

# Leadership Styles and Political Survival of Chinese Communist Party Elites

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The characters and preferences of individual leaders matter greatly for policies and governance in many political systems, yet systematic evidence on how politicians lead and the consequences of their leadership styles remains scant. This study sheds light on these issues by analyzing a unique data set of internal evaluation remarks for top provincial politicians in China. Latent class analyses on evaluation keywords reveal two distinct styles: an assertive, autocratic style that focuses on centralized decision-making and efficient execution and a relatively soft, collegial style that respects dissent and fosters intralite collaboration. We further show that these two leadership styles are associated with distinct governing strategies and that they both offer viable, but different, paths to political survival. These findings enrich our understanding of survival tactics and selection dynamics in one-party systems.

Leadership is “one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (Burns 1979, 2). Political leaders take actions that affect the lives of millions, if not billions. They often differ in how they make decisions, handle interpersonal relations, and resolve disagreements with others (Barber 1972; Greenstein 2000), and these differences can sometimes have important bearings on major domestic and international affairs (Crabb and Mulcahy 1986; Dafoe and Caughey 2016; Jones and Olken 2005). The personal styles of leaders can be even more important in autocratic regimes than in democracies, given the former’s lack of institutionalized constraints on power holders (Jones and Olken 2005). However, apart from the biographies of a few significant historical figures, systematic evidence on how politicians lead in nondemocracies remains scant, in part because of the difficulties in collecting reliable data on leaders’ personalities and behaviors.

In this article, we use a unique data source from China to shed new light on the variety and consequences of leadership styles in nondemocracies. The Chinese case is not only

theoretically interesting but also of practical significance. Given China’s rising influence on a global scale, a better understanding of the styles of its leaders holds important implications for international cooperation and global governance. Our study leverages a novel data set of internal remarks for China’s top provincial politicians (i.e., provincial party secretaries) between 2000 and 2015. These remarks were produced by the Central Organization Department (COD) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for the purposes of cadre evaluation. They contain rich and relatively standardized information about politicians’ work style, interpersonal approach, and personal character, offering a rare opportunity for us to probe into political leadership from the perspective of regime insiders.

Our empirical analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we use latent class analysis (LCA) to classify provincial leaders into different “styles” on the basis of co-occurring patterns of keywords in their personal evaluations. Contrary to the conventional view that most autocratic leaders rule with a strong-handed, coercive style (Landa and Tyson 2017), our

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Jiang acknowledges support from the Research Grant Council of Hong Kong (ECS-24612618) and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in the article are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <https://doi.org/10.1086/710144>.

analysis suggests that there are two distinct types of provincial chiefs with markedly different approaches to leadership. The first cluster, reflecting the conventional image of an autocrat, consists of those with a strong personality and a work style that emphasizes efficient execution—often described by words such as *resolute*, *bold*, *enterprising*, *direct*, and *forthright*. The second cluster, by contrast, represents leaders with a much more collegial and conciliatory leadership style. This type of leader is associated with adjectives such as *prudent*, *humble*, *careful*, and *comradely*, all of which imply an agreeable personality and good coalition-building skills.

We then examine whether these two leadership styles correspond to any meaningful difference in substantive governing strategies. We find evidence that provincial secretaries with different leadership styles differ in how they treat their colleagues and subordinates, as measured by their willingness to share media coverage and enforce cadre discipline. Moreover, examining how styles affect leaders' career trajectories, we find that both styles offer viable, but different, means to achieve political survival. While autocratic-style leaders rise faster within the political hierarchy, collegial-style leaders tend to enjoy a lower risk of disciplinary investigation.

Our study contributes to research on elite behaviors in authoritarian regimes. Although analyses of the behaviors and psychology of individual leaders such as Hitler, Stalin, and Mao dominated the earlier studies of totalitarianism, the contemporary literature on authoritarian politics has devoted most of its attention to institutions rather than individuals (Boix and Svobik 2007; Gandhi 2008; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2019). However, it remains an open question how binding authoritarian institutions are and whether they are the sole determinant of leaders' behaviors. Complementing, but also departing from, this institution-centered perspective, our analysis suggests that elites facing the same institutional constraints still can and do govern with markedly different styles—a finding that underscores the importance of individual agency in politics.

