

A Bigger World or a Bigger Room? Internet Access, Political Affiliation, and Online Expression in China

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Abstract

How do Internet access and political affiliation interact to influence online expression in China? This study categorizes Chinese netizens' Internet access as regular or irregular, based on their exposure to blocked online information. Using data from the 2015 Chinese Urban Governance Survey (CUGS), a unique dataset that measures individuals' use of circumvention technologies, the authors find that the association between irregular Internet access and engagement in online criticism varies by individuals' political affiliation with the party-state system. For netizens with irregular Internet access, Communist Party (CCP) members who are ideologically loyal to the party-state system are more active in online criticism, whereas state-sector employees who benefit economically from the system are less active. These findings indicate that exposure to alternative information that contradicts official propaganda may affect perceptions of the regime, particularly among CCP members, thereby leading Internet censorship to produce counterproductive effects. Meanwhile, the constraining role of economic affiliation suggests that the traditional patronage networks employed by the party-state system extend to political control in cyberspace.

Keywords

Internet access, online expression, political affiliation, circumvention technologies, China's party-state system

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Introduction

With the increasing penetration of the information and communication technologies (ICTs), scholars' attention has focused on their effects on citizen empowerment. Individuals who use the Internet to gather news and exchange information are more likely to be embedded in social networks that facilitate online activism (Elliott and Earl, 2018; Spaiser, 2012) and to organize online protests (Freelon, 2014). Moreover, research has

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shown that those with Internet access and strong Internet-usage skills are able to select information and customize methods for communicating their political interests, allowing them to participate in online civic life more actively (Min, 2010; Norris, 2001).

As ICTs provide a platform for sharing information and organizing activities, Chinese people have gained unprecedented access to debate on public issues, which pressures the government for transparency and human rights protection (e.g. Leibold, 2011; Chen, 2014; Yang, 2009; Zhang and Lin, 2014). Researchers have found that the proliferation of Internet users among Chinese people facilitates online political expression and protest actions by lowering the communication and networking barriers to civic activism (Wang et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2018). With regard to online expression, criticism of the government in China is partially tolerated, as the Chinese leadership views such criticism as a means of enhancing state legitimacy and maintaining regime stability (King et al., 2013; Nathan, 2003). The government has even established institutionalized channels, such as the online leader's message board, that allow citizens to voice concerns and express dissatisfaction (e.g. Duckett and Wang, 2013; Su and Meng, 2016; Wang and Shen, 2017). However, when online posts directly criticize the party-state system, the senior leadership, or specific policies, and have the potential to mobilize collective action, such content is highly likely to be censored (King et al., 2013; Weiss, 2019).

Chinese netizens' Internet access and its impact on online expression have attracted considerable academic attention. However, few studies have integrated the party-state system's influence. This system aims to maintain the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) absolute control over the state and has infiltrated every aspect of political and socioeconomic life, including Internet activism (Xu, 2021; Yang, 2009). People who are closely affiliated with the party-state system are expected to conduct their online expressions in accordance with the principles of the political regime. We therefore propose two types of political affiliation: CCP members who are ideologically loyal to the party-state system, and state employees who benefit economically from the system.

Another indispensable factor is China's censorship regime, which aims to maintain political stability by filtering undesirable content. On the one hand, for most Internet users in China, when posting critical content on sensitive issues considered undesirable by the authorities on social media platforms, they face the risk of having their posts removed or their online accounts suspended. Some individuals may even encounter legal repercussions for such online actions (King et al., 2013). On the other hand, certain websites, such as foreign social media platforms and foreign news sites, are blocked on a national scale by the colossal censorship apparatus known as the Great Firewall (Mou et al., 2016; Shen and Zhang, 2018; Yang, 2009). This border-level Internet censorship relates to Internet access, and scholars have focused on the ability to use circumvention technologies to access blocked websites and on their impacts. Unsurprisingly, Chinese people who adopt anti-censorship circumvention tools that enable them to visit blocked webpages are more enthusiastic about protest forms of participation in ongoing social and political events (Hobbs and Roberts, 2018; Shen and Zhang, 2018).

In China, border-level Internet censorship restricts individuals to posting and accessing information inside the Great Firewall (MacKinnon, 2011). This makes seeking and diffusing uncensored information more difficult, although not entirely impossible (Dal and Nisbet, 2022; Roberts, 2018). It is known that such a censorship strategy motivates individuals to find ways to circumvent it in their daily digital media practice (Dal and Nisbet, 2022; Roberts, 2020). Individuals who do not adopt circumvention tools have limited access to information, knowledge, and opportunities, which constrains ICTs'

empowering potential in China. Based on this, we divide the Internet access among Chinese netizens into two categories based on the information they are exposed to: regular Internet access and anti-censorship irregular Internet access. The former refers to using digital media and online search engines without proxy servers, which limits users to a censored information environment. The latter involves employing circumvention tools to access blocked websites, thereby increasing the likelihood of exposure to off-limits information. Based on the categorization, this study examines how regular and irregular Internet access are associated with citizens' online criticism of government, and how these two patterns of Internet access interact with political affiliation to influence online criticism.

Overall, this work contributes to the literature on political affiliation and online criticism in a party-state system. First, we find that the groups with specific political affiliations with the party-state system differ in terms of their online political participation. Scholars have highlighted that in the digital era, some states have established a political control mechanism that is designed primarily to prevent certain Internet users from engaging in collective action and challenging the legitimacy of the political regime (King et al., 2013; Qin et al., 2017; Xu, 2021). The traditional political control mechanism, according to the findings, also applies to political participation in cyberspace, whereas existing studies focus on the effects of Internet access on online expression without accounting for party-state affiliation. Second, even though border-level Internet censorship is aimed at maintaining the stability of the political regime by filtering sensitive information, it can still produce counterproductive effects.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Internet Access and Online Criticism in China

In the case of an extensive system of Internet censorship, China's party-state system does not allow people to access "undesirable" content on the Internet and has developed a strict Internet regulation system via the Great Firewall to block "undesirable" websites, even though China has risen as a global information power (Shen and Zhang, 2018). Besides accessing the Internet within a censored information environment, Internet users are expected to use circumvention tools to bypass the Great Firewall, so that they can visit the blocked websites and seek uncensored information (Wang et al., 2018). Given the country's restrictions on accessible content, we categorize Chinese netizens' Internet access into two types: regular access and irregular access based on their use of anti-censorship circumvention technologies.

In the context of China, regular Internet access refers to the use of information and communication platforms inside the Great Firewall. Despite the intensive cyber regulation, Chinese citizens use the Internet for regular communication and information gathering via online activities. More specifically, regular Internet access within the Great Firewall reduces communication and networking barriers and socially connects individuals in cyberspace. This connectivity facilitates online collective discussions and even expressions of criticism concerning government policies and social events, which are to some extent contentious and disruptive (Wang et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2018).

In the past, Chinese authorities had long tolerated Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), a popular circumvention tool used to bypass censorship. Since 2014, the Chinese government has not only completely blocked some previously accessible foreign websites, but

also restricted VPN services (Yuen, 2015). Given such intensive border-level censorship, accessing the Internet irregularly via VPNs imposes both financial costs and technical challenges. Users must frequently seek alternative VPNs when existing ones are shut down by the government (Roberts, 2018). The financial costs and technical barriers prevent most netizens from accessing a wider range of information. Chinese netizens bypass the Great Firewall primarily to use social networking websites such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, and Instagram. They also use Google to search for information (Mou et al., 2016). Even though the largest user base for these global websites is in English-speaking countries, these global websites are entirely blocked in China due to the presence of politically sensitive information.

