



Chinese Views on US–China Relations: Continuity and Change across Two US Elections

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Abstract

This article examines how Chinese public opinion toward the USA and US–China relations evolved across two US presidential transitions, drawing on original pre- and post-election surveys conducted in 2020 and 2024. We find that perceptions of US global leadership and domestic governance were highly responsive to leadership change, with Biden’s election associated with a marked rebound in confidence, even as views of US global influence grew more polarized. In contrast, attitudes toward bilateral relations remained relatively stable. Respondents consistently acknowledged America’s economic influence while recognizing enduring tensions. At the individual level, younger and more educated respondents expressed more negative views of the relationship but greater confidence in China’s economic trajectory, while those with personal ties to the USA reported more favorable attitudes and stronger endorsement of US values. Beyond these findings, the article advances a theoretical argument that public opinion matters in authoritarian states by sustaining governing legitimacy and, in turn, contributing to regime resilience.

Introduction

The first Trump presidency (2016–20) marked a dramatic shift in US–China relations, with China emerging as a central issue in Trump’s campaign and policies such as the 2018 trade war significantly reshaping bilateral ties.¹ At the time, many assumed that the Trump era represented an aberration and that a return to traditional leadership, such as a Biden administration, would restore “normalcy” in US foreign policy broadly, and US–China relations, in particular.² This sentiment was widely captured by the phrase circulating early

¹ Xiying Zuo, “The Trump Effect: China’s New Thoughts on the United State,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2021), pp. 107–27.

² Fangyuan Liu, “Return to Normality? Commentary on Joe Biden, Donald Trump and the 2020 US Presidential Election in China Daily,” *Journalism*, Vol. 25, No. 8 (2024), pp. 1812–30.

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in Biden's term: "The adults are back in charge."³ Results from our 2020 pre- and post-election surveys of Chinese public opinion largely supported these expectations: Chinese perceptions of the bilateral relationship and of US leadership had deteriorated under Trump, but showed a clear rebound—what we term a "Biden Bump"—immediately following the 2020 election.⁴

However, in terms of actual policy, the Biden administration did not reverse course on China.⁵ The tariffs imposed under Trump remained in place, and new measures such as semiconductor export controls were introduced. This marked not only continuity but escalation, underscoring bipartisan consensus in the USA on taking a tougher stance toward China.⁶ As the 2024 presidential election approached, President Biden had stepped down and been replaced by Vice President Harris, while a second Trump term loomed large. This transition raised critical questions: First, how have Chinese public views evolved after four years of Biden's China policy? Second, how would they respond to the possibility of Trump's return? Third, and more importantly, are there deeper, longer-term trends in how Chinese citizens view the bilateral relations, the USA, and China's own role amid sustained great-power competition?

To examine these questions, we replicated our 2020 survey design for the 2024 US presidential election, assessing Chinese public opinion on bilateral relations, US global leadership, and China's standing vis-à-vis the USA. A pre-election wave (20–28 October 2024) captured public sentiment during the campaign's final phase, while a post-election wave (10–18 November) measured immediate reactions to the outcome. This before-and-after design allows us to assess whether Chinese attitudes are responsive to specific US leadership transitions, while the cross-cycle comparison (2020 and 2024) reveals how public opinion evolves amid entrenched US–China rivalry. With two waves conducted across two elections, we now have a unique opportunity to study the fluidity and trajectory of Chinese public sentiment during a pivotal decade of strategic competition.

At the aggregate level, our main findings are as follows. First, perceptions of US global leadership and domestic governance proved most sensitive to presidential transitions, shifting significantly between the Trump and Biden administrations. Specifically, Biden's election and tenure were associated with greater confidence in the US president's ability to handle global affairs appropriately and with stronger perceptions of respect for personal freedoms domestically. Second, views of US influence in world affairs became more polarized compared to four years earlier, reflecting divergent perceptions of American power—a sense of its relative decline alongside its enduring capacity to shape allies' policies during the Biden era. Third, Chinese public perceptions of US–China bilateral relations remained stable across survey waves, with a majority consistently recognizing the significance of US economic influence while maintaining a realistic view of enduring bilateral tensions. Support for China assuming a global leadership role also remained steady.

At the individual level, we find a notable generational and educational divide: younger and more educated respondents held more negative views of US–China relations, while simultaneously expressing greater confidence in China's economic trajectory. Meanwhile,

³ Chris Cillizza, "Joe Biden's Message to Vladimir Putin? The Adults Are Back in Charge," Cable News Network, 16 June 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/16/politics/vladimir-putin-joe-biden-summit/index.html>; Financial Times, "The Grown-ups Are Back in Charge in Washington," 27 November 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/1b751d3e-e410-4e81-af75-775312cfeb62>.

⁴ Songying Fang et al., "Chinese Public Opinion about US–China Relations from Trump to Biden," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2022), pp. 27–46.

⁵ Zhiqun Zhu, "Same Objective, Different Approaches: Comparing Trump's and Biden's China Policy," in Stanley A. Renshon and Peter Suedfeld, eds., *The Trump and Harris Doctrines: Preservationism Versus Progressivism in the 2024 Presidential Election* (Cham: Springer, 2024), pp. 123–44.

⁶ Christopher Carothers and Taiyi Sun, "Bipartisanship on China in a Polarized America," *International Relations* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231201484>.

respondents with personal connections to the USA through study abroad or travel experiences stood out for their more favorable assessment of the USA across nearly every dimension. They are more likely to express confidence in American global leadership and endorse its domestic values. Importantly, this pro-US orientation does not come at the expense of national confidence; these individuals also express strong faith in China's rise.

As strategic competition deepens, a nuanced understanding of Chinese public opinion is essential not only for anticipating China's foreign policy behavior but also for envisioning sustainable forms of bilateral relations and international order. Our findings suggest that cross-national exposure fosters a more pluralistic worldview rather than a purely zero-sum understanding of power. Yet recent trends, such as US visa restrictions, declining Chinese student enrollments, and reduced exchange programs, have weakened these channels, which have long been among the most effective tools for fostering goodwill.⁷ Despite these challenges, the strong and persistent interest among the Chinese public in US presidential elections underscores continued opportunities for constructive engagement through educational, cultural, and professional connections grounded in shared interests and mutual respect. Such pragmatic engagement can help manage long-term competition and prevent it from escalating into costly conflict.⁸

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. First, we develop a theoretical argument about the role of public opinion in providing legitimacy for authoritarian states and, in turn, contributing to their resilience. We examine this logic in the context of China and US–China relations, highlighting how public opinion can bolster the Chinese government's domestic legitimacy and, consequently, shape its foreign policy. Next, we outline the research design, including survey methodology, questions, and sample characteristics. In the empirical sections, we first present aggregate findings across three thematic areas: bilateral relations, US global leadership, and China's international standing. We then explore how individual attributes, such as age, education, nationalism, and personal ties to the USA, shape attitudes. This is followed by analyses of open-ended responses to uncover underlying rationales for assessment of bilateral relations and preferred model of global leadership. The final section concludes by synthesizing key findings, highlighting implications for policy.

Why Chinese Public Opinion Matters for Foreign Policy

For a long time, the conventional wisdom held that Chinese public opinion was largely irrelevant to government policy, except on particularly sensitive issues capable of mobilizing strong nationalistic sentiment, such as those related to territorial disputes or matters that invoke historical grievances, such as those stemming from Japan's wartime aggression.⁹ This perspective aligns with the broader theoretical assumption that public opinion carries little weight in authoritarian systems like China's.

Yet in practice, all governments care about public opinion regardless of regime types; otherwise, we would not observe extensive efforts to shape public perceptions by governments and politicians worldwide.¹⁰ What varies across political systems is not the existence of this

⁷ James Chau, "The Power of 'People-to-People' Ties in US-China Relations," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, No. 28 (2024), pp. 120–9.

⁸ Mark Witzke, "There's Still Hope for U.S.-China Student Exchange," *China-US Focus*, 20 June 2025, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/society-culture/theres-still-hope-for-us-china-student-exchange>.

