Information Control and Public Support for China’s Social Credit System


In 2014, China’s State Council released a plan outlining the legal and regulatory framework for implementing a national “social credit system” (SCS) by 2020. By 2018, 43 municipal governments in China had deployed an SCS on a pilot basis to monitor, reward, and punish citizens based on assessments of their “trustworthiness.” While critics view such systems as tools of surveillance and repression, opinion surveys in China find almost 80% of citizens support them. A recent survey experiment and analysis of state media explore the role of information control in fostering public support for the system.

**The data.** Researchers first conducted a survey experiment in 2019 among 750 elite college students at three universities in East, North, and West China. Students were randomly assigned to a control condition or one of three treatment conditions. In treatment scenarios, respondents either received information about the SCS’s role in social-order maintenance (e.g., punishing a drunk driver who caused a traffic accident), political repression (e.g., punishing a citizen who criticized the government), or both. Then, to better understand the role of state media coverage in public support of the SCS, researchers analyzed both the observational survey of the college students and a nationwide online survey of 2,028 Chinese netizens. They also manually analyzed 646 scripts of TV news reports and articles that contained “social credit” in the title or text from China’s three most important state media outlets.

**Background on China’s social credit system.** Past research has shown that despite China’s ambitious plans to implement a national SCS by 2020, the system still lacks a nationwide unified framework. By 2018, 43 city governments had introduced SCS pilot programs with differing practices. Currently, most local SCSs serve as data-sharing platforms rather than real-time surveillance tools, with limited use of advanced algorithms. Local administrations employ redlists for rewards and blacklists for penalties to foster “trustworthy” and law-abiding behavior. SCS penalties may restrict access to trains, hotels, good schools, government jobs, and loans. Milder sanctions involve limiting internet access and public shaming on billboards or social media.

**INSIGHTS**

- A recent survey experiment involving elite college students in China shows that revealing the repressive potential of China’s social credit system (SCS), which digitally monitors, rewards, and punishes citizens, lowered support for the system by 12%.

- A second, broader survey shows that citizens were more likely to support the SCS if they learned about it primarily from state media.

There is debate about the benefits and costs of such a system. Western media often criticize the SCS as a potential tool for repression, while some scholars perceive it as a means to uphold social order, especially when the legal system is weak. Public trust issues in China, spanning contract breaches, safety scandals, pollution, and corruption, bolster this rationale for the SCS.
Publicly released information in China focuses on the SCS’s role in regulating financial and social behavior, but evidence suggests that repressing dissidents through local SCSs is common, as at least 10 local governments have incorporated rules for punishing petitioners and protesters into their SCSs. Nevertheless, in its current form, the system seems to fall short of full Orwellian-style digital repression. Past analysis suggests that conflicting interests among state agencies, data quality and standardization issues, data privacy laws, and citizen resistance may have hampered the government’s effort in developing a nationwide SCS.

Knowledge of SCS’s repressive potential lowers citizen support. The results of the survey experiment show that revealing the repressive potential of the SCS significantly reduces citizens’ support for the system. However, emphasizing its social-order maintenance function does not increase support. Given that the average level of support among respondents for the SCS was 7.5 out of 10, receiving information about the repressive potential of the SCS lowered individuals’ support by 12%. Researchers then divided survey respondents into two groups: those who obtained information from only state media outlets and those who obtained information from additional sources. They found that receiving information about the repressive potential of the SCS had a larger negative effect among those who only received information from state media outlets. The researchers attribute this differential effect to possibly higher “shock value” of new information for those who are less informed — i.e., consumers of state media.

State media bolsters public support for SCS. By analyzing additional nationwide online survey data, researchers again found that support for the SCS was higher if citizens knew about the SCS through state media. The online survey also revealed that citizens with lower social trust tended to support the SCS more because they believed that it could effectively promote trustworthiness in society. For example, respondents reported a preference for avoiding peers with lower SCS scores: 62% indicated that they would either look at their low-score friend differently or hesitate to hold a positive attitude toward them. Taken together, such findings underscore how citizens may support the SCS as a means to maintain social order and bolster trustworthiness.

State media frames SCS as maintaining social order, promoting trust. Analysis of state media reports show that they rarely present the SCS in a negative light. Researchers found that only 2.8% of state media articles discussing the SCS were negative, while the rest of the articles either praised the SCS’s trust-building and social-order maintenance functions or simply presented neutral facts about the SCS to the public. Even within the 2.8% of articles in which a negative tone could be detected, only one article had one sentence related to possible political repression.

Information control facilitates public support of SCS. The analysis concludes that high levels of public support for the SCS arise partly due to citizens’ lack of information concerning the SCS’s repressive potential. The government amplifies the social-order maintenance function of the SCS to garner public support, while the system’s role in political repression may not be publicly perceptible. Taken together, these findings highlight the role of information control in the public support for the SCS in China. However, the survey experiment shows that a simple reminder of the SCS’s repressive function can substantially lower support for the SCS, while additional positive framing does not boost support. These findings suggest that public support for the SCS may not be stable or easily recovered once new information regarding its repressive potential is available.