	-
Income ladder 2	-	-0.262**	-	-0.122	-	-	-	-
Income ladder 3	-	-0.110	-	-0.016	-	-	-	-
Income ladder 4	-	-0.208*	-	-0.162	-	-	-	-
Income ladder 5	-	Ref.	-	Ref.	-	-	-	-
Income ladder 6	-	-0.176	-	-0.199*	-	-	-	-
Income ladder 7	-	-0.192	-	-0.280**	-	-	-	-
Income ladder 8	-	-0.119	-	-0.202	-	-	-	-
Income ladder 9	-	-0.185	-	-0.320	-	-	-	-
Income ladder 10	-	1.662**	-	1.521*	-	-	-	-
Education								
No education	-	-	-0.228*	-0.284**	-	-	-	-
Primary education	-	-	-0.174*	-0.207**	-	-	-	-
Secondary vocational	-	-	Ref.	Ref.	-	-	-	-
Secondary education	-	-	0.051	0.044	-	-	-	-
Tertiary education	-	-	0.164	0.156	-	-	-	-
Social class index	-	-	-	-	0.072***	-0.001	0.084***	0.222***
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country and survey year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,471	3,240	3,471	3,240	2,979	12,795	5,863	9,544

Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, significance level based on robust standard errors. Individual controls include: gender, age and its square, marital and employment status. Authoritarian countries: Russia, Turkey, Iran, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan; democratic non-EU countries: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova; democratic EU countries: Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Estonia.

Table 2 reports the coefficients of the middle class index in the models explaining different preferences for governing the country – strong leader, experts, army rule, and democracy – for the four country groups. The middle class in China is as likely their non-middle-class counterparts to prefer a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections – the middle class index is statistically insignificant. The result is different from the three comparator country groups: the middle class there are less likely to prefer a strong leader to govern the country, especially so in the democratic EU countries. The middle class are less likely to support the army rule as a form of government in China and especially in the democratic EU countries, while the coefficient of the middle class is statistically insignificant in the democratic non-EU countries and significant at the 95% level and positive in authoritarian countries. Finally, it is only the democratic EU countries where the middle class prefer a democratic system of governance; the middle class index is statistically insignificant in China, authoritarian countries and democratic non-EU countries.

Overall, it is only in the democratic EU countries that the middle class is clearly favouring democracy and rejecting the army rule and strong leaders. In China, the middle class are not in favour of the army rule but do not exhibit a clear rejection of strong leaders or a clear acceptance of a democracy.

Table 2. Middle class and preference for governing the country, ordered logit coefficients, by country/country group

	Dependent variable: "How would you assess the following ways of governing a country (from 1 "very bad" to 4 "very good")			
	China	Authoritarian	Democratic non-EU	Democratic EU
Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections				
Social class index	-0.000	-0.029**	-0.059***	-0.157***
Having the army rule				
Social class index	-0.080**	0.028*	-0.004	-0.169***
Having a democratic political system				
Social class index	-0.028	0.003	0.033	0.191***

Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, significance level based on robust standard errors. The table report the estimates of the middle class index for 12 ordered logit regression, each including the same individual controls (gender, age and its square, marital and employment status), country and survey wave fixed effects. Authoritarian countries: Russia, Turkey, Iran, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan; democratic non-EU countries: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova; democratic EU countries: Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Estonia.

Table 3 reports the coefficients of the middle class index for the models explaining different kinds of political activism: signing a petition, joining a boycott, attending a demonstration and joining a strike. The results suggest that in China, as well as in all three comparator country groups, the middle class are more likely to have signed a petition and joined a boycott in the past, as well as more likely to say that they might undertake these action in the future, than the non-middle class counterparts. Next, there is no correlation between the middle class index and participation (actual past or potential future) in demonstrations and strikes in China. This is different from the three comparator country groups. In all three, the middle class are more likely to say that they might attend a demonstration and, in the democratic (both non-EU and EU) countries, that they have already done so. Concerning strikes, the middle class are more likely to have joined one in the past in all three country groups and more likely to say that they might do in in the future in the authoritarian countries as well as recent EU democracies. All in all, the highest relative levels of political activism among the middle class are observed in the recent EU democracies, while in China the middle class are more likely to take part in political activities where “stepping out” is not necessary (petitions and boycotts) but not necessarily so in more visible manifestations of political activism (demonstrations and strikes).

