

Categorical Confusion: Ideological Labels in China

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Abstract

The idea of a left-right ideological dimension helps citizens and parties organize their thinking about politics. While the left-right dimension is traditionally organized around questions of inequality and change in democracies, its meaning under authoritarian rule remains uncertain. This paper uses two national surveys to investigate the policy, partisan, and symbolic content of the left-right dimension in China. The analysis of these surveys reveals that while many Chinese citizens are willing to locate themselves on the left-right scale, their placements are distorted by a variety of perceptual bias known as differential item functioning. The labels of left and right do not carry a consistent programmatic meaning, and the partisan and symbolic content of these ideological labels is limited. One implication of the absence of a shared ideological understanding is that it prevents Chinese citizens from developing the type of vocabulary necessary for exercising political agency.

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Introduction

The left-right ideological spectrum serves as a way for both politicians and members of the mass public to summarize and communicate their political preferences. The labels of left and right help simplify democratic politics by helping voters orient themselves in a multidimensional issue space (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; Hinich and Munger 1994). While the specific meaning of these labels varies by locale (Jou 2010; Knutsen 1997; Zechmeister and Corral 2013), they are commonly understood to contain information about a mix of policies, partisanship, and symbolic issues (Conover and Feldman 1981; Huber 1989; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976).

The utility of the left-right distinction is largely predicated on the political choices that voters and parties face in democracies. What meaning might we expect these labels to carry in an authoritarian regime like China? While the historical legacy of the Communist party is often understood with reference to the idea of left and right, and intellectuals commonly speak in terms of a left or right agenda, my argument in this paper is that these labels do not carry a consistent meaning for the general public. I present results from two national surveys which show that while many people are willing to place themselves on a left-right spectrum, there is at best a weak association between these self-identified labels and policy issues, even for people who are well-informed about politics. Although Chinese citizens who call themselves left or right rarely reach a consensus on issues, they do tend to relate their own ideological placements to the perceived ideology of other political actors, such as the Communist party or the Kuomintang.

This paper contributes to a burgeoning literature on the nature of ideology in authoritarian regimes by examining the coherence of ideological self-conceptualizations among the general public. In this way it complements previous work on the structure of political preferences in public opinion, which focused more on psychological traits (Beattie, Chen and Bettache 2021), or the latent structure of citizen beliefs (Cantoni et al. 2017; Ji and Jiang 2020; Nathan and Shi 1996; Pan and Xu 2018; Wu and Meng 2016).

The next section of this paper reviews the comparative literature on ideological labels. I then develop a theory of ideological self-identification under authoritarian rule and examine variation in left-right placement using two national surveys of the Chinese public, with a focus on the distortions introduced by differential item functioning. My analyses compare the issue content of left and right in China with the partisan component of these labels. After considering the results in comparative context, I conclude with some thoughts about how Chinese citizens' conceptual understanding of ideology has changed over time.

Left and Right in Comparative Perspective

The left-right dimension is commonly understood to be organized around two major divisions: advocating for social change versus protecting tradition, and rejecting versus accepting inequality (Jost, Federico and Napier 2009). The meaning of these labels tends to vary, since they reflect the core divisions in each society (Benoit and Laver 2006) and the dimensionality of the party space (Bakker, Jolly and Polk 2012), but in many cases the left-right dimension becomes a "super-issue" which eventually encompasses all of the important issues in a polity (Inglehart 1990). While the terms left and right are essentially abstractions constructed by elites, they serve as anchors for an underlying operational ideology that is composed of bundles of policy issues (Jost, Federico and Napier 2009; Sniderman and Bullock 2004). These bundles of issues form what is known as the ideological component of the left-right dimension.

In addition to its policy content, the left-right dimension also encodes information about partisanship and evaluations of symbolic issues, such as attitudes towards social groups. Partisanship provides a shortcut for individuals to infer what the label means (Evans, Heath and Laljee 1996; Huber 1989; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Knutsen 1997; Zechmeister 2006). Moreover, in contrast to the ideological component of the label, which is more meaningful for well-informed individuals, the partisan component is easily accessible, even for the poorly-informed (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976). While many voters may not have a grasp of the policy content of ideological labels,

the labels themselves take on symbolic meanings which are in turn driven by attitudes towards social groups, such as businessmen and immigrants (Bauer et al. 2016; Conover and Feldman 1981; Levitin and Miller 1979). In some cases, political communications from elites can induce a disconnect between the symbolic content of the labels and the underlying operational ideology. Ellis and Stimson (2012) show that in the US, for instance, many citizens identify as conservatives but believe that the government should spend more to solve social problems.

The degree to which these ideological labels carry a consistent programmatic meaning is shaped by factors such as the age of the regime and the effective number of political parties. In new democracies, such as the post-communist states of Eastern Europe, it often takes a few years for the general public to coalesce around a shared understanding of the policy content of the left-right dimension (Evans and Whitefield 1993, 1998; Hanson 2010; Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2008). Studies of European democracies have found that the ideological content of the left-right label is clearer in societies with a large number of effective parties (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976), though Zechmeister and Corral (2013) argue that a different pattern holds in Latin America, because fragmentation in the party system there is associated with a large number of relatively young parties which have not yet established a strong ideological reputation.

The public is also more likely to make use of ideological labels in polarized societies. Converse (1964) argued that much of the public lacked the sophistication to conceive of politics in ideological terms during a period of relatively low polarization in American politics, but in recent years, as polarization has increased in the US, ideological labels have also become more meaningful for the general public (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998). Similar patterns hold in a variety of democratic contexts. In general, ideological self-placement plays a larger role in vote choice in more polarized societies because when polarization is high, ideological labels provide a stronger signal about the preferences of political actors (Dalton 2011; Huber 1989; Singer 2016; Zechmeister 2015; Zechmeister and Corral 2013).

The utility of these labels also varies by cultural context. In East Asian democracies, for instance, a smaller proportion of people are willing to place themselves on the left-right scale, compared to respondents in the West. A larger proportion of those who do volunteer an ideological placement in these states put themselves at the center of the scale (Jou 2010). While citizens in Japan are likely to associate the left-right dimension with bundles of policies, citizens in newer democracies, such as the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan, are less likely to do so (Jou 2011). Hsiao, Wang and Achen (2017) go a step further and argue that the left-right dimension carries little meaning in Taiwan, in large part because most issues get interpreted in light of the unification-independence divide instead.

A Theory of Authoritarian Ideological Divisions

What meanings do we expect the left and right labels to carry under an authoritarian regime? Many dictators come to power on the strength of social movements which are bound together by left-wing or right-wing ideals (Schurmann 1968), but once they have established themselves in office, the absence of a political alternative allows them to lay claim to the center of the policy space and to rule by relying on their valence advantages, rather than on their ideological brand (Schofield and Levinson 2008; Wu 2019).

Since the left-right schema is essentially an intellectual heuristic, its coherence among the general public requires regular political stimulus to sustain. If this is missing, then we might expect that "in keeping with the principle of least effort, [the left-right dimension] would not be a salient feature of a given political culture unless there is a need for it. Consequently, one might expect this dimension to play a relatively prominent role where there is a multiplicity of salient political alternatives. If there are no salient alternatives, obviously it will not play an important role" (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976, p. 245-246). Following this logic, we would expect that ideological divisions along the left-right dimension would loom large in public opinion when an autocrat invokes them to take power and shut down opposition figures. However, once an authoritarian regime has consolidated its hold on power, we would not expect these same issues to be

broadly salient. While individuals in consolidated autocracies will still have different preferences about policy, when there is no public debate between political alternatives, the public's views take on an ad hoc character that lacks consistency. My argument is that we should only expect the dictatorships that are facing salient political alternatives to possess ideological divisions that are broadly understood by the public. If a credible alternative to the ruling regime exists, then these ideological divides will become part of the meaning of the left-right dimension.¹

The experience of newly democratic states helps us theorize what these labels might mean in an autocracy. While the left-right divide in consolidated democracies takes on the character of the labor-capital, center-periphery, church-state, and land-industry cleavages that [Lipset and Rokkan \(1967\)](#) first laid out, left and right often take on the character of a democratic-authoritarian dimension in new democracies. In new democracies, the most salient political issue is not the redistribution of wealth, but rather the redistribution of power ([Moreno 1999](#)). Societies that have just emerged from the crucible of democratization are likely to be polarized between supporters of the new democracy and authoritarian loyalists. New democracies moreover face a common set of governing problems, which include the creation of new democratic institutions, the effort to wrest power away from the old authoritarian elites, and the need to manage an economy in crisis. These political dynamics enhance the salience of the democratic-authoritarian cleavage and create the conditions necessary for it to become part of the meaning of left and right.

A similar process may be at work in authoritarian regimes that are collectively contemplating the specter of democracy. If the prospect of democracy becomes a salient alternative to the current regime for the general public, then we would also expect the democratic-authoritarian dimension to become one of the organizing principles of public

¹In some respects, our expectations for a consolidated autocracy are similar to what we might see in a democracy with low levels of polarization. In both of these cases, an ideological label will only be a weak signal of aggregate preferences, and as a result, members of the public will have weak incentives to make use of ideological labels. Meanwhile, an autocracy facing a credible challenge is analogous to a polarized democracy - an ideological label would be more informative and therefore more likely to be used by the public.

opinion. Since the terms "left" and "right" are, as [Inglehart and Rabier \(1986, p. 470\)](#) put it, "like a universal solvent" which "[tends] to absorb whatever major conflicts are present in the political system," we would expect the left-right dimension to encode preferences about democracy under these circumstances.

