Information Asymmetry and Public Support for Social Credit Systems in China

Xun Cao  
Penn State University

Genia Kostka  
Freie University at Berlin

Xu Xu¹  
Stanford University

Abstract: China's social credit system (SCS) is created in a civil-law tradition to foster law and order, but its unconstrained power may shape citizens' social and political life in a dangerous direction. What makes citizens ignore the SCS's repressive potential to show overwhelming support? We argue that citizens are inherently uninformed for the following reasons: (1) the SCS entails invisible, targeted repression, (2) government information control exacerbates citizens' information problem, and (3) citizens’ isolation of discredited peers makes targeted repression even more secret. We examine the informational cause of support for the SCS using a nationwide survey of over 2,200 Chinese netizens and a field survey of over 750 college students in three regions of China. We show that citizens’ support for the SCS are positively associated with their exposure to state media and tendency to isolate discredited friends. A survey experiment further finds that framing the SCS as a social-order-maintenance tool does not further increase public support but revealing information on the SCS's repressive potential significantly reduces people’s support. Overall, the support for the SCS due to citizens’ ignorance of repression implies that the government can use the SCS for more intensive repression without encountering much resistance from society.

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