Table 3. Middle class and political activism, multinomial logit coefficients, by country/country group

	Dependent variable: Have you ….? (“Have done”, “Might do”, “Would never do”)							
	China		Authoritarian		Democratic non-EU		Democratic EU	
	Might do	Have done	Might do	Have done	Might do	Have done	Might do	Have done
A. Signed petition								
Social class index	0.136***	0.339***	0.159***	0.188***	0.118***	0.240***	0.148***	0.411***
B. Joined boycott								
Social class index	0.133***	0.242***	0.151***	0.137**	0.124***	0.318***	0.166***	0.253***
C. Attended demonstration								
Social class index	-0.014	0.052	0.146***	0.055	0.081***	0.217***	0.151***	0.351***
D. Joined strike								
Social class index	0.035	0.150	0.070**	0.131*	0.085	0.350***	0.056**	0.109**

Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, significance level based on robust standard errors. The table reports the estimates of the middle class index for 16 multinomial logit regression, each including the same individual controls (gender, age and its square, marital and employment status), country and survey wave fixed effects. The reference category of the dependent variable is “would never do”. Authoritarian countries: Russia, Turkey, Iran, Vietnam, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan; democratic non-EU countries: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova; democratic EU countries: Poland, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Estonia.

Next, I test the hypothesis that the middle class experiencing feelings of insecurity are more supportive of democracy and politically active. Given that most of the theoretical discussion regarding insecurity and support for democracy focuses on China, I only test the models for this country. The model specifications include the insecurity index (the higher values of which indicate greater worries about losing one's job, not being able to give children good education, and government surveillance), as well as the interaction term between the insecurity index and the social class index.

The results reported in Table 4 suggest that people experiencing insecurity are on average less likely to consider democratic governance important, less likely to favour army rule but more likely to favour a strong leader. As before, people at the higher end of the social class index distribution in China are on average more likely to consider democratic governance important and less likely to favour the army rule. The interaction term is always statistically insignificant, meaning that the middle class people experiencing feelings of insecurity are not necessarily preferring any specific way of governing the country.

Table 4. Middle class, insecurity, and preference for governing the country, ordered logit coefficients; China

	Democratic governance important	Strong leader good	Army rule good	Democracy good
Social class index	0.103**	0.061	-0.134**	0.021
Social class index*Insecurity index	-0.049	-0.098	0.085	-0.079
Insecurity index	-0.352***	0.270***	-0.753***	-0.074

Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, significance level based on robust standard errors. The table reports the estimates of the variables of interest for four ordered logit regressions, estimated on the sample of Chinese respondents. All regressions include the same individual-level controls (gender, age and its square, marital and employment status) and year-fixed effects. Higher values of the insecurity index indicate greater worries about losing one's job, not being able to give children good education, and government surveillance.

The picture is different for political activism (Table 5). People reporting feelings of insecurity are more likely to report that they might get involved in all four kinds of

activism, as well as that they have done all, except attending demonstrations, previously. The interaction terms is now positive and statistically significant in several specifications: those with a higher social class index and feeling insecure are more likely to say they might get involved in all kinds of activism except joining a strike and more likely to report that they have already signed a petition and join a strike. The social class index as such is only significant (and positive) predicting signing a petition in the past. Taken together, the results indicate that it is the people experiencing insecurity who are more likely to be engaged in civic and political activism while being a middle class and experiencing insecurity strengthens the result. The social class index as such has little bearing on civic and political activism.

Table 5. Middle class, insecurity, and political activism, multinomial logit coefficients, China

