

# Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness: A Field Experiment in China

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*A growing body of research suggests that authoritarian regimes are responsive to societal actors, but our understanding of the sources of authoritarian responsiveness remains limited because of the challenges of measurement and causal identification. By conducting an online field experiment among 2,103 Chinese counties, we examine factors that affect officials' incentives to respond to citizens in an authoritarian context. At baseline, we find that approximately one-third of county governments respond to citizen demands expressed online. Threats of collective action and threats of tattling to upper levels of government cause county governments to be considerably more responsive, whereas identifying as loyal, long-standing members of the Chinese Communist Party does not increase responsiveness. Moreover, we find that threats of collective action make local officials more publicly responsive. Together, these results demonstrate that top-down mechanisms of oversight as well as bottom-up societal pressures are possible sources of authoritarian responsiveness.*

A growing body of research shows that authoritarian regimes are responsive to societal actors.<sup>1</sup> However, we know relatively little about *why* authoritarian regimes respond, and what mechanisms influence the interactions between these regimes and citizens. Our understanding of the sources of authoritarian responsiveness remains limited because of challenges in directly measuring how regimes respond to individuals, as well as difficulties in identifying the causal drivers of responsiveness.

Most often, responsiveness is assessed through the congruence of public preferences and policy proposals or

through indirect measures of adherence to societal preferences. Truex (2014) finds evidence of representation in China's National People's Congress (NPC) by measuring the congruence of citizens' policy preferences and proposals put forth by members of the NPC. Malesky and Schuler (2010) assess responsiveness of delegates in Vietnam's National Assembly to the needs of local constituents by measuring whether delegates mention local issues or use words such as *voter* or *constituency* in their comments in the Assembly. Manion (2013) measures whether local congress members in China view themselves as representatives of their geographic constituency, and Meng, Pan,

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<sup>1</sup>Examples include evidence of how quasi-democratic institutions adopted by authoritarian regimes can facilitate responsiveness, of how channels ranging from traditional media to the Internet to petitioning systems allow individuals to communicate with regime officials (Chen and Xu 2014; Lorentzen 2014), and of how tolerance of certain types of protest constitutes a form of responsiveness, as well as evidence of the effect of informal institutions (Tsai 2007; Xu and Yao 2015), citizen input in policymaking (Wang 2004), responsiveness authoritarianism (Reilly 2013; Stockmann 2013; Weller 2008), and domestic audience costs (Weeks 2008).

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and Yang (2014) measure whether Chinese officials express willingness to incorporate suggestions of citizens into policy. To our knowledge, the only study that directly measures the responsiveness of authoritarian governments is work by Distelhorst and Hou (2014) on prefecture governments in China.

To further our understanding of the sources of authoritarian responsiveness, we address the challenges of measurement and causality by conducting an online field experiment among 2,103 Chinese counties that directly measures how subnational governments respond to citizen requests while identifying factors that cause changes in the level of responsiveness. By doing so, we shed light on sources of authoritarian responsiveness, with implications for the general mechanisms through which autocrats (as well as their agents) can be held accountable.<sup>2</sup>

Responsiveness refers to the extent to which officials in the regime adhere to the demands of societal actors.<sup>3</sup> Demands can be programmatic (e.g., expressing preference for a change policy) or they can be particularistic (e.g., expressing the desire to obtain some personal benefit). Likewise, responses can take different forms. The regime can respond by providing the desired outcome, such as enacting a new policy or conferring benefits in response to expressed preferences. The regime can respond by taking other actions, which help generate desired outcomes. For example, in response to societal demands, officials can propose a new policy or support an individual's application for benefits. Finally, the regime can respond by informing those who are making demands how they can advocate for a desired policy or how they can obtain desired benefits. For ethical and practical reasons, our experiment focuses on particularistic demands and tries to solicit responses only in the form of information.