Left and Right in China

The meaning of the left-right dimension for politicians and intellectuals in China has historically been broadly consistent with its more general definition, which emphasizes debates about redistribution and the pace of change. For Mao, it was possible to make a political mistake by hewing too far to the left or to the right. In a 1955 speech before the Central Committee, he explained that "When the right time comes for something to be done, it has to be done. If you don't allow it, that is a Right deviation. If the right time has not come for something and yet you try to force it through, that is a 'Left' deviation" ([Mao 1977, p. 230-231](#)).

The labels themselves were often used as a weapon during power struggles. During the Anti-Rightist campaign (1957-58), after Mao had asserted that one percent of the work units participating in the campaign should be labelled as rightists, over half a million people received the label for their failure to demonstrate sufficient loyalty to the Communist Party ([Chung 2011](#)). In many cases the ideological offense was to stand for conventionally liberal principles, such as free speech or freedom of the press. In the early years of the Cultural Revolution, Mao went on to explain that rightists were one of the five bad categories of people, alongside landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, and bad elements ([Link 2013, p. 66](#)).

After Mao's death, the party's official verdict on history declared the Cultural Revolution to be a mistake and laid much of the responsibility for its excesses at the feet of the ultra-leftist Gang of Four ([CCP Central Committee 1981](#)).² During this time, the Mao loyalists were accused of being both ultra-leftists and conservatives for oppos-

²Though the Gang of Four had also been accused of being ultra-rightists by Mao's successor, Hua Guofeng, shortly after he had engineered their arrest ([Baum 1994, p. 43](#)).

ing Deng Xiaoping's reform program, and the association between the ultra-left and conservatism remained in the air afterwards (Link 2013, p. 250).

Deng reinforced these associations between the left and opposition to reform during his Southern Tour, which was his attempt to restart the economic reforms that had stalled after Tiananmen. He explained that resistance to the reforms was a leftist tendency, and that while the party had to guard against the influence of both the left and the right, the left was more threatening (Blanchette 2019; Zhao 1993).

As the reform era wore on, the emergence of Neo-Authoritarians, Neo-Maoists, and the New Left introduced new wrinkles into the meaning of these ideological labels. The scholars and intellectuals who called themselves the New Left had generally spent time abroad and were heavily influenced by contemporary Western academic critiques of capitalism and imperialism, while those who called themselves Neo-Maoists sought to rehabilitate the Cultural Revolution. While contemporary Chinese liberals critiqued the CCP and its totalitarian past, many on the left wanted to revive the egalitarian elements of the Maoist legacy, even if they acknowledged the excesses under Mao (Blanchette 2019; Li 2017). In economic debates, leftists focused on the disruption created by privatization and generally opposed China's accession to the WTO, while liberals continued to advocate for the benefits of market allocation (Goldman 2005).

A variety of new ideological labels have emerged in recent years as more political discussion migrates online. Critics of efforts to promote social justice and multiculturalism have begun calling their opponents *baizuo*, or the "White Left," while liberal commentators have attacked online nationalists by giving them the label "Little Pink" (Fang and Repnikova 2018; Zhang 2017). Some online communities have begun to adopt the identitarian arguments and preoccupations of the western alt-right (Zhang 2020), while a number of liberal intellectuals evinced their admiration for Donald Trump and his ideological initiatives (Lin 2021).

Specific Expectations

Our review of the history of these labels shows that many intellectuals and political actors conceive of political divides in recognizably ideological ways. If cues from the Communist party and from these intellectual debates have filtered down into the mass public, we might expect for the left and right labels to be associated with similar issues in public opinion. Individuals who self-identify as left should be more likely to support increased state control over the economy and an authoritarian political system. While national identity is often orthogonal to the left-right dimension ([Inglehart and Klingemann 1976](#)), the patriotic message coming from the party suggests that nationalism is also part of the meaning of the left. The party's efforts to inculcate conservative social values suggest that traditional views on social issues are associated with the left as well. Meanwhile, we should expect for people who self-identify as right to be more likely to favor free markets, democracy, and progressive social values. In keeping with findings from other cases, however, we might expect for the correlation between issues and ideological self-identification to be low and perhaps limited to the most-informed individuals.

While recognition of the policy content of ideological labels might be restricted to the most knowledgeable segments of the population, the partisan meaning of left and right should be accessible to a larger proportion of the population. My expectation is that the Communist Party is identified with the left, and that members of the Communist party are more likely to place themselves on the left. This prediction is tempered, however, by previous research which suggests that while party members are more likely to endorse authoritarian views, the ideological preferences of party members and non-party members are broadly similar ([Wu 2019](#); [Wu and Meng 2016](#)).

We also expect left and right self-identifications to be related to evaluations of political symbols, such as social groups or the United States. While this association should be attenuated by the absence of top-down messaging that identifies political groups with either the left or the right, Chinese liberals, who are generally seen as the right, are often accused of harboring a strong attachment to the US and other Western

democracies (Lin 2021). To the extent that a relationship exists between ideological self-placement and political symbols, approval of the US and other Western democracies should be associated with the right.

Data

The analysis for this paper draws on two national Chinese surveys - the 1993 Survey on Social Mobility and Social Change in China, and the 2002 wave of the Asian Barometer survey.³ Both surveys were conducted face-to-face using a stratified multi-stage area sampling procedure with probabilities proportional to size measures (PPS). The primary sampling units in each case were counties in rural areas and cities in urban areas, while the secondary sampling units were townships or township-level administrative districts. The populations that were sampled are representative in each instance of the national over-18 population, with the exception of the Tibet Autonomous Region. The 1993 survey successfully interviewed a total of 3,287 respondents, with a response rate was 94.5%. The 2002 survey interviewed 3,183 respondents with a response rate of 84.1%.

Variation in Left-Right Placement in China

The two surveys asked respondents to place themselves on a left-right scale in slightly different ways. In the 1993 survey, respondents were asked to place themselves on a spectrum that ran from 1 to 6, where 1 represented the most "left" and 6 represented the most "right" political attitudes. In addition to identifying their own ideological position, they were also asked to identify the position of the Chinese Communist Party, their father, and the Kuomintang, which was the ruling party in Taiwan at the time of the survey.

The 2002 survey asked respondents to place themselves and the Communist Party

³The 2008 China Survey also asked about ideological labels, but there is some concern about the quality of the responses because most respondents declined to answer the self-placement question. We present the analysis of that survey in Figures A.1-A.3.

on a 1-7 scale, where 1 represented the left and 7 represented the right.⁴

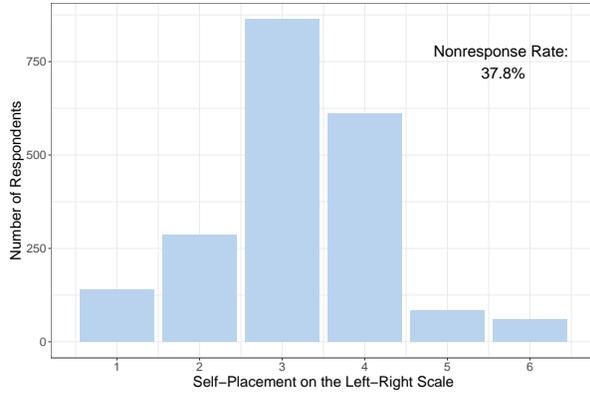
Figure 1 shows the distribution of ideological self-placements in 1993 and 2002. Non-response for this question was relatively high. 37.8% of respondents declined to place themselves on the left-right spectrum in 1993, while 42.3% did not respond in the 2002 survey. These figures are noticeably higher than the averages of 12.1% in Western Europe, 22.8% in Eastern Europe, and 19.5% in Latin America, and are comparable to the non-response rate in Taiwan, which was 54.2% in 2001 and 44.4% in 2008 (Hsiao, Wang and Achen 2017; Mair 2007; Zechmeister and Corral 2013).

Most respondents in each year decided to place themselves in the middle of the spectrum. The left-right scale for the 1993 survey did not have a midpoint, but 72.1% percent of respondents placed themselves at 3 or 4 on the 6 point scale. 38% placed themselves at the midpoint of the 7 point scale in 2002. These figures are high compared to the proportion of middle placements in established and ex-communist European democracies, which average between 27.5% and 34.4%, though they are less exceptional when we consider response patterns in East Asia, where 36.9% of Japanese respondents (2004), 41.5% of Filipinos (2004), and 51.6% of respondents in Taiwan (2001) opted to place themselves at the center (Jou 2010).

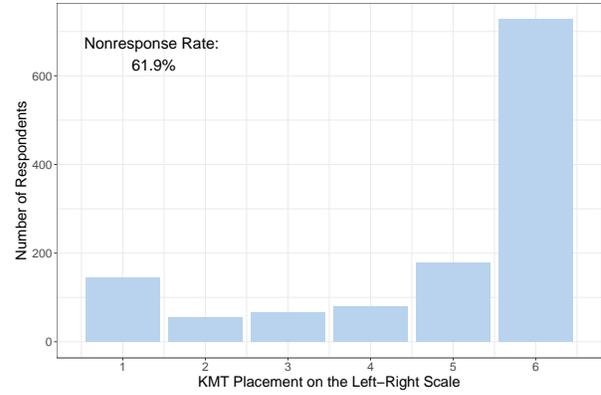
These patterns of ideological self-identification are quite different from the ways in which respondents choose to place the Communist Party and the Kuomintang. Figure 1 shows that in 1993, the left-right distribution for the Communist Party was bimodal, with peaks on the far left and in the center; in 1993 the far left formed the largest single category. Fewer respondents were able or willing to identify the position of the KMT, but for the 38.1% of respondents who did answer the question, the far right was by a fair margin the most popular placement.