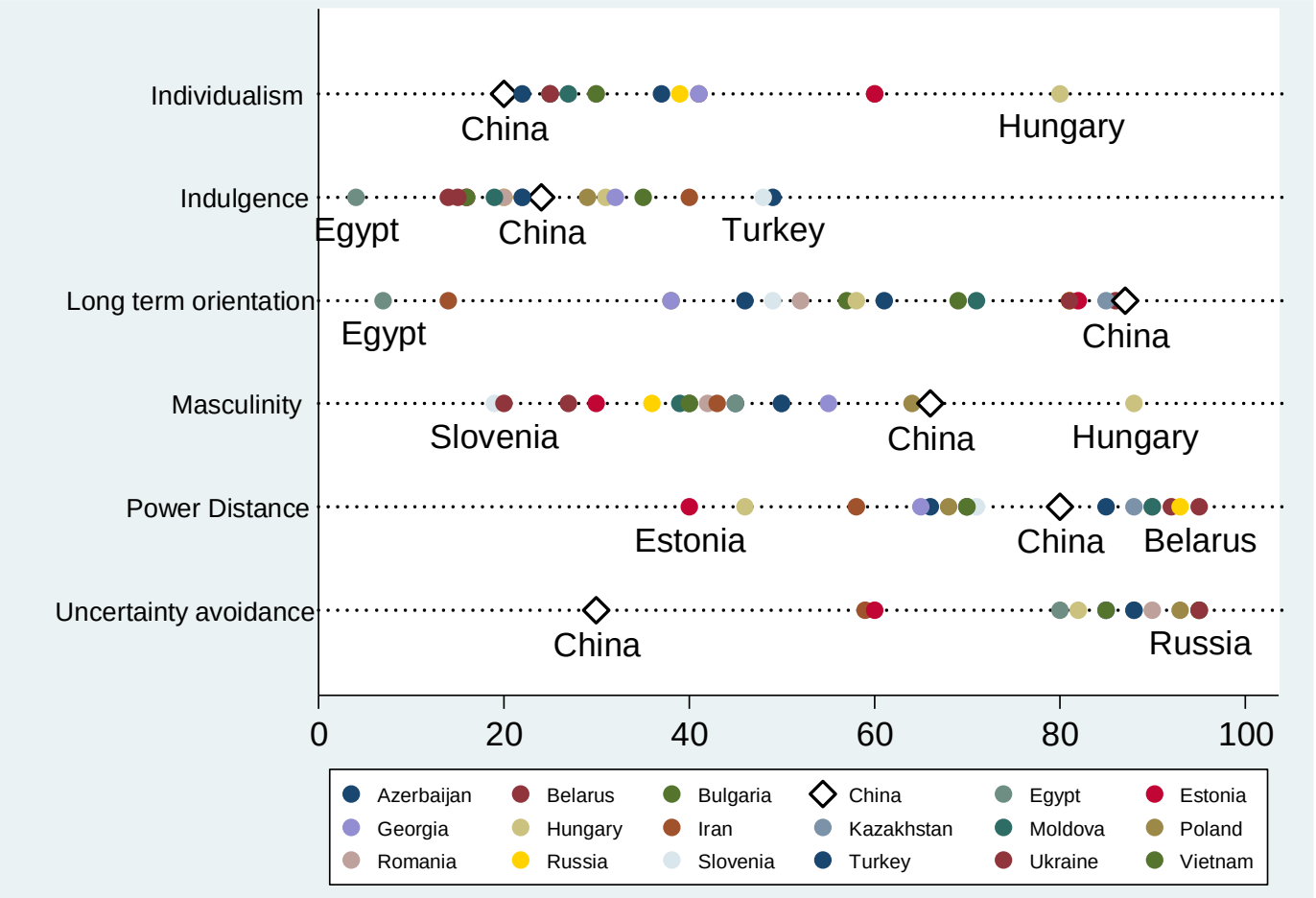
	Dependent variable: Have you ….? (“Have done”, “Might do”, “Would never do”)							
	Signed petition		Joined boycott		Attended demonstration		Joined strike	
	Might do	Have done	Might do	Have done	Might do	Have done	Might do	Have done
Social class index	0.051	0.217**	0.031	0.152	-0.017	-0.008	0.025	0.112
Social class index*Insecurity index	0.091**	0.139**	0.108***	-0.005	0.081**	0.062	0.039	0.263**
Insecurity index	0.155***	0.193*	0.134**	0.390**	0.148**	0.208	0.193***	0.402**

Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, significance level based on robust standard errors. The table reports the estimates of the variables of interest for four multinomial logit regressions, estimated on the sample of Chinese respondents. All regressions include the same individual-level controls (gender, age and its square, marital and employment status) and year-fixed effects. Higher values of the insecurity index indicate greater worries about losing one’s job, not being able to give children good education, and government surveillance.

Next, I explore if country's culture affects the middle class's preferences for democracy. To capture culture, I draw on the widely used Hofstede's six dimensions of culture: individualism vs collectivism; indulgence vs restraint; long- vs short-term orientation; masculinity vs femininity; power distance; and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede at al, 2010). Graph 1 shows the position of China and other countries included in the analysis along each of the six dimensions. China scores lowest on individualism as well as uncertainty avoidance, and highest on long-term orientation. China's position on the power distance and masculinity scales is towards the upper end, and it is situated in the middle of the indulgence distribution (all relative to the countries included in the analysis).