Blocked sensitive messages typically refer to alternative information or positions that oppose the mainstream Chinese propaganda. Netizens use anti-censorship circumvention tools to visit blocked websites for various purposes. However, the irregular Internet access increases the likelihood of exposure to these off-limits messages, which in turn lowers their trust in China's government (Chen and Yang, 2019; Shen and Zhang, 2018). The loss of trust in the government triggers more online discussions about highly politicized topics, such as online criticism of mass incidents (Hobbs and Roberts, 2018). With a loss of trust in the authorities, these individuals might voice their concerns and complaints outside the Great Firewall, directing them at the government or the regime. We therefore focus on the main effect of Internet access on Chinese netizens' online criticism by testing the following main hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: People with regular Internet access are more active in terms of online criticism.

Hypothesis 2: People with anti-censorship irregular Internet access are more active in terms of online criticism.

Who Are More Self-Constrained in the Digital Era?

China's party-state system is associated with political control, encouraging netizens to exercise self-censor over their online expression and align their online civic activities with the principles of the political regime; however, this self-censorship does not imply a retreat from political concerns (King et al., 2013; Stern and Hassid, 2012). We claim that this self-constraint would be most pronounced in those groups that are politically committed to maintaining China's party-state system, which might be eroded by online criticism of government.

Party and state are closely intertwined in communist countries, with the state's function being integrated into the dominant role of the party, hence creating a party-state system. The system reveals that the "political" and "professional" missions are related: it seeks to perpetuate the Communist Party rule while simultaneously relying on the state bureaucracy to achieve the Party's goal (Snape and Wang, 2020). In this regard, Communist Party members and state-sector employees are both affiliated with China's party-state system, representing two distinct roles in sustaining the regime's legitimacy and efficiency.

Defined as affiliation with the party-state system, political affiliation primarily represents two specific groups in China: Communist Party members and state-sector employees. Members of the Communist Party are ideologically affiliated with China's party-state

system and ideologically constrained. Throughout the history of the Communist Party's rule in China, political loyalty screening has been a critical aspect of party recruitment, ensuring that the members are ideologically aligned with the one-party ruling system (Bian et al., 2001). The party consistently mobilizes its members to participate in activities such as donating money to victims and serving the public in order to cultivate their ideological loyalty to the political regime (Dickson, 2014). Since Xi Jinping assumed leadership of the Party in 2012, the party-building campaign, aimed at guiding the ideology and behavior of the Party members, has even intensified. As a core part of the campaign, CCP members are required to be ideologically loyal to the party, reinforcing the belief that China will not prosper without political stability and Communist Party rule, which serves to consolidate the communist regime's legitimacy (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018; Zhao, 2016). The intensifying and institutionalized party-building campaign serves as a constraint mechanism for achieving ideological control, justifying ideological monitoring while also suppressing the Party members' online expressions of criticism.

State-sector employees are affiliated with China's party-state system through economic ties. Even though China has transitioned to a market-oriented economy, its redistribution system continues to favor those employed in the administrative agencies, public organizations, and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), as was the case during the state-socialist period (Lu et al., 2013; Wu, 2019). Being a CCP member increases opportunities for career mobility within the Party/government bureaucracy or SOEs (Dickson, 2014) but is not a prerequisite for being a member of the state sector (Ji and Jiang, 2020).¹ More importantly, working in the state sector implies a heavy economic reliance on the state budget, a feature not shared by CCP membership. By salarizing a certain number of employees in the state sector, the state can ensure that it serves as a professional and effective apparatus, from the highest state office to grassroots public organizations (Brødsgaard, 2002). If a state-sector employee's participation in any aggressive form of online civic activity is recognized by the authorities, an economic penalty or punishment, such as termination, is likely to ensue for violating the operation of the political system.

How Do CCP Members and State-Sector Employees With Internet Access Behave Online?

Due to the mechanisms for affiliation with the party-state system, CCP members and state-sector employees follow two logics of practice. Party members are urged to believe that the CCP's ideology serves people's fundamental interests, and to assist the party in mobilizing a mass consensus in favor of its legitimacy (Su, 2011). Previous studies have explored CCP members' preferences regarding their political behaviors in the context of party-state system. Due to their ideological conviction, CCP members are expected to fulfill their duties through political participation and are therefore more active in grassroots voter participation and community work as volunteers (Nagao and Kennedy, 2021; Qin and Owen, 2023). Tang (2011) found that CCP members are more interested in politics than non-CCP members, particularly in elections and other non-conflicting actions. The literature consistently suggests that CCP members are more likely to participate in politics through regime-sponsored channels (see also: Tsai and Xu, 2018).

Some scholars also point out that the patterns of CCP members' political behavior are not necessarily motivated by intrinsic ideological conformity, but rather by instrumental considerations related to personal career development. There are two main advantages of

being a communist party member in China's party-state system: the first is the opportunity for career mobility within the Party/government bureaucracy or SOEs; the second is the potential for greater economic returns in the general labor market (Dickson, 2014; McLaughlin, 2017). These advantages generate instrumental motives, encouraging individuals not only to join the party but also to actively maintain behavioral loyalty to both the ruling party and the political system (Qin and Owen, 2023).

In line with the logic of behavioral loyalty, one may argue that, within a censored official propaganda system, party members are less likely to participate in discontented networking-based activities. This is not only because these activities have the potential to ignite collective action, which is seen as disruptive to regime stability (King et al., 2013), but also because the information inside the Great Firewall makes them believe that the party and political system represent the fundamental interests of the masses.

For a long time, party-building campaigns as a routine practice have deeply shaped CCP members' ideological orientations and values (Mittelstaedt, 2023). The merit-based selection process, coupled with the indoctrination into modernized ideological frameworks, predisposes CCP members to adopt more progressive stances on some issues, including social equality, political pluralism, and openness toward foreign values than the mass public (Ji and Jiang, 2020). Likewise, CCP members tend to place themselves on the left of the ideological spectrum, which signifies egalitarianism and support for the party-state system, consistent with the common ideals and doctrines emphasized in intra-party education campaigns (Wu, 2023). We argue that when CCP members employ anti-censorship circumvention tools to access filtered content, exposure to information that contradicts official propaganda challenges the regime faith cultivated through long-standing party-building campaigns. Such information exposure motivates CCP members to express dissatisfaction toward governance practices and political justice rather than regime opposition. In this sense, online criticism signifies a form of regime-internal evaluation shaped by prior ideological socialization rather than opposition to the party-state system itself. The hypotheses regarding the moderating effect of ideological affiliation with the party-state system are as follows:

Hypothesis 3: The positive effect of regular Internet access on online criticism would be discouraged by ideological affiliation with the party-state system.

Hypothesis 4: The positive effect of anti-censorship irregular Internet access on online criticism would be strengthened by ideological affiliation with the party-state system.

In addition to ideological affiliation with the party-state system, economic affiliation means that those within the state sectors benefit economically, which provides a crucial perspective on institutional legacy for understanding China's politics and society after economic liberalization in the existing literature. Rosenfeld (2021) has found that people in post-communist countries who have benefited from a large public sector or built a career in the state sector show stronger dependency on the state and a preference for a redistributive system. In China, individuals working for the state sectors are more statist and supportive of the current political regime, as their lives are highly dependent on the state apparatus under the party-state system (Chen, 2013; Wu and Meng, 2023). However, the statist orientation is not necessarily associated with Communist party membership (Wu and Meng, 2023).

In the context of China, the state-sector employment system constructs patronage networks, which play an instrumental role in achieving political and economic tasks during the reform era (Jiang, 2018). State-sector employees benefit economically from the political system, thereby enabling people who work in the state sector to stay in touch with the operation of the state. For this group, there is a clear awareness of the significance of the smooth functioning and operational efficiency of the party-state system, both in terms of their benefit and potential consequences of system failure. We therefore argue that state-sector employees are aware that if they fail to cooperate with the party-state system, there would be economic costs. Even when exposed to alternative information against the official propaganda or when they become socially connected in cyberspace, state-sector employees may not withdraw their support for the regime. Their interest in preserving the party-state apparatus will nevertheless discourage them from engaging in disruptive methods to exert pressure on the government. The following hypothesis focuses on the moderating effect of economic affiliation with the party-state system:

Hypothesis 5: The positive effect of anti-censorship irregular Internet access on online criticism would be discouraged by economic affiliation with the party-state system, as would the positive effect of regular Internet access on online criticism.

