

# Who Supports Social Credit Systems in China?

Chungheng Liu (2022). **Who Supports Expanding Surveillance? Exploring Public Opinion of Chinese Social Credit Systems.** *International Sociological Association.*

China has accelerated the expansion of surveillance infrastructure to create social credit systems across many jurisdictions. Behavior that negatively impact social credit records can range from severe law breaking to more minor infractions like misconduct on the subway, and often include political behavior like protesting or spreading unsanctioned information online. In some cities, poor social credit records can be the basis for punishments, such as travel and internet restrictions. In the wake of their marked expansion, how does China's urban public view these "state-centered" social credit systems?

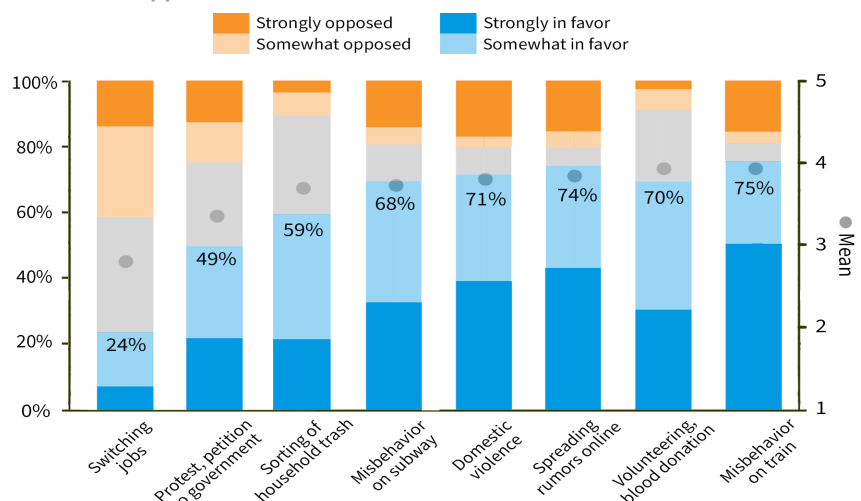
**The data.** To explore this question, researchers from the China Data Lab at the University of California San Diego's 21st Century China Center administered an online survey to mainland Chinese urban adult residents between January and April 2020 in collaboration with Qualtrics, a survey company. Researchers obtained a widely representative sample of 1,173 respondents. Researchers polled citizens on their support for two variables: surveillance of behaviors commonly included in developing social credit scores, and state administered punishments for low social credit scores.

## INSIGHTS

- Support for social credit systems, which monitor and punish a wide variety of behaviors, is generally high in China, particularly among advantaged groups like the wealthy, educated, and those with urban residence permits.
- Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members and others with closer ties to the Party-state are less likely to support social credit surveillance and punishment.
- Variation in views may occur because urban upper classes see social credit systems as reinforcing existing preferential norms and laws, whereas those with "middling" ties to the Party-state may resent extra scrutiny but lack the power to either benefit from or bypass it.