Our findings also advance the literature on political selection in China. Scholars have long debated whether competence or political connection is more important in determining political promotion within the Chinese system (Jia, Kudamatsu, and Seim 2015; Li and Zhou 2005; Xi, Yao, and Zhang 2018). Several recent studies suggest that, at least for senior provincial politicians, their promotions depend more on personal connections with paramount leaders than on actual economic or fiscal performance (Landry, Lü, and Duan 2018). However, to the extent that senior leaders who govern large territories often shoulder a wide range of responsibilities, it is unclear whether their capabilities can be fully mea-

sured by only a few numerical metrics. A unique advantage of our data is that they enable us to see through the lens of regime insiders. Our findings suggest that considerations for abilities still matter in the selection of high-level political elites, but the decision is based less on “hard” performance indicators than on more general execution or coalition-building skills, which are often not directly observable using conventional administrative data.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Subjects

The subjects of our empirical analysis are party secretaries of the CCP's provincial party committees. Provincial party secretaries are the de facto leaders of Chinese provinces, many of which are the size of small- or medium-sized countries. They have an elevated status in the Chinese political system and enjoy a better chance of becoming national leaders than other officials of the same rank (Bo 2002). Nominally, provincial secretaries are only responsible for political leadership and for convening meetings of the provincial party standing committee, which collectively makes decisions on important political and policy matters. In reality, however, provincial secretaries enjoy considerable discretion over the degree of their involvement in day-to-day government affairs. While some secretaries choose to govern with a laid-back style, delegating many decisions to their colleagues, others prefer to centralize power and tighten control over the policy agenda. More dominant provincial secretaries are usually better equipped to overcome resistance and implement challenging policy tasks, yet they are also more likely to incite resentment among colleagues and subordinates. If such resentment escalates, it can sometimes result in retributive political attacks that damage the provincial secretary's own career.<sup>1</sup>

### Data

Our primary data on provincial party secretaries' leadership styles are produced by the CCP's own personnel evaluation system. Since the late 1990s, the COD has developed a set of institutionalized procedures to assess the character and competence of the party's senior cadres. Officials are evaluated annually on their performance and receive a special comprehensive evaluation when they are being considered

1. There are several ways by which dissatisfied colleagues and subordinates can undermine the careers of provincial chiefs. Formally, maintaining a cohesive collective leadership body is one of the main responsibilities for provincial secretaries; colleagues' opinions are actively solicited by the COD when evaluating a provincial secretary. Informally, colleagues and subordinates may have informal connections to high-level decision makers who can influence a provincial leader's career.

for new positions. For the latter type of evaluation, the COD usually dispatches a special team to the locality to gather all relevant information from a wide range of sources. The team holds multiple one-on-one meetings not only with the official but also his or her colleagues, subordinates, and representatives from various local institutions (e.g., party, government, and legislature) to discuss the official's strengths and weaknesses. In some cases, techniques such as public opinion polling and psychological testing are also used (Yan 2017). At the end of the evaluation process, the team produces a written document detailing the traits, character, and temperament of the candidate. Our interviews with staff members of the COD suggest that although the assessment has no binding power on final personnel decisions, it serves as an important source of information in higher-level deliberations.

While these evaluations are usually kept from the public eye, for provincial party secretaries, one occasion when their evaluation remarks will be made public is during leadership turnover meetings. When the provincial leadership is reshuffled, a formal meeting is convened. This meeting is typically attended by both the incoming and departing party secretaries, a senior deputy from the COD, and all local cadres above a certain rank. At the meeting, the COD deputy will deliver remarks that commend the departing secretary for his or her accomplishments and introduce the successor. These remarks, which are publicized as part of the official press release, contain summaries of both the predecessor's and the successor's COD evaluations. To collect such information, we first compiled a exhaustive list of provincial leadership turnovers that occurred between 2000 and 2015 and then conducted an extensive search for the official coverage of each of these turnovers.<sup>2</sup> We were able to collect a total of 103 evaluations for 67 provincial leaders (some individuals received remarks on more than one occasion). This represents 62% of the provincial leaders who served during this period. In the subsequent analysis, we use all 103 evaluations for estimation, treating each evaluation as an independent draw to allow for the possibility that leaders may change styles during their careers. Our results are nonetheless robust to using only the earliest evaluation for each leader.