Research Design

Data

In the empirical study, we use data from the China Urban Governance Survey (CUGS). Launched in 2015, the China Urban Governance Survey is a survey of a nationally representative sample of adults aged 18 to 70 years who have lived in the city for more than 6 months and been at their current address for at least 30 days, excluding residents of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, as well as non-Chinese citizens. GPS Assistant Area Sampling is used as the sampling method in this survey, which measures the size of the sampling units based on the population and employs multi-stage, stratified probabilities-proportional-to-size sampling, ensuring that the collected data is nationally representative. The survey asked the respondents a series of questions about their social, economic, and political lives, and finally included 3513 valid samples. More importantly, this survey included a question about the proficiency with which Chinese netizens use circumvention tools to bypass the Great Firewall.

Questions about Chinese netizens' use of censorship circumvention tools and their access to blocked websites have not been permitted in subsequent nationally representative public surveys. Except for a very limited number of survey experiments conducted in specific settings (e.g. Chen and Yang, 2019), whose data are unpublished and not publicly accessible, comparable national-level data are unavailable. As a result, the 2015 CUGS becomes the only publicly available survey dataset that can be used to examine how bypassing the Great Firewall is associated with Chinese netizens' online expressions, and no more recent nationally representative data are available. This 2015 survey has been widely utilized in recent studies investigating citizens' reactions to China's censorship system and their experiences using censorship circumvention technologies (e.g. Pan et al., 2022; Roberts, 2018).

Variables and Measurement

Dependent, Independent, and Moderating Variables. We measure online criticism using two questions: “Have you criticized government officials and policies on the Internet?” and “Do you often post/retweet about mass incidents and social events?” The former refers to direct criticism targeting the government, whereas the latter refers to indirect criticism that uses the Internet for information diffusion and for mobilizing support around sensitive events happening in the offline world (Yang, 2008). We construct a binary dependent variable, where respondents who actively participate in online criticism of government are coded as “1,” while the rest are coded as “0.”

In the context of China’s Internet censorship, the key independent variable is Internet access, which comprises regular Internet access under government restriction and irregular Internet access using anti-censorship tools. Regular Internet access refers to Internet use that is limited to unblocked digital media, with restricted access to selected foreign websites. We use the question, “Do you use Sina Weibo or WeChat?” as an indicator of regular Internet access. In 2015, *WeChat* and *Sina Weibo* were the most popular communication and information exchange platforms, monitored and controlled by the Chinese government (Harwit, 2017; Hobbs and Roberts, 2018). The use of *Sina Weibo* and *WeChat* signifies an individual’s regular access to the Internet under border-level Internet censorship. Irregular Internet access is indicated by the questionnaire “Do you use the circumvention tool to find blocked information on the Web?.” These variables are both constructed on a binary scale, with a value of “1” indicating access and “0” indicating lack of access.

Google Search Trends is used as a measurement tool to determine whether foreign social media and entertainment websites are more popular than political news websites among Chinese netizens with irregular Internet access. We choose the keywords “Facebook” and “YouTube” for social networking and entertainment, and “The New York Times” (in Chinese: *Niuyue Shibao*) and “Voice of America” (in Chinese: *Meiguo Zhiyin*²) for political curiosity, and the search trends for these keywords in China reveal the primary needs of Chinese circumvention tool users in 2015. Figure 1 shows that during the CUGS period, Chinese netizens who adopted circumvention tools to visit blocked websites were primarily motivated by entertainment and social networking with overseas friends. This evidence addresses the endogeneity concern in the estimation that irregular Internet access is not driven by the intention to engage in online criticism of government. However, evidence from a survey experiment conducted by Chen and Yang (2019) suggests that the initially low demand among Chinese university students for politically sensitive information results from an underestimation of the value of uncensored information. They also found that although access to uncensored Internet alone has little impact on students’ acquisition of politically sensitive information, when students are modestly incentivized to use Western news outlets to obtain more diverse information, subsequent visits to foreign news websites and the acquisition of politically sensitive information increase substantially. Therefore, the use of circumvention tools can be seen as a proxy for the likelihood of exposure to politically sensitive content, as bypassing border-level Internet censorship increases netizens’ exposure to alternative information.

According to the hypotheses, the moderating variable is political affiliation, which includes ideological and economic affiliation with China’s party-state system. The variable of *ideological affiliation* is indicated by a question about whether the respondent is

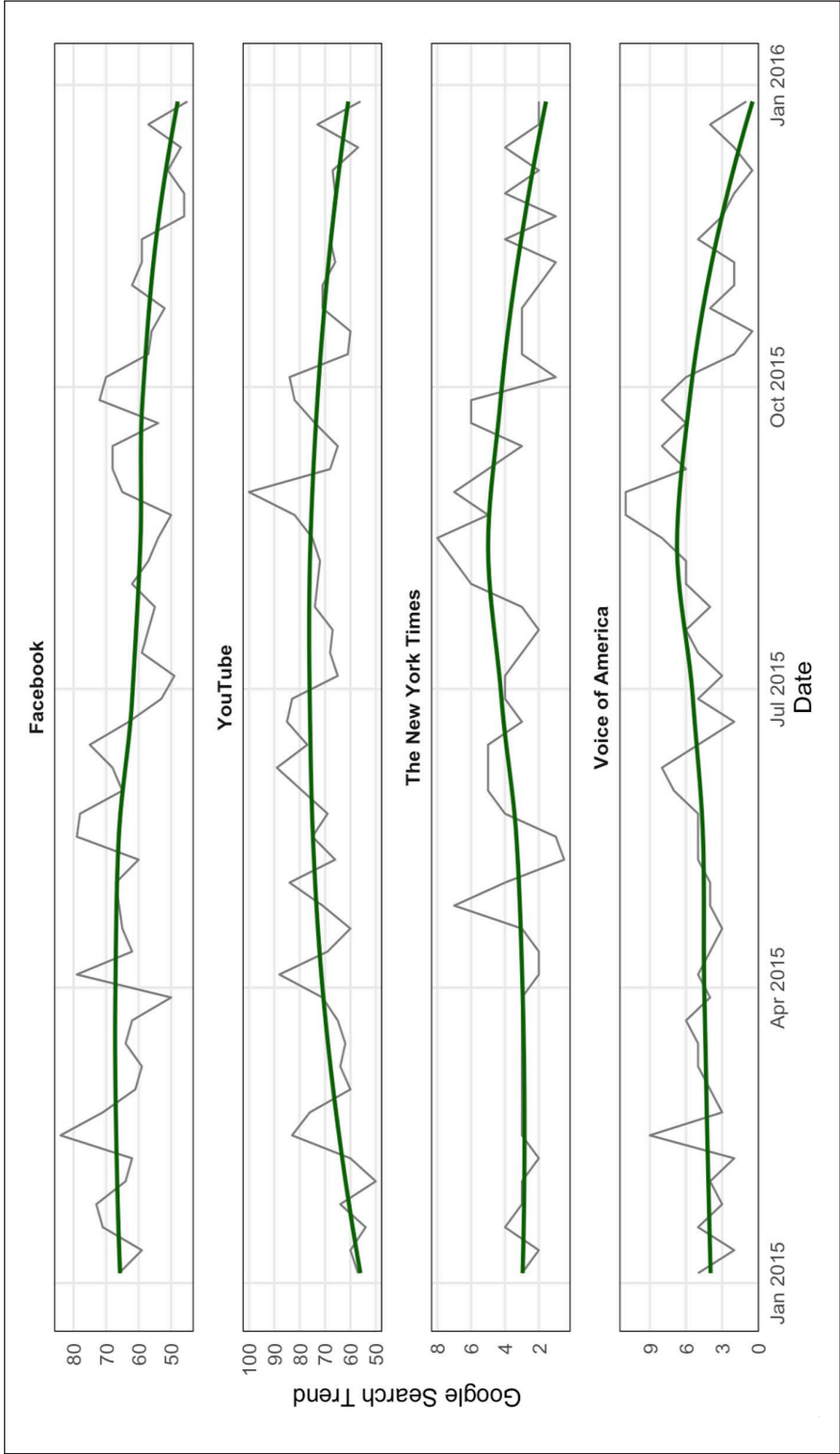


Figure 1. The Google Search Trends of “Facebook,” “YouTube,” “The New York Times,” and “Voice of America” in 2015.

