

# Why Do Authoritarian Regimes Allow Citizens to Voice Opinions Publicly?

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7th BNUBS-GATE Workshop

August 26, 2016

# Motivation: Paradoxical Tendencies



- ▶ On the one hand — limited freedom of speech (authoritarians strive for control over information)

## Motivation: Paradoxical Tendencies

- ▶ On the other hand — some openness and policy responsiveness
- ▶ The case of China:
  - ▶ More than 10% of urbanites complain about the government in regards to everyday matters
  - ▶ 54.8% report that complaining helps solve their problems
  - ▶ Issues of complaints: food & drug safety, public security, utilities, community environment, health care,...

## Motivation: Authoritarianism with Public Communication

- ▶ Public communication: a process through which citizens publicly express preferences/opinions.
- ▶ Institutions that allow certain forms of public communication: media, internet, government websites, legislative hearings, People's Political Consultative Conference, ...
- ▶ Citizens' expressions are heard not only **by the government**, but also **by each other**.

## Motivation: Puzzle

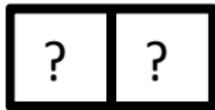
- ▶ Classical argument: complaints facilitate protests and cause social instability.
- ▶ Why would some authoritarian regimes allow people to publicly complain, while some others don't?

## Our Explanation

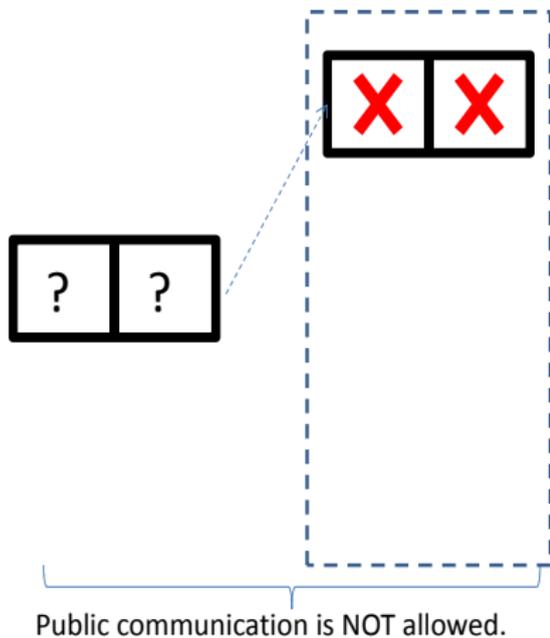
Potential benefits of allowing citizens to speak

- ▶ [1] to **improve the policy based on public opinion**  
Government's strategic response to revealed public opinion mitigates the cost of public expression of discontent
- ▶ [2] to **reshape citizens' beliefs** and to **discourage them** by revealing that citizens are divided on the issue  
Possibly tilt the cost and benefit of public communication in favor of openness

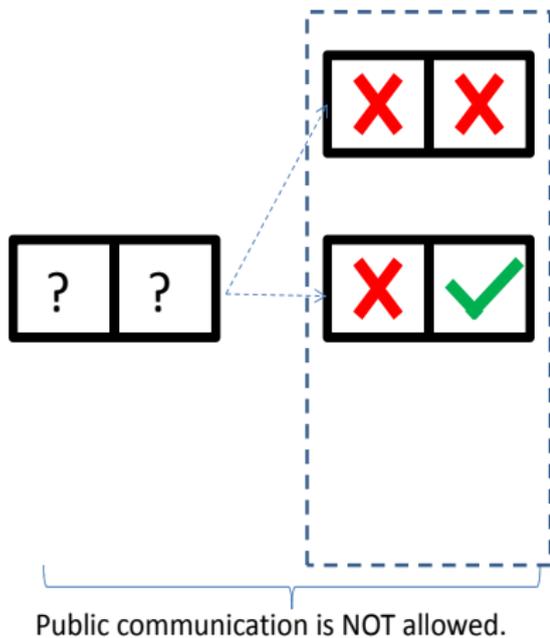
## An Illustration of the Idea



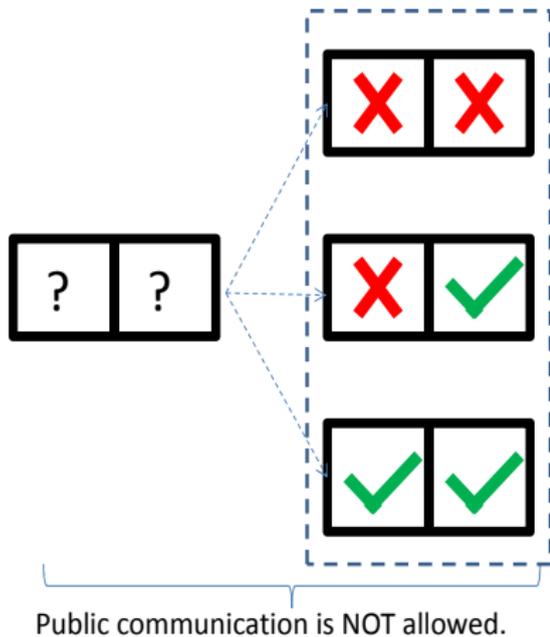
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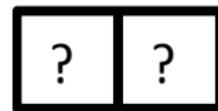
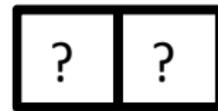
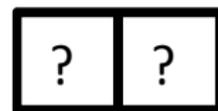
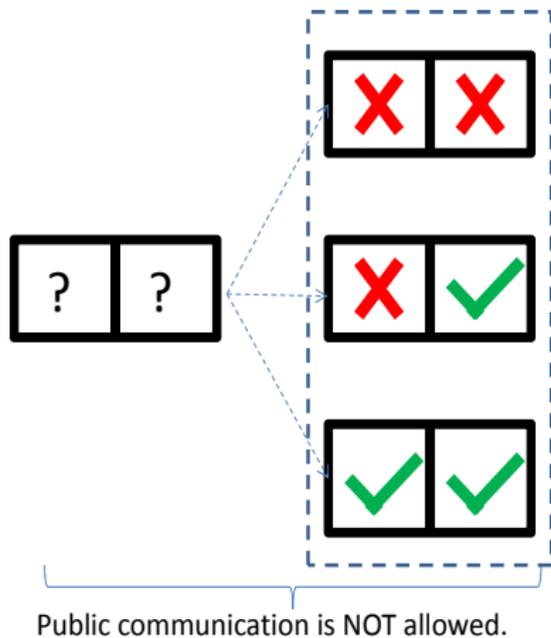
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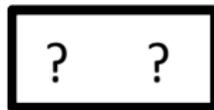
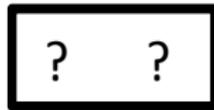
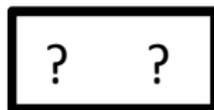
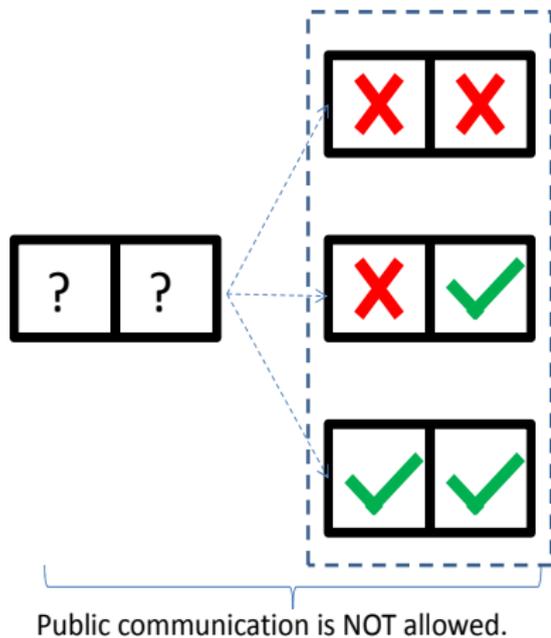