⁹ James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy* (Columbia, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Karolin Soontjens and Stefaan Walgrave, "Listening to the People: Politicians' Investment in Monitoring Public Opinion and their Beliefs about Accountability," *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2023), pp. 498–518; Stefaan Walgrave and Karolin Soontjens, "How Politicians Learn about Public Opinion," *Research & Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2023), pp. 1–9.

preoccupation, but rather the state's capacity to shape perceptions¹¹—and consequently, the extent to which public sentiment actually constrains policymaking.¹²

When scholars claim that public opinion does not matter in authoritarian systems, they are essentially making two distinct arguments: first, authoritarian governments have greater control over information sources, allowing them to manage perceptions more effectively than democracies and thus avoid constraints;¹³ and second, even if the public is informed and dissatisfied, the absence of free and fair elections means leaders are not held accountable for their actions, enabling them to disregard public opinion.¹⁴

While both arguments may appear theoretically sound, they are overly simplistic when considered against real-world conditions. The first argument overlooks the profound changes in cross-border information flows over the past several decades driven by globalization and the rapid advancement of communication technologies. With the rise of the internet and, especially, the proliferation of social media, combined with the large-scale movement of people across borders, information flows have become porous and difficult for any government to contain.¹⁵ Ordinary citizens no longer rely solely on state-controlled sources to obtain information even in authoritarian contexts.¹⁶

The second argument assumes that accountability through elections is the only mechanism that compels governments to respond to public opinion. In reality, public opinion also matters by affecting a government's concern for legitimacy. All governments, including authoritarian ones, require political legitimacy, that is, public acceptance of their right to rule, to maintain long-term power.¹⁷ Legitimacy makes governance easier by reducing compliance costs and enabling effective policy implementation.¹⁸ Conversely, losing legitimacy makes governing more difficult, potentially causing social instability or even regime collapse through popular unrest, especially when crises hit. Legitimacy can arise when the public feels its preferences are reflected in government turnover as in electoral democracies, or when those preferences are incorporated into policy decisions and their outcomes.¹⁹

That the Chinese government derives legitimacy from economic performance is well established and serves as a prime example of authoritarian resilience.²⁰ This understanding, however, often leads to the prediction that slowing economic growth would erode this

¹¹ Tetsuya Matsubayashi, "Do Politicians Shape Public Opinion?" *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2013), pp. 451–78.

¹² Julie Sevenans, "How Public Opinion Information Changes Politicians' Opinions and Behavior," *Political Behavior*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2021), pp. 1801–23.

¹³ Taylor C. Boas, "Weaving the Authoritarian Web: The Control of Internet Use in Nondemocratic Regimes," in John Zysman and Abraham Newman, eds., *How Revolutionary Was the Digital Revolution? National Responses, Market Transitions, and Global Technology* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 361–78.

¹⁴ Yonatan L. Morse, "The Era of Electoral Authoritarianism," *World Politics*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (2012), pp. 161–98.

¹⁵ Anna Litvinenko, "Revolution vs. Reaction: The Role of Social Media in Authoritarian Regimes," in Stephen Coleman and Lone Sorensen, eds., *Handbook of Digital Politics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2023), pp. 45–75.

¹⁶ Aysenur Dal and Erik C. Nisbet, "Walking Through Firewalls: Circumventing Censorship of Social Media and Online Content in a Networked Authoritarian Context," *Social Media + Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2022), pp. 1–13.

¹⁷ Bruce Gilley, *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy* (Columbia, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Imran Arif and Nabamita Dutta, "Legitimacy of Government and Governance," *Journal of Institutional Economics*, Vol. 20, No. e14 (2024), pp. 1–23.

¹⁹ Bruce Gilley, "The Determinants of State Legitimacy: Results for 72 Countries," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2006), pp. 47–71; Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel, "Identity, Procedures and Performance: How Authoritarian Regimes Legitimize Their Rule," in Alexander Dukalskis and Johannes Gerschewski, eds., *Justifying Dictatorship* (London, UK: Routledge, 2018), pp. 37–55; Taisu Zhang, "Legality and Legitimacy in Authoritarian Regimes," Yale Law School, Public Law Research Paper, 31 July, 2025, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5067475>.

²⁰ Andrew J. Nathan, "China's Changing of the Guard: Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2003), pp. 6–17; Yuchao Zhu, "Performance Legitimacy and China's Political Adaptation Strategy," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2011), pp. 123–40.

performance-based legitimacy.²¹ Yet such predictions have not fully accounted for China's enduring stability even as growth has slowed to around 5%, roughly half the rate sustained in previous decades. What remains less well understood, though extensively documented by scholars of Chinese politics, is the role of variety of institutional mechanisms through which the government incorporates public preferences and channels grievances,²² and its continuous monitoring of public sentiment across a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues.²³ At minimum, this approach helps prevent the government from being caught off guard by events that might spark widespread public discontent through various strategies.²⁴ More positively, it allows policies to align with public preferences, thereby strengthening public support. By swiftly addressing trust gaps when policy and public sentiment diverge, while reinforcing policies that already enjoy public support, the government sustains its political legitimacy.

Compared with domestic issues, foreign policy in China often allows more room for public discussion. Debates over domestic matters can risk setting citizens against government officials, giving the government strong incentives to restrict open discourse.²⁵ In contrast, foreign affairs are more likely to align government interests with public sentiment against an external actor. Moreover, foreign policy involves greater uncertainty, as it requires anticipating the preferences and strategies of foreign counterparts, which are harder to gauge than those of domestic actors. Allowing broader debate in this arena can therefore be seen as a productive means of generating diverse perspectives and identifying the most effective strategies.

US–China relations have become a highly salient foreign policy issue for both the American and Chinese publics in recent years. In the USA, US–China trade relations emerged as one of the most important campaign issues in the 2016 presidential election. In China, the 2016 US presidential election ranked among the top five Internet events of the year,²⁶ while the China–US trade war was by far the most discussed Internet topic of 2018, surpassing any domestic issue.²⁷ Moreover, the trade war sparked intense public debate in China over its potential impact on the economy and on appropriate policy responses. These debates unfolded in academic journals for foreign policy analysts, in professional forums

²¹ Michael Beckley, “The Peril of Peaking Powers: Economic Slowdowns and Implications for China’s Next Decade,” *International Security*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2023), pp. 7–46.

²² Steven J. Balla et al., “Notice the Comment? Chinese Government Responsiveness to Public Participation in the Policymaking Process,” *Governance*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2025), pp. 1–23; Jidong Chen et al., “Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2016), pp. 383–400; Yao Liu, Ye Zheng, and Jiannan Wu, “Implementation Responsiveness: Linking Public Opinion to Policy Implementation,” *Journal of Chinese Governance*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2024), pp. 558–78; Tianguang Meng and Zheng Su, “When Top-down Meets Bottom-up: Local Officials and Selective Responsiveness Within Fiscal Policymaking in China,” *World Development*, Vol. 142 (2021), 105443; Jonathan R. Stromseth et al., *China’s Governance Puzzle: Enabling Transparency and Participation in a Single-Party State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

²³ Fang et al., “Chinese Public Opinion about US–China Relations from Trump to Biden”; Yungeng Xie, *Report on Chinese Social Opinion and Crisis Management* (Singapore: Springer, 2019).

²⁴ Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts, “How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 2 (2013), pp. 326–43; Daniel Mattingly, *The Art of Political Control in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Jessica Chen Weiss, “Authoritarian Signaling, Mass Audiences, and Nationalist Protest in China,” *International Organization*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (2013), pp. 1–35; Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China’s Great Firewall* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

²⁵ Jidong Chen and Yiqing Xu, “Why Do Authoritarian Regimes Allow Citizens to Voice Opinions Publicly?” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (2017), pp. 792–803.