It is important to acknowledge that the sample of provincial leaders with evaluation remarks is clearly not a ran-

dom sample of all the provincial party secretaries. Given the paucity of data on leadership characteristics in nondemocratic systems, however, this data set represents the best available information on leadership styles. Since the main focus of this article is to explore the variations in leadership styles rather than to estimate the exact proportion of each style in the population, we believe that this sample is appropriate. Provinces that have leaders in our sample account for about 83% of the national gross domestic product, 80% of the national population, and 82% of fiscal expenditure. In appendix I (apps. A–L are available online), we conduct a series of tests to assess the source of missingness and the extent to which missing data may bias our analysis. We find that the availability of remarks varies mainly over time but is not strongly associated with politicians' career outcomes or biographical attributes (see fig. A.3; figs. A.1–A.5 are available online). We also show that the composition of leadership styles is similar between periods with high and low levels of missingness (fig. A.5) and that the main results remain robust to various strategies that correct for the potential missing data bias (tables A.7–A.9; tables A.1–A.19 are available online).

### DETECTING LATENT LEADERSHIP STYLES

Our substantive reading of the evaluation remarks suggests that different leadership styles may exist among the CCP elites (for concrete examples, see app. C). To explore this issue more systematically, we apply LCA to the evaluation remarks. The LCA method uses multivariate, categorical data as inputs to identify underlying, unobserved clusters of observations that have similar values on manifest variables. In the context of this study, this method enables us to classify leaders into distinctive subgroups based on the content of their evaluation remarks. Before performing the analysis, we preprocessed the raw evaluation text in several steps. First, we split all the remarks into short phrases based on punctuation. We were able to obtain 1,327 distinct phrases, with an average length of 9.3 characters in each phrase. We removed any phrases that were general political litany and combined into a single group phrases that were either synonymous or overlapping for more than 80% of the characters. We then conducted a number of interviews with officials working in the COD and other related agencies, asking them to interpret the meaning of each group of phrases. Using their responses, we carried out another round of aggregation, reducing the final number of phrase groups to 12. Appendix B displays the most common phrases in each finalized phrase group, the interpretations by regime insiders, and the percentage of COD evaluations that contain those phrases. Political loyalty and leadership experiences are the two most commonly discussed issues in COD evaluations.

2. While the central new agency produces a general announcement for each turnover, the more detailed coverage of turnover meetings (from which evaluation remarks are obtained) is written by local party newspapers. The specific content of the local reporting is influenced by a number of idiosyncratic factors, such as local norms in reporting political events, local officials' speculations (not always accurate) about the center's intentions, and the availability of other concurrent newsworthy materials (personal interviews of officials from Shaanxi, Shanghai, and Henan).

Other common phrases include descriptions of one’s work attitudes, vision, interpersonal style, and personal temperament.

We create 10 binary indicators, each corresponding to a phrase group displayed in table A.1 (except for the two most common ones). Each binary indicator takes the value 1 if a personal evaluation contains any of the phrases that belong to the corresponding phrase group and 0 otherwise. Taking the observed distributions of indicators as input, the LCA model (1) assigns each leader to a given class (i.e., style) and (2) estimates the class-specific probability of receiving remarks that belong to a given phrase group (for estimation details, see app. E). We estimate several models with different numbers of latent clusters and select the two-class model on the basis of goodness-of-fit statistics such as the Bayesian information criterion. Figure 1 displays the class-conditional probabilities for the 10 expressions, ordered by the difference in probability between the two classes (from the most positive to the most negative). The first class, which accounts for about 60% of the party chiefs in the sample, appears to be most closely related to an autocratic, execution-oriented leadership style. Leaders who belong to this class have high loadings on expressions that describe an aggressive work style (e.g., “strong sense of responsibility,” “bold”) and a strong personality (e.g., “frank and straightforward,” “not afraid of making criticisms”) and low loadings on those that are associated with consultation and interpersonal management (e.g., “comradely,” “prudent,”

and “humble”). By contrast, the second class consists of politicians whose leadership style appears to be much “softer” and more conciliatory. These leaders are often described as being “compatible,” “comradely,” and “humble.” They are viewed as being flexible in adjusting their policy agenda to the practical political situation (“prioritizing”) and “careful and thorough” in policy implementation. A variance decomposition exercise suggests that between-subject variation accounts for about 83% of the total variance in leadership styles, and within-subject variation accounts for about 17%.