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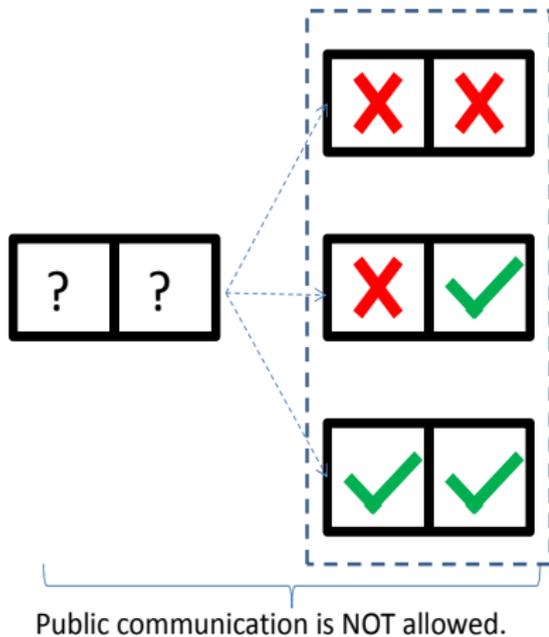
Public communication is allowed.

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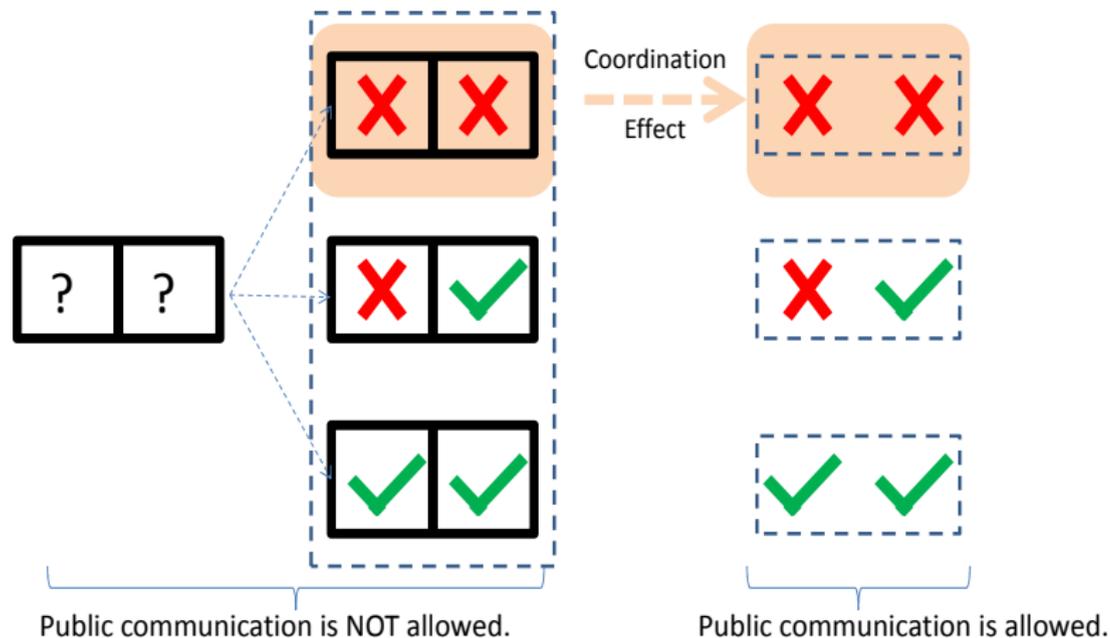
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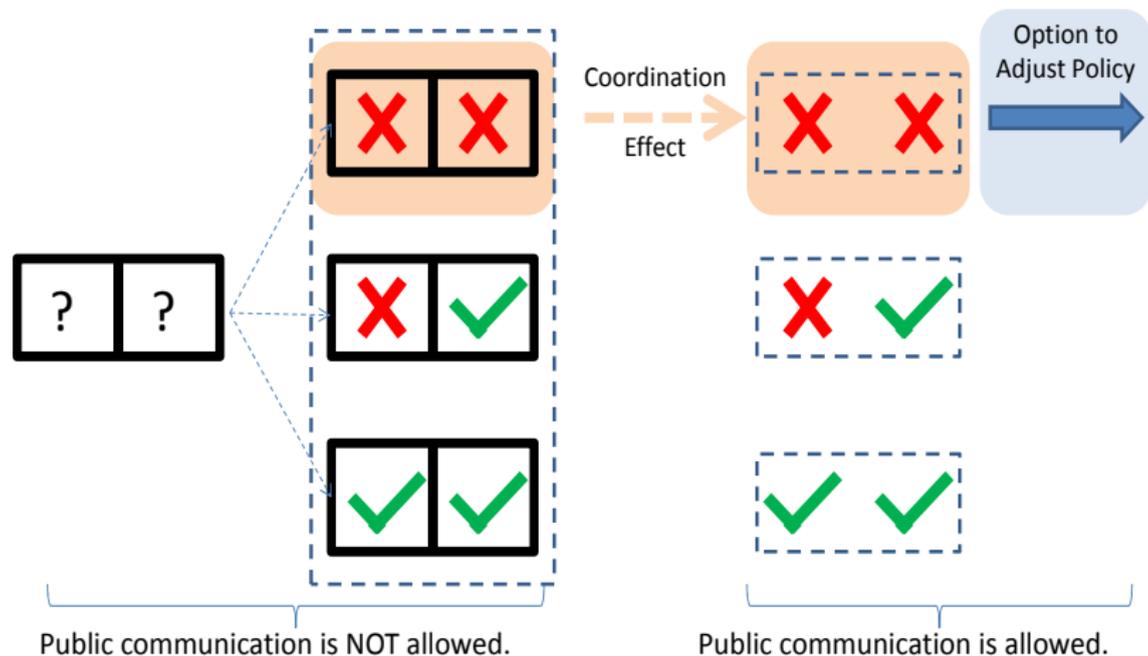
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## An Illustration of the Idea



**Coordination effect:** e.g., Bueno de Mesquita and Downs (2005), Hollyer, Rosendor and Vreeland (2011, 2013), Lorentzen (2014), Little (2012, 2014)