The 2002 survey only asked respondents to identify the position of the CCP. The bottom left panel of Figure 1 shows that respondent placements of the Communist Party changed by 2002. The distribution of party placements now only has one peak,

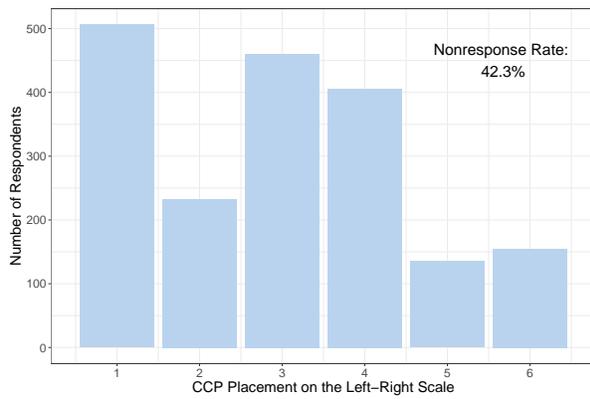
⁴The published questionnaire lists a 1-6 scale instead, but during the survey, enumerators used a 7 point scale instead (Tianguang Meng, Personal Communication).



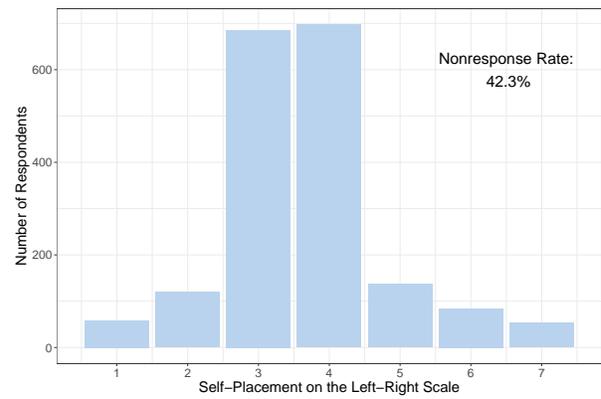
(a) 1993 Self-Placements



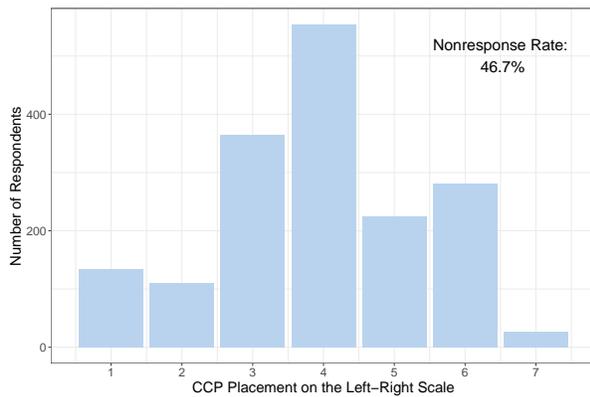
(b) 1993 KMT Placements



(c) 1993 CCP Placements



(d) 2002 Self-Placements



(e) 2002 CCP Placements

Figure 1: Distribution of Left-Right Placements from Two Surveys

at the center of the left-right scale, and more respondents perceive the party to be on the right than on the left.

Correcting for Differential Item Functioning

A closer examination of these ideological placements reveals signs of systematic respondent-level bias, which is also known as differential item functioning (DIF). DIF becomes a problem when survey respondents with the same opinion place themselves at different locations on an ideological scale, or when respondents with different opinions place themselves at the same position on the scale (Aldrich and McKelvey 1977; King et al. 2004). Sometimes these patterns can appear because respondents tend to perceive themselves to be moderate, while they perceive members of other political parties to be ideologically extreme (Hare et al. 2015; Saiegh 2015). Another common problem is when respondents⁵ reverse the order of the ideological scale by placing the leftist parties on the right, and the more conservative parties on the left (Lo, Proksch and Gschwend 2014; Palfrey and Poole 1987). When present, these distortions make it difficult to compare survey responses across individuals. Figure 2 shows that placements for the Communist Party and the Kuomintang in the 1993 survey are systematically correlated with an individual's self-placement on the ideological scale. Respondents who place themselves on the far left of the six point scale also place the Communist Party on the far left, while they place the Kuomintang on the far right. For respondents who place themselves on the far right of the scale, the situation is reversed; they place the Communist Party on the far right, while they place Kuomintang on the far left.⁶ This pattern of responses indicates that the bulk of the respondents who placed themselves on the right in this survey have the ideological scale backwards.

Scholars have developed a wide variety of approaches to correct for the distortions introduced by DIF (Aldrich and McKelvey 1977; King et al. 2004; Poole 1998). One classic technique, the Aldrich-McKelvey (A-M) scaling procedure, assumes that while survey respondents vary widely in how they place political parties on an ideological scale, the actual positions of these parties are the same for every respondent. This

⁵Palfrey and Poole (1987) shows these respondents tend to be poorly informed about politics.

⁶I should note, however, that the box plots in Figure 2 show that there is more variance in party placements for the respondents who place themselves on the far right than there is for the respondents who place themselves on the far left.

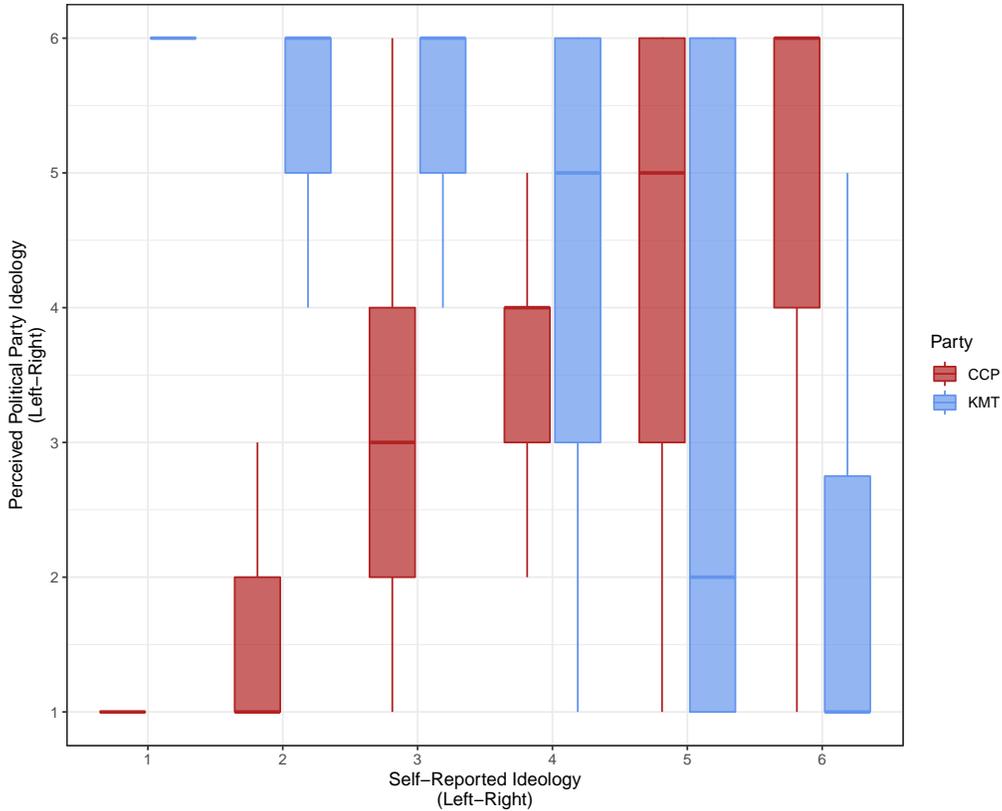


Figure 2: Perceived ideological positions for the CCP and the KMT in the 1993 Survey, by ideological self-placements.

means that the parties can be used as anchors to help measure the biases of individual respondents; once these biases are identified, it is possible to generate a corrected estimate of each individual's ideological position. The intuition behind the A-M model is that each respondent's perceived location for a given political party is a linear function of that political party's "true" position, along with two respondent-specific parameters. The first of these parameters is the α shift term, which corrects for bias in how the respondent uses the ideological scale. The second parameter is a β stretch term, which captures expansions and contractions in how respondents place different political parties on the scale. If a respondent has reversed the order of the ideological scale, then β will be negative.

[Hare et al. \(2015\)](#) created a Bayesian implementation of the A-M scaling procedure to help alleviate missing data problems and improve uncertainty estimates. In the

Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey model (BAM), we model y_{ij} , the perceived location of political party j for each individual i with the equation

$$y_{ij} = \alpha_i + \beta_i \zeta_j + \epsilon_{ij}. \quad (1)$$

where α_i is the shift term for individual i , β_i is the stretch term for individual i , ζ_j is the true location of party j , and ϵ_{ij} is our heteroskedastic error term.

Applying the Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey scaling approach to the 1993 survey data⁷ reveals a wide divergence between self-reported ideology and our estimates that correct for DIF. The top panel of Figure 3 shows that there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between estimated BAM scores and self-reported ideology scores. The BAM scores show that respondents who placed themselves at a 4 on the six point scale are likely to be farther to the right, once we correct for DIF, than respondents who placed themselves on the far right, at 6. In fact, our results show that the respondents who place themselves on the far right have approximately the same estimated ideology as the respondents who placed themselves on the far left.