In democracies, responsive government is a reaction to pressure from below, either pressure exerted directly by

citizens through political action (Cleary 2007; Hirschman 1970; Putnam 1993; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995) or indirectly through the incentives created by electoral institutions (Besley and Case 1995; Canon 1999; Powell 2000; Grose 2005, 2011, 2014; Grose, Malhotra, and Van Houweling 2013; Haynie 2001). In authoritarian regimes, responsiveness could also be a reaction to pressure from below, such as when collective action precipitates government response. When responsiveness is motivated by pressure from below, in both democracies and authoritarian regimes, responsiveness could be directed toward the general public or directed more narrowly toward insiders or coethnics. However, in contrast to responsiveness in democracies, authoritarian responsiveness could also stem from pressure from above, through a desire to curry favor with factional sponsors or in response to the incentives of formal institutions such as a *nomenklatura* system.

We assess these three potential sources of authoritarian responsiveness—pressure from below, pressure from above, and entreaties of loyal insiders—through a field experiment. We find that, at baseline, approximately one-third of county-level governments in China respond to citizen demands for government assistance in obtaining social welfare. Demands that include vague threats of collective action and specific threats of tattling to upper levels of government cause county-level governments to be 30 to 35% more responsive (i.e., causal effect of 8 to 10 percentage points). Both treatments also cause county governments to provide more direct information in their responses to citizens. Threats of collective action cause local officials to be more publicly responsive, whereas threats of disclosure to upper levels of government do not have this effect. We also find that, on average, identifying as loyal, long-standing members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not cause increased responsiveness.

Together, these results show that the threat of oversight from above and the fear of collective action from below both play important roles in generating responsiveness in an authoritarian context. In other words, top-down mechanisms of oversight as well as bottom-up societal pressures are possible sources of authoritarian responsiveness. The results also show that absent informal, insider channels to reach the regime, simply being a loyal member of the CCP does not seem to generate much influence.

This article is arranged as follows. The next section details our experimental design and discusses the ethics of our research, as well as the steps we took to ensure the security of the research subjects, our research team, and future research of this type. We describe the characteristics of government forums in the third section. We

<sup>2</sup> Responsiveness and accountability are different notions. Accountability turns on the ability of various parties to sanction power wielders in some way, whereas responsiveness of power wielders to various parties could be obtained simply due to benevolence or serendipitous alignment of goals (Grant and Keohane 2005; Malesky and Schuler 2010). In line with previous scholarship, in this article, when we use the term *accountability*, we refer to the sanctioning and punishment mechanisms that force officials of the regime to be responsive; when we use the term *responsiveness*, we refer to the extent to which officials of the regime adhere to demands.

<sup>3</sup> China is a single-party regime with a dual Party–government apparatus in every organization, with the Party being dominant. When we refer to officials, we mean both Communist Party and government officials. At the county level, officials include the county executive and the county party secretary. For additional discussion, see the Experimental Design section.

subsequently present our results and discuss the implications of our findings, and the last section concludes.

## Experimental Design

Existing research suggests that responsiveness among county-level officials in China could derive from three possible sources—a desire to mitigate the threat of collective action, a desire to appear capable in the eyes of upper-level officials, and a desire to satisfy Party members.

Scholars, using a diverse array of methods, have documented numerous examples of Chinese government response to collective action (Bernstein and Lu 2003; Chen 2012; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2014; Li 2014; Lorentzen 2013; O'Brien and Li 2006; Perry 2002; Wasserstrom and Perry 1994). Many of these works suggest that lower-level officials have strong incentives to prevent collective action and protest from occurring, either because contention damages officials' prospects of political advancement or because contention interferes with rent seeking or administration, irrespective of career concerns. Among authoritarian regimes more generally, the threat of rebellion is a fundamental concern and has been shown to precipitate actions, which can include responsiveness (Boix and Svoblik 2013; Levitsky and Way 2010; Svoblik 2012; Wintrobe 1998, 2007). Therefore, we expect the incentive to be responsive to increase with the threat of collective action.

In addition to pressure from below that comes from the general public, previous research also shows that responsiveness can be directed more narrowly toward loyal insiders or coethnics (Broockman 2013; Butler and Broockman 2011; Geddes 2006; Hanson 2013; Lust-Okar 2005; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Magaloni and Wallace 2008; Rueda 2005). The logic for greater responsiveness to loyal insiders relates to the need for authoritarian leaders to maintain a stable winning coalition (Buono de Mesquita et al. 2004; Haber 2006). As a result, we expect the incentive to be responsive to loyal insiders—CCP members in the China case—to be higher than the incentive to respond to an ordinary member of the population.