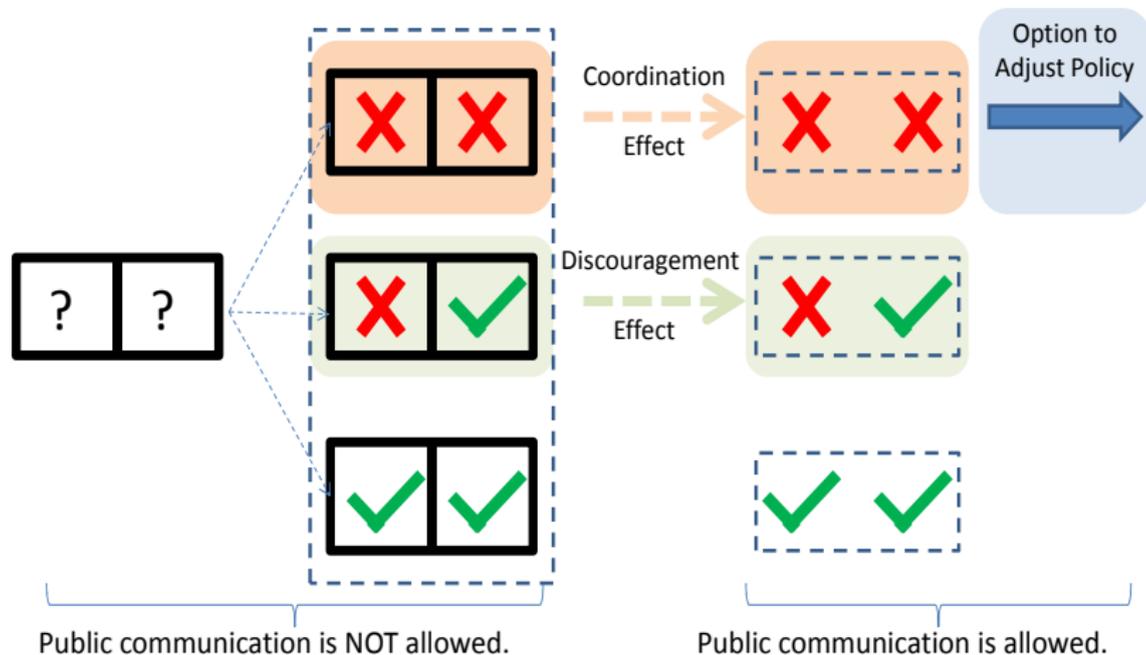
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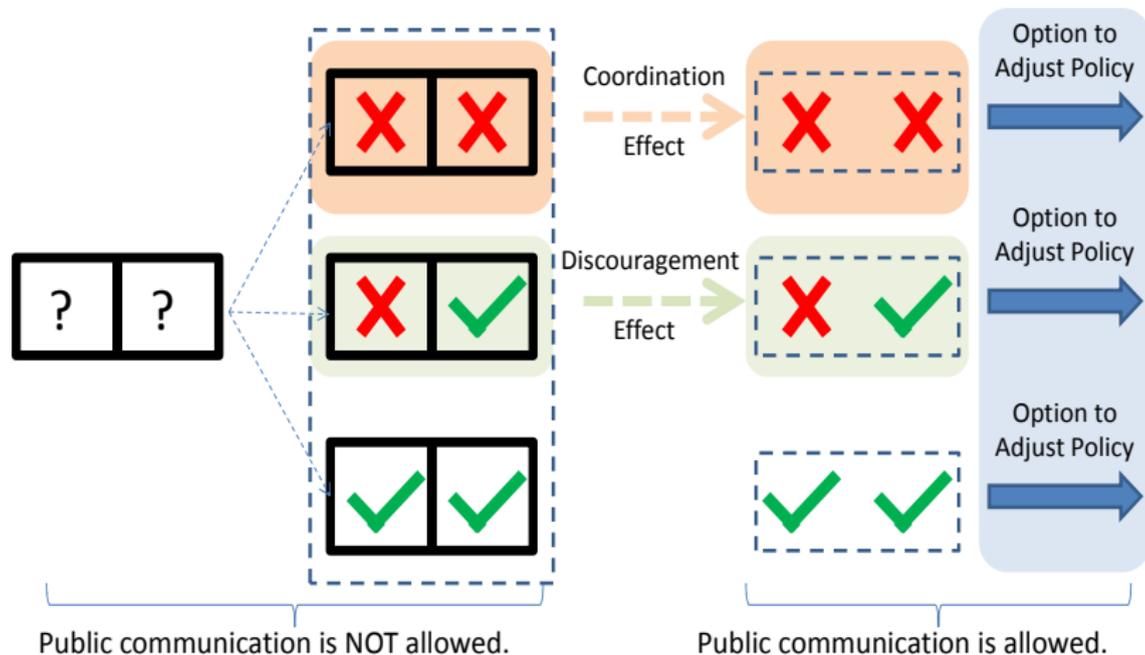
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# The Main Contribution and Argument

- ▶ **Coordination effect** through horizontal information flows
- ▶ **Discouragement effect** through horizontal information flows
- ▶ **Policy-adjustment effect** through vertical information flows

# The Main Contribution and Results

- ▶ Equilibrium characterization:

Openness  $\uparrow$  when the government perceives more social heterogeneity.

- ▶ Institutional comparisons/ extensions:

Sometimes, public communication  $\succ_{Gov}$  private polling;

Private channels of horizontal communication across citizens  
 $\Rightarrow$  more openness.

## Model Setup: Basic Idea

Gov: chooses policy (proposing power)



Citizens: choose whether to protest (collective veto power)

## Model Setup: Basic Idea

Gov: controls citizens' abilities to communicate



Gov: chooses policy (proposing power)



Citizens: choose whether to protest (collective veto power)

## Model Setup: Basic Idea

Gov: controls citizens' abilities to communicate



Citizens: speak to influence



Gov: chooses policy (proposing power)



Citizens: choose whether to protest (collective veto power)

## Model Setup: Basic Idea

Gov: controls citizens' abilities to communicate



Citizens: speak to influence (the gov and other citizens)



Gov: chooses policy (proposing power)



Citizens: choose whether to protest (collective veto power)

## Model Setup: Preferences Over Policies

- ▶ A government, 2 citizens
- ▶ 2 policy options: the status quo policy  $Q$  , the reform policy  $R$
- ▶ Each citizen  $i$  can be *discontent* ( $\bar{\omega}$ ) or *content* ( $\underline{\omega}$ ).