²⁶ Huaxin Zhu et al., “2016 zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao” (“2016 Analysis of Public Sentiment on China’s Internet”), in Lei Fan et al., eds., *2017 zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce* (2017 *Society of China Analysis and Forecast*) (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 2017), pp. 229–47.

²⁷ Huaxin Zhu et al., “2018 zhongguo hulianwang yuqing fenxi baogao” (“2018 Analysis of Public Sentiment on China’s Internet”), in Peilin Li et al., eds., *2019 zhongguo shehui xingshi fenxi yu yuce* (2019 *Society of China Analysis and Forecast*) (Beijing: Social Sciences Literature Press, 2019), pp. 264–81.

for legal practitioners, and across social media platforms with millions of followers.²⁸ The discussions ranged widely, covering reactions from the business community, non-governmental exchanges between Chinese and American foreign policy elites, and timely updates on US policies and the responses of other major economies. Anyone with even a moderate interest in China's economic conditions and the trade war's effects on individual well-being was likely exposed to some of these conversations. Indeed, our 2020 study of Chinese public opinion on US–China relations show the opinions have changed dramatically from earlier findings.²⁹

Given the depth of public interest, public reactions to changes in US leadership can shape the government's response to American electoral outcomes and influence its diplomatic flexibility. A confrontational US administration, for instance, may fuel nationalist sentiment in China, creating a rally-around-the-flag effect that strengthens public support for a tougher external stance.³⁰ However, if the government's foreign policy response is seen as inadequate or ineffective, public dissatisfaction may grow, posing reputational risks and audience costs for the leadership.³¹ The 2020 and 2024 US presidential elections, both held amid ongoing tensions in trade, technology, and regional security, offer a valuable window into how Chinese public opinion evolves during prolonged strategic competition and how these shifts may shape the broader dynamics of US–China relations.

Research Design

Before our 2020 study, there was little systematic research on how Chinese public opinion responds to US electoral transitions. Although global surveys such as those by the Pew Research Center had tracked international views of the USA, they did not focus specifically on Chinese perceptions during American electoral transitions. Our study addressed this gap by developing a survey comprising nine substantive questions and one auxiliary question, organized into three key dimensions: evaluations of China-US bilateral relations, perceptions of the USA and its global role, and assessments of China's relative position in the world (see Table 1).

Several questions in our survey were adapted from items originally used in the Pew Global Attitudes Survey (PGAS) and were first incorporated into our own study in 2020, along with a few newly designed questions. For longitudinal comparison, the same questions—with slight refinements for contextual relevance—were re-administered in both the pre- and post-election waves of the 2024 survey. One notable update was made to Question 9, which probes preferences for future global governance structure. In the 2024 iteration, we expanded the response options to include the following: “a multipolar world inclusive

²⁸ Ruibin Wang, “Trump zhengfu dui hua jingmao xin zhengce: yuanqi ji yingdui” (“The Trump Administrations New Economic and Trade Policy Toward China: Origins and Responses”), *Waijiao Jikan (Foreign Affairs Quarterly)* (2018), <https://www.cpifa.org/cms/book/122>; Donghui Fu, “Shilun cong WTO fa shang cuobai Trump de maoyizhan” (“On Defeating Trump's Trade War Through WTO Law”), *Jintiancheng (AllBright Law Review)*, 1 January 2019, <https://www.allbrightlaw.com/CN/10475/6bb58605066b2c3d.aspx>; “Meimei: zhong mei daibiao sixia jiechu, taolun chongqi maoyi tanpan” (“U.S. Media: Chinese and American Representatives Held Private Talks to Discuss Resuming Trade Negotiations”), *Guancha.cn (Observer Network)*, 31 July 2018, https://www.guancha.cn/internation/2018_07_31_466386.shtml; “Lei jun deng mingying qiyejia tan zhong mei maoyi moca: yi kefu dui qiye yingxiang” (“Lei Jun and Other Private Entrepreneurs on the Sino-US Trade Friction: ‘We Have Overcome the Impact!’”), *Guancha.cn (Observer Network)*, 21 November 2018, https://www.guancha.cn/ChanJing/2018_11_21_480531.shtml; Wen Wang, “Zhong mei maoyizhan ‘qianxian’ guilai de shi dian ganwu” (“Ten Reflections from the ‘Frontline’ of the U.S.-China Trade War”), *Renda Chongyang Wang (RDCY)*, 11 September 2018, <http://rdcy.ruc.edu.cn/zw/xw/jrgz/20c1aae00b69458e8ce69b5716968e07.htm>.

²⁹ Fang et al., “Chinese Public Opinion about US–China Relations from Trump to Biden.”

³⁰ Jiyoung Ko, “Not So Dangerous? Nationalism and Foreign Policy Preference,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (2022), sqac053.

³¹ Xiaojun Li and Dingding Chen, “Public Opinion, International Reputation, and Audience Costs in An Authoritarian Regime,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2021), pp. 543–60; Jessica Chen Weiss and Allan Dafoe, “Authoritarian Audiences, Rhetoric, and Propaganda in International Crises: Evidence from China,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (2019), pp. 963–73.

Table 1. Survey questions**Part I: Evaluations of China–US bilateral relations**

Q1. Over the past year, has the US–China relationship gotten better, worse, or stayed the same?

Q2*. To what extent does the US take into account China’s interests in its international policy decisions?

Q3a*. How much influence is the US having on China’s economic conditions?

Q3b*. [If answer to 3a is “great deal” or “fair amount”] Is the impact on China’s economic conditions positive or negative?

Part II: Perceptions of the US and its global role

Q4*. Compared to 10 years ago, does the US play a more, less, or as important a role in the world?

Q5*. How much confidence do you have in a US president to do the right thing regarding world affairs?

Q6*. Do you think the US government respects the personal freedoms of its people?

Part III: China’s status in the world vis-à-vis the US

Q7*. Which country is the world’s leading economy?

Q8. Which country is the world’s largest economy?

Q9. In the future, which situation would be better for the world?

Note: *denotes questions adapted from the PGAS.

of both China and the United States.” This modification was intended to better capture contemporary debates about shifting international leadership configurations.

To improve our understanding of how respondents reasoned, the 2024 survey included open-ended follow-ups after two items. After Q1, respondents were prompted: “Please briefly explain why you think US–China relations have improved, worsened, or stayed about the same.” Similarly, after Q9, they were asked to elaborate on their preferred global leadership structure by briefly explaining their response. These open-ended answers are analyzed later to provide qualitative insight into the beliefs and considerations underlying public attitudes.

The 2020 survey was conducted in two waves: a pre-election wave from 29 October to 3 November 2020 ($N = 1065$), and a post-election wave from 25 January to 2 February 2021 ($N = 1018$), yielding a combined sample of 2083 Chinese adults. The 2024 survey followed the same structure, with the pre-election wave fielded from 20 to 28 October 2024 ($N = 850$), and the post-election wave from 10 to 18 November 2024 ($N = 852$), for a total of 1702 respondents. In the 2024 surveys, participants were recruited through Dynata, a prominent provider of online survey research services frequently utilized in academic studies.³² To build its respondent panels, Dynata employs a range of digital marketing strategies and a tiered incentive system, enabling it to recruit participants from diverse demographic groups. It also employed census-based quotas to generate respondent samples that are nationally representative in terms of age, gender, and geographic region.

Table 2 presents summary statistics for key demographic and attitudinal variables across all four survey waves—two conducted around the 2020 US presidential election and two around the 2024 election. Each wave employed a consistent quota sampling strategy based on gender, age group, and geographic distribution. Overall, the samples exhibit broad

³² Antoine J. Banks and Heather M. Hicks, “The Effectiveness of a Racialized Counterstrategy,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (2019), pp. 305–22; Adam S. Chilton et al., “Reciprocity and Public Opposition to Foreign Direct Investment,” *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (2020), pp. 129–53; Michael Tomz et al., “Public Opinion and Decisions About Military Force in Democracies,” *International Organization*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (2020), pp. 119–43. For recent public opinion research in China using Dynata, see, for example, Manfred Elfstrom and Xiaojun Li, “Propaganda and Blame Attribution during Economic Downturns: Evidence from China,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-025-09466-2>; Farsan Ghassim et al., “Public Opinion on Institutional Designs for the United Nations: An International Survey Experiment,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (2022), sqac027; Tanja Schweinberger, “Geopolitics and International Organisations: Mass Public Opinions in the USA and China,” 13 October 2024, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4985897>.