Finally, responsiveness of lower-level officials in an authoritarian regime can also stem from pressure from above, because of a desire to gain favor with factional sponsors (Nathan 1973; Pye 1980) or in response to the incentives of formal institutions such as the cadre evaluation system (Edin 2003; Fukuyama 2014). Because it is difficult to monitor and evaluate lower-level officials, upper-level officials could use citizens as an oversight mechanism to obtain information about the actions of lower-level officials, and as a result, we expect the threat

of tattling to upper levels of government, which carries with it the risk that lower-level officials will appear incompetent or delinquent in front of their superiors, to increase incentives to be responsive.

The above arguments lead to the following hypotheses for responsiveness among county-level governments in China:

- H1:* Assignment to threats of collective action increases responsiveness of county-level officials to citizen demands.
- H2:* Assignment to threats of evoking the oversight of upper-level government increases responsiveness of county-level officials to citizen demands.
- H3:* Assignment to claims of CCP membership and loyalty to the Party increases responsiveness of county-level officials to citizen demands.

We test these hypotheses by posting requests on county government web forums in China and tracking the responses we receive from government officials.<sup>4</sup>

We conduct this experiment in China for three main reasons. First, China is often regarded as a model case of authoritarian durability that exhibits responsiveness to its citizens. Second, China's large, hierarchical single-party structure allows us to investigate subnational authoritarian responsiveness with sufficient empirical power. Third, the prevalence of online channels for citizen engagement among subnational units allows us to implement a randomized experiment of responsiveness while mitigating ethical concerns.

In April 2007, the State Council, China's chief administrative organ, promulgated the "Open Government Information Ordinance" (OGI), which required county and higher levels of government to increase transparency. As part of this initiative, the majority of local governments in China have set up government websites, which contain online forums where citizens can submit questions or comments.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>China's administrative structure from top to bottom includes the central level, provincial level, prefectural (city) level, county (district) level, and township level. We focus on counties, including counties in rural areas and districts in municipalities, including districts in provincial-level municipalities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing.

<sup>5</sup>OGI only requires county and higher levels of government to increase transparency but is agnostic as to the method. Local governments can comply by making information available on the Internet, but they may also comply by making information available through newspapers, press briefings, public broadcasts, and other methods. Furthermore, local governments have a great deal of leeway in interpreting what is meant by transparency and in meeting the information requirements laid out in OGI regulations. For example, localities are required to make public budgetary information; however, they can publish financial data with detailed breakdowns

The overall strategy of government websites—whether and how to respond to complaints posted on forums, what types of information websites should contain, what information should be sent directly to top county executives and CCP officials—is determined primarily by the county executive with input from the county propaganda department. The day-to-day functions of government websites are typically overseen by administrators in an information management office, who report to the office of the county executive and share information with the local propaganda department. Although the operational details vary by locality, when citizens make requests or complaints online, the information management office can respond directly or forward complaints to the relevant agency (e.g., agriculture department, civil affairs department, public security department), for investigation and response. The information management office and agencies receiving requests from the information management office are evaluated on the comprehensiveness and speed of their handling of requests and complaints.<sup>6</sup>

Information gathering is an important task for authoritarian regimes (Dimitrov 2015, 2014b; Fukuyama 2014; Wallace 2015), and the information gathered through Chinese government web forums is taken very seriously by local officials. Summaries of complaints are typically sent on a regular basis (e.g., weekly) to the county executive and party secretary. Since the information management office acts as the gatekeeper for citizen requests, and since it reports to the county executive, responsiveness to online complaints provides insight into the priorities of the county's top officials.

We identified online forums on government websites for 2,227 (77%) Chinese counties and recorded a detailed set of characteristics, including whether the website contains an online forum or a place to contact local officials, as well as the requirements for posting to the forum or contacting officials. We attempted to submit posts to all identified forums, and we successfully submitted posts to 2,103 (73%) forums. We then submitted a request for assistance in obtaining social welfare and recorded the posting process, as well as various characteristics of the government response.<sup>7</sup> The forums were checked 10 and 20 business days after the date of submission for responses,

by line item or they can publish high-level, aggregated financial information that casts the locality's performance in a positive light.

<sup>6</sup>Based on authors' interviews and government documents.