### Table of Payoffs

	reform policy	status quo policy
the gov	$-\mu$	0
<i>content</i> citizen	$-\underline{L} \leq 0$	0
<i>discontent</i> citizen	$L > 0$	0

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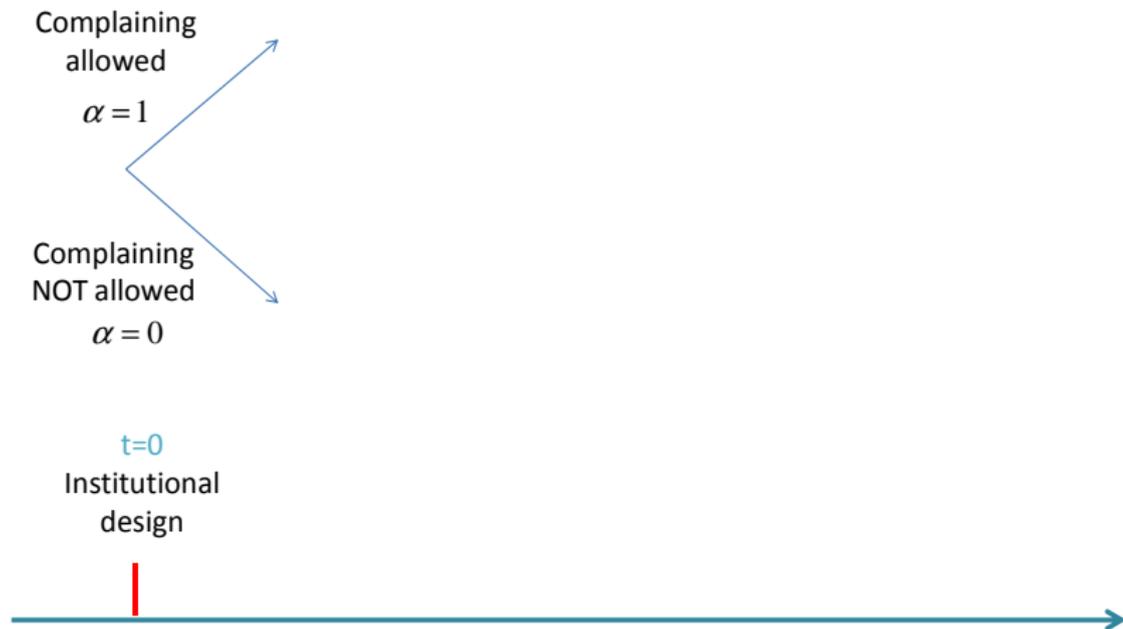
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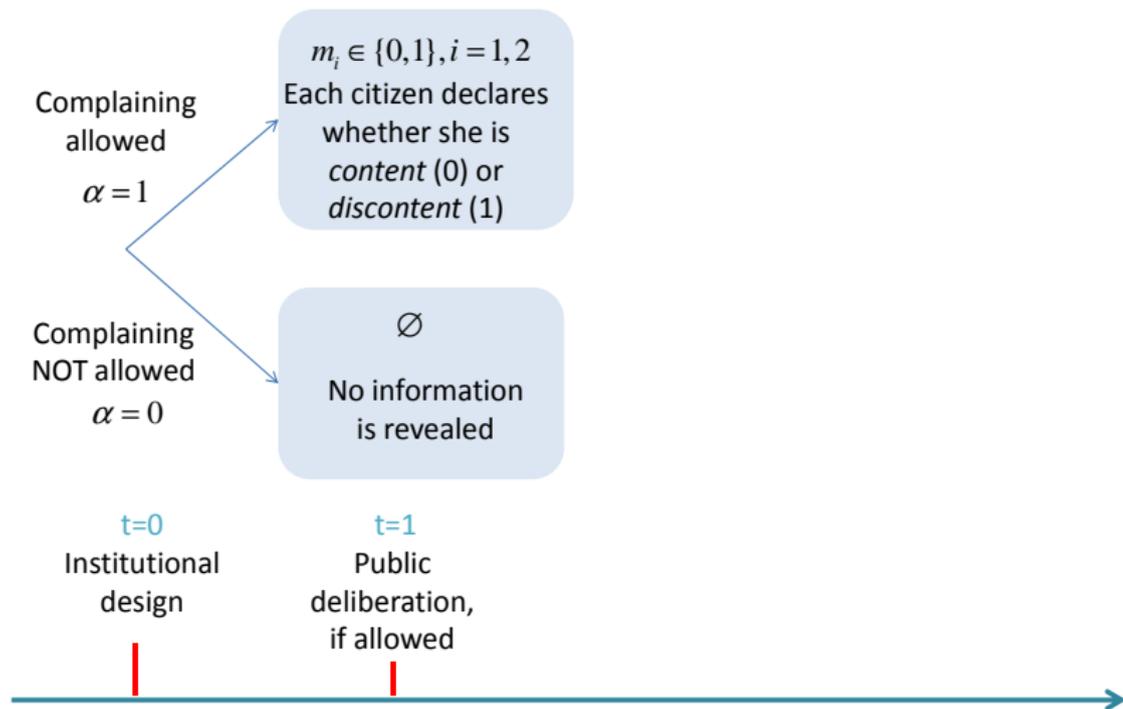
## Model Setup: Information about Citizens' Preferences

- ▶ Citizens' preferences are privately known.
- ▶ With probability  $\frac{1}{2}$ , a citizen is discontent ( $\bar{\omega}$ ).
- ▶ Social homogeneity/preference correlation:  
If one of the two citizens is *discontent*, with probability  $\gamma$ , the other one is also an *discontent*.  
 $\gamma > 0.5$ : positive correlation;  $\gamma < 0.5$ : negative correlation.
- ▶  $\gamma \sim G(\gamma)$ , the government observes it.  
Citizens only have a rough estimation: e.g., the expectation  $\bar{\gamma} = E(\gamma)$ .