Table 2. Sample comparisons

Variable	Panel A: 2020				Panel B: 2024			
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Diff.	Pooled	Wave 1	Wave 2	Diff.	Pooled
Male	0.54	0.51	0.03	0.53	0.51	0.52	-0.01	0.52
Age 18–34	0.34	0.36	-0.02	0.35	0.35	0.35	0	0.35
Age 35–44	0.24	0.25	-0.01	0.25	0.21	0.21	0	0.21
Age 45+	0.42	0.39	0.03	0.41	0.44	0.43	0.01	0.44
CPC membership	0.15	0.18	-0.03	0.17	0.11	0.15	-0.04	0.13
Income	4.63	4.64	-0.01	4.63	4.66	4.63	0.03	4.64
College degree+	0.59	0.62	-0.03	0.61	0.65	0.68	-0.03	0.66
Han Chinese	0.95	0.92	0.03	0.94	0.97	0.97	0	0.97
Rural hukou	0.28	0.21	0.07	0.25	0.39	0.37	0.02	0.38
Nationalism	0.9	0.91	-0.01	0.9	0.88	0.88	0	0.88
US experience	0.31	0.31	0	0.31	0.35	0.35	0	0.35
Coastal province	0.54	0.48	0.06	0.51	0.51	0.51	0	0.51

Note: All variables are binary indicators (0–1) except for income, which is measured on a seven-point scale. Coastal provinces include: Liaoning, Hebei, Tianjin, Shandong, Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan.

demographic comparability, especially in terms of gender balance, ethnic composition (Han Chinese), and regional representation (coastal vs. interior provinces). Educational attainment increased slightly from 2020 to 2024, with a greater share of college-educated respondents in the latter (71 vs. 61%).

We assess comparability both within and across election cycles. Within the 2020 cycle, two-sample t-tests indicate no statistically significant differences between the pre- and post-election waves across any measured variable, supporting the validity of comparing opinion shifts over that period. In the 2024 cycle, a few statistically significant differences do emerge. The post-election wave contains fewer respondents born in the 1960s ($p < 0.01$), more born in the 1970s ($p < 0.01$), and a higher share of membership in the Communist Party of China (CPC) ($p < 0.05$). These differences may reflect random sampling variation or inconsistencies in how the survey firm implemented age quotas. To ensure analytical rigor, all multivariate models control for these demographic variables.

Comparisons between 2020 and 2024, based on the pooled samples from each year, also reveal modest shifts. Respondents in 2024 were younger on average, more highly educated, and slightly less likely to be CPC members. Nationalism levels appear lower in 2024 (83%) than in 2020 (91%), but this may partly reflect measurement differences: two of the five items used to construct the nationalism index were replaced in the 2024 survey to better capture the concept of nationalism. The share of respondents with personal experience in the USA—through study, travel, or work—remained stable at approximately one-third. While some differences in composition exist, they do not undermine the utility of the data for comparison across waves and years. All analyses that follow account for these shifts through appropriate statistical controls.

In the sections that follow, we primarily present unadjusted distributions of responses across survey waves to illustrate key trends in Chinese public opinion over time. This descriptive approach allows us to highlight broad patterns in attitudes before introducing more complex modeling. While we acknowledge that some sample composition differences exist, these raw comparisons remain informative given the overall demographic similarity across waves. For outcome-specific analyses where individual-level characteristics are likely to affect attitudes, we incorporate covariate adjustments to ensure robustness.

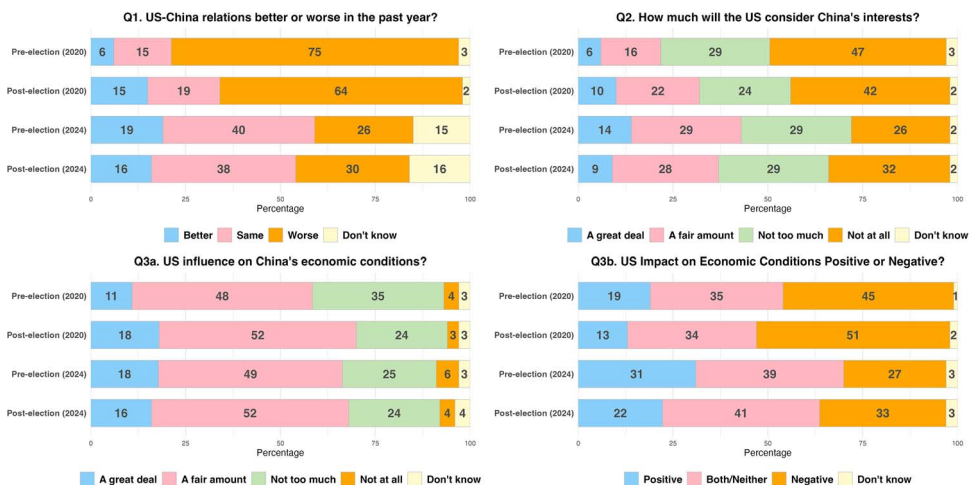


Fig. 1. Evaluations of China–US Bilateral Relations. Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Source: Authors' Surveys.

Findings of the Aggregate Patterns

This section presents descriptive findings across the three thematic dimensions of the survey. For each question, we report the raw distribution of responses across all four waves (2020 pre- and post-election; 2024 pre- and post-election). Given the sample sizes in each wave (approximately 850–1000 respondents), the margin of error for differences between two proportions is roughly $\pm 4.5\%$. As a rule of thumb, we treat any between-wave difference greater than 5 percentage points as statistically significant at conventional levels.

While demographic differences between the 2020 and 2024 samples were discussed in the previous section, it is important to consider how these shifts may affect the interpretation of aggregate trends. In the Appendix, we present a composition-effect analysis that quantifies how changes in observable characteristics influence the predicted probability of each outcome, based on the pooled regression models as before. The results suggest that for 7 out of 10 outcomes, the demographic profile of the 2024 sample attenuates the observed shift in opinion, implying that the unadjusted findings are conservative. In the remaining three outcomes, the inflation is modest (all below 1.2 percentage points). These adjustments bolster our confidence that the descriptive findings presented below reflect real attitudinal shifts rather than artifacts of sampling variation.

Views on the Bilateral Relationship

Figure 1 displays Chinese public opinion across four indicators related to the US–China relationship: evaluations of whether relations have improved or worsened (Q1), perceptions of US attentiveness to China's interests (Q2), assessments of US economic influence on China (Q3a), and whether that influence is viewed as positive or negative (Q3b).

In 2020, Chinese perceptions of the bilateral relationship showed a modest rebound following the US election. The share of respondents who said relations had worsened dropped by 11 percentage points, while the proportion reporting improvement rose by nine points. This “Biden Bump” suggests that Chinese respondents viewed Biden's victory as a potential turning point for the relationship after the first Trump presidency. Nevertheless, the share of those who believed the relationship had worsened remained high at 64%.

By 2024, across both the pre- and post-election phases, the proportion of respondents describing US–China relations as having “worsened” dropped substantially—from 75% in

the 2020 pre-election wave to around 30% in the 2024 post-election survey. This shift was accompanied by a significant rise in the “remain the same” category, which increased by over 20 percentage points compared to 2020 levels. The notable increase in “do not know” responses in 2024 (15–16%) further reflects heightened uncertainty, likely stemming from the unexpected leadership transition from Biden to Harris and Trump’s return to office.