<sup>7</sup>All posts were made from within China. We submitted our requests after the "two meetings" (两会) of the National People's Congress and the People's Political Consultative Conference to avoid posting during a politically sensitive period when local officials likely have a larger workload.

and the date of the responses is recorded.<sup>8</sup> Altogether, we obtain a detailed set of indicators of government capacity and transparency at the county level.

Our outcome of interest is responsiveness of county governments, and we examine one facet of responsiveness, namely, how information is provided in response to a particularistic demand. The provision of information is a meaningful facet of responsiveness. Tsai (2015) suggests that in rural China, the government's positive response to citizens' requests make them more supportive of the regime.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, evidence shows that government and party officials believe the Internet to be an important channel for officials to gather information and to manage discontent (Meng, Pan, and Yang 2014). Responsiveness as measured by the provision of information is influenced by the incentives of local officials and the "principal-agent" relationship between those officials and administrators who are directly responsible for replying to citizens online.

We measure responsiveness in four ways after the initial post was submitted: whether there is a response;<sup>10</sup> if there is a response, when the response was given; whether the response is viewable by the general public;<sup>11</sup> and finally, the specific content of the response. We include these four measures so that we capture the full extent to which responses may vary. Together, these measures provide us with dichotomous, continuous, and categorical measures of our outcome.

## Treatment Conditions

To test the three hypotheses, we randomly assign each of our control and treatment conditions to be posted on county government web forums within each prefecture. The treatment conditions were written to be similar in

<sup>8</sup>In total, 90.5% of the replies on government web forums include the date on which the reply was posted.

<sup>9</sup>In addition, a recent survey conducted in 29 Chinese provincial capitals shows that among citizens who had made complaints or suggestions to local governments (9.9% of all respondents), 54.8% reported receiving assistance from the government in resolving their problems and 40.7% reported that their requests were at least partially acknowledged by the government (China Public Governance Survey, 2013, Unirule Institute, Beijing, and Horizontal-Key, Inc.; see Tsai and Xu 2015).

<sup>10</sup>All non-automated replies from the government are coded as a response, even if the reply is a request by the government for more information.

<sup>11</sup>Based on pretesting and previous research, we know that certain websites may respond privately or make both requests and responses viewable only to the individual submitting the request (King, Pan, and Roberts 2014).



tone and length to existing content found on online government forums. We pretested the content of the conditions with Chinese citizens and officials to fine-tune their appropriateness for an online forum and their relevance to the concepts we are interested in capturing.<sup>12</sup>

Our treatment design entails a request from a Chinese citizen regarding the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (*Dibao*), a nonconditional cash transfer program aimed at providing a social security net for Chinese residents whose income falls below a level set by the local government (Solinger 2005, 2010). Just as Chong et al. (2014) use post office efficiency to measure state capacity, responses to requests for *Dibao* provide a reasonable measure of local government responsiveness in China. While responsiveness to other types of issues, (e.g., demands for public goods provision, reports of corruption) may lead to differing patterns of responsiveness, we focus solely on *Dibao* for reasons related to the feasibility of implementation, ethics, and external validity.

First, focusing on *Dibao* makes it feasible to implement this experiment across all Chinese counties. Unlike employment, housing, environmental protection, and other issues where no national policy exists, *Dibao* is a national policy that covers both rural and urban residents. Second, focusing on *Dibao* mitigates the ethical concern that requests submitted by researchers will be viewed suspiciously by local governments and, as a result, negatively affect responsiveness to real citizens or “taint the pool” for future research. This is because social assistance is a topic that frequently appears on government forums, so it is not strange or surprising for questions on this topic to appear.<sup>13</sup> Finally, focusing on *Dibao* improves our confidence of the external validity of our experiment. Audits on constituency service conducted by Distelhorst and Hou (2015) show that responsiveness to requests related to *Dibao* is similar to that of other issues, such as tax reform, support for private enterprises, and unemployment benefits. In addition, unlike other issue areas that may bias the effect of any particular treatment condition, we had no reason *ex ante* to expect that *Dibao* itself would

generate differential levels of responsiveness to different types of treatment conditions.