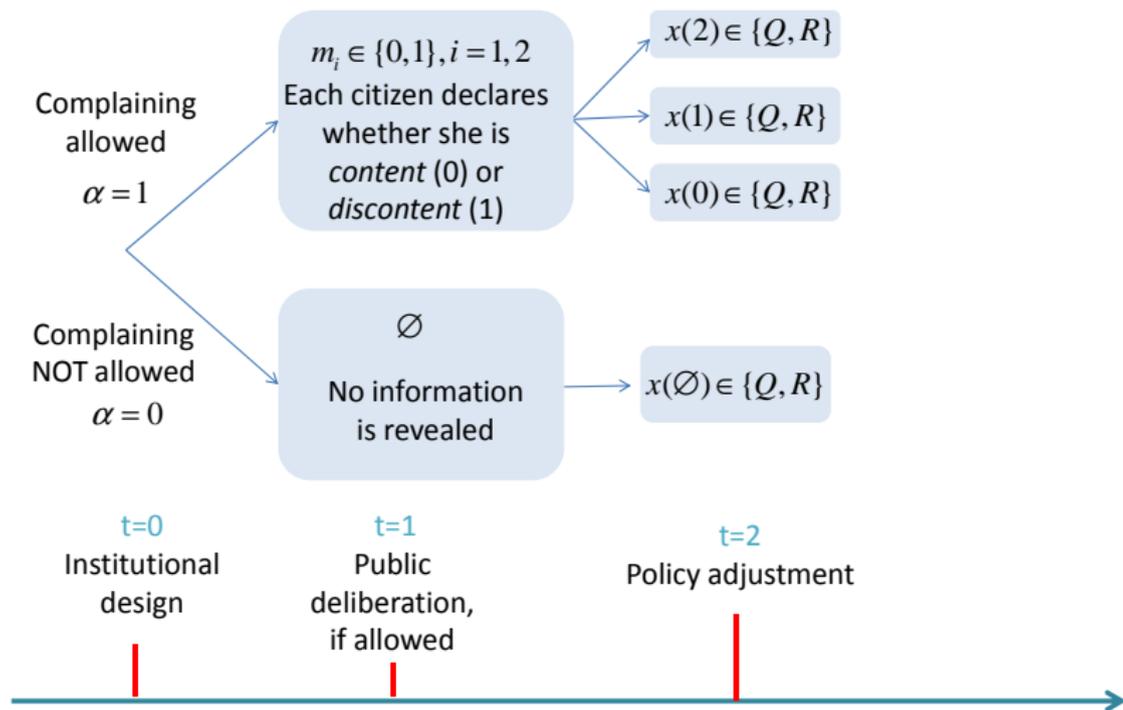
# Model Setup: Timing



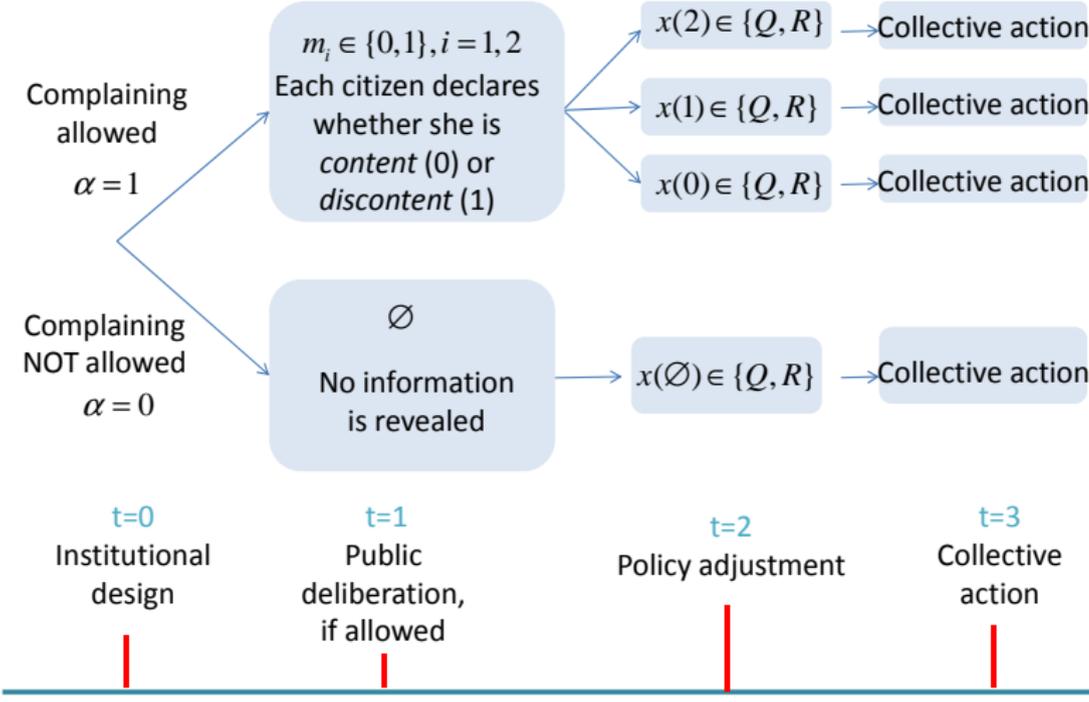
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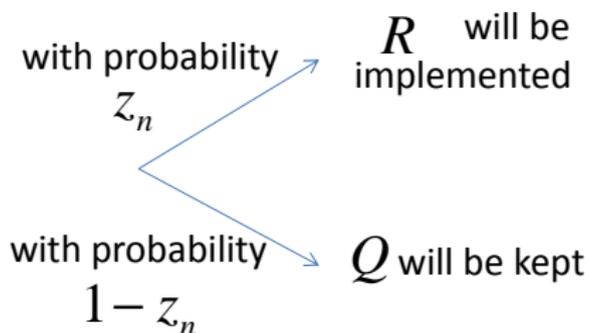


# Model Setup: Timing



## Collective-Action Stage

- ▶ The probability of success of the collective action is  $Z_n$  ( $n = 0, 1, 2$  is the number of participants).



## Collective-Action Stage

- ▶ Individual cost of protest:  $k_i$  for citizen  $i=1,2$
- ▶ The government suffers  $\rho_n > 0$  ( $n$ : the number of participants)
- ▶ *Additional assumptions*
- ▶ [1] Probability of success  $\uparrow$  the number of participants:  
 $Z_2 = 1 > Z_1 = \lambda > Z_0 = 0$
- ▶ [2] The cost of the gov  $\uparrow$  the number of participants:  
 $\rho_2 > \rho_1 > \rho_0 = 0$

# Equilibrium Notion

- ▶ *Perfect Bayesian Nash Equilibrium*
- ▶ Focus on the “most informative” equilibrium

## Solve the Model: the Collective-Action Stage

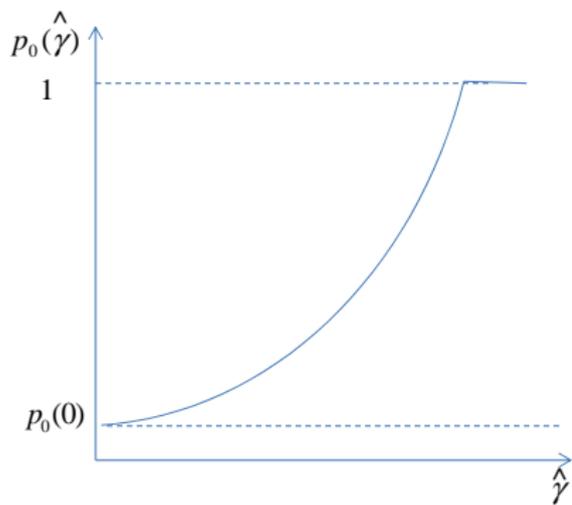
► **Lemma 1**

A content citizen never joins the collective action;

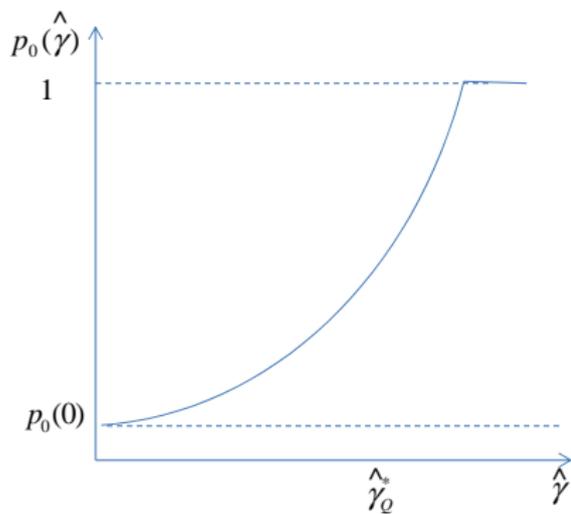
A discontent citizen joins the protest with probability  $p_0(\hat{\gamma})$ ,  
where  $\hat{\gamma}$  is her belief about

