

HOW CHINA'S POST-1980 GENERATION IS POLITICALLY DIFFERENT

SHAN Wei

EAI Background Brief No. 1279

Date of Publication: 7 September 2017

Executive Summary

1. The post-1980 generation constitutes the first batch of people born after the launch of China's economic reform and the one-child policy. They are about to take leadership role in all trades and professions in the country. Their political attitudes are hence important for understanding China's political future.
2. Four waves of national public opinions surveys provide a comprehensive profile of the post-1980s' nationalistic inclination, political trust, political interest, and other attitudes and behaviour.
3. Data analysis reveals significant generational gap between the post-1980s and older cohorts. As the most educated generation and growing up with "patriotic education", this group is not as nationalistic as many have expected. In reality, they are the least nationalistic among Chinese citizens.
4. The cohort is more sceptical of both the central government and local governments than the older generations. They show little interest in politics, though they are more confident of participating in the discussion of public issues.
5. This confidence, however, did not translate into action. The post-1980s are not only less likely to vote in state-controlled elections, but also no more proactive than other generations to stand up for their interests or rights.
6. The generational gap may be due to value changes in Chinese society brought about by economic development and modernisation. The post-1980s are more open to the outside world and are more likely to abandon traditional family values and develop a democratic orientation.
7. In the short term, political apathy and inactiveness may work in favour of Beijing, which provides the government with the room to guide, coopt and tame these youth.

8. In the long term, however, Beijing will have to face a society led by the more critical and less obedient post-1980s.
9. China's political future depends on how successful the Party adapts itself to social changes brought about by the post-1980 cohort, or how successful the Party is in guiding, coopting and controlling this young generation to make them more compliant.