Regarding perceptions of whether the USA considers China’s interests, post-election optimism in 2020 led to a modest yet statistically significant increase in respondents selecting “a fair amount” or “a great deal.” By the 2024 pre-election period, this optimism appeared to have become entrenched, with 43% of respondents choosing one of these positive options. However, this figure declined to 37% post-election, a statistically significant drop. The downward shift suggests that expectations for improved US accommodation of Chinese interests diminished amid anticipation of a return to policies from the first Trump era.

Perceptions of US economic influence on China were consistently high across all four waves. In both 2020 and 2024, a majority of respondents believed that the USA had either “a fair amount” or “a great deal” of influence on China’s economic conditions. These numbers have remained stable since Biden took office, suggesting a durable public understanding of structural economic interdependence between the two countries. Interestingly, the lowest percentage was in the 2020 pre-election survey at 59%, with nearly 70% in the rest of the surveys. This suggests that Trump’s first term brought increased awareness of the importance of US influence on China’s economy.

However, views on whether this influence is positive or negative shifted over time, revealing a rather unusual pattern. In 2020, a slight majority (51%) and later a plurality across the two survey waves viewed US economic influence as negative. By 2024, these negative perceptions softened considerably, with only 27% characterizing US influence as negative in the pre-election wave, while 31% viewed it as positive. After Trump’s re-election, the share of negative views rose to 33%, while positive views fell to 22%. In both 2024 waves, a plurality (39 and 41%) chose “neither.” One plausible explanation for the downward shift in perceptions is the widespread belief that a positive legacy of both Trump’s trade war and Biden’s technology restrictions has been the strengthening of China’s domestic supply chains and its drive toward greater self-sufficiency.³³

The findings indicate that a growing segment of the Chinese public views the bilateral relationship as locked in a prolonged and predictable rivalry, one that is neither improving nor likely to worsen further. In terms of economic influence, Trump’s initial term heightened awareness of the USA’s role in shaping China’s economic trajectory, a perception that persisted throughout Biden’s presidency. Paradoxically, even as Biden maintained and escalated Trump-era measures, including expanded export controls on advanced semiconductors, the share of respondents viewing US influence as harmful declined significantly—from a peak of 51% at the outset of Biden’s term to just 27% by its conclusion. This shift may reflect increasing optimism about China’s capacity to endure external economic pressure.

Views of the USA and Its Role in the World

Figure 2 presents Chinese public opinion on three aspects of the USA’s global and domestic performance: whether the USA is more or less important in world affairs than a decade ago (Q4), how much confidence respondents have in the US president to do the right thing in global affairs (Q5), and whether the US government respects the personal freedoms of its people (Q6).

Perceptions of the US global role have become more divergent over time. In 2020, both before and after the presidential election, about two-thirds of respondents believed the

³³ Brian Spegele, “The Fortress That China Built for Its Battle with America,” *Wall Street Journal*, 21 May 2025, https://www.wsj.com/world/china/china-us-technology-economy-advancements-bb8d7439#comments_sector.

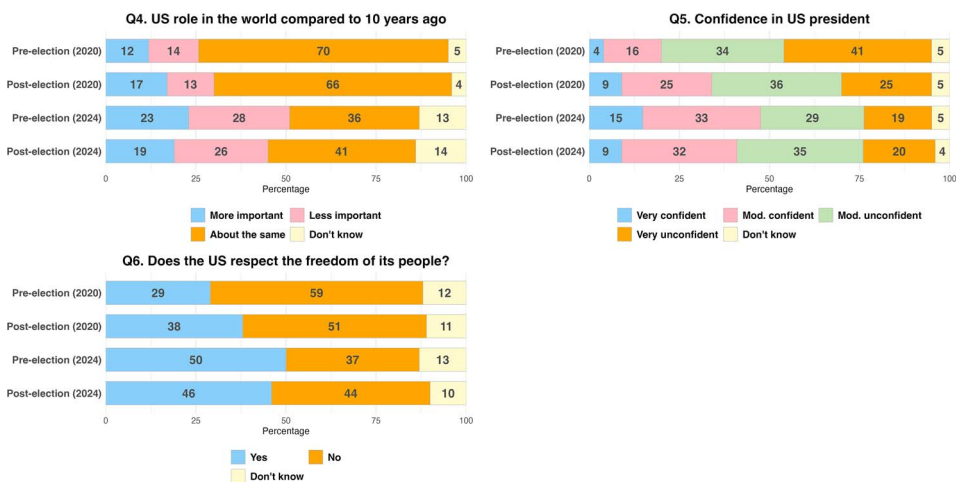


Fig. 2. Perceptions of the USA and Its Global Role. Note: percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Source: Authors' Surveys.

USA played “about the same” role as ten years earlier (66–70%). Perceptions of the US global role have become more divergent over time. In 2020, both before and after the presidential election, about two-thirds of respondents believed the USA played “about the same” role as ten years earlier (66–70%). By 2024, this “about the same” category had shrunk substantially, falling to 36 and 41% in the pre- and post-election waves. Meanwhile, the share of respondents saying the USA is “more important” increased from 12 to 19% over the four-year period, perhaps reflecting observation of its ability to build a strong coalition during the Ukraine war. At the same time, the proportion viewing the USA as “less important” also rose, from 14 to 26%. “Do not know” responses increased markedly as well. Taken together, these shifts suggest a declining consensus in Chinese views of the trajectory of US global power and a growing sense of uncertainty.

Views of the US president saw a sharp improvement after the 2020 election. The combined share of respondents expressing “very” or “moderate” confidence rose from 20 to 34% between waves, while the share expressing “very unconfident” dropped from 41 to 25%. Perceptions continued to improve over the next four years, peaking in the 2024 pre-election wave at 15% “very” and 33% “moderately” confident, a total of 48%. However, this figure declined by 7 percentage points in the post-election wave. At the same time, there was a corresponding seven-point increase in the proportion of respondents expressing a lack of confidence, likely in response to Trump’s re-election and reflecting Chinese skepticism toward his leadership style and anticipated policies.

Perceptions of USA respect for personal freedoms improved significantly between 2020 and 2024. In 2020, following Biden’s election, the percentage of respondents who said the USA respects the freedoms of its people rose moderately from 29 to 38%, while 51–59% said it does not. By 2024, the share responding “yes” increased to 50% in the pre-election wave—a 21-point gain from the end of the first Trump presidency. Although that figure dipped slightly to 46% after the election, it remained well above 2020 levels. This improvement likely reflects reduced media attention to US social unrest during the George Floyd protests and the COVID-19 response at the end of Trump’s first term. At the same time, negative responses rose from 37 to 44% between waves, suggesting renewed doubts about the US government’s domestic practices.

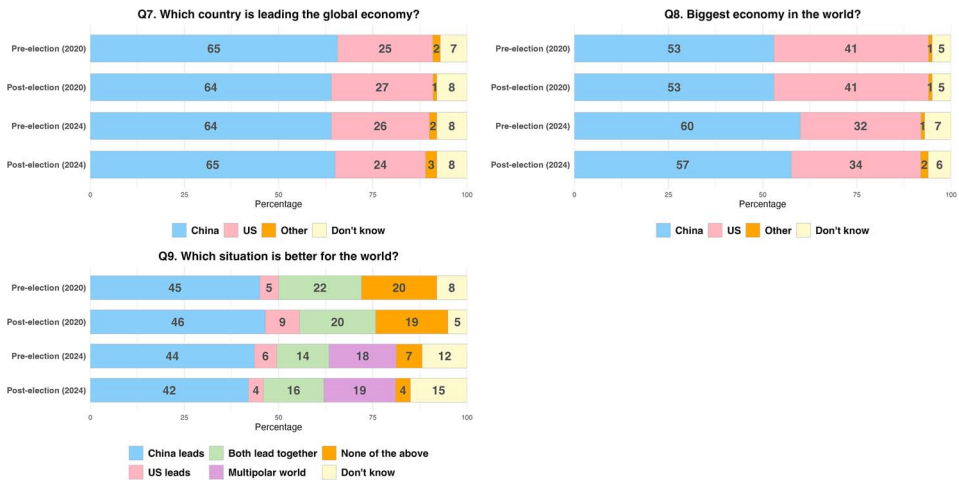


Fig. 3. China’s Status in the World Vis-à-Vis the USA. Note: percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Source: Authors’ Surveys.