Because of the fragmentation of local government websites and more generally local governments in China, it is very unlikely that officials in one county will realize that a similar post appears in another county during our experiment. Moreover, because forum content that is public is not always indexed by search engines, and because questions about social welfare and *Dibao* are common types of questions found on government forums, the likelihood of identifying the posts of our experiments is low.

The control condition is as follows:<sup>14</sup>

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]

This inquiry is phrased to demonstrate some knowledge of *Dibao*, to increase the diversity and richness of government responses, and to maximize the likelihood of a more personalized response.<sup>15</sup> For example, the request states that the head of household and his wife have been unable to find work. This signals that the lack of employment is not due to lack of effort because in recent years, some localities have tried to make *Dibao* status contingent on inability to find employment. Additionally, the inclusion of an elderly, ill mother and school-aged child emphasizes the economic hardship faced by this household, making the household a more likely candidate for

<sup>12</sup>All three treatment conditions were included as hypotheses in the registered preanalysis plan. In the preanalysis plan, we also hypothesized that responsiveness to threat of tattling to upper-level government would be higher than collective action or claims of CCP loyalty, and that threats of collective action would generate more responsiveness than CCP loyalty.

<sup>13</sup>This is in part related to the fact that although *Dibao* is a public social welfare scheme, many eligible households do not receive the benefit (Chen, Ravallion, and Wang 2006). The fact that *Dibao* implementation varies not only lends credibility to posts about *Dibao* made by real citizens, but it also lends credibility of our posts in the experiment.

<sup>14</sup>We do not release the Chinese text in the article in order to protect the human subjects of this experiment.

<sup>15</sup>Based on pretesting, if we did not demonstrate knowledge of *Dibao*, it is likely that more responses would have been formulaic—for example, directing the request to the residential committee.

*Dibao* status. Finally, the inquiry states that the applicant has been turned down by the residential committee. This again shows a certain level of knowledge about the *Dibao* program, which requires applications to be initiated at the residential committee.

In each of the treatment conditions, the treatment is inserted at the beginning of the new paragraph prior to the phrase “Can you help my family obtain *Dibao*?” To measure the effect of threats of collective action on responsiveness, we add the following sentence:

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 together about this situation.

To assess the effect of threat of tattling to upper levels of government on responsiveness, we add the following text to our request:

If this problem cannot be addressed, I'll have to report it to upper-level government officials.

And finally, to measure the effect of claims of loyalty to the CCP, we add the following:

I'm a long-standing CCP member, I've always followed the leadership of the Party.

### Ethical Considerations

Our experiment entailed the use of deception to protect human subjects, to minimize disruption to the system we are studying, and to protect the safety of our research team. The human subjects aspects of our experimental protocol were preapproved by the institutional review boards of our universities.

One of our guiding principles in conducting this research was to minimize disruption to the system we are studying. Since our experiment entailed submitting requests to government-managed websites, this meant minimizing the use of governmental resources. We made requests for county governments to take action in the form of a written response. Based on the subject of our inquiry, pretesting, and analysis of online forums, we did not believe local governments would take any action beyond writing a response, and this prior expectation was borne out by the experiment. The subjects of our research,

those responding to requests on government forums, were not debriefed in order to minimize the time government administrators would spend reading and potentially responding to a debrief notice. Minimizing disruption also involves making sure that future posts, whether from citizens or other researchers, are taken seriously. By not debriefing our subjects, we increase the chances of minimizing disruption and decreasing risks to future applicants of the *Dibao* program.

To protect the safety of the research team and for logistical reasons, we did not use confederates in submitting the informational requests. If a confederate had been used, we would have needed to find individuals from households that qualify for *Dibao* in each of the localities where we conducted the experiment. Given the scope of the experiment, it would have been extremely difficult and costly to recruit the appropriate number of confederates, and confederates with similar enough characteristics to support our experimental design. In addition, by not using confederates, we eliminate the potential for inconvenience, however small, that confederates submitting the information requests might face.

### Randomization and Balance

Randomization was conducted within prefectures to account for vast regional differences in economic development and government efficiency. We believe geographic stratification also minimizes disruption to the system we are studying because adjacent counties within the same prefecture are less likely to receive the same treatment condition.