To analyse the effects of culture on the relationships of interest, I estimate the full-sample models, augmenting them with the interaction terms of the middle class index and each of the culture dimensions. The results are reported in Tables 6 and 7. Cultural attitudes have a strong association with the middle class's preferences for governing the country. For example, the more pronounced are individualism values in the country, the more supportive is the middle class of democratic governance and the less supportive of strong leader, who do not bother with parliament and elections, as well as the army rule. More pronounced indulgence (vs restraint) values in a country makes the middle class less supportive of democratic governance as well as strong leaders. Higher national scores of the long-term orientation values are associated with the middle class's greater acceptance of strong leaders and the army rule. In countries with more pronounced masculinity the middle class supports democratic governance less and strong leaders more. More pronounced power distance values in a country make the middle class less supportive of the army rule, while more pronounced uncertainty avoidance values makes it more supportive of the army rule and less supportive of democracy.

Graph 1. Hofstede's dimensions of culture for China and other countries included in the analysis



Notes: Based, on the sample of countries included in the analysis, the graph shows the position of China as well as countries with the lowest and highest values for each of Hofstede's six dimensions of culture.

Table 6. Middle class and preference for governing the country, interactions with Hofstede's dimensions of culture

	Democratic governance important	Strong leader good	Army rule good	Democracy good
Social class index	0.148*	0.036	-0.027	0.082
Social class*individualism	0.004***	-0.004***	-0.003***	0.004***
Social class*indulgence	-0.002***	-0.002***	0.000	-0.002***
Social class*long term orientation	0.000	0.001**	0.003***	-0.000
Social class*masculinity	-0.003***	0.002**	0.000	-0.003***
Social class*power distance	0.001	-0.001	-0.004***	0.001
Social class*uncertainty avoidance	-0.001*	0.000	0.003***	-0.000
Observations	35,745	33,452	31,918	33,839

Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, significance level based on robust standard errors. The table reports the estimates of the variables of interest for four ordered logit regressions, estimated on the sample of all countries. All regressions include the same individual-level controls (gender, age and its square, marital and employment status), country and year-fixed effects.

Table 7 repeats the exercise of the cultural dimension interaction terms for outcomes capturing political activism. First, we notice that for the whole sample of countries under consideration, the middle class are more generally likely to be engaged in political action or considering doing so, with the exception of having joined a strike, where the coefficient of the middle class index is statistically insignificant. On top of that, higher national scores on indulgence make the middle class people more likely of have signed a petition but a less likely to have joined a boycott or attended a demonstration. In countries scoring higher on long-term orientation, masculinity and power distance, the middle class are less likely to join boycotts and attend demonstrations, and in countries with higher uncertainty avoidance, the middle class are less likely to join boycotts.

All in all, the underlying cultural values of a country appear to be closely linked to both the political preferences and political activism of the middle class people.

Table 7. ***Middle class and political activism, interactions with Hofstede's dimensions of culture***

	Dependent variable: Have you ….? ("Have done", "Might do", "Would never do")							
	Signed petition		Joined boycott		Attended demonstration		Joined strike	
	Might do	Have done	Might do	Have done	Might do	Have done	Might do	Have done
Social class index	0.549***	0.386***	0.711***	0.659**	0.744***	0.886***	0.671***	0.541
Social class*individualism	-0.001	0.004	0.001	-0.007	-0.002	-0.001	-0.003	-0.007
Social class*indulgence	0.000	0.005***	-0.000	-0.004**	-0.000	-0.003*	0.000	-0.004
Social class*long term orientation	-0.001*	-0.001	-0.003***	0.003	-0.003***	-0.005***	-0.002	0.001
Social class*masculinity	-0.000	-0.002	-0.002**	0.002	-0.001	-0.004**	-0.002	0.002
Social class*power distance	-0.003	-0.000	-0.001	-0.008*	-0.004**	-0.003	-0.003	-0.005
Social class*uncertainty avoidance	-0.001	-0.003	-0.003**	0.004	-0.001	0.001	-0.001	0.002
Observations	31,885	31,885	31,784	31,784	30,629	30,629	16,787	16,787