These findings suggest that Chinese public opinion toward the USA is responsive to leadership changes and observable shifts in US policy rather than adhering to fixed ideological positions. The increase in confidence in the US president and improved perceptions of US respect for personal freedoms illustrate how Chinese views can shift with changes in Washington’s leadership. However, the post-2024 decline in confidence and renewed skepticism following Trump’s return highlight the fragility of these gains. The data also point to declining agreement among Chinese respondents regarding the trajectory of US global influence. It reflects mixed narratives about American power—on one hand, recognition of the US’s capacity to influence allies; on the other, a perception of its relative decline compared to the rest of the world.

Views of China’s Status in the World Vis-à-Vis the USA

Figure 3 presents Chinese public views of China’s relative position in the global economy (Q7 and Q8) and attitudes toward preferred configuration of global leadership (Q9). Across all four waves, the data show striking consistency in perceptions of China’s economic power, alongside more fluid views on the ideal global order, especially after the introduction of a new “multipolar world” option in 2024.

Respondents overwhelmingly saw China as the current leader of the global economy. In both 2020 and 2024, around 64–65% identified China as the leading economy, and these figures remained stable across all four waves. Perceptions of which country has the world’s largest economy were more cautious and showed slightly more variation. In 2020, across both waves, 53% of respondents said China had the biggest economy. By 2024, that figure rose to 60% in the pre-election wave before declining slightly to 57% post-election. Meanwhile, the share viewing the USA as having the largest economy fell from 41% in 2020 to 32–34% in 2024. These differences suggest that while the public consistently views China as dominant in relative terms, there is modest sensitivity to the distinction between economic leadership and absolute size.

Views on the preferred global order reflected both continuity and change. Across all four waves, a clear plurality (42 to 46%) favored a world led by China, while support for US leadership remained minimal (4 to 9%). Most interestingly, there was notable support for joint US–China leadership, with around 20% in the 2020 surveys and 14–16% in 2024,

even after the introduction of a new response option. In the 2024 survey, “a multipolar world” was added as an alternative and attracted 18% support in the pre-election wave and 19% post-election, making it the second most preferred option. The inclusion of this choice appears to have provided an outlet for respondents who were dissatisfied or only partially satisfied with the binary options presented in 2020. Meanwhile, the rise in “do not know” responses—from 5–8% in 2020 to 12–15% in 2024—signals growing ambivalence amid an increasingly uncertain global environment.

Taken together, these results show a broad and stable public consensus on China’s global economic ascendancy, resilient to leadership changes in the USA and fluctuations in bilateral relations. A substantial portion of respondents consistently supports Chinese global leadership, though this view has not reached majority status. At the same time, a sizable share favors alternative arrangements, including multipolarity and joint leadership with the USA.

Effects of Individual Attributes on Attitudes

While the findings from the preceding section reveal broad patterns in Chinese public opinion across two US presidential election cycles, they do not shed light on how individual characteristics shape these attitudes. In this section, we turn to an individual-level analysis of the 2024 survey data.³⁴ Where relevant, we draw comparisons across the two election cycles to highlight key continuities and shifts.

Our analysis examines how four theoretically informed attributes—age, education, nationalism, and personal experience in the USA—correlate with public opinion on the bilateral relationship and China’s global position. These variables were also central to our 2020 study and continue to offer insight into how generational context, ideological orientation, and cross-national exposure shape foreign policy preferences. Age and education serve as proxies for generational socialization and cognitive resources; nationalism reflects the degree of alignment with state narratives; and experience in the USA captures the moderating or polarizing effects of direct exposure to a rival power.³⁵

We estimate a series of probit models with each of the main survey outcomes as dependent variables. All models include the four explanatory variables and control for baseline demographics, including gender, urban residency, region (coastal vs. inland), and CPC membership, as shown in Table 2. We ran the models separately for the 2024 pre- and post-election waves as well as for the pooled data. The findings presented in Figure 4 are based on the pooled sample, which allows us to maximize statistical power and assess stable correlates of opinion across both political moments. The wave-specific models are reported in the appendix and yield broadly consistent results.

Age Cohorts

Respondents born in the 1990s or later, often referred to as the “post-90s” generation, are significantly more likely to say that US–China relations are deteriorating (+8%) compared to their older counterparts. However, in 2024, there is no significant age-based difference in views on the US impact on China’s economy, suggesting a convergence of expectations across generations regarding economic dynamics. Where the post-90s cohort clearly stands out is in its heightened confidence in China’s global position. They are more likely to say that the USA is less important than it was ten years ago (+7%), China is the leading economy (+7%), and to support the view that a China- or China–US-led world is preferable (+9%).

³⁴ For the analysis of the 2020 results, see Fang et al., “Chinese Public Opinion about US–China Relations from Trump to Biden.”

³⁵ Also see Dong Wang et al., “The Effect of Imagined Social Contact on Chinese Students’ Perceptions of Japanese People,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (2021), pp. 223–51.

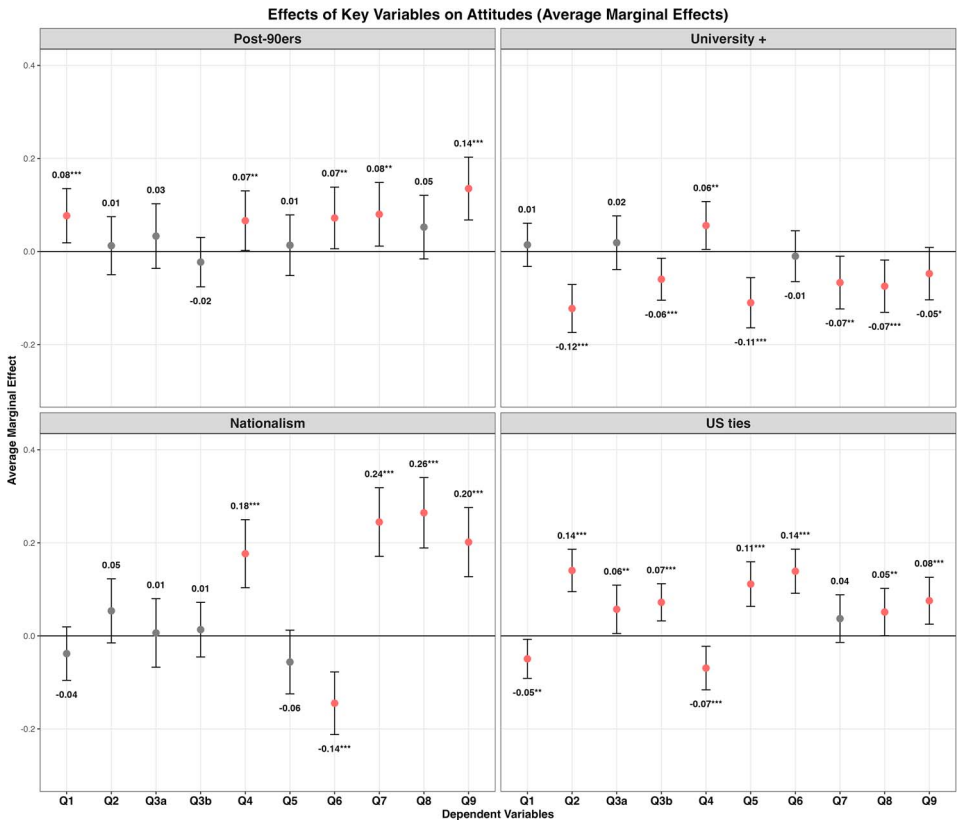


Fig. 4. Effects of Individual Attributes on Attitudes. Note: The dependent variables are dichotomized, with 1 indicating the following: a worsening US–China relationship (Q1); belief that the USA considers China’s interests (Q2); perception that the USA has a large (Q3a) and positive (Q3b) impact on China’s economy; belief that the USA is less important compared to ten years ago (Q4); confidence in the US president’s handling of world affairs (Q5); belief that the USA respects its people’s freedoms (Q6); perception that China is the leading (Q7) and the largest (Q8) economy; and preference for China or joint US–China leadership as the best global arrangement (Q9). Dots represent average marginal effects, and bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Full estimation results are available in the online appendix. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Source: Authors’ Surveys.