Table 1 shows the covariate balance across control and treatment groups on a number of different demographic, economic, and fiscal factors. Demographic variables include population in 2000 and 2010, population density, gender ratio, the scope of the migrant population, the percentage of households with urban (or nonagricultural) residential permits, the percentage of permanent urban residents (residents with urban *hukou*), average years of education, literacy rates, the unemployment rate, the proportion of the workforce concentrated in agriculture, industry, and service sectors, as well as the proportion of ethnic minorities. Economic variables include gross domestic product (GDP), per capita GDP, 2000–2010 nominal GDP growth, output by sector (agricultural, industrial, services), the number of industrial enterprises above a designated size (above 5 million Chinese Yuan (CNY)), total investment from households, enterprises, and government, as well as total savings, which is the total outstanding bank deposits of rural and urban

**TABLE 1 Covariate Balance across Treatment Groups**

	Obs.	Control	T1: CA Threat	T2: Tattle Threat	T3: Loyalty Claim	p-value
Log population	2,869	12.7	12.7	12.7	12.8	.84
Log population (2000)	2,869	12.7	12.7	12.7	12.7	.85
Population growth (2000–10 %)	2,869	5.06	4.91	5.02	5.07	.85
Gender ratio (female = 1.00)	2,869	1.05	1.05	1.06	1.06	.44
Log population density (person/km <sup>2</sup> )	2,869	14.8	14.8	14.9	15.0	.49
Migrant (%)	2,869	16.8	16.5	17.1	17.1	.85
Nonagriculture household (%)	2,869	29.1	29.5	29.1	30.5	.63
Permanent urban residents (%)	2,869	46.4	46.9	46.3	48.1	.54
Average years of education	2,869	8.69	8.72	8.69	8.76	.79
Illiteracy rate among age above 15 (%)	2,869	6.43	6.33	6.33	6.28	.99
Ethnic minority (%)	2,869	17.1	15.8	15.7	16.3	.78
Unemployment rate (%)	2,869	3.26	3.26	3.22	3.44	.54
Workforce in agriculture (%)	2,869	52.6	51.8	52.2	50.5	.48
Workforce in industry (%)	2,869	20.0	20.4	20.9	21.3	.36
Workforce in services (%)	2,869	27.2	27.8	26.9	28.2	.44
GDP per capita (1,000 CNY)	2,821	25.3	25.3	24.4	24.8	.77
Log GDP per capita	2,821	9.89	9.90	9.89	9.89	.99
Log GDP	2,821	8.84	8.83	8.84	8.85	.98
Average nominal GDP growth (2000–10)	2,821	0.15	0.15	0.15	0.15	.97
Log agricultural output	2,821	7.13	7.13	7.13	7.14	1.00
Log industrial output	2,821	7.96	7.95	7.97	7.99	.96
Log services output	2,821	7.68	7.69	7.69	7.69	1.00
Enterprises above designated size	2,821	51.7	51.4	52.1	49.9	.96
Log total investment	2,821	8.43	8.42	8.43	8.45	.96
Log total saving	2,821	6.77	6.81	6.80	6.82	.93
Log total government revenue	2,821	5.74	5.72	5.76	5.74	.98
Log total government expenditure	2,821	7.15	7.13	7.14	7.15	.91

*Note:* Group means and p-values corresponding to F tests of all three treatment indicators are shown in the table. Data are from 2000 and 2010 Census and Provincial Statistical Yearbooks. Variables were measured in 2010 unless otherwise noted.

households at the end of 2010. Finally, fiscal variables include government revenue and expenditures. As can be seen from Table 1, randomization is successful and our treatment is balanced across all of the above dimensions.