Notes: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1, significance level based on robust standard errors. The table reports the estimates of the variables of interest for four multinomial logit regressions, estimated on the sample of all countries. All regressions include the same individual-level controls (gender, age and its square, marital and employment status), country and year-fixed effects.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to determine if the emerging middle class in China, as well as in three comparator country groups – countries with authoritarian tendencies, the Eastern European democracies that recently have joined the EU, and Eastern European democracies that are not part of the EU, are more supportive of democracy, and, by extension, if they could be considered agents of democratisation. The results, based on the analysis of two waves of the World Values Survey, suggest that the Chinese middle class report some appreciation of the democratic governance system – more so than in countries with authoritarian tendencies but less than in the post-Socialist democracies that have recently joined the EU. Worryingly, relative to people from lower social classes, the middle class in China are not less supportive of strong leaders who do not have to bother with parliament and elections; this is different in all three comparator groups where the middle class are more likely to find this type of governance bad.

The results also suggest that the Chinese middle class are more likely than their lower social class counterparts to sign petitions and participate in boycotts, while there is no difference between the two groups for more open, "stepping-out" types of civic/political activism: participation in strikes and demonstrations. This is different for the three comparator country groups, and especially the post-Socialist democracies that have recently joined the EU, where the middle class are more likely to get involved in all four kinds of activism. Finally, the people experiencing insecurity in China, and particularly those at the higher end of the social class scale, report higher levels of political activism. At the same time those experiencing insecurity (regardless of social class) are particularly likely favour strong leaders who do not bother with parliament and elections and less likely to consider democratic governance is important.

The evidence obtained in this study provides limited support to the modernisation theory that predicts that, in autocracies, the middle class people clearly prefer democratic governance. This is not really the case in China, and similar indifference of the middle to

democracy is obtained in other countries with authoritarian tendencies. The levels of political/civil activism among the Chinese middle class are also among the lowest – China, for example, is the is the only country in our sample where there is no difference between the higher and lower social classes in the past or future participating in demonstrations and strikes.

The support of the middle class for democracy as well as its level of political/civic activism are noticeably higher in the recent post-socialist democracies, especially the ones that joined the EU. This would support the *critical junctures* theory, as both the break-down of the former Socialist bloc and joining the EU could be considered major events contributing to the development of inclusive economic and political institutions, from which the middle class would be particularly likely to benefit and which they would like to preserve and strengthen. Central European and Baltic countries decided to break with their communist past, disempowering former elites and establishing democratic and free market institutions. At the same time, 'extractive' political and economic institutions led by (former communist) elites persist countries with authoritarian tendencies, such as China, Russia or Turkey. Importantly, the *critical junctures* framework suggests transitions from 'extractive' to 'inclusive' institutions can happen only in the face of major external events (such as the breakdown of the socialist bloc); endogenous democratisation – for instance, through the demand for democracy of the rising middle class – has a limited role here.

The conceptual frameworks predicting that it is the people experiencing insecurity (including and particularly the middle class) who are more supportive of democracy receive little support. In China, those experiencing insecurity report higher political/civic activism but do not show a clear preference for democratic governance – if anything they are more likely to support strong leaders who do not bother with elections and parliaments.

Finally, the neo-Weberian approach, suggesting that socio-economic outcomes are driven by cultural values, has received considerable empirical support. Using Hosftede's six dimensions of culture, I have first shown that countries in our sample cover a wide range of values on each dimension of culture and, second, that these country-level cultural

values matter for the middle class's attitudes towards governing the country and political activism. For example, among the countries included in the analysis, China scores lowest on individualism and highest on long-term orientation. This, among other things, explains China's middle class's relatively low support for democracy, high support for strong leaders who do not bother with parliaments and elections and relatively low likelihood of attending demonstrations. At a more general level, the analysis suggests that the farther apart the countries are in terms of cultural values, the more different will be their middle classes' attitudes towards democracy and political activism. Overall, the findings support the neo-Weberian approach, highlighting the role that local culture plays in shaping political attitudes and political activity of the middle class, and refutes theories positing that the middle class will develop uniform preferences democracy and adopt uniform political action, regardless of context and culture, as their countries become richer.

All in all, there is little evidence that the emerging middle class will to be an agent of democratisation in countries where reforms are most needed, such as China, as well as other countries with authoritarian tendencies. Underlying national cultural attitudes provide some explanations as to why the middle class may or may not be supportive of democracy.

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