a member of the Communist Party, and the variable of *economic affiliation* is indicated by a question about whether the respondent works for party and government agencies, public organizations, or state-owned enterprises. Although some individuals join the Communist Party for economic or political advantages, CCP members tend to be ideologically affiliated with the party-state system as a result of institutionalized party-building campaigns. CCP members are expected to have higher regime trust, greater political knowledge, stronger interest in political affairs, higher efficacy in political participation, and a stronger sense of political justice (see also: Carter et al., 2024). Figure 2 shows that, controlling for demographic factors, CCP members exhibit higher levels of trust in China's party-state system and report stronger political interest, higher efficacy in online political participation, and greater political knowledge than non-members. Meanwhile, the figure also shows that CCP members have a stronger sense of political justice and are more likely to believe that citizens in China are treated equally by the government. Accordingly, CCP membership can be regarded as a trustworthy proxy for ideological affiliation with the party-state system, which itself is shaped by long-term party-building efforts.

Other Control Variables. We include several control variables to prevent potential confounders' influence and identify the pure effect of independent variables.

Empirical research suggests that political participation is generally related to subjective factors, such as political interest, regime trust, political efficacy, political knowledge, and a sense of political justice. These factors are associated with different modes of political participation and have been proposed to online criticism of government in China (e.g. Mou et al., 2011). The variable of political interest is measured on a 4-point scale, with "1" indicating the least interest and "4" indicating the most interest. The question: "To what extent do you agree that the party-state system is the one most suited to China?" measures the subjective variable of *regime* trust, with values ranging from "1" to "4" representing ascending levels of trust. On the CUGS, one question asks, "To what extent do you believe online public opinion influences government policy-making decisions?" We use the question to represent respondents' online political efficacy. Similarly, we construct the variable of a sense of political justice based on a symmetric disagree-agree scale for the statement of "Everyone in China is equally treated by the government," coding the strongest disagreement as "1" and the strongest agreement as "4." Because there is no direct questionnaire item for measuring respondents' political knowledge, we use five questions regarding basic political knowledge to measure this variable, with more correct answers indicating greater political knowledge. The respondents are asked: "What is the length of an entire term for elected delegates to the provincial people's assembly?" and "Who are the General Secretary of the CCP, the Prime Minister of China, the President of the U.S., and the Prime Minister of Japan?"

Previous research has shown that traditional offline participation can be effective in predicting online civic activism (Kim and Hoewe, 2023). Thus, we include measures to capture these two variables. In the context of China, the variable offline participation is indicated by grassroots voter participation, offline petition, and offline protest, which are measured by whether the respondents participated in these offline activities (1) or not (0). Individual socio-demographic factors are considered when exploring the differences within online criticism (Hoffmann and Lutz, 2021; Wang et al., 2018). Therefore, this study incorporates several variables, including gender, age, education, and hukou³ status. Gender is coded as "0" for females and "1" for males. Age is measured from youngest to

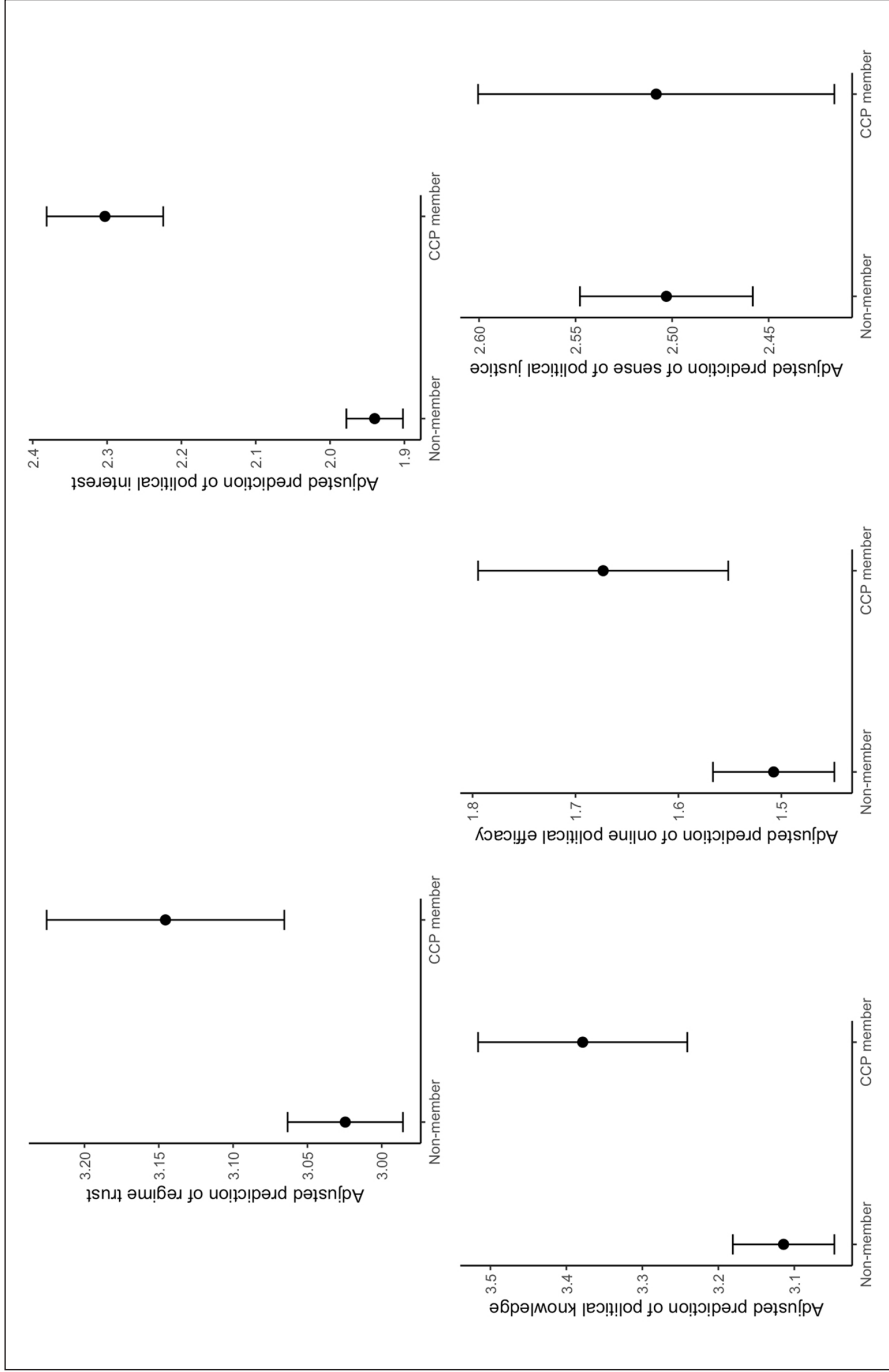


Figure 2. Adjusted Predictions of Regime Trust, Political Interest, Online Political Efficacy, Political Knowledge, and Sense of Political Justice by CCP Membership. Predictions control for age, gender, education, and hukou. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

oldest, while education level is measured on a 1–9 scale, from the lowest to highest. We create a binary variable of hukou status, with “0” representing a rural hukou and “1” representing an urban hukou.