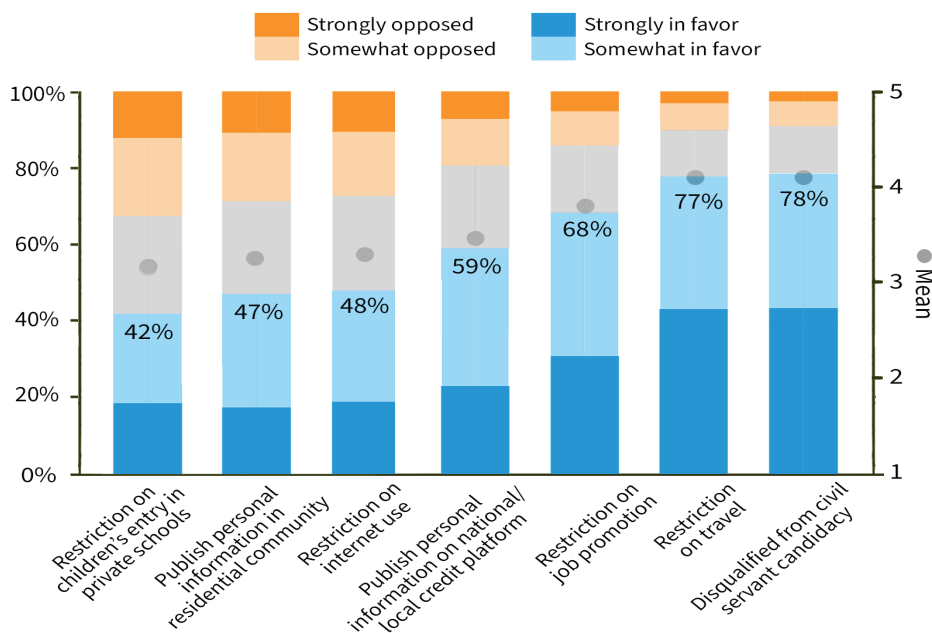
In addition to sociodemographic information, researchers also collected data about four factors that they believe affect public support for social credit systems: i) respondents' level of trust in China's political system, the central government, and local government; ii) an individual's proximity to the Party-state apparatus as measured by Party membership, occupation, and occupation of relatives; iii) media consumption, including official media, domestic liberal media, or foreign media; and iv) prior experiences with social credit systems.

Support for surveillance of behaviors for social credit records



**Impact of COVID-19 on offline consumption.** The analysis found generally high support for state-sponsored social credit systems in China, though results varied significantly across measured factors. Specifically, researchers found a high degree of support – either strongly supportive or somewhat supportive – for surveilling activities like: misbehavior on the train (75%), spreading rumors online (74%), domestic violence (71%), misbehavior on the subway (68%), and sorting of household trash (59%). Support for surveillance of protesting or petitioning the government was lower but not low at 49%.

### Support for social credit system punishments



**Citizens also supported punishments associated with poor social credit records.** Researchers found the highest degree of support for disqualifying people with poor records from civil service candidacy (78%) and restricting their travel (77%). Citizens also supported restricting job promotions (68%) and publicizing personal information on both local and national credit platforms (59%). However, restricting one's child's entry into private schools (42%), publicizing to the residential community the offender's personal information (47%), and restricting the offender's internet use (48%) garnered lower levels of support.

Supporters of social credit systems were most likely to cite two reasons for their support: the need to enforce discipline among unruly segments of the population and concerns about loopholes in the formal legal system. Those tending to oppose the systems cited concerns about unclear rules and restrictions on personal freedom, though other rationales, including potential for abuse, privacy concerns, and worries over technical difficulties were also present.

**Who supports social credit surveillance and punishment?** Individuals with higher trust in the central government and China's political system were more likely to support the use of social credit systems and their associated punishments. Additionally, people with higher socioeconomic status — including those with higher income, more education, and urban residence permits (*hukou*) — were more likely to support China's social credit surveillance and punishment.

Surprisingly, however, CCP members and those with relatives employed by government/political institutions were less likely to support social credit systems. In addition, those who consumed foreign media were less supportive of social credit surveillance, while those who have had experience with commercial credit systems (like Zhima Credit and/or Tencent Credit) were generally unsupportive of both social credit surveillance and punishment.

**Parsing the variation in views.** While support for social credit systems is generally high, attitude variations may stem from subgroups' differing perceptions of the personal risks and benefits of the surveillance and punishment systems. The researchers posit that high support for social credit systems suggest that the public sees them as reinforcement for existing legal and moral norms rather than as a simple replacement or opposition for the rule of law. It may also be the case that individuals with higher socio-economic status support surveillance and punishment, as they are often disproportionately enforced on socially marginalized and disadvantaged groups, even when those systems claim to be universal and objective.

For CCP members and those with relatively close connections to the Party-state who expressed limited support for SCS, researchers suggest that those with "middle-level" political capital often experience extra state scrutiny, yet have fewer opportunities to gain from or bypass the surveillance compared with political elites.

Taken together, the nuances in public opinion encourage scholars and policymakers alike to think beyond a simplified understanding of citizens' policy preferences in an authoritarian party-state.