These rescaled ideological positions are a product of the individual shift and stretch parameters for each respondent. The middle panel of Figure 3 shows that the shift term (α) for our respondents has a similar inverted U-shape, with respondents who place themselves in the middle of the ideological spectrum receiving the highest α values on average. Our estimates for α are consistently positive, which indicates that most respondents place the Communist Party and the KMT farther to the right than they should.⁸ The bottom panel of Figure 3 shows that respondents who place themselves at the ends of the ideological scale have β values that are farther from 0, which means that they tend to have more dispersion in their ideological placements for the CCP and the KMT. Respondents who self-report as moderates tend to compress their placements into a smaller segment of the scale. The bottom panel of Figure 3 also shows that

⁷We are only able to use this approach for the 1993 survey, since the 2002 survey does not ask respondents to place the KMT.

⁸In the US, on the other hand, the distribution for α estimates is centered on zero.

respondents who place themselves on the right side of the scale tend to have β values that are negative, which means that they have reversed the ideological scale in their minds.

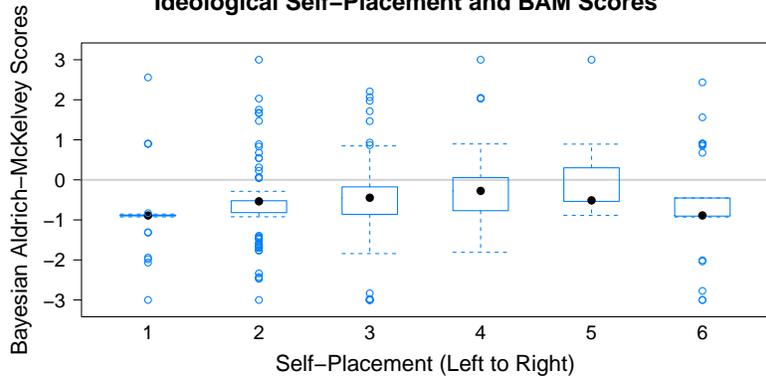
If we compare the rescaled ideal points presented in Figure 4 with the raw ideological self-placements in Figure 1a, we see that the rescaled ideology estimates are more tightly clustered around the position of the Communist Party than the raw placements. While the raw placements have a peak in the middle of the ideological scale, the DIF-corrected BAM scores are concentrated on the left. By comparing the dark grey bars, which represent individuals with $\beta > 0$, and the light grey bars, which represent individuals with $\beta < 0$, Figure 4 shows that once we correct for DIF, the distribution of ideological positions for individuals who have flipped the order of the scale is comparable to the distribution for everyone else.

The Policy Content of Ideological Labels

What do these labels mean? Figures 5 and 6 show the correlations between left-right self-identification and positions on issues in 1993 and 2002, respectively. Figure 5 shows that there is no association between a respondent's beliefs on economic issues and her left-right self-identification in 1993. There is also no correlation between her views on social issues and her left-right placement. There does, however, appear to be a slight correlation between pro-authoritarian views and placement on the left. Respondents who call themselves leftists are slightly more likely to believe that too many political parties in a society will produce chaos, that China's political system is suitable for its current circumstances, and that the government should control the spread of information in society. These correlations are all relatively small,⁹ and they are similarly

⁹Correlations between policy issues and ideological labels were historically quite modest in many democracies as well, though in some cases they have increased in recent years because of greater polarization. In the US, for instance, [Abramowitz and Saunders \(2006\)](#) show that in 1988, the correlation between ideological self-placement and seven policy issues ranged from 0.14 (Abortion) to 0.36 (Jobs/Living Standards), with an average correlation of 0.24. By 2004, the average correlation had risen to 0.36.

Figure 3: Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey Scaling Estimates
Ideological Self-Placement and BAM Scores



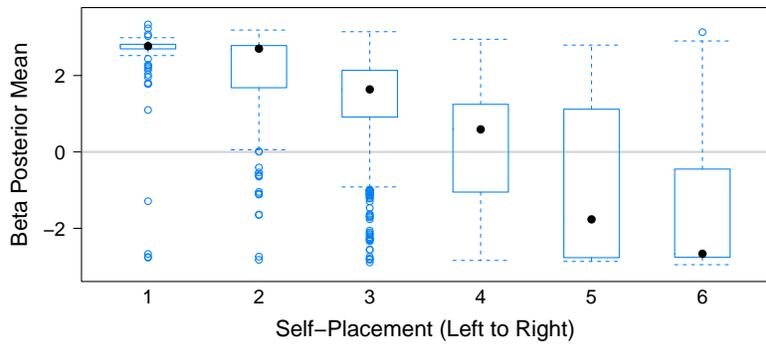
(a) Distribution of Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey scores

Ideological Self-Placement and Alpha (Shift) Term



(b) Distribution of Alpha (shift) parameter estimates

Ideological Self-Placement and Beta (Stretch) Term



(c) Distribution of Beta (stretch) parameter estimates

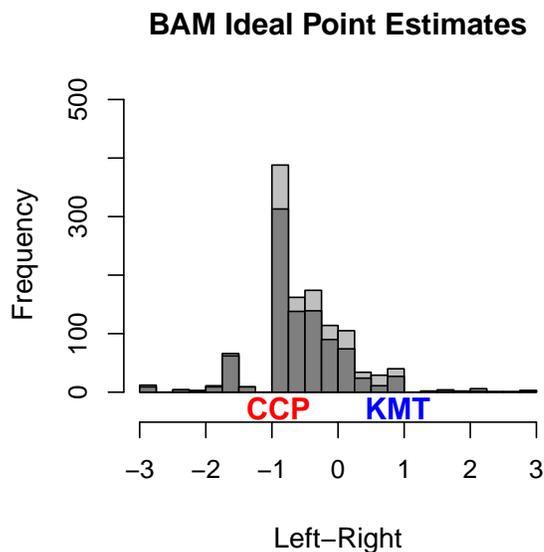


Figure 4: Histogram of Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey scores. The dark bars represent respondents who have the correct ordering of the ideological space (i.e. positive β values, which mean they put the CCP to the left of the KMT), while the light bars represent respondents who have flipped the ideological scale.

modest if we confine our analysis to the most-informed third of the sample.¹⁰ Although some of the correlations are statistically distinguishable from zero, we also conduct an equivalence analysis to evaluate the substantive importance of these correlations (Lakens 2017; Rainey 2014). An examination of the 90% confidence intervals for our estimates shows that none of the policy issues have a correlation with ideological self-identification that exceeds 0.13. We argue that this is evidence of a limited effect, since in Taiwan, Hsiao, Wang and Achen (2017) found correlations between ideological labels and issues ranging from -0.02 (social welfare) and 0.13 (environment), which they cite as evidence that left-right labels lack any consistent meaning there. There are also hints of inconsistency. The question that asked whether expanding democracy will affect stability is slightly correlated with rightist views, for instance.

When combined with the placements of the Communist party in Figure 1c, these correlations suggest that in 1993, at a time when memories of the regime’s near-death

¹⁰Our measures of political knowledge use six factual questions about world leaders to estimate a binary item response model.

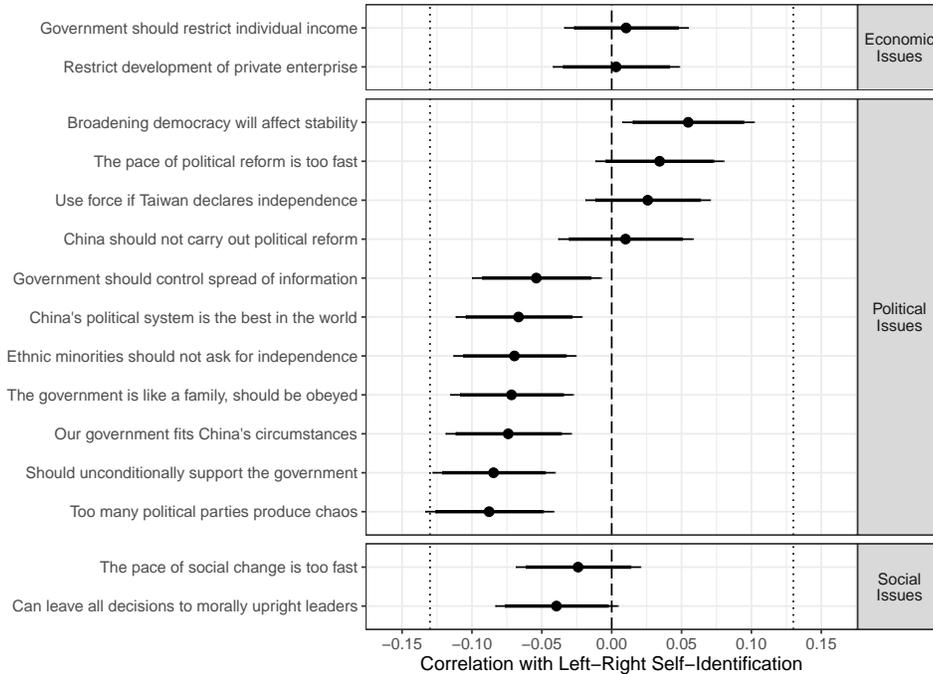


Figure 5: Correlations between Left-Right placement and specific issues in the 1993 survey. Thick bars represent 90% confidence intervals, thin bars depict 95% confidence intervals, and the dotted lines indicate the maximum level of correlation between Left-Right placement and issues in Taiwan.

experience at Tiananmen were still fresh, the left was, to a limited degree, associated with authoritarianism while the right was associated with democracy. In a sense this confirms the prediction that the left-right dimension will end up taking on the meaning of the most salient political issues in a given society.