**LEADERSHIP STYLES AND GOVERNING OUTCOMES**

Do leaders with different styles govern differently? To answer this question, we examine the association between the LCA classifications and empirical proxies for leaders’ governing behaviors. The detailed analysis can be found in appendix H. We focus on two types of outcomes. The first is provincial leaders’ public appearances relative to their colleagues (e.g., the governor or all members of the provincial standing committee), and the second is the number of local cadres that are given disciplinary sanctions. Public appearance is a key indicator of the distribution of power and responsibility in closed regimes and has long been used by researchers of authoritarian regimes to infer what is going on inside those regimes (Willerton 1992). As in the case of national politics, how often provincial party secretaries appear in public relative to their colleagues can tell

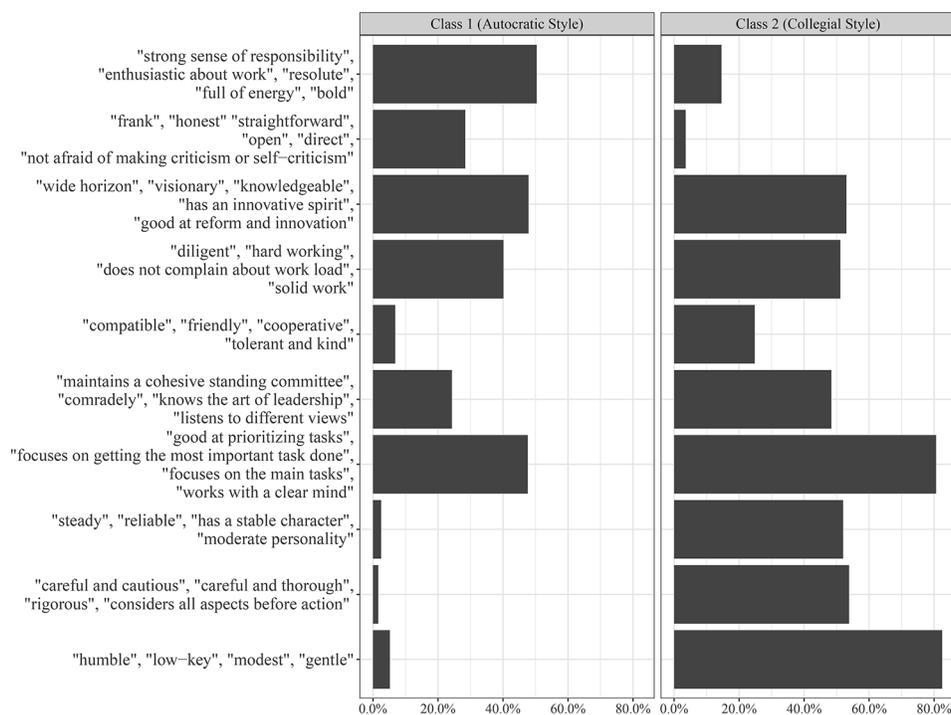


Figure 1. Variety of leadership styles

Table 1. Leadership Style and Career Outcomes

	Promotion		Demotion	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Collegial style	-.214*** (.077)		-.233** (.097)	
Collegial style (continuous measure)		-.229*** (.086)		-.295*** (.093)
Connected to major factions	.214* (.109)	.221** (.110)	-.010 (.111)	-.003 (.110)
Age and tenure	✓	✓	✓	✓
Other controls	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note. Estimated effects of collegial style on both positive and negative career outcomes. Other controls include length of the evaluation, attendance at an elite college, growth in gross domestic product (tenure average), and growth in fiscal revenue (tenure average). Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. Two-tailed significance tests. Number of leaders = 67.

\*  $p < .1$ .