Table A1 in Appendix 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all variables in the dataset.⁴

Empirical Results

Internet Access and Online Criticism

Table 1 presents the findings of the logistic regression analysis for expressions of criticism online. In Models 1 and 3, we include all control variables and demonstrate how regular Internet access is related to two forms of online criticism of government among Chinese netizens, without incorporating province-fixed effects. The results show that regular Internet access is positively correlated with both criticizing government officials and policies on the Internet (coefficient=1.165, $p < 0.01$) and discussing mass incidents and social events online (coefficient=0.799, $p < 0.01$). With province-fixed effects included in Models 2 and 4, regular Internet access remains positively associated with both forms of online criticism at the 0.01 significance level, supporting the first hypothesis. The Akaike information criterion (AIC) estimates the quality of each model, relative to each of the other models. As shown in Table 1, regarding the relationship between regular Internet access and online criticism of officials and policies, the logistic regression model without province-fixed effects demonstrates better goodness of fit. For the relationship between regular Internet access and engagement in online discussions about mass incidents and social events, the model with province-fixed effects shows higher quality.

In Table 2, Models 1 and 3 show regressions of anti-censorship irregular Internet access on online criticism without province-fixed effects. It is found that irregular Internet access is positively associated with both criticizing government officials and policies on the Internet (coefficient=0.692, $p < 0.05$) and discussing mass incidents and social events online (coefficient=0.975, $p < 0.01$). After estimating the models with province-fixed effects in Models 2 and 4, the direction and significance of the effects remain unchanged, supporting Hypothesis 2. These results suggest that online interpersonal networks and being exposed to alternative information might motivate individuals to participate in criticism of government in cyberspace. Based on the value of AIC, the model without including province dummies fits better for online criticism of officials and policies, while the model with province-fixed effects provides a better fit for engagement in online discussions on mass incidents and social events.

In all regressions presented in Tables 1 and 2, neither political knowledge nor *hukou* status is significantly associated with online criticism of government. As a form of self-education, political knowledge increases the likelihood of institutionalized political participation, such as voting in grassroots elections (Li and Yu, 2023). However, it may not be correlated with non-institutionalized forms of critical expressions. As for *hukou*, which reflects institutional discrimination, the long-standing rural–urban divide has been internalized in citizens’ perceptions (Afridi et al., 2015) and may therefore no longer influence their motivations to engage in critical expressions.

Table 1. Logistic Regression of Online Criticism on Regular Internet Access.

	Criticizing officials and policies online		Discussing mass incidents and social events online	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Regular internet access	1.165*** (0.341)	1.286*** (0.358)	0.799*** (0.301)	0.773** (0.318)
Online political efficacy	0.206* (0.111)	0.245** (0.115)	0.047 (0.108)	0.072 (0.110)
Regime trust	-0.068 (0.147)	-0.098 (0.151)	-0.325** (0.141)	-0.373** (0.145)
Sense of political justice	-0.426*** (0.143)	-0.426*** (0.148)	-0.305** (0.139)	-0.292** (0.145)
Political interest	0.338** (0.154)	0.282* (0.161)	0.317** (0.152)	0.293* (0.162)
Grassroots voter participation	0.355 (0.241)	0.226 (0.254)	0.628*** (0.233)	0.538** (0.246)
Offline petition	0.960** (0.405)	0.993** (0.426)	0.506 (0.457)	0.473 (0.476)
Offline protest	2.612*** (0.353)	2.664*** (0.368)	2.728*** (0.357)	2.743*** (0.373)
Political knowledge	-0.059 (0.093)	-0.104 (0.098)	0.067 (0.095)	0.053 (0.100)
Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	0.482** (0.236)	0.555** (0.240)	0.469** (0.229)	0.496** (0.234)
Age	-0.048*** (0.011)	-0.044*** (0.011)	-0.075*** (0.011)	-0.076*** (0.012)
Education	0.149* (0.079)	0.194** (0.082)	0.104 (0.076)	0.108 (0.08)
Hukou (urban hukou holder = 1, rural hukou holder = 0)	0.076 (0.247)	0.023 (0.256)	-0.082 (0.234)	-0.256 (0.247)
Constant	-3.858*** (0.866)	-4.130*** (1.383)	-1.919** (0.818)	-1.156 (1.144)
Province FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	3513	3513	3513	3513
AIC	782.009	794.196	805.851	801.453

Entries are logit coefficients from logistic regression models. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Logistic Regression of Online Criticism on Irregular Internet Access.

	Critiquing officials and policies online		Discussing mass incidents and social events online	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Irregular Internet access	0.692** (0.293)	0.764** (0.309)	0.975*** (0.273)	1.143*** (0.293)
Online political efficacy	0.118 (0.110)	0.136 (0.112)	-0.023 (0.108)	0.002 (0.109)
Regime trust	-0.070 (0.148)	-0.111 (0.152)	-0.319** (0.143)	-0.399*** (0.147)
Sense of political justice	-0.444*** (0.142)	-0.439*** (0.147)	-0.314** (0.139)	-0.298** (0.144)
Political interest	0.333** (0.155)	0.286* (0.162)	0.306** (0.153)	0.283* (0.163)
Grassroots voter participation	0.433* (0.242)	0.289 (0.254)	0.733*** (0.235)	0.638*** (0.248)
Offline petition	0.883** (0.414)	0.879** (0.433)	0.363 (0.465)	0.277 (0.485)
Offline protest	2.418*** (0.356)	2.448*** (0.372)	2.542*** (0.359)	2.560*** (0.378)
Political knowledge	-0.042 (0.093)	-0.077 (0.097)	0.081 (0.095)	0.073 (0.099)
Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	0.381 (0.235)	0.428* (0.239)	0.365 (0.229)	0.372 (0.235)
Age	-0.049*** (0.011)	-0.046*** (0.011)	-0.075*** (0.012)	-0.076*** (0.012)
Education	0.125 (0.080)	0.166** (0.082)	0.067 (0.078)	0.067 (0.081)
Hukou (urban hukou holder = 1, rural hukou holder = 0)	-0.030 (0.248)	-0.086 (0.255)	-0.194 (0.236)	-0.363 (0.247)
Constant	-2.512*** (0.766)	-2.524* (1.309)	-0.970 (0.751)	-0.070 (1.094)
Province FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	3513	3513	3513	3513
AIC	791.508	804.758	802.336	794.141

Entries are logit coefficients from logistic regression models. Standard errors in parentheses.
 *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Results About the Moderating Role of Political Affiliation

We conduct the analysis of moderation effects based on the models with better goodness of fit. Models 1–4 in Table 3 report the findings of the moderating role of ideological affiliation indicated by CCP membership in the relationship between Internet access and online criticism. Models 1 and 3 show that CCP membership does not moderate the positive correlation between regular Internet access and two forms of online criticism of government. Model 2 shows weak evidence or a trend of a positive moderating effect of CCP membership on the relationship between irregular Internet access and criticizing government officials and policies (coefficient = 1.428, $p < 0.1$). However, shown in Model 4, CCP membership does not show any moderation in the relationship between regular Internet access and discussing mass incidents and social events online. Full logistic regression results are reported in Table A2 in Appendix 1. Based on the statistical results, the interaction effect is estimated with low statistical power. Accordingly, we interpret the interaction effect as suggestive rather than conclusive evidence.

To identify how Internet access interacts with CCP membership in shaping citizens' online expressions of criticism, we conduct a comparative analysis by examining its interaction with membership in other democratic parties. As friends of Chinese Communist Party, members of these democratic parties are allowed to express their opinion to signal a deliberative turn in political development. They function more in a consultative capacity rather than representing a source of political opposition in China's party-state system (He and Warren, 2011; Zhang, 2018). In this sense, individuals affiliated with other democratic parties are not expected to demonstrate strong ideological loyalty to the regime. Models 5–8 in Table 3 show that neither online communication and networking nor access to alternative information against official propaganda affects members of other democratic parties' motivation to engage in online criticism of government. Full logistic regression results are shown in Table A3 in Appendix 1. Although a p -value below 0.1 provides weak evidence consistent with the hypothesized moderating effect of CCP membership, the result nevertheless has theoretical implications when compared with the insignificant moderating role of other democratic party membership. Due to long-standing party-building campaigns, CCP members' ideological orientations reflect a stronger adherence to the Party's officially promoted progressive values as well as higher levels of trust in the party-state system (e.g. Ji and Jiang, 2020). Consequently, when exposed to alternative political information, CCP members are more likely than members of other democratic parties to become critical of the regime's political fairness and justice. This response can be attributed to their prolonged political socialization within the Party.