The correlations in the 2002 survey show however that the association between the left and authoritarianism was fleeting. In Figure 6, we see that in the 2002 survey, the correlations between authoritarian views on political issues and self-placement on the left are generally indistinguishable from zero. Both the left and the right are modestly associated with a few attitudes that are consistent with an authoritarian worldview. Respondents who self-identify as right are slightly more likely to agree with the notion that the pace of political reform is too fast, while self-identified leftists are likely to agree with the idea that the Communist party should take the lead in the implementation of democracy.

Economic issues in 2002 are also generally uncorrelated with left-right placement, though self-styled rightists are more likely to agree that poverty is the product of individual, rather than societal factors. Examination of social issues reveals that the right is slightly more likely to endorse traditional gender attitudes, which would not be surprising elsewhere but which runs counter to our expectations in China. We should note however that none of these correlations are large in magnitude. Our estimated confidence intervals suggest that we can be confident that none of these correlations are larger than 0.13.¹¹

On the whole, the results from these surveys suggest that the policy content of ideological labels in China is weak and inconsistent. In 1993, much of the population perceived the Communist Party to occupy the far left of the ideological space, and people who self-identify as left are also slightly more likely to hold authoritarian political views, though the correlation is modest. In the 2002 survey, the political connotations of the left and right are less clearly delineated, and by 2002, most respondents placed the party in the center; only a handful perceived it to be on the far left. While some individuals are willing to identify themselves as part of the left or the right, their preferences on issues do not seem to follow a common pattern.

The relationship between economic issues and ideological self-placement is similarly inconsistent. There are some hints that leftists favor a greater state role in the economy, but the preponderance of the evidence suggests that the economic content of the left-right label is limited. The left-right dimension also does not appear to possess a clear set of meanings when it comes to social issues, though traditional values about the gender and the family are in a few cases associated with the right in 2002.

We should note that it is hard to say whether the differences we do observe between surveys are a product of change over time, or if they are an artifact of the different measures of left-right self-identification used in each year. While some of the trends are likely to be true regardless of the scale used (i.e. the change in the perceived

¹¹Our analyses here are also subject to multiple comparisons concerns. Many of the initial correlations are no longer significant after a Bonferroni adjustment.

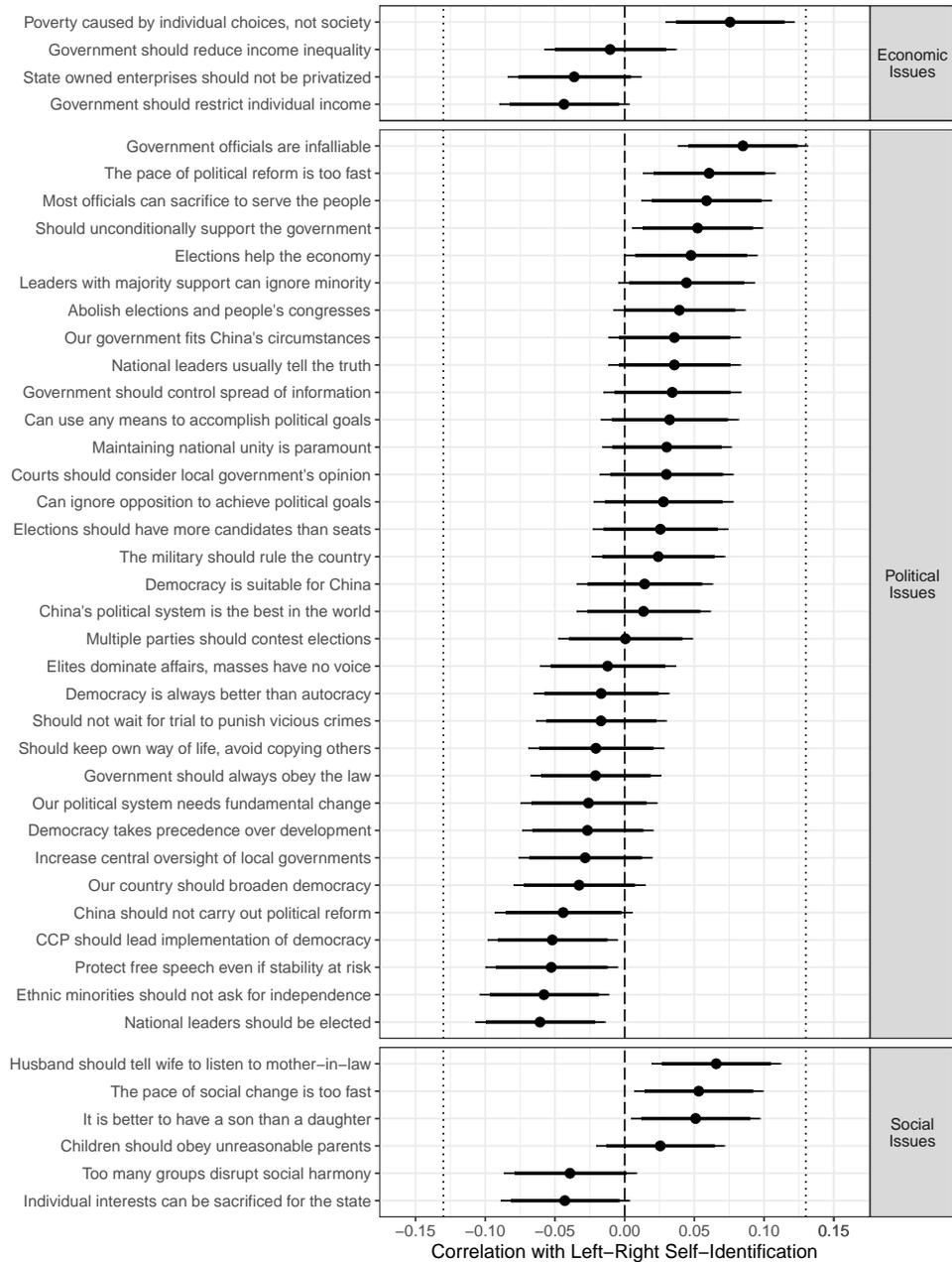


Figure 6: Correlations between Left-Right placement and specific issues in the 2002 survey. Thick bars represent 90% confidence intervals, thin bars depict 95% confidence intervals, and the dotted lines indicate the maximum level of correlation between Left-Right placement and issues in Taiwan.

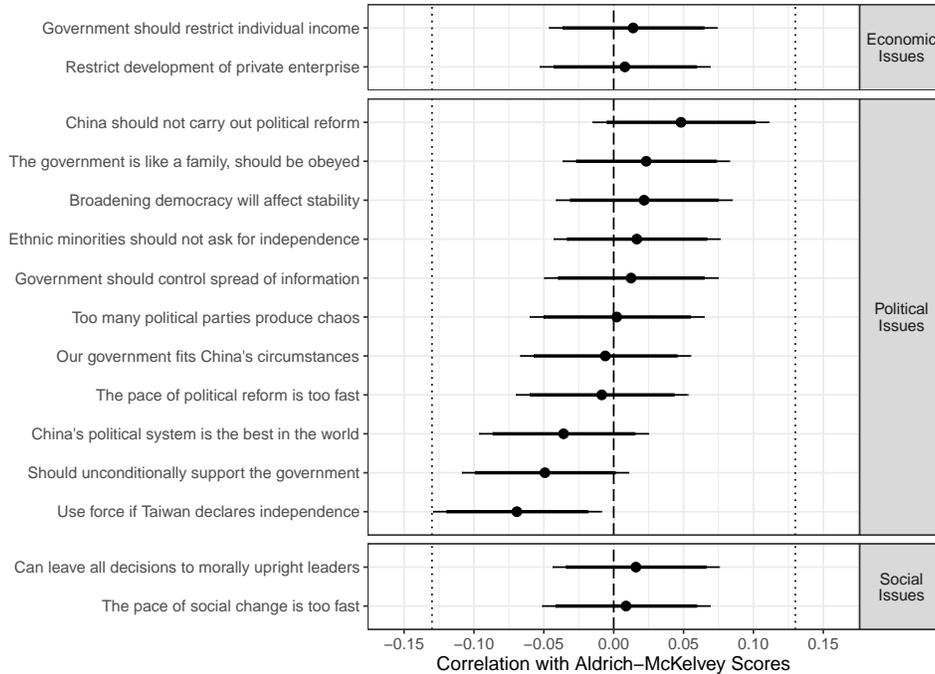


Figure 7: Correlations between Aldrich-McKelvey scores and specific issues in the 1993 survey. Thick bars represent 90% confidence intervals, thin bars depict 95% confidence intervals, and the dotted lines indicate the maximum level of correlation between Left-Right placement and issues in Taiwan.

location of the Communist party), others, such as the increase in non-response in 2002, may be a function of the decision to use a scale with an exact midpoint in that year. Given the shifting public debate over ideology during this period, it is also possible that respondents understood the question differently in each year.

The distortions produced by DIF might help explain why some of these correlations are as inconsistent as they are. However, correcting for DIF using Aldrich-McKelvey scores instead of self-reported ideology does not help us uncover clearer correlations between ideal points and issue positions. If anything, the correlations are weaker, as we see in Figure 7.¹²

¹²The correlations in Figure 7 are between individual policy issues and Aldrich-McKelvey scores, rather than the Bayesian variant.

