

## *Authoritarian Critical Citizens and Declining Political Trust in China\**

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### *Abstract*

Cross-national opinion surveys reveal that the Chinese regime enjoys perplexingly high levels of political trust when compared internationally. However, by tracing multiple surveys over time, this study finds that trust in the Chinese central government has declined notably since the early 2000s. We identify rising public criticism of income inequality as an underlying cause for the declining political trust during the surveyed period. We propose the concept of authoritarian critical citizens to understand the impact of citizens' evaluation of specific government performance on diffuse support in authoritarian contexts. Whereas in democracies the rise of critical citizens may not undermine regime support, we argue that the rise of authoritarian critical citizens poses serious challenges to the Chinese party-state because the decline of specific support erodes the legitimacy and support of authoritarian regimes.

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