### Characteristics of Government Web Forums

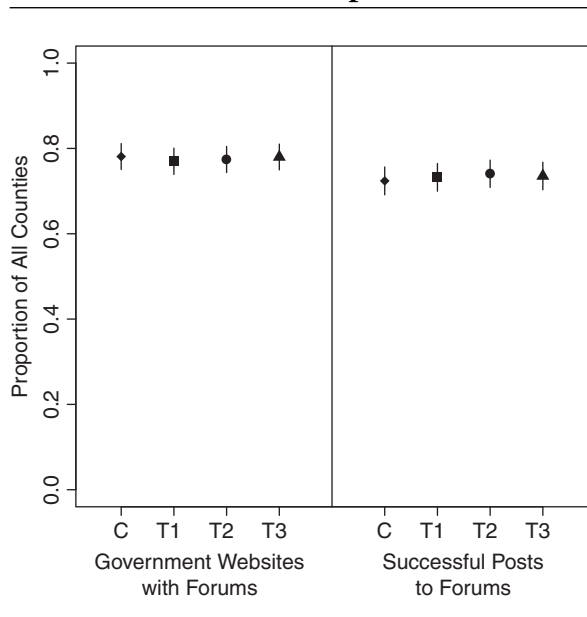
As mentioned above, among 2,869 Chinese counties, online forums were identified for 2,227 (77%), and posts were successfully made to 2,103 forums. For the 124 counties with forums where our posting was not successful, the main reason for failure to post was due to technical difficulties. In these cases, the submission led to errors in page loads after a lengthy wait. In each of these

cases, at least three attempts were made at submission using different browsers from within China.

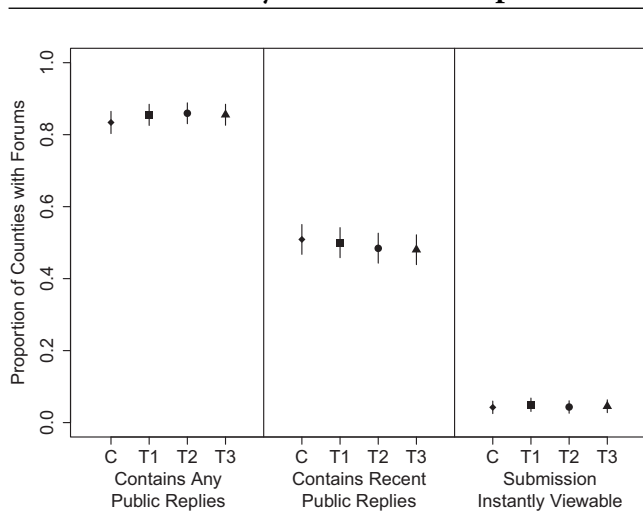
Whether a county has an online forum and whether we were successful in posting our request does not affect the validity of our experimental design. Figure 1 shows that we achieve balance across treatment groups for whether there is a government forum and whether posts are successful. In total, we submitted 519 posts to the control group, 525 posts to the first treatment group assessing threats of collective action, 531 posts to the second treatment group examining threats of tattling to upper levels of government, and 528 posts to the third treatment group focused on claims of long-standing loyalty to the CCP.

For each forum, we collected information on the characteristics of the forum, including whether existing posts and replies were publicly viewable—in other words,

**FIGURE 1 Availability of County Government Web Forums by Treatment Group**



**FIGURE 2 Openness of County Government Web Forums by Treatment Group**



whether someone who does not have an account or is not logged on to the site can view posts and replies. We also recorded the dates of the most recent posts and replies. Lastly, we documented whether the posts we submitted were immediately viewable, or whether the posts were first reviewed by authorities before they were released to be publicly viewable. As shown in Figure 2, approximately 85% of forums have existing publicly viewable posts and replies. This means that for 85% of government forums, anyone who visits the forum URL can view posts and

replies released by the government without creating an account or logging on.

Approximately 50% of forums contain posts by the local government made within the past 30 days. However, less than 5% of forums immediately release submitted posts. This means that the vast majority of government forums first review the content of posts submitted before the posts are released to be seen by the general public. This finding is in line with the high prevalence of review found among government websites (King, Pan, and Roberts 2014). As seen in Figure 2, all of the forum characteristics related to openness are balanced across treatment groups.

Finally, we collected information on the requirements for submitting posts to the government forum, including whether an e-mail address is required, whether a name is required, whether a personal identification number is required, whether a phone number is required, and whether an address is required. Since we do not use the information of real confederates, if an ID number, a telephone number, or an address is required, we randomly generate data to fill in these fields. The same, common male name was used in all requests, and e-mail accounts were created for the experiment. As shown in Figure 3, 80% of government forums require users to submit a name, 60% require a phone number, approximately 50% an e-mail address, 30 to 40% an address, and only 10% a personal identification number. Posting requirements are also balanced across treatment groups.

## Experimental Results

