

Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China

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1 Motivations

2 Research Design

3 Results

Conceptual Framework

Existing research shows that authoritarian regimes exhibit responsiveness to citizens (Distelhorst and Hou 2014; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Truex 2014; Wang 2004; Weeks 2008)

We ask what the sources of authoritarian responsiveness might be

- Citizen engagement / threat of collective action
- Formal authoritarian rules
- Attention to core supporters

Hypotheses

- H1 Threats of collective action increases responsiveness of subnational governments to citizen demands.
- H2 Evoking the oversight of upper level leaders increases responsiveness of subnational governments to citizen demands.
- H3 Claims of loyal, CCP membership increases responsiveness of subnational governments to citizen demands.

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Online Field Experiment

- Submit information requests to county-government web forums with random assignment
- Requests for *dibao* (Minimum Livelihood Guarantee Scheme) of four treatment and control conditions
- Successfully submitted requests to 2,103 counties

Control Condition

Respected leader:

My wife and I have lost our jobs, and we have been unable to find work for a long time. Our economic situation is very difficult, and we cannot make ends meet. We have to support my elderly mother who is ill and for whom we have to buy medicine. We also have our son who is in school and has school fees and living fees that are difficult to bear. I have tried to apply for *Dibao* through my residential committee, but they say I am not eligible.

Can you help my family obtain *Dibao*? Much gratitude!

Yours,

[Common male name]

Treatment 1

Respected leader:

My wife and I have lost our jobs, and we have been unable to find work for a long time. Our economic situation is very difficult, and we cannot make ends meet. We have to support my elderly mother who is ill and for whom we have to buy medicine. We also have our son who is in school and has school fees and living fees that are difficult to bear. I have tried to apply for *Dibao* through my residential committee, but they say I am not eligible.

People around me are in a similar situation, they face difficulties, and they also can't get *Dibao*. If you can't help, we'll try to figure out what we can do collectively about this situation. Can you help my family obtain *Dibao*? Much gratitude!

Yours,

[Common male name]

Treatment 2

Respected leader:

My wife and I have lost our jobs, and we have been unable to find work for a long time. Our economic situation is very difficult, and we cannot make ends meet. We have to support my elderly mother who is ill and for whom we have to buy medicine. We also have our son who is in school and has school fees and living fees that are difficult to bear. I have tried to apply for *Dibao* through my residential committee, but they say I am not eligible.

If this problem cannot be addressed, I'll have to report it to upper-level government officials. Can you help my family obtain *Dibao*? Much gratitude!

Yours,

[Common male name]

Treatment 3

Respected leader:

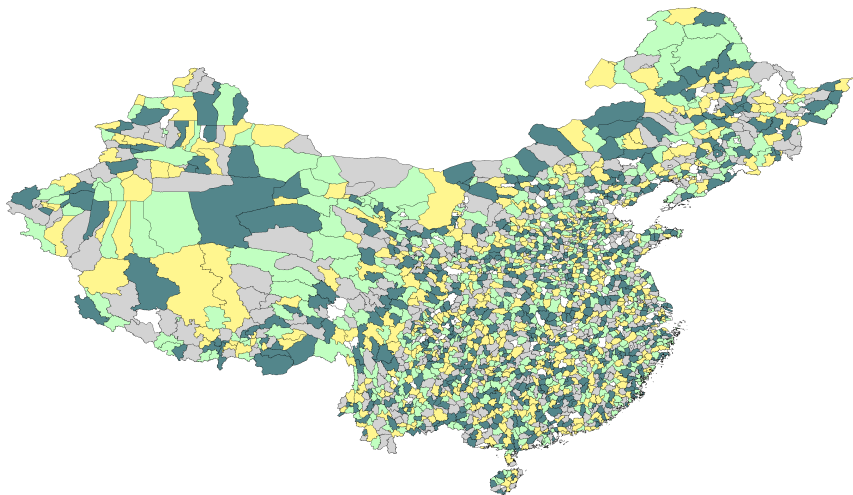
My wife and I have lost our jobs, and we have been unable to find work for a long time. Our economic situation is very difficult, and we cannot make ends meet. We have to support my elderly mother who is ill and for whom we have to buy medicine. We also have our son who is in school and has school fees and living fees that are difficult to bear. I have tried to apply for *Dibao* through my residential committee, but they say I am not eligible.

I'm a long-standing CCP member, I've always followed the leadership of the Party. Can you help my family obtain *Dibao*?
Much gratitude!

Yours,

[Common male name]

Stratified Randomization by Prefecture (excluding Taiwan)



Covariate Balance Across Treatment Groups

	Control	T1: CA Threat	T2: Tattle Threat	T3: Loyalty Claim	<i>p</i> -value
Log population	12.7	12.7	12.7	12.8	0.84
Log population (2000)	12.7	12.7	12.7	12.7	0.85
Population growth (2000-10 %)	5.06	4.91	5.02	5.07	0.85
Gender ratio (female = 1.00)	1.05	1.05	1.06	1.06	0.44
Log population density (person/km ²)	14.8	14.8	14.9	15.0	0.49
Migrant (%)	16.8	16.5	17.1	17.1	0.85
Non-agriculture household (%)	29.1	29.5	29.1	30.5	0.63
Permanent urban residents (%)	23.2	23.4	23.1	24.0	0.54
Average years of education	8.69	8.72	8.69	8.76	0.79
Illiteracy rate (%)	6.43	6.33	6.33	6.28	0.99
Ethnic minority (%)	17.1	15.8	15.7	16.3	0.78
Unemployment rate (%)	3.26	3.26	3.22	3.44	0.54
Large enterprises	51.7	51.4	52.1	49.9	0.96

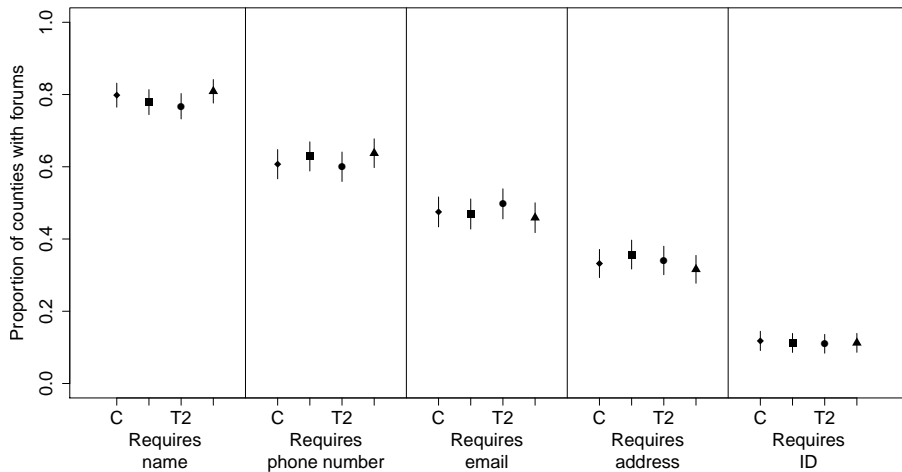
Covariate Balance Across Treatment Groups (cont.)

	Control	T1: CA Threat	T2: Tattle Threat	T3: Loyalty Claim	<i>p</i> -value
Work force in agriculture (%)	52.6	51.8	52.2	50.5	0.48
Work force in industry (%)	20.0	20.4	20.9	21.3	0.36
Work force in services (%)	27.2	27.8	26.9	28.2	0.44
GDP per capita (1,000 CNY)	25.3	25.3	24.4	24.8	0.77
Log GDP per capita	9.89	9.90	9.89	9.89	0.99
Log GDP	8.84	8.83	8.84	8.85	0.98
Avg. nominal GDP growth (2000-10)	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.97
Log agricultural output	7.13	7.13	7.13	7.14	1.00
Log industrial output	7.96	7.95	7.97	7.99	0.96
Log services output	7.68	7.69	7.69	7.69	1.00
Log total investment	8.43	8.42	8.43	8.45	0.96
Log total saving	6.77	6.81	6.80	6.82	0.93
Log total gov't revenue	5.74	5.72	5.76	5.74	0.98
Log total gov't expenditure	7.15	7.13	7.14	7.15	0.91

Online Field Experiment

- Information requests submitted to county-government web forums with random assignment
- Four treatment and control conditions
- Successfully submitted requests to 2,103 counties
- Outcome of interest: responsiveness (response, publicly viewable, speed, content)
- Collected data on website characteristics

Posting Requirements



Ethical Considerations

- Minimize wasting government resources
- Avoid “Contaminating the pool” for future researchers
- Prevent damaging responsiveness to real Dibao applicants
- Protect human subjects, the research team

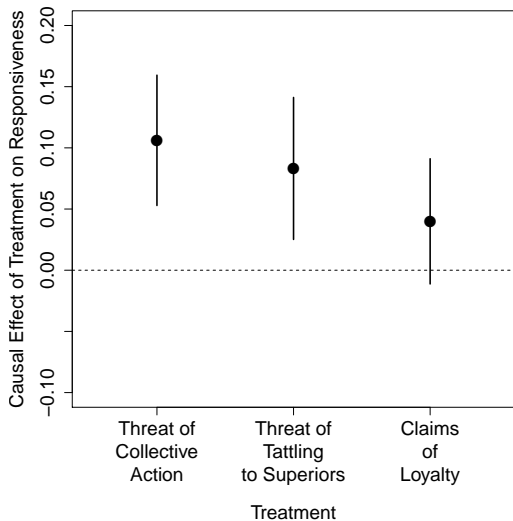
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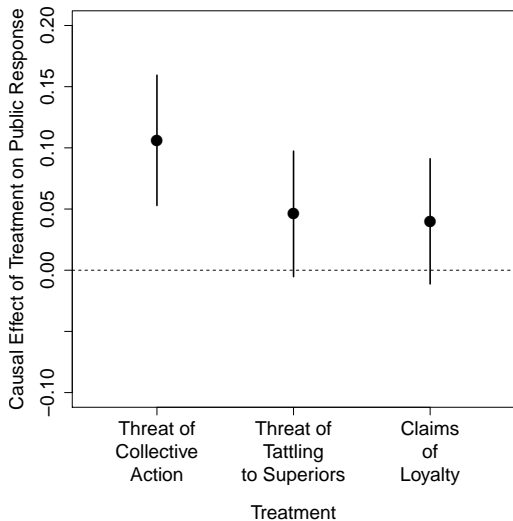
Causal Effects on Responsiveness

Responsiveness to
control condition:
32%



Causal Effects on Publicly Viewable Responses

Responsiveness to
control condition:
21%



Content of Responses

- Deferral: response does not provide an answer to the question of how to obtain Dibao
- Referral: response suggests contacting another agency for further assistance
- Direct Information: response provides information to answer questions in request

Deferral

Hello letter writer! Your question does not contain enough specificity, for example, your address.

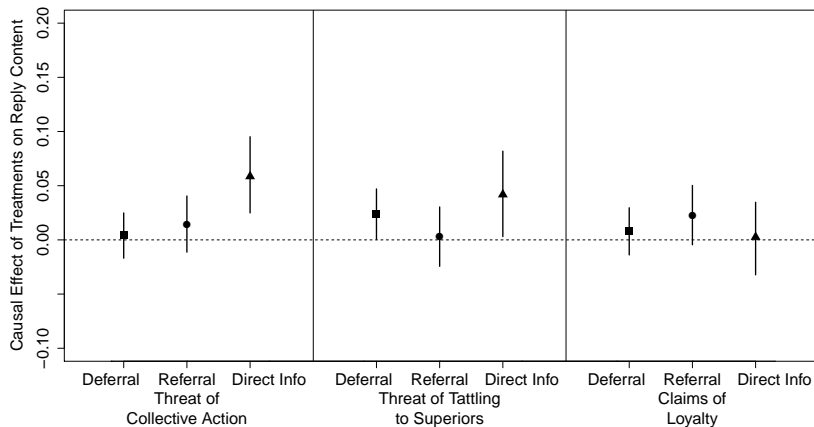
Referral

*Hello, you must meet certain requirements to apply for Dibao, based on the situation you describe, we cannot determine your eligibility. Please consult with the department of civil affairs for Dibao information. Telephone: ****373.*

Direct Information

*XX comrade, hello! First, thank you for your interest and support in our work on civil affairs. Eligibility for Dibao is based on household income. In your post, you did not specify your household income, nor did you specify whether you are a rural or urban household. For example, this year, in our city, the rural Dibao level is 2400 yuan. If your household's annual income is less than 2400 yuan, you have initial eligibility to apply for Dibao. But, whether you can receive Dibao is based on a rigorous set of criteria, which I cannot detail line by line here. Please go to the Hukou (household registration) office of the township civil affairs department to obtain detailed information. You can also obtain information by phone, our phone number is ****287. In addition, since the district-level civil affairs agency only has ability to review Dibao applications, and since the township government leads evaluation of Dibao eligibility, you can give your detailed information to the township office, who we believe will take your detailed information and provide preliminary advice on whether you are eligible to receive Dibao.*

Causal Effects on Reply Content



Concluding Remarks

- We find
 - One third county level governments responsive online
 - Threats of collective action and tattling lead to increases in responsiveness
 - Threats of collective action lead to public response
 - Identifying as loyal, long-standing members of CCP no effect
- Possible implications
 - Responsiveness from formal rules
 - Responsiveness from citizen engagement