$\gamma$ : preference correlation of citizens /social homogeneity

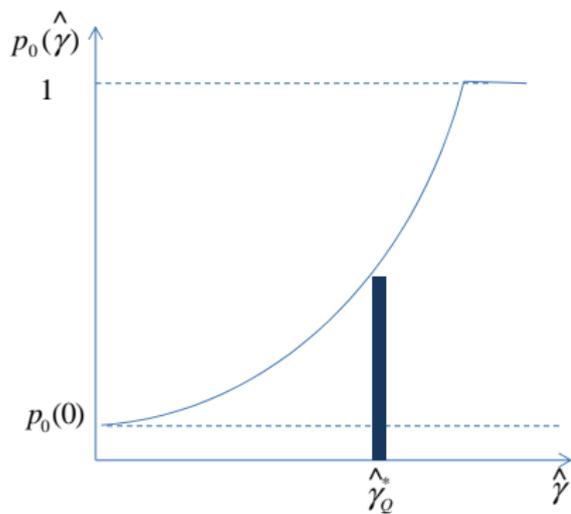
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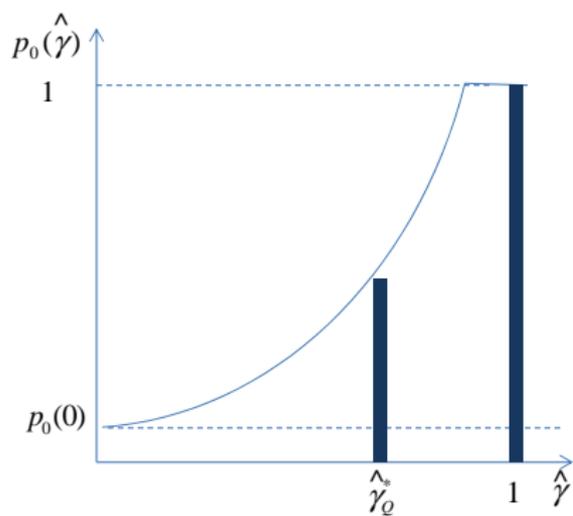
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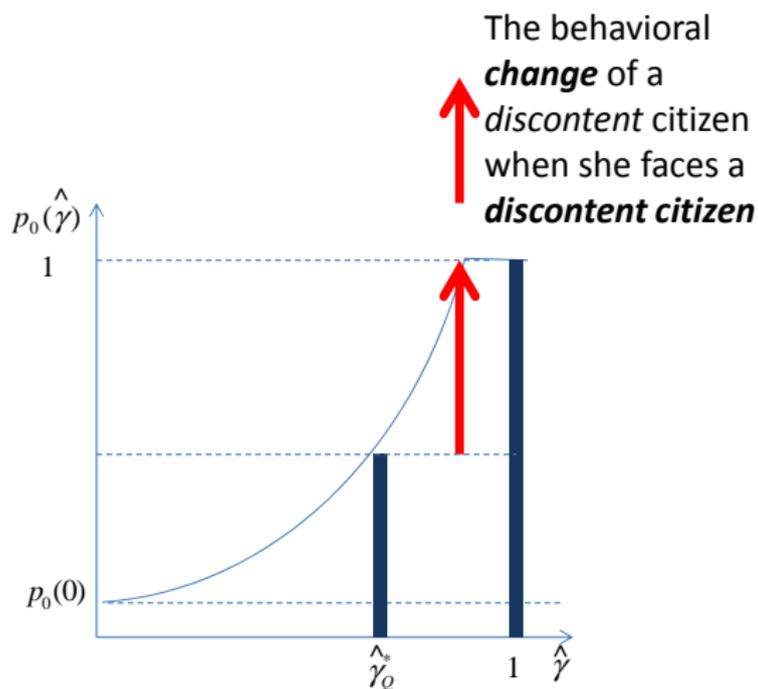
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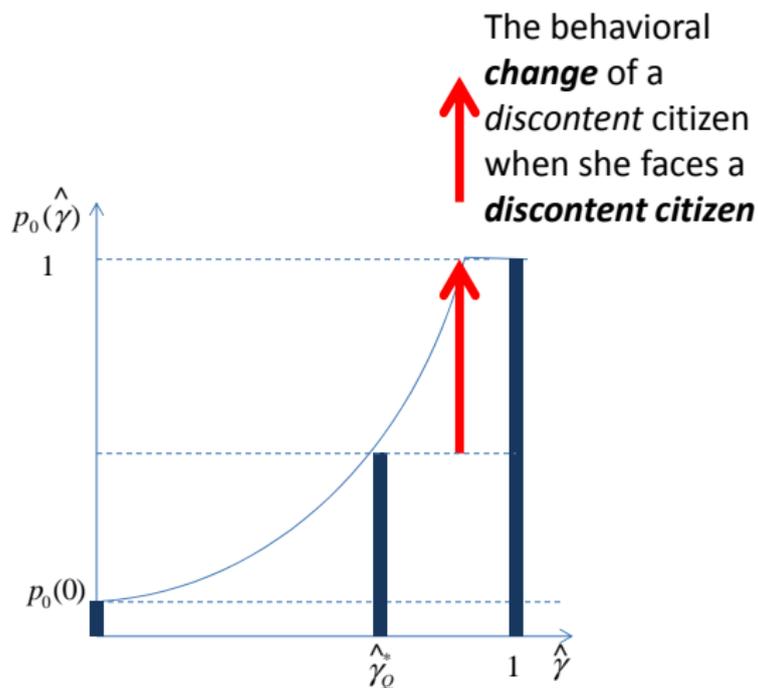
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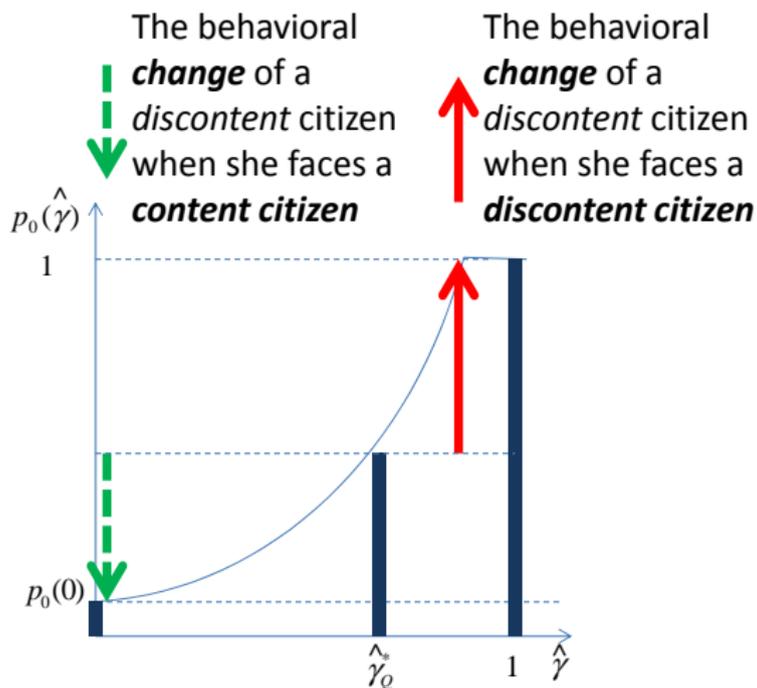
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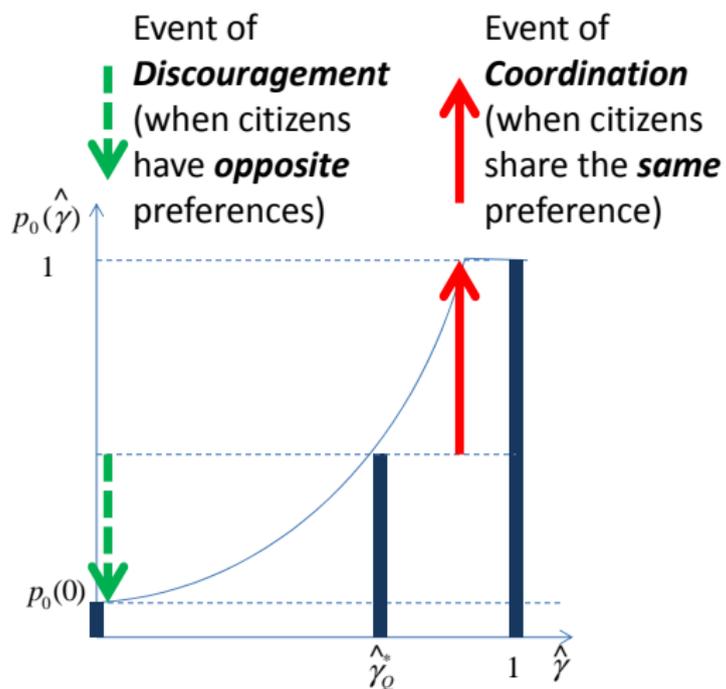
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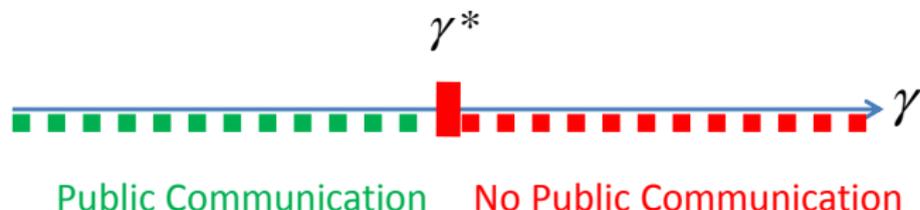