In Table 4, Models 1 and 3 suggest that economic affiliation does not show any moderation in the relationship between regular Internet access and online criticism. Models 2 and 4 reveal that being employed in the state sector discourages the positive correlation between anti-censorship irregular Internet access and criticizing officials and government policies online (coefficient = -1.943, $p < 0.05$), whereas this economic affiliation with the party-state system does not significantly moderate the relationship between anti-censorship irregular Internet access and engagement in online discussion about mass incidents and social events. Full logistic regression results are reported in Table A4 in Appendix 1. Under standard regularity conditions, estimators converge to a normal distribution as sample size increases. Even though GPS Assistant Area Sampling ensures that the 3513 survey observations are nationally representative, the sample size remains relatively small compared with China's total population. In terms of the statistical significance of

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results for Online Criticism: CCP Versus Other Democratic Party Membership as Moderators.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Critiquing officials and policies online	Critiquing officials and policies online	Discussing mass incidents and social events online	Discussing mass incidents and social events online	Critiquing officials and policies online	Critiquing officials and policies online	Discussing mass incidents and social events online	Discussing mass incidents and social events online
Regular Internet access	1.103*** (0.354)		0.633* (0.327)		1.231*** (0.355)		0.829** (0.328)	
Irregular Internet access		0.484 (0.321)		0.967*** (0.323)		0.621** (0.302)		1.121*** (0.300)
CCP member	-1.442 (1.181)	-1.207** (0.505)	-1.540 (1.164)	-0.517 (0.435)				
Democratic party member					3.678*** (1.191)	1.721** (0.825)	4.397*** (1.324)	3.143*** (0.798)
Regular Internet access × CCP member	0.708 (1.228)		1.502 (1.201)					
Irregular Internet access × CCP member		1.428* (0.813)		1.076 (0.731)				
Regular Internet access × democratic party member					-1.929 (1.421)		-1.150 (1.523)	
Irregular Internet access × democratic party member						15.628 (543.300)		30.588 (5530.990)
Other controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	-4.278*** (0.869)	-2.914*** (0.803)	-1.260 (1.161)	-0.215 (1.115)	-3.629*** (0.878)	-2.173*** (0.772)	-0.781 (1.154)	0.375 (1.103)
Province FE	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	3513	3513	3513	3513	3513	3513	3513	3513
AIC	780.631	787.923	803.119	795.674	777.253	783.962	786.724	776.889

Entries are logit coefficients from logistic regression models. Standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Table 4. Logistic Regression of Online Criticism With State-Sector Employee as a Moderator.

	Critiquing officials and policies online		Discussing mass incidents and social events online	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Regular Internet access	1.230*** (0.391)		0.527 (0.333)	
Irregular Internet access		0.893*** (0.307)		1.227*** (0.312)
State-sector employee	-0.299 (0.739)	-0.375 (0.317)	-1.926* (1.090)	-0.283 (0.319)
Regular Internet access × state-sector employee	-0.377 (0.791)		1.664 (1.122)	
Irregular Internet access × state-sector employee		-1.943** (0.985)		-0.862 (0.834)
Other controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	-4.193*** (0.891)	-2.812*** (0.791)	-1.260 (1.151)	-0.251 (1.111)
Province FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	3513	3513	3513	3513
AIC	781.280	786.143	800.029	795.072

Entries are logit coefficients from logistic regression models. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

the moderating effects of CCP membership and state-sector employment, when the true effect is nonzero and stable, increasing sample size reduces standard errors and increases statistical power, which raises the probability of rejecting the null hypothesis (e.g. Cohen, 1988; Held and Ott, 2016; Wooldridge, 2010).

Figure 3 illustrates the marginal effects of interacting irregular Internet access and two forms of political affiliation. As shown in Figure 3, the interaction effect of irregular Internet access on direct forms of online criticism of the government varies across the two types of political affiliation. The influence of irregular Internet access on the likelihood of participating in online criticizing activities increases with ideological affiliation, whereas it decreases with economic affiliation. This indicates that the government's policy-making processes and responsiveness to public concerns are perceived as crucial to the legitimacy and stability of China's political regime.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Internet has been regarded as a tool for empowering ordinary citizens, promoting political participation, and catalyzing the process of democratization. Using China as an example, this study investigates whether the relationship between Internet access and online criticism of government would be pronounced for specific groups affiliated with the party-state system.

The empirical findings first confirm that Chinese netizens, whether possessing regular or anti-censorship irregular Internet access, are both more actively involved in online criticism of government. CCP members tend to behave actively when they access blocked Internet content. Recent party-building campaigns have strengthened CCP members'

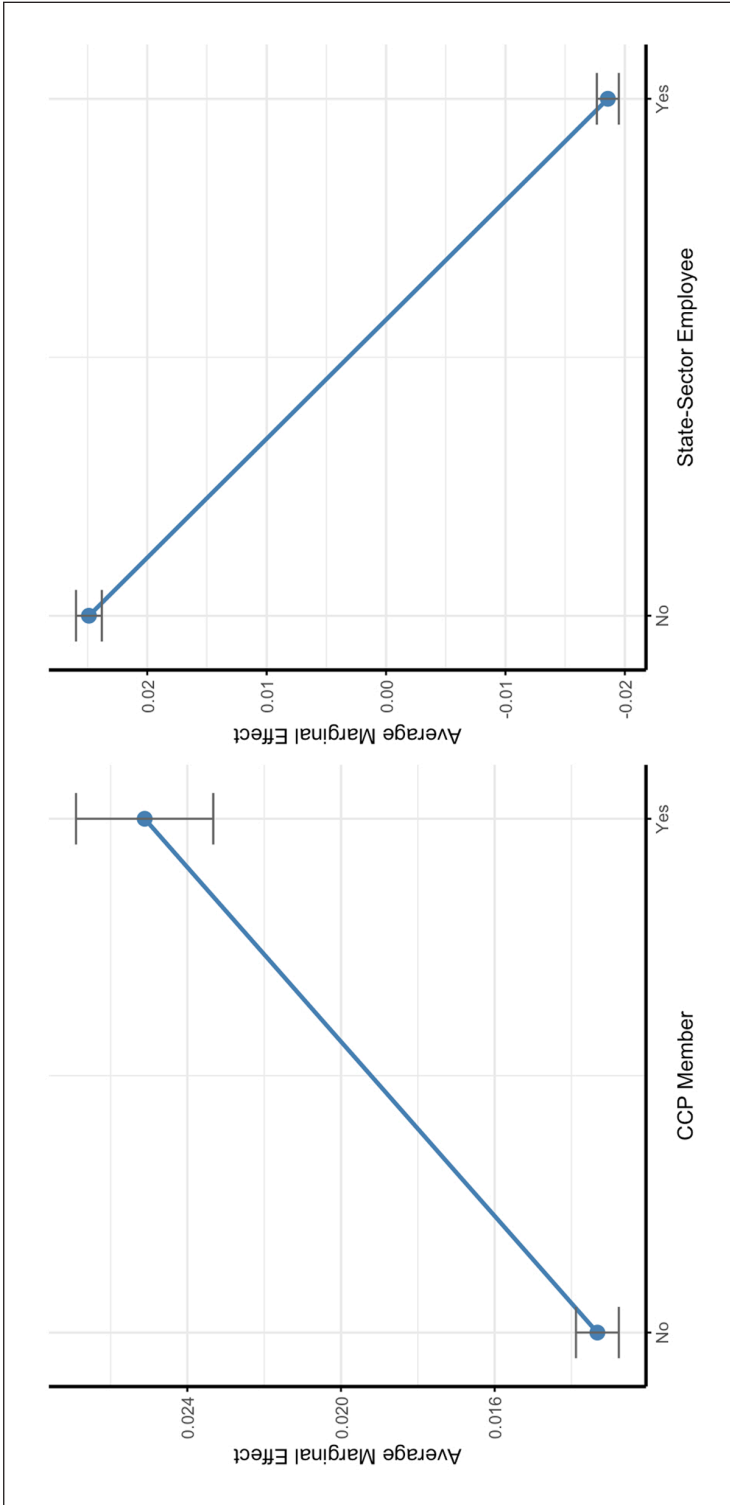


Figure 3. Marginal Effects of Interaction Terms Based on Model 2 in Table 3 and Model 2 in Table 4. The plots of marginal effects are based on Model 2 in Table 3 (left panel) and Model 2 in Table 4 (right panel). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