The Partisan and Symbolic Content of Ideological Labels

While the policy content of left and right in China appears to be limited and contradictory, ideological labels are customarily understood to contain a mixture of policy, partisan, and symbolic meanings. Figure 8 shows that the labels are strongly correlated with the perceived location of both the Communist Party and the Kuomintang. The estimated correlation between the perceived position of the Communist Party and respondent left-right placement is 0.56 in 1993 and 0.48 in 2002¹³, while the estimated correlation between self-placement and the perceived position of the Kuomintang was -0.42 for the respondents who answered both questions.¹⁴

However, while the perceived location of political parties has a strong association with left-right self-placement, there is no significant correlation between membership in the Communist party and left-right self-placement in 1993. There is a significant correlation between party membership and self-placement on the left in 2002, but even then it is substantively small ($r = -0.06$).

While we have shown that there is a partisan component to the left-right label, in some respects our findings here only open up new questions. What does the strength of the association between self-placement and the perceived position of the party tell us, if the party itself has a somewhat indistinct ideological label?

If ideological labels are capturing subjective evaluations of political symbols, like the US, then we might expect attitudes towards these symbols to show a strong correlation with ideological self-identification. Figure 8 suggests that individuals who have a positive view of the US and Japan may also be slightly more likely to consider themselves part of the right (all of the correlations are between 0.03 and 0.06, though the only item to possess a statistically significant correlation with the left-right dimension here is the respondent's attitude towards Japan in 2002).

¹³We should note here that the correlation is higher in 1993, even though more respondents perceived the CCP to have an extreme position in that year. This implies that respondents who placed the party on the left were also likely to self-identify as leftists.

¹⁴The relationship between ideological self-identification and the perceived position of the KMT that we find in the 1993 survey is especially interesting in light of the Hsiao, Wang and Achen (2017) argument that the left-right spectrum is essentially meaningless in Taiwan.

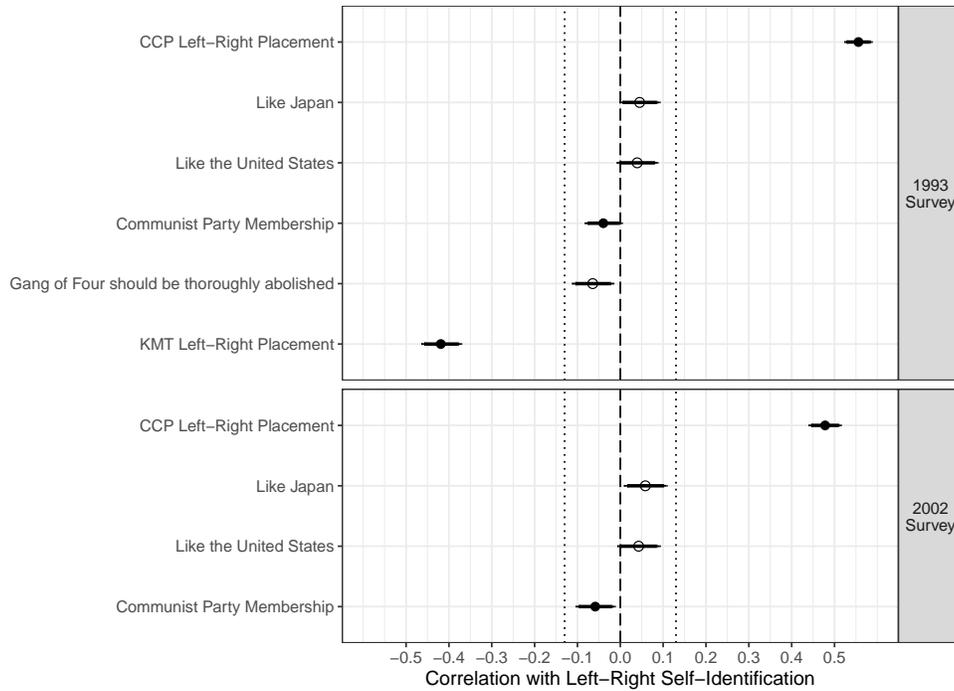


Figure 8: Correlations between Left-Right placement and partisan and symbolic variables in the 1993 and 2002 surveys. Black dots represent partisan variables; white dots represent symbolic variables. Thick bars represent 90% confidence intervals, thin bars depict 95% confidence intervals, and the dotted lines indicate the maximum level of correlation between Left-Right placement and issues in Taiwan.

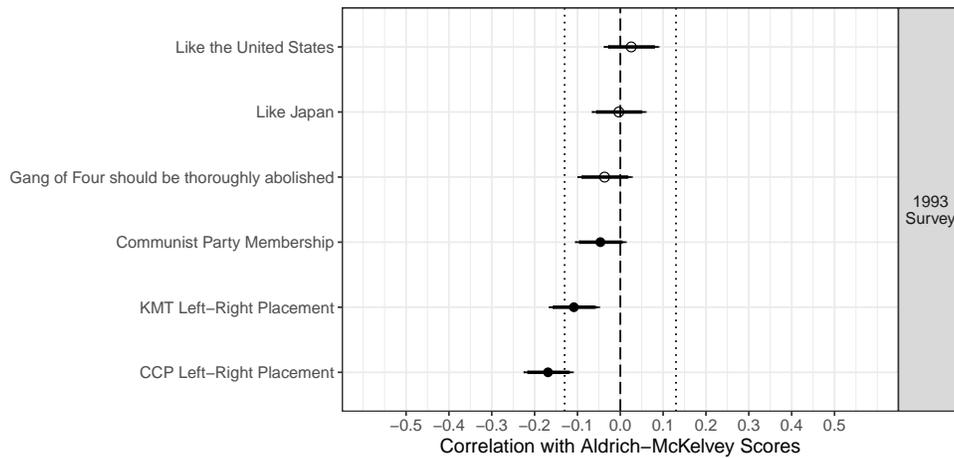


Figure 9: Correlations between Aldrich-McKelvey scores and partisan and symbolic variables in the 1993 survey. Black dots represent partisan variables; white dots represent symbolic variables. Thick bars represent 90% confidence intervals, thin bars depict 95% confidence intervals, and the dotted lines indicate the maximum level of correlation between Left-Right placement and issues in Taiwan.

Figure 8 also shows that there is an association between the belief that the Gang of Four should be thoroughly abolished and self-placement on the left. This result is the opposite of what we would expect, since the Gang of Four is still, despite some mixed messaging from the party, one of the leading cautionary tales of the dangers of leftist excess. While few respondents of any persuasion in 1993 might be expected to harbor sympathy for them, it is still surprising to see self-identified leftists take a harder line.

After we correct for DIF, the correlations between individual ideal points are generally diminished. Figure 9 shows that attitudes towards the US, Japan, and the Gang of Four do not appear to correlate with individual Aldrich-McKelvey scores.¹⁵ The partisan component of these ideological estimates are substantially different. Individuals who place the CCP on the left are more likely to have Aldrich-McKelvey scores that are also on the left side of the ideological scale, but the correlation is substantially weaker than it is for raw placements. The relationship between KMT placement and Aldrich-McKelvey scores is the reverse of the correlation we see in raw self-placements; individuals who place the KMT on the left tend to have Aldrich-McKelvey scores on the right as well.¹⁶ These results suggest that the public's conception of left and right in China was quite uncertain.

Concluding Remarks

The evidence presented in this paper shows that the number of ordinary citizens in China who are unable or unwilling to place themselves on the left-right dimension is high by comparative standards. Citizens who do call themselves leftists or rightists tend to have disparate preferences on economic, political, and social issues, and as a result the relationship between the left-right dimension and issues is still poorly defined. While self-placements are clearly correlated with the perceived position of the Communist Party (and the Kuomintang), we know even less about the origins of these perceptions.

In many ways, the public's conceptions of left and right confound our expectations.

¹⁵Here again we are assessing the relationship between partisan and symbolic issues with standard Aldrich-McKelvey scores, rather than Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey scores.

¹⁶This is likely to be a product of DIF, as we saw in Figures 2 and 3.

Scholars and officials often use left and right to describe China's debates about economic reform and the proper role of the market, but left-right placements are largely uncorrelated with economic preferences among the general public.

The left does carry some authoritarian connotations for respondents in the 1993 survey, though these associations are thin on the ground in the 2002 survey. One possible explanation for this observation is that democracy was a relatively salient alternative to Communist rule in 1993, and that as a result the left-right dimension captured this debate. If we posit that democracy had receded from public consciousness by 2002, then it may also make sense for the left-right schema to lose this association over time. Unfortunately, differences in the survey instruments used in each year prevent us from ruling out the possibility that this shift is a product of question wording.

Does it matter if Chinese citizens are confused about the left-right spectrum? In democracies, ideological labels help citizens form affective orientations towards parties, summarize policy positions, and structure the partisan composition of policy-making coalitions ([Fortunato, Stevenson and Vonnahme 2016](#)). Labels also serve as the basis of political identity ([Mason 2018](#)). While Chinese citizens may not need to refer to ideological labels to predict the partisan composition of the policy-making coalition, they could still use them as heuristics to guide their affective orientations towards the Communist party or individual politicians, and they could in principle be using them to summarize the policy preferences of political actors. The confusion surrounding ideological labels suggests that Chinese citizens still lack a common language to summarize, communicate, and fight for their political preferences. The creation of this language will be at the center of political developments in China in the years to come.

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Supporting Information

The 2008 China Survey

The 2008 China Survey also asked respondents to record their ideological labels. A total of 3,989 respondents completed the 2008 survey questionnaire, with a response rate of 72.2%. The 2008 survey used an eleven point scale, with 0 representing the left and 10 the right. There were some concerns with the quality of the responses to this survey, as 67.7% of respondents did not respond to the self-placement question. Figure A.1 shows that the phenomenon of middle placements was also especially pronounced for the 2008 survey, where 61% of the respondents who placed themselves on the 11 point left-right scale chose the midpoint.