\*\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ .

us a good deal about their willingness to share power. Disciplinary investigations, moreover, are highly contentious moves that often create political enemies. Existing research has shown that sweeping investigations are more likely to happen when higher-level leaders are less concerned with their relationship with local cadres (Li et al. 2017). The regression results suggest that leadership styles do make statistically and substantively significant differences in the outcomes of interest: compared to those with an autocratic style, collegial secretaries make about 11 fewer public appearances relative to their colleagues and carry out 500–700 fewer investigations on subordinates each year (table A.5).

### LEADERSHIP STYLES AND POLITICAL SURVIVAL

Next, we study the career implications of leadership styles. We create a binary indicator for whether provincial secretaries were later promoted to be a member of the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC), the CCP's highest decision-making body, and another indicator for whether they were investigated for corruption or forced into early retirement.<sup>3</sup> We regress these

indicators on leadership style using a linear probability model and report the results in table 1. Column 1 shows that being collegial is negatively and significantly associated with promotion to the PSC, suggesting that those with an autocratic leadership style may enjoy a competitive edge in promotion contests. The magnitude of the coefficient estimate is as large as about 20 percentage points and remains strong even after we control for provincial leaders' political connections and their economic and fiscal performance.<sup>4</sup> Notably, the effect size of leadership style is about the same as the effect of political connections, suggesting that leadership style may be an important consideration in high-level promotion decisions alongside other factors such as network affiliations.

While the promotion patterns seem to confirm the conventional view that autocratic-style figures are more likely to succeed in a nondemocratic system, further analysis suggests a more nuanced interpretation. In table 1 columns 3 and 4, we report the estimated effect of style on demotions. The results suggest that a crucial advantage of being collegial is in career security. The probability that a collegial-style leader receives a

3. One potential concern is that the content of the remarks may be manipulated to justify certain promotion decisions. However, as will be shown in this section, neither style is necessarily better than the other when it comes to political survival. To minimize the endogeneity concern, we determine a provincial secretary's style according to the earliest remarks received if multiple evaluations remarks are present. There is on average a 6.3-year lag between receiving the evaluation and landing on the PSC (for those who are eventually promoted). In the appendix, we conduct several additional tests to address the issue of strategic manipulation

(see tables A.11–A.13). We define early retirement as leaving government (or taking up ceremonial legislative posts) before reaching the mandatory retirement age (65 for ministerial-level officials and 70 for deputy national/Politburo level).

4. We focus on connections with two consecutive general secretaries, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, as well as their allies in the PSC. Connection is determined by whether a provincial secretary has undergone significant promotions when working under members of these major factions in the past.

disciplinary investigation is about 20 percentage points lower than those with an autocratic style, a magnitude similar to the advantage that autocratic-style leaders enjoy in promotion. The protection effect of collegial style also stands out in comparison to other variables. Neither connection to major factions nor performance, for example, is as effective in lowering the investigation risk as being collegial.

## CONCLUSION

Leadership behavior is an important window through which to learn about the inner workings of many political systems, yet systematic study of it is often hampered by the paucity of reliable data. This article uses a novel data source—the CCP’s internal evaluation remarks for its provincial leaders—to study variations in leadership styles in the world’s largest one-party regime. We show that there are two distinct leadership styles among the CCP’s provincial chiefs: an assertive, autocratic style that emphasizes policy accomplishments over interpersonal relations and a cautious, collegial style that prioritizes coalition building. We provide evidence that the two leadership styles are associated with different behavioral patterns and have different implications for survival within the CCP regime. The autocratic style represents a high-risk, high-reward approach, whereas the collegial style represents a less risky option that trades policy efficacy for better relations with peers and subordinates.

One issue that we have not addressed in sufficient depth in this article is what factors influence a politician’s choice of leadership style. It is possible that politicians may strategically adjust their leadership style in response to the characteristics of the localities that they govern or other changes in the political environment. However, it would also be too cynical to suggest that politicians are free to choose any style they want independent of their personality, temperament, and past reputation. How the combination of intrinsic traits and extrinsic incentives gives rise to a particular leadership style is a question that deserves further exploration in future research.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article benefited tremendously from conversations with several Chinese government officials, who remain anonymous

for ethics considerations. For valuable comments, we thank participants at the second Quantitative Political Science Research Workshop in Hong Kong. Jonathan Esty, Jing Xu, Zhiyuan Zhang, and Ziwen Zu provided excellent research assistance.

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