These patterns depart from the findings of our 2020 study, when younger respondents were largely aligned with older cohorts and showed less support for a China- or China–US-led global order.

Education

The 2024 results reinforce findings from 2020, showing that university-educated respondents are systematically more critical of the USA, while also expressing less triumphalism about China’s economic position. Compared to their less-educated peers, university graduates are 12% less likely to believe that the USA considers China’s interests in its foreign policy decisions. They are also less likely to view the USA as having a positive impact on China’s economy (–6%) and express lower confidence in the US president’s handling of world affairs (–11%).

At the same time, higher education correlates with a more tempered view of China’s economic standing. University-educated respondents are less likely to believe that China is

the world's leading economy (−7%) or the largest by size (−7%). This group may be more attuned to economic indicators and aware of the challenges facing China's economy, making them less susceptible to triumphalist narratives—even as they are more likely to say that the USA is less globally important than it was a decade ago. Taken together, these results suggest a greater capacity among educated respondents to critically assess more extreme narratives on both sides.

Nationalism

As in the 2020 study, respondents scoring high on the nationalism index are significantly more likely to express strong skepticism toward US global leadership and domestic practices. Even more striking are the effects of nationalism on perceptions of China's rise: nationalists are 24% more likely to say that China is the leading economy and 26% more likely to view it as the largest. They are also 24% more likely to prefer a China-led or China–US–led global order.

However, unlike in 2020, nationalism in 2024 is not significantly associated with perceptions of a worsening bilateral relationship, views of US disregard for China's interests, or assessments of US economic influence on China. This shift suggests a growing consensus within Chinese society about the nature of the US–China relationship, regardless of nationalist sentiment.

Personal Ties

Among all individual-level traits, personal ties to the USA exert the most consistently moderating influence on Chinese public opinion. In both 2020 and 2024, respondents with US experience—whether through study, work, or family—demonstrate more favorable assessments of the USA across nearly every dimension, even as the broader environment has grown more adversarial. These effects persist even after controlling for education, region, and other demographic variables, underscoring the enduring power of direct exposure in shaping cross-national attitudes.

In the 2024 surveys, respondents with US ties consistently express more favorable views toward the USA across multiple dimensions compared to their counterparts. Those with US experience are 5% less likely to say that US–China relations are deteriorating and 14% more likely to believe that the USA considers China's interests in its foreign policy. They are also more inclined to recognize US influence on China's economy (+6%) and 7% more likely to view that influence as positive. These findings echo the 2020 results, in which respondents with US connections similarly expressed greater optimism about the bilateral relationship.

Personal ties also translate into stronger endorsement of American global leadership and domestic values. Respondents with US experience are 7% less likely to say that the USA is becoming less important globally, 11% more likely to express confidence in the US president's handling of international affairs, and 14% more likely to believe that the USA respects personal freedoms. These patterns suggest that personal experience not only softens animosity but also fosters greater appreciation for American global status and domestic political institutions.

Crucially, and reinforcing a pattern first observed in the 2020 survey, this more favorable orientation toward the USA does not come at the expense of confidence in China. Respondents with US ties are also 5% more likely to say that China is the world's largest economy. In other words, cross-national exposure does not produce a zero-sum reassessment of global standing. Personal experience with the USA appears to coexist with strong confidence in China's economic strength. These patterns suggest a more pluralistic worldview. Notably, US ties are also significantly associated with support for a China-led or jointly led global order.

Preferences for a Multipolar World

The 2024 survey introduced a new response option measuring support for a multipolar world, providing fresh insights into public preferences regarding global leadership arrangements. As detailed in the [Appendix Table 9](#), urban, educated, and male respondents demonstrate significantly higher support for multipolarity. These demographic groups—typically more exposed to discourses framing multipolarity as an alternative to US hegemony—also tend to be more attentive to international affairs.

A pronounced gender gap emerges in these preferences: men are 9.5 percentage points more likely than women to favor a multipolar world and 8 percentage points less likely to support either Chinese leadership or joint China–US leadership. Further analysis reveals that while men exhibit marginally greater preference for joint US–China leadership compared to women, their overall lower support for China-led leadership drives this disparity. Women, conversely, show stronger preference for China-exclusive leadership. This gendered pattern merits deeper investigation in future research.

Open-Ended Answers

As noted earlier, the 2024 survey included open-ended follow-up questions after two items to better understand the motivations behind respondents' perceptions, one following Q1, regarding their assessment of bilateral relations, and another following Q9, concerning their preferred model of global leadership. In this section, we analyze the responses to these two questions. We first removed responses that were empty, unintelligible, or too vague to interpret meaningfully. We then conducted a keyword-based thematic classification of the remaining responses to identify recurring patterns and rationales.

Factors Shaping Views of US–China Relations

In analyzing the open-ended responses to the question, “How have US–China relations changed over the past year?” we focused on two groups, beginning with those who believed the relationship had worsened. Among the 376 valid responses in this group, the dominant theme, mentioned in 36% of cases, involved the escalation of US economic sanctions and trade restrictions. Many referred to actions such as tariffs, supply chain decoupling, and sanctions targeting Chinese firms. As one respondent explained, “Trade disputes have become more frequent” (贸易纠纷更加频繁), while another wrote, “They use various financial systems and tariffs as economic tools to sanction us” (用各种各样金融制度和关税等经济手段制裁我们).

A second theme, present in 6% of responses, emphasized strategic rivalry and intensifying political conflict, particularly in areas such as security and ideology. One respondent noted, “The two countries differ ideologically, and the USA makes things difficult for China in every way” (两个国家意识形态不同 美国处处为难中国), while another observed, “Geopolitical conditions are worsening and becoming increasingly hostile” (地缘政治恶化, 越来越敌对). Many also mentioned Taiwan, commenting that “The USA continues to sell weapons to Taiwan” (美国持续向台湾地区售卖武器) and “The USA keeps stirring up issues over Taiwan” (美国持续在台湾问题上做文章).

A third theme, found in 5% of responses, reflected moral condemnation of the USA. These responses often characterized the USA as selfish, hegemonic, or hostile. For example: “The US government is too overbearing and selfish” (美国政府太霸道了, 太自私自利了), and “The USA is a hegemonic country that is hostile toward us” (美国是一个霸权主义国家, 对我们有敌意).

Roughly 53% of the responses were too vague or idiosyncratic to be confidently classified. These often included general expressions such as “relations are tense” or “things are getting worse,” without specifying why.

In contrast, among the 230 respondents who perceived an improvement in relations, the most common explanation, accounting for 29%, reflected a sense of domestic optimism or national strength. These respondents appeared to project China's internal progress—rising living standards, technological advancement, and economic growth—onto its international relations. As one respondent put it, “Life is becoming more comfortable” (生活越来越舒服了), while another observed, “The domestic situation is gradually improving” (国内形势走向逐渐开朗).

Another 7% of responses attributed the improvement to recent diplomatic efforts, pointing to expanded dialog, high-level visits, and signs of renewed engagement. One remarked, “The meetings between Chinese and American leaders in Bali and San Francisco laid a foundation for improving relations” (中美两国领导人在巴厘岛和旧金山的会晤为两国关系的改善奠定了基础), while another noted, “China and the USA share common interests; there's been more interaction, and relations have somewhat improved” (中国和美国有共同利益的存在, 交流更多了, 关系变好了一些).