belief in the political values propagated by the party-state system. However, exposure to alternative information opposing Chinese official propaganda outside the Great Firewall challenges the regime faith cultivated through long-standing institutionalized party-building campaigns among CCP members. In this sense, China's Internet censorship, on the one hand, to some extent succeeds in maintaining the stability of the regime; on the other hand, it may also trigger a "Streisand effect," counterproductively increasing awareness of certain issues among CCP members (Jansen and Martin, 2015). The other empirical finding is that having an economic affiliation with the party-state system discourages the positive correlation between Chinese netizens' irregular Internet access and the criticism of officials and government policies. The result implies that individuals economically affiliated with the party-state system perceive alternative information that contradicts official propaganda as a threat to regime stability. This perception suggests that they are more likely to tolerate the censorship system. Despite undergoing economic reforms, those inside the state sector still heavily rely on the effective operation of the regime to maintain economic advantages and privileges.

These results suggest that access to alternative information that counters official propaganda has a strong influence on the motivation for online political expression among party-state affiliated groups in cyberspace (see also: Hobbs and Roberts, 2018). However, the direction of this influence differs between CCP members and state-sector employees. Before 2015, Chinese authorities kept their hands off the use of circumvention tools, leaving a small window for Internet users to bypass the Great Firewall for entertainment and professional purposes (Yuen, 2015). According to our survey data, 16.8% of those with irregular Internet access to blocked websites are CCP members, while 21.2% are employed in the state sector. These two groups are not the mainstream users bypassing the Great Firewall. For some cadres who are CCP members and employed in specific party and state agencies, such as security agencies, using circumvention tools to visit blocked websites is not allowed. In addition, many CCP members and state-sector employees primarily visit these websites for information searching or entertainment. However, once they are exposed to a broader range of information sources, the likelihood of being exposed to politically sensitive content increases.

Empirical results do not support the hypothesis regarding the moderating role of political affiliation in the relationship between individuals' regular Internet access and online criticism. This may be attributed to the other type of censorship mechanism that rapidly block sensitive keywords and discussions of social events inside the Great Firewall. Netizens with regular Internet access, whether affiliated with the party-state system or not, are exposed to largely homogeneous and censored information. As a result, they are less likely to self-constrain their online communication and networking when relying solely on official information. This indicates that inside the Great Firewall, political affiliation may not constitute a dividing line in individuals' motivation to engage in online networking based on political discussions.

Despite being collected in 2015, the data allow us to reveal three theoretical implications of regime resilience of China's party-state in the digital era. First, Internet access does appear to increase online critical expressions in a party-state system with the technical empowerment effect. From the perspective of participating groups, however, the Internet's empowering effect is unequal. Political affiliation highlights a constraint mechanism. Through this mechanism, irregular information access generated by censorship circumvention conditionally affects political awareness and online expression. Thus, despite ICTs reshaping state-society relations in China's party-state system, the

empowerment effects of Internet access on civic life should be acknowledged but not overstated at any time.

Second, our findings from the China case confirm the role of the patronage system in bringing elites together and ensuring political stability. Moreover, they highlight the constrained impact of ICT empowerment due to the influence of the patronage system. Netizens who stimulate one another and the spread of critical expression online have the potential to generate actual collective action (King et al., 2013). Patronage networks based on economic affiliation constrain elites' behavior and help keep online expression under government control. Where the party-state system integrates the mechanism of patronage system with specific political affiliation ties, surveillance, and punishment, the regime should be most durable (see also: Levitsky and Way, 2012). China has promoted regime resilience through patronage-based cohesion, allowing it to adapt to the new challenges of losing absolute control of information flow and public opinion in the digital era. Therefore, an increase in irregular Internet access would not necessarily erode the social foundations of the party-state.

Third, the effects of border-level Internet censorship appear to be far more complex in a party-state system. Hard propaganda that guides people to see desirable information facilitates positive evaluations of the regime (Huang, 2015; Roberts, 2020). The adaptation of a censorship system to manipulate the information environment largely stabilizes the political regime. However, as the results of our study reveal, once people are aware of censorship and can access sensitive information, censorship can also have the opposite effect. Particularly for those who are ideologically adherent to the one-party ruling system, alternative information may shatter the illusion of the regime and update their beliefs. Accordingly, in the context of the party-state, Internet censorship is a double-edged sword or a paradox, occasionally running counter to the authorities' expectations. While it does contribute significantly to stabilizing the regime, it also gives rise to new challenges.

It is undeniable that, since the survey data was collected in 2015, the findings of this article have temporal limitations. In recent years, an increasing number of information-centered communication platforms have emerged and developed in China, such as *Xiaohongshu* (RedNote). Although quickly removed, a large amount of alternative information circulated on these platforms and spread rapidly among netizens. Thus, traditional border-level censorship has become less effective in preventing netizens from accessing censored information. In addition, China is facing the challenge of economic decline due to the US–China trade war and the pandemic. Understanding how netizens are motivated to participate in online civic activities and how the authorities respond to the influence of public opinion requires more recent and diverse data.

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Data availability statement

The 2015 Chinese Urban Governance Survey (CUGS) data employed in this article can be accessed through reaching Prof. Tianguang Meng (maxmeng@tsinghua.edu.cn).

Notes

1. Published in 2015, the annual national civil servant exams in China planned to recruit 15,663 positions. Of these, 13.9% (2182 positions) required candidates to be members of the CCP or the Communist Youth League. CCP membership is a prerequisite for many positions within central-level party and government agencies; however, these positions represent a very small proportion of the total available through the annual national civil servant exams, accounting for only 449 out of 15,663 positions.
2. Since 2012, “The New York Times” has been blocked in China, while “Voice of America” has consistently been inaccessible. These two websites, which provide Chinese language services, are well-known among Chinese Internet users.
3. *Hukou*, generally known as the household registration system, was originally served as a political tool for regulation. It notably contributed to urban-rural disparity in China by favoring urban *hukou* holders and discriminating against rural *hukou* holders in the allocation of resources. With the relaxation of the *hukou* system since the economic reform, an increasing number of rural *hukou* holders have resided and worked in urban areas and were included in this survey.
4. The 2015 CUGS included 3513 samples in the dataset, but some questions were not answered by the respondents. Therefore, this study conducts imputation to substitute missing entries in the dataset, allowing us to perform more accurate analysis.

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Appendix I

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics of All Variables.

Ordinal variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Standard deviation
Online political efficacy	3513	0	4	1.508	1.350
Regime trust	3513	1	4	2.996	0.716
Sense of political justice	3513	1	4	2.436	0.822
Political interest	3513	1	4	2.155	0.742
Political knowledge	3513	0	5	3.344	1.392
Age	3513	18	70	43.196	15.044
Education	3513	1	9	4.200	1.895
Binary variable	N	% Code "1"	% Code "0"		
Regular Internet access (yes = 1, no = 0)	3513	79.70%	20.30%		
Irregular Internet access (yes = 1, no = 0)	3513	5.10%	94.90%		
Grassroots voter participation (yes = 1, no = 0)	3513	27.13%	72.87%		
Offline petition (yes = 1, no = 0)	3513	3.25%	96.75%		
Offline protest (yes = 1, no = 0)	3513	1.57%	98.43%		
Gender (male = 1; female = 0)	3513	49.70%	50.30%		
Hukou (urban hukou holder = 1; rural hukou holder = 0)	3513	66.70%	33.30%		
CCP member (yes = 1, no = 0)	3513	11.64%	88.36%		
Democratic party member (yes = 1, no = 0)	3513	0.57%	99.43%		
State-sector employee (yes = 1, no = 0)	3513	28.18%	71.82%		

Hukou, generally known as household registration system, classifies individuals as either urban or rural *hukou* holders. This institution has long structured urban-rural divide in China by favoring urban *hukou* holders and discriminating against rural *hukou* holders in the allocation of resources. With the relaxation of the *hukou* system since the economic reform, an increasing number of rural *hukou* holders have resided and worked in urban areas and were included in this survey.