## Results (Equilibrium Characterization)

### Proposition 1:

The government allows public communication if and only if its perceived social homogeneity is small, i.e.,

$$\alpha^* = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } \gamma < \gamma^* \\ 0 & \text{if } \gamma \geq \gamma^* \end{cases}, \text{ where } 0 < \gamma^* \leq 1.$$



## Results-Implications: the Case of Contemporary China

- ▶ Limited openness and issue-based complaints
- ▶ Openness (public communication) does NOT necessarily lead to policy improvement.

The government strategically uses public communication to isolate those with opposite preferences.

## Results (Institutional Comparisons/ Extensions)

- ▶ Public communication v.s. private polling?  
Characterize conditions under which  
public communication  $\succ_{Gov}$  private polling.
- ▶ Private channels of horizontal communication across citizens  
 $\Rightarrow$  more openness.

## Conclusion

- ▶ A simple model with citizens' horizontal communication and the government's vertical learning
- ▶ Three driving forces: **coordination effect, discouragement effect, policy-adjustment effect**
- ▶ Openness ↑
  - when the government perceives more social heterogeneity;
  - when the chance of private communication among citizens increases.
- ▶ Characterize conditions under which the government prefers public communication to private polling.

# Q & A

▶ Uniqueness

▶ Equilibrium Selection

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## Payoffs and Assumptions in Collective Action

- Suppose  $x = Q$ . Recall that  $u_i(Q) = 0$ .

	participate ( $j$ )	abstain ( $j$ )
participate ( $i$ )	$u_i(R) - k_i$	$\lambda u_i(R) - k_i$
abstain ( $i$ )	$\lambda u_i(R)$	$u_i(Q)$

<b>a discontent citizen</b>	participate ( $j$ )	abstain ( $j$ )
participate ( $i$ )	$L - k_i$	$\lambda L - k_i$
abstain ( $i$ )	$\lambda L$	0

<b>a content citizen</b>	participate ( $j$ )	abstain ( $j$ )
participate ( $i$ )	$-L - k_i$	$-L - k_i$
abstain ( $i$ )	$-\lambda L$	0

$0 < \lambda < \min\{\frac{1}{L}, \frac{1}{2}\}$ , and  $F(k_i)$  is concave.

## Characterizing Collective Action

- ▶  $k_i$  i.i.d.  $[0, 1]$ ;  $F(k_i)$  is concave.

<b>a discontent citizen</b>	participate ( $j$ )	abstain ( $j$ )
participate ( $i$ )	$L - k_i$	$\lambda L - k_i$
abstain ( $i$ )	$\lambda L$	0

- ▶ Payoff gain:

$$\begin{aligned} & \hat{\gamma}F(k^*)(1 - \lambda)L + (1 - \hat{\gamma}F(k^*))\lambda L - k_i \\ &= \hat{\gamma}F(k^*)(1 - 2\lambda)L + \lambda L - k_i \end{aligned}$$

- ▶ Fix point(s) problem:

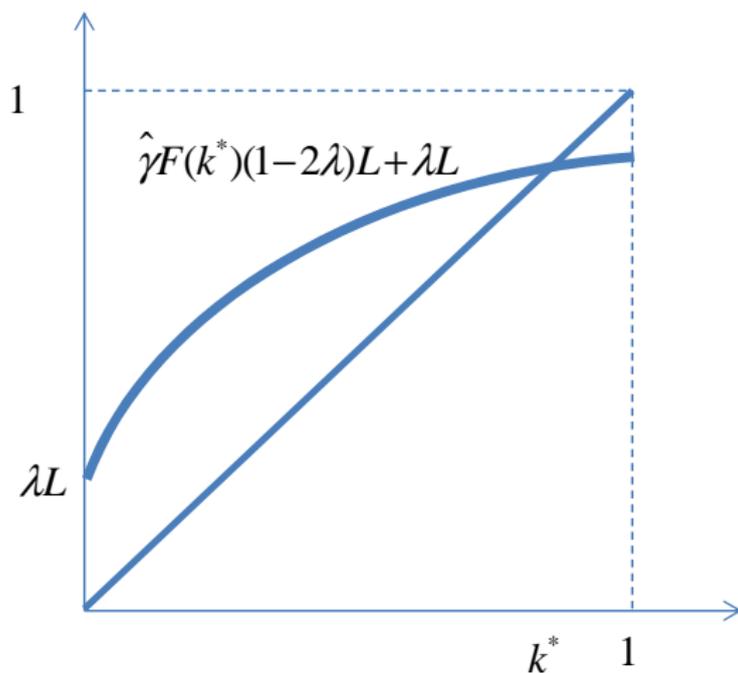
$$k^* = \min\{\hat{\gamma}F(k^*)(1 - 2\lambda)L + \lambda L, 1\}$$