A smaller group (6%) emphasized peace and stability, expressing hope that the two sides would avoid conflict. As one noted, “Only peaceful coexistence will lead to a better future” (只有和平相处才会更好), while another stated, “Because peace and development are the defining themes of our time” (因为和平与发展是当代世界的主题).

The remaining 57% of responses either offered no clear explanation (e.g., “I like it,” “It's getting better”) or were too ambiguous to categorize under a specific theme.

Drivers of Support for Competing Global Orders

Responses to the question, “Why do you believe this model of global leadership is best for the world?” were generally more clearly articulated and thematically concentrated. Among the 580 valid responses who preferred a China-led global order, the dominant rationale (36%) was China's material strength and modernization. These respondents highlighted China's economic power, technological advancement, and leadership capacity. As one noted, “China has made significant progress in areas like AI and 5G” (在科技领域, 中国取得了显著进步, 特别是在人工智能, 5G 通信技术等方面). A second theme, cited by 17% of respondents, emphasized China's commitment to peace and justice. One respondent stated, “China is the country most committed to peace in the world” (中国是最强调和平的国家), while another explained, “China adheres to a path of peaceful development and is committed to safeguarding global peace and stability” (中国坚持和平发展道路, 致力于维护世界和平与稳定). A few respondents highlighted China's potential to help other nations, perceiving it as a benevolent leader capable of promoting shared prosperity. As one put it, “China can lead other countries to prosper together” (中国带领其他国家一起富裕). The remainder of the responses (47%) were too vague or generalized to classify into a coherent theme, often consisting of brief patriotic statements or references to national pride.

Among the 202 respondents who preferred joint US–China leadership, the most common rationale (34%) was a belief that great powers should lead together. Many emphasized the strength or global standing of both countries. One respondent put it simply: “They are both powerful” (两个国家都很强大), while another stated, “Only through the alliance of strong powers can we become even stronger” (只有强强联合, 才能使我们更强大). A second group (33%) justified this position based on economic parity, noting that “China and the USA are the world's two largest economies” (中国和美国的经济总量排名第一和第二, 所以他们两个共同领导世界). A small number of respondents offered more elaborate justifications that reflected broader geopolitical reasoning. These responses emphasized the necessity of US–China cooperation under multilateral norms, or described joint leadership as a pragmatic solution grounded in both realism and Chinese values of peace and restraint. Nearly half of the responses (47%) were too brief or general to assign to a specific theme.

Respondents who endorsed a multipolar world including both China and the USA expressed a diverse range of views, though many emphasized shared governance and pluralism. Of the 248 valid responses in this group, the most common rationale (34%) highlighted the importance of shared responsibility and inclusiveness, calling for collective leadership, mutual respect, and diversity in global affairs. As one respondent wrote, “The Earth belongs to everyone; it’s a big collective” (地球是大家的, 是大集体). Another elaborated, “A multipolar world including China and the USA would be more equal. Countries could supervise each other, contribute to peaceful development, and avoid domination or bloc politics” (包括中美的多极世界会更加平等, 同时每个国家之间都能够相互监督, 能够起到共同和平发展的作用, 不会一家独大或者团体化).

Other themes, while less frequent, were still notable. About 12% of respondents emphasized the importance of fairness and balanced development, such as one who stated, “A multipolar world is more conducive to global peace and development and aligns with the interests of all countries” (多级世界更有利于全球和平发展, 符合各国人民利益). Another 5% described multipolarity as a natural or inevitable trend, pointing to the declining dominance of any single power and a global shift toward greater complexity. Comments like “Multipolarity is the trend of the future” (多极化是未来的趋势) and “This is the direction of global development” (这是世界发展的方向) reflect this view. An additional 4% expressed clear opposition to unipolarity or hegemonic dominance, as in the remark, “The world doesn’t need hegemony or unipolarity” (世界不需要霸权和单一).

Support for a US-led world order was relatively limited, with 67 respondents offering clear justifications. Among them, the most common rationale (43%) cited the USA’s material strength, particularly its technological and economic leadership. As one respondent put it, “The USA is strong in both economy and technology” (在经济和科技领域都很强大), while others highlighted its global leadership and innovation. A smaller group (15%) pointed to American values or political institutions, exemplified by the remark, “Because American values and governance are the best” (因为美国的价值观和治理是最好的). The remaining 42% gave responses that were too brief or ambiguous to assign a clear theme.

Conclusion

This study provides a rare, longitudinal analysis of how Chinese public opinion on key dimensions of great power competition has evolved during a turbulent period in US–China relations. Based on paired pre- and post-election surveys conducted during the 2020 and 2024 US presidential elections, we go beyond simple measures of US favorability to examine Chinese views on bilateral relations, US global leadership, domestic governance, and China’s international standing. By comparing results across the two election cycles, we assess how these perceptions differ across demographic groups and over time.

Our analysis reveals a public that is highly attentive to US political transitions, yet increasingly steady in its views on key aspects of the bilateral relationship after experiencing both the Trump and Biden presidencies. In our 2020 post-election survey, we observed a “Biden Bump”—a notable positive shift in Chinese evaluations of the bilateral relationship, confidence in US global leadership, and perceptions of American respect for its citizens’ personal freedoms. These gains not only persisted over the next four years but, in most cases, expanded significantly. However, they declined following Trump’s re-election in 2024.

The one exception lies in perceptions of whether the relationship has improved. Although positive views have remained consistently low, there was a significant shift during the Biden presidency from assessments of the relationship as “worsening” to “staying the same.” This suggests that expectations have stabilized: many now view the relationship as characterized by persistent friction, with little anticipation of rapid improvement or further deterioration. Biden’s decision to maintain Trump-era tariffs and adopt a similarly competitive posture

toward China, particularly in technology sectors, likely contributed to a sense of policy continuity, regardless of who occupies the White House. This reflects a public adaptation to political realities and a growing normalization of geopolitical competition in Chinese public consciousness.

The dimension where public consensus has formed and stabilized across the two presidential election cycles is perceptions of China's standing and role in the world. Nearly two-thirds of respondents consistently view China as the leading economy in the world, and a growing majority have regarded it as the largest economy across all four survey waves. However, despite this economic confidence, only a stable plurality prefers China as the sole global leader. Most Chinese citizens favor either alternative leadership arrangements—such as multipolarity or joint leadership with the USA—or express uncertainty about which structure would be best.

Additional individual-level analysis shows that younger, more educated, nationalist, and globally connected individuals interpret the same international events through distinct lenses. The post-90s cohort now expresses greater confidence in China's global position and stronger support for China-centered leadership models, marking a shift from 2020, when their views closely aligned with those of older generations. Higher education tends to temper triumphalist narratives about China while heightening skepticism toward US leadership. Nationalism, by contrast, reinforces belief in Chinese primacy and deepens distrust of America's commitment to its professed values.

Personal ties to the USA exert the most consistent moderating influence on Chinese public opinion, with respondents who have US experience expressing more favorable views of the USA across nearly every dimension in both 2020 and 2024. These individuals are more likely to trust US leadership, recognize its global influence, and endorse its values—without diminishing their confidence in China's own global position. These patterns collectively suggest that while structural dynamics set the backdrop for public opinion, both shifts in international power relations and domestic policy changes, alongside lived experiences, mediate how Chinese citizens evaluate the bilateral relationship.

These findings carry important policy implications. As we noted earlier, understanding a nation's public opinion helps anticipate its policy choices and clarify, indirectly, what trade-offs the public may be willing to accept in times of crisis to support those choices. Like military and economic intelligence, accurate assessments of public sentiment should be incorporated into governments' foreign policy calculations and expectations of policy outcomes. Doing so can help minimize miscalculations and reduce the risk of costly conflict between nations. In this regard, both American and Chinese public opinion exert a disproportionate influence on global affairs, not only because of their respective governments' global reach, but also because these publics are increasingly attentive, opinionated, and politically consequential. Understanding their evolving views is thus essential for managing competition, sustaining diplomacy, and preserving global stability.

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