Table A2. Full Logistic Regression Results for Online Criticism With CCP Membership as a Moderator.

	Critiquing officials and policies online		Discussing mass incidents and social events online	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Regular Internet access	1.103*** (0.354)		0.633* (0.327)	0.967*** (0.323)
Irregular Internet access		0.484 (0.321)		-0.517 (0.435)
CCP member	-1.442 (1.181)	-1.207** (0.505)	-1.540 (1.164)	0.002 (0.109)
Online political efficacy	0.214* (0.111)	0.122 (0.110)	0.074 (0.111)	-0.407*** (0.148)
Regime trust	-0.054 (0.148)	-0.069 (0.149)	-0.350** (0.146)	-0.301** (0.144)
Sense of political justice	-0.422*** (0.143)	-0.438*** (0.142)	-0.288** (0.145)	0.315* (0.165)
Political interest	0.392** (0.156)	0.394** (0.158)	0.307* (0.163)	0.677*** (0.249)
Grassroots voter participation	0.384 (0.243)	0.484** (0.243)	0.542** (0.247)	0.264 (0.491)
Offline petition	0.959** (0.405)	0.845** (0.422)	0.507 (0.478)	2.595*** (0.384)
Offline protest	2.728*** (0.361)	2.513*** (0.367)	2.836*** (0.381)	0.076 (0.099)
Political knowledge	-0.041 (0.094)	-0.032 (0.094)	0.063 (0.100)	0.356 (0.235)
Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	0.466** (0.236)	0.366 (0.236)	0.494** (0.234)	-0.075*** (0.012)
Age	-0.045*** (0.011)	-0.046*** (0.011)	-0.075*** (0.012)	0.075 (0.082)
Education	0.182** (0.080)	0.162** (0.082)	0.119 (0.081)	-0.337 (0.248)
Hukou (urban hukou holder = 1, rural hukou holder = 0)	0.095 (0.248)	-0.012 (0.248)	-0.265 (0.249)	1.076 (0.731)
Regular Internet access × CCP member	0.708 (1.228)		1.502 (1.201)	-0.215 (1.115)
Irregular Internet access × CCP member		1.428* (0.813)		
Constant	-4.278*** (0.896)	-2.914*** (0.803)	-1.260 (1.161)	Yes
Province FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	3513	3513	3513	3513
AIC	780.631	787.923	803.119	795.674

Entries are logit coefficients from logistic regression models. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A3. Full Logistic Regression Results for Online Criticism With Democratic Party Membership as a Moderator.

	Criticizing officials and policies online		Discussing mass incidents and social events online	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Regular Internet access	1.231*** (0.355)		0.829** (0.328)	1.121*** (0.300)
Irregular Internet access		0.621** (0.302)		3.143*** (0.798)
Democratic party member	3.678*** (1.191)	1.721** (0.825)	4.397*** (1.324)	-0.019 (0.111)
Online political efficacy	0.194* (0.112)	0.098 (0.111)	0.058 (0.112)	-0.430*** (0.149)
Regime trust	-0.080 (0.148)	-0.096 (0.149)	-0.398*** (0.147)	-0.321** (0.148)
Sense of political justice	-0.456*** (0.146)	-0.463*** (0.144)	-0.321** (0.148)	0.266 (0.165)
Political interest	0.328** (0.156)	0.340** (0.156)	0.267 (0.164)	0.654*** (0.251)
Grassroots voter participation	0.332 (0.243)	0.433* (0.245)	0.545** (0.249)	0.231 (0.491)
Offline petition	0.946** (0.410)	0.882** (0.417)	0.411 (0.489)	2.545*** (0.385)
Offline protest	2.630*** (0.358)	2.419*** (0.361)	2.768*** (0.378)	0.085 (0.100)
Political knowledge	-0.060 (0.094)	-0.046 (0.094)	0.059 (0.102)	0.355 (0.237)
Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	0.475** (0.237)	0.360 (0.236)	0.502** (0.236)	-0.082*** (0.012)
Age	-0.051*** (0.011)	-0.053*** (0.011)	-0.081*** (0.012)	0.036 (0.081)
Education	0.134* (0.079)	0.107 (0.080)	0.086 (0.080)	-0.270 (0.251)
Hukou (urban hukou holder = 1, rural hukou holder = 0)	0.104 (0.249)	0.043 (0.251)	-0.195 (0.249)	
Regular Internet access × democratic party member	-1.929 (1.421)		-1.150 (1.523)	
Irregular Internet access × democratic party member		15.628 (543.300)		30.588 (5530.990)
Constant	-3.629*** (0.878)	-2.173*** (0.772)	-0.781 (1.154)	0.375 (1.103)
Province FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	3513	3513	3513	3513
AIC	777.253	783.962	786.724	776.889

Entries are logit coefficients from logistic regression models. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A4. Full Logistic Regression Results for Online Criticism With State-Sector Employee as a Moderator.

	Criticizing officials and policies online		Discussing mass incidents and social events online	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Regular Internet access	1.230*** (0.391)		0.527 (0.333)	1.227*** (0.312)
Irregular Internet access		0.893*** (0.307)		-0.283 (0.319)
State-sector employee	-0.299 (0.739)	-0.375 (0.317)	-1.926* (1.090)	0.015 (0.109)
Online political efficacy	0.213* (0.111)	0.141 (0.110)	0.081 (0.110)	-0.402*** (0.147)
Regime trust	-0.084 (0.148)	-0.075 (0.148)	-0.364** (0.146)	-0.319** (0.145)
Sense of political justice	-0.435*** (0.144)	-0.470*** (0.143)	-0.297** (0.146)	0.293* (0.164)
Political interest	0.367** (0.155)	0.359** (0.157)	0.307* (0.163)	0.644*** (0.248)
Grassroots voter participation	0.384 (0.242)	0.472* (0.243)	0.516** (0.247)	0.482 (0.487)
Offline petition	1.042*** (0.405)	1.120*** (0.410)	0.601 (0.479)	2.560*** (0.378)
Offline protest	2.604*** (0.354)	2.477*** (0.358)	2.759*** (0.377)	0.087 (0.099)
Political knowledge	-0.045 (0.094)	-0.023 (0.095)	0.072 (0.100)	0.338 (0.236)
Gender (male = 1, female = 0)	0.434* (0.237)	0.335 (0.237)	0.480** (0.235)	-0.072*** (0.012)
Age	-0.042*** (0.011)	-0.045*** (0.011)	-0.071*** (0.012)	0.078 (0.081)
Education	0.169** (0.079)	0.138* (0.081)	0.127 (0.080)	-0.317 (0.248)
Hukou (urban hukou holder = 1, rural hukou holder = 0)	0.161 (0.249)	0.066 (0.250)	-0.241 (0.248)	
Regular Internet access × state-sector employee	-0.377 (0.791)		1.664 (1.122)	
Irregular Internet access × state-sector employee		-1.943** (0.985)		-0.862 (0.834)
Constant	-4.193*** (0.891)	-2.812*** (0.791)	-1.260 (1.151)	-0.251 (1.111)
Province FE	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	3513	3513	3513	3513
AIC	781.280	786.143	800.029	795.072

Entries are logit coefficients from logistic regression models. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.