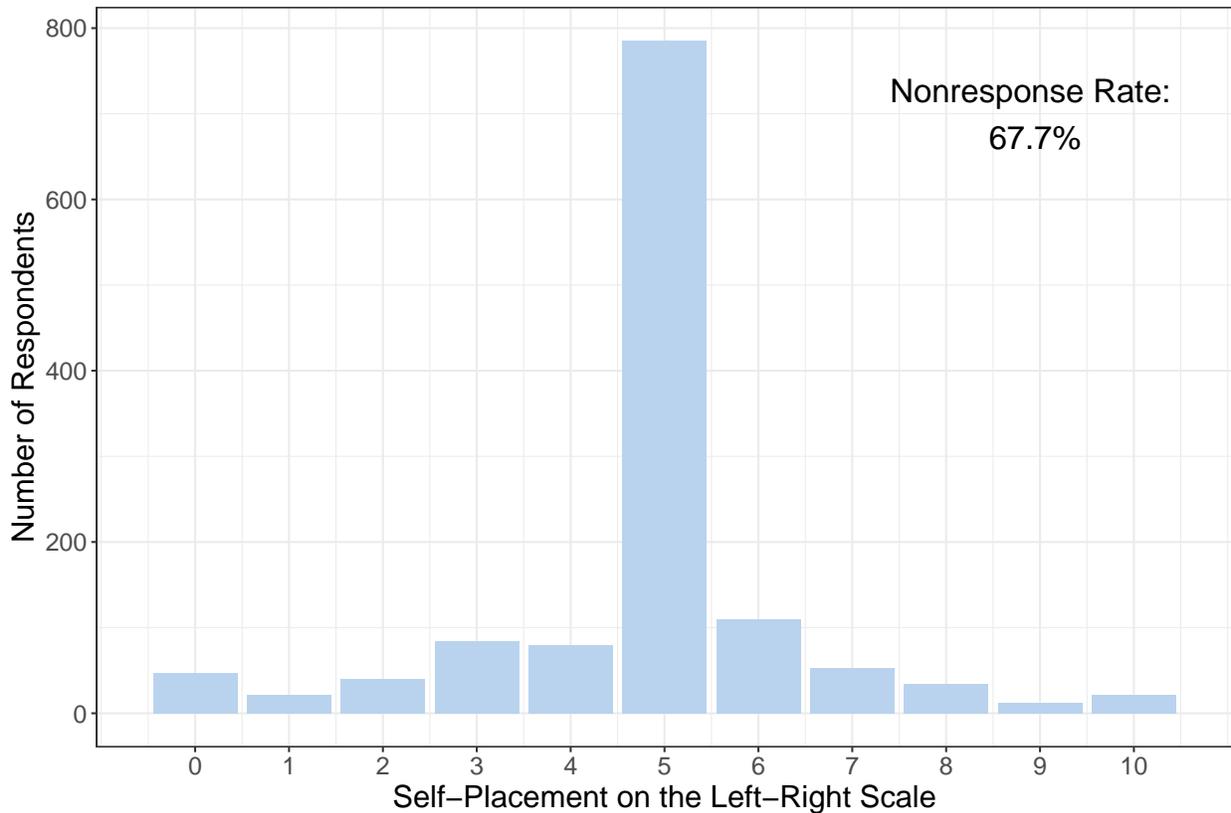


Figure A.1: Distribution of Left-Right Placements in the 2008 Survey

Figure A.2 depicts the correlations between policy issues and left-right self-placement

in the 2008 survey. The results echo the conclusions from the other surveys; most of the issues do not have a significant correlation with ideological self-identification. The slight correlation we saw between authoritarianism and the left from the 1993 survey is not apparent here. There does appear to be a small association between the left and traditional values about gender and the family, which were issues that slightly correlated with placement on the right in the 2002 survey. There is also a slight association between the left and beliefs about whether the government should provide extra support to the poor. A look at the 90% confidence intervals for these two questions reveals that both of these issues are potentially equivalent in size to the largest correlations we observe between left-right labels and issues in Taiwan, though they are still quite modest. All of the other correlations between issues and ideological labels in the 2008 survey are either indistinguishable from zero or negligible.

Our analysis of symbolic issues also does not turn up clear associations. Figure [A.3](#) shows that there are no significant correlations in the 2008 survey between ideological labels and symbolic issues, such as membership in the Communist Party or attitudes towards marginalized groups.

Principal Components Analysis

We also present the results of a principal components analysis of the 1993 and 2002 surveys to examine how political space is structured and to see whether the latent measures of ideology we recover are correlated with either the raw self-placements, or with the Aldrich-McKelvey scores we calculated.

The top two panels of figure [A.4](#) show the scree plots from the two surveys. We find that an elbow in the scree plot appears after one dimension in the 1993 survey, while in the 2002 survey, the variance explained drops off after two dimensions. The bottom two panels of figure [A.4](#) plot the loadings from each of the questions in the two surveys. We can see that many of the questions load in the same direction in the 1993 survey, while there is more variation for the 2002 survey.

Figure [A.5](#) presents the correlations between the principal components and the

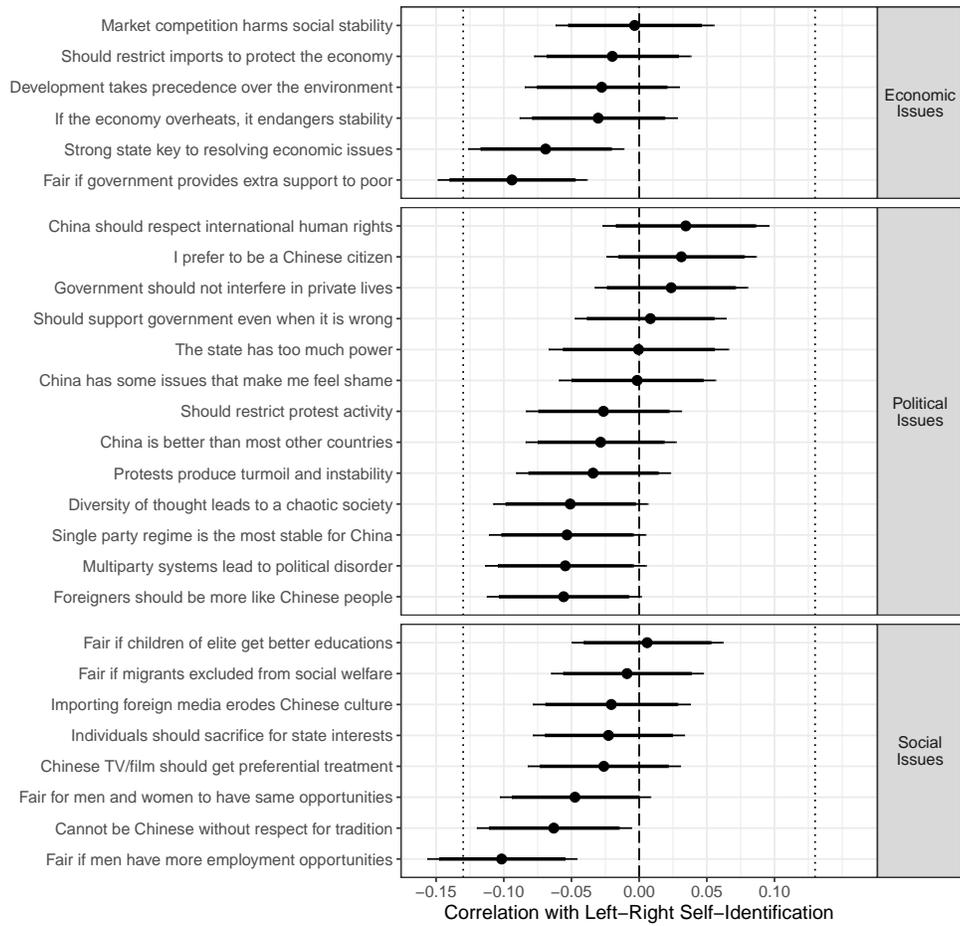


Figure A.2: Correlations between Left-Right placement and specific issues in the 2008 survey. Thick bars represent 90% confidence intervals, thin bars depict 95% confidence intervals, and the dotted lines indicate the maximum level of correlation between Left-Right placement and issues in Taiwan.

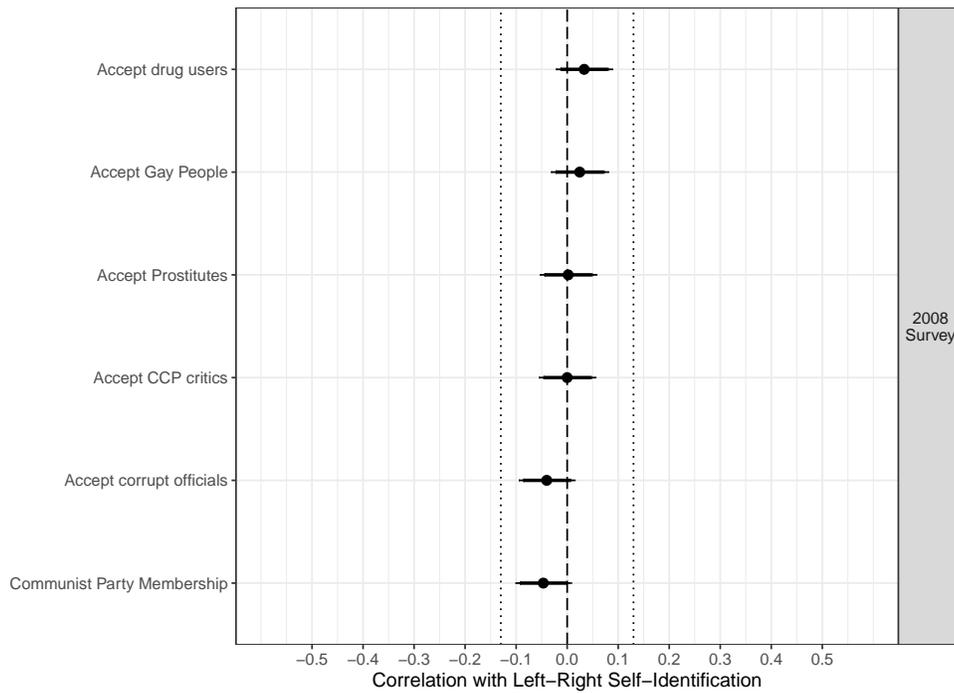
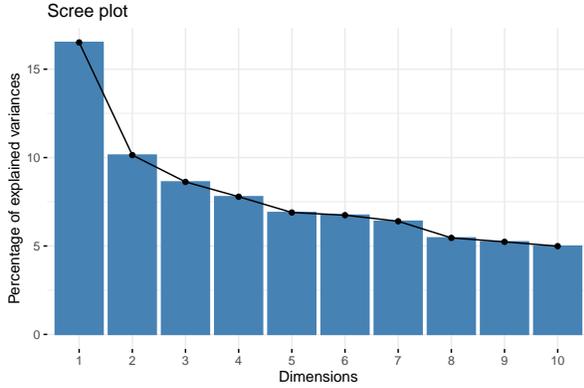
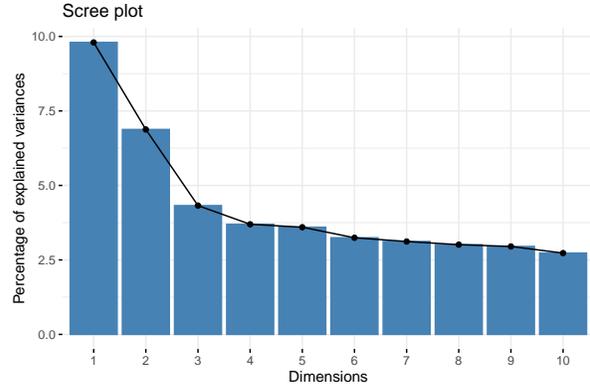


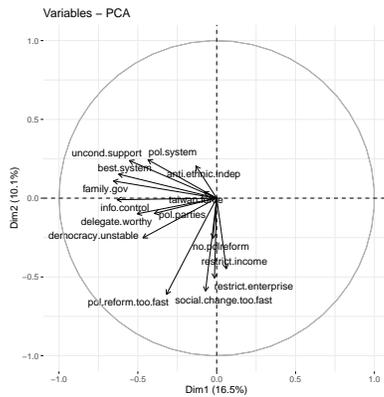
Figure A.3: Correlations between Left-Right placement and partisan and symbolic variables in the 2008 survey. Thick bars represent 90% confidence intervals, thin bars depict 95% confidence intervals, and the dotted lines indicate the maximum level of correlation between Left-Right placement and issues in Taiwan.



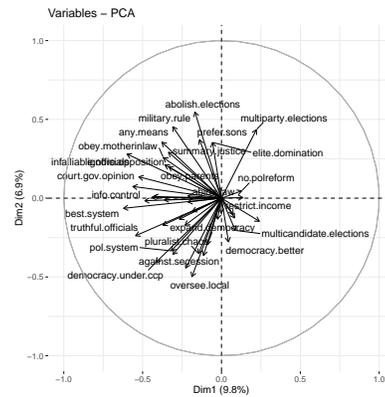
(a) 1993 PCA Scree Plot



(b) 2002 PCA Scree Plot



(c) 1993 PCA Question Loadings

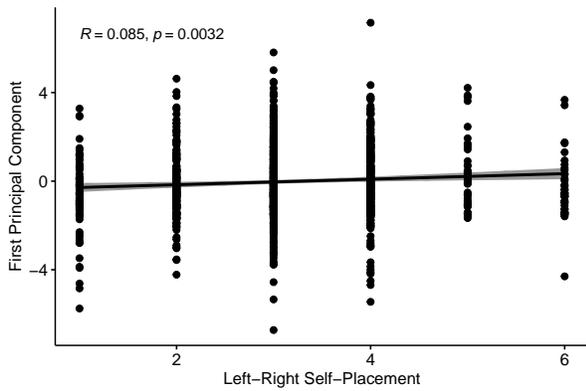


(d) 2002 PCA Question Loadings

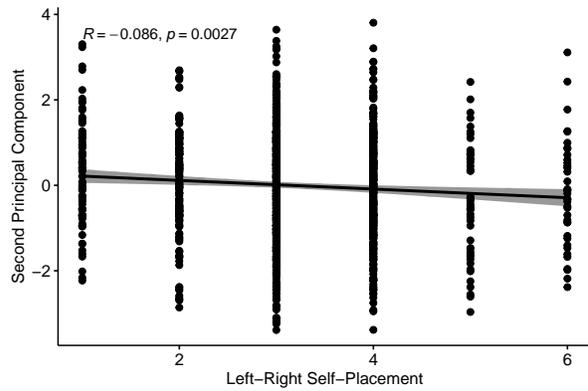
Figure A.4: Principal Components Analysis of Two Surveys

ideological labels. It also presents correlations between the principal components and the Aldrich-McKelvey scores in the 1993 survey. The first principal component has a positive, statistically significant correlation with left-right self-placement in the 1993 survey and a negative, statistically significant correlation in the 2002 survey, while the second principal component has a negative, statistically significant correlation in the 1993 survey and no clear correlation in the 2002 survey. Aldrich-McKelvey scores do not show clear correlations with either principal component in the 1993 survey.

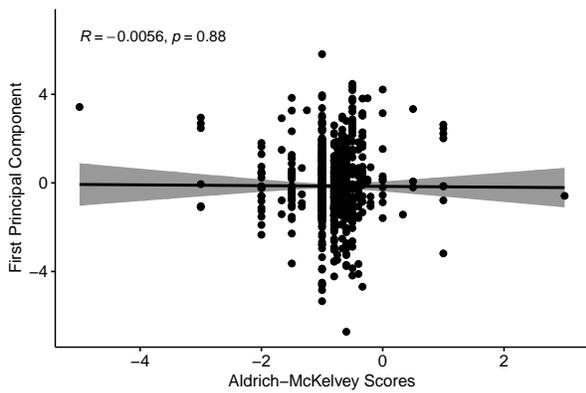
However, all of these correlations are modest, and all of them are well below the 0.13 cutoff we assigned for a negligible effect. Taken together, the results in figure A.5 show that neither our raw nor our DIF-corrected ideological labels are strongly related to latent ideological dimensions in these two surveys.



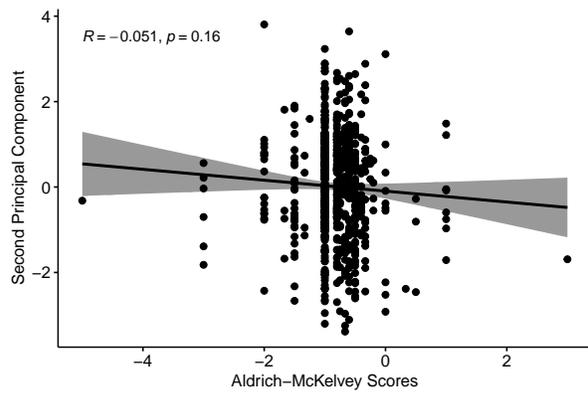
(a) 1993 PC1 Self-Placement Scatter Plot



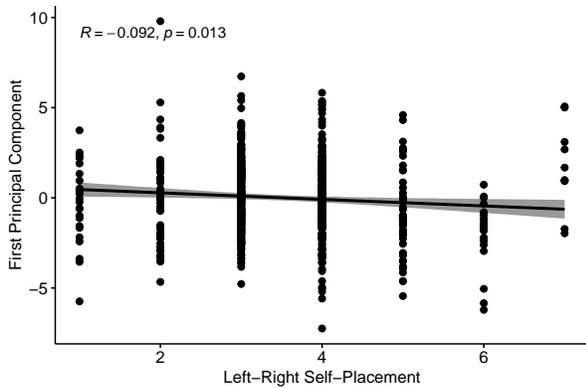
(b) 1993 PC2 Self-Placement Scatter Plot



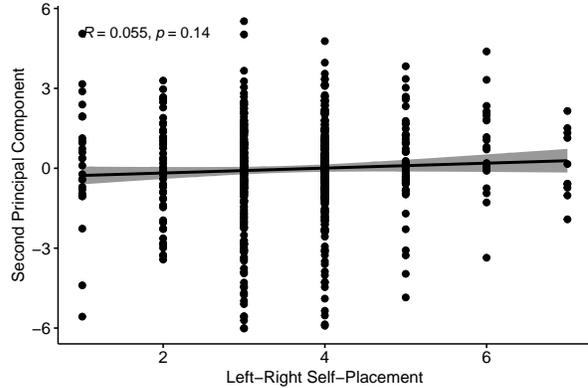
(c) 1993 PC1 Aldrich-McKelvey Scatter Plot



(d) 1993 PC2 Aldrich-McKelvey Scatter Plot



(e) 2002 PC1 Self-Placement Scatter Plot



(f) 2002 PC2 Self-Placement Scatter Plot

Figure A.5: Correlations between Principal Components, Left-Right Placement, and Aldrich-McKelvey Scales