▶ back

▶ back to main slides

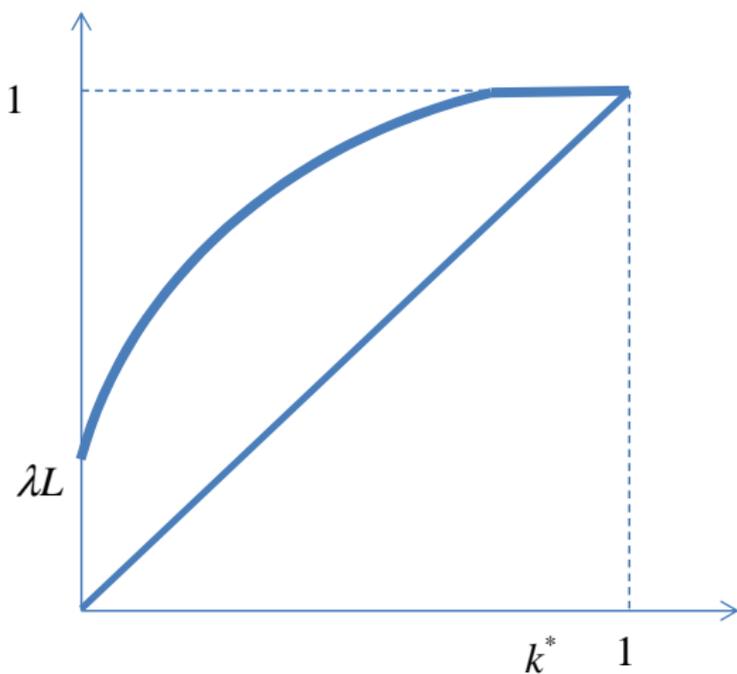
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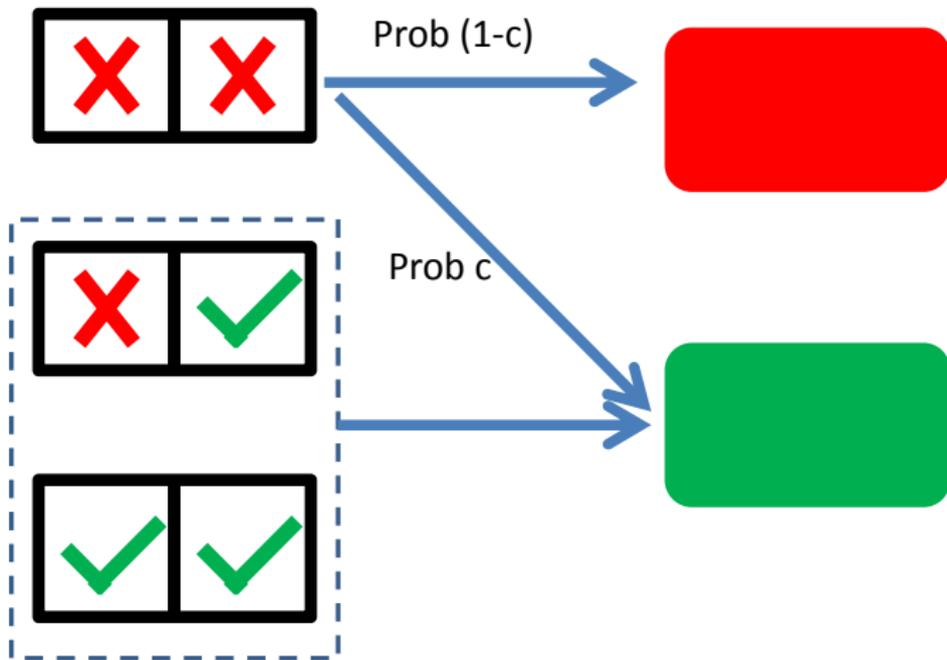
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# Equilibrium Selection

- ▶  $\gamma^{**} = \inf_{\gamma^* \text{ is an equilibrium}} \gamma^* > 0$  (uniquely and well defined)
- ▶ Among all the equilibria,  $\gamma^{**}$  maximizes the government's welfare.
- ▶ Among all the equilibria,  $\gamma^{**}$  has the minimum level of openness.

▶ back

# A Signal-jamming Technology



## Related Papers

- ▶ Tradeoff between coordination effect and monitoring effect

Egorov, Guriev and Sonin (2009) "Why Resource-poor Dictators Allow Freer Media: A Theory and Evidence from Panel Data." *APSR*

Lorentzen (2014) "China's Strategic Censorship." *AJPS*.

- ▶ Common-value coordination games

Shadmehr and Bernhardt (2011) "Collective Action with Uncertain Payoffs: Coordination, Public Signals and Punishment Dilemmas." *APSR*

Little (2012) "Elections, Fraud, and Election Monitoring in the Shadow of Revolution." *QJPS*

## Ancient Chinese Wisdom

“防民之口，甚于防川，川壅而溃，伤人必多，民亦如之。是故为川者，决之使导；为民者，宣之使言。”

——《国语·周语上》

To silence the populace is as grim a task as preventing flood. A blocked river would eventually inundate and cause great catastrophe; the same can be said of a stifled people. It is therefore wise to dredge the river to let it run free, and to enable the people to speak its mind.

—Discourses of the States (Guo Yu), around 500 BC

## Effect of the Cost to Adjust the Policy

- ▶ Cases: Tunisia and Egypt in Arab Spring
- ▶ Beisseinger (2013), Beissinger, Jamal and Mazur (2012):
- ▶ "The evidence also shows that most participants were motivated primarily by economic demands (and to a lesser extent, corruption), not by desires for civil and political freedoms"
- ▶ Mechanism: low ability to improve economic performances⇒
- ▶ no openness, no policy responsiveness, positive probability of revolution

## A Related Project

- ▶ “Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China” (with Jennifer Pan and Yiqing Xu)

Threat of collective action

Threat of tattling to upper levels of government

Identifying as loyal members of the Communist Party

▶ [back](#)

# Preference Correlation

- ▶  $x_i = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{with probability } \frac{1}{2} \\ 0 & \text{with probability } \frac{1}{2} \end{cases}$
- ▶  $\gamma \in [0, 1]$
- ▶ Correlation coefficient =  $\frac{\text{Cov}(x_1, x_2)}{\sigma_1 \sigma_2} = 2\gamma - 1 \in [-1, 1]$

▶ back to main slides

## Public Communication v.s. Private Polling

- ▶ (1) When the government's private signal indicates that citizens are relatively heterogeneous (i.e., there exists an  $\hat{\gamma} > 0$ , whenever  $\gamma < \hat{\gamma}$ ), it strictly prefers public communication to private polling; and
- ▶ (2) when the government's private signal indicates that they are relatively homogeneous ( $\gamma \geq \gamma^{**}$ ) and knows that the citizens believe they are heterogeneous ( $W(p_0(\bar{\gamma})) \leq \mu$ ), it strictly prefers private polling to public communication (and the outcome with no communication in the benchmark game).

# Modeling Private Channels of Horizontal Communication

- ▶ When public communication is not allowed, with probability  $h$ , through certain private channels of communication, citizens can directly learn each other's preference;
- ▶ With probability  $1 - h$ , their communication is not successful so that they still do not know each other's preference.
- ▶ Thus  $h$  captures the effectiveness of citizens' horizontal interaction without the government's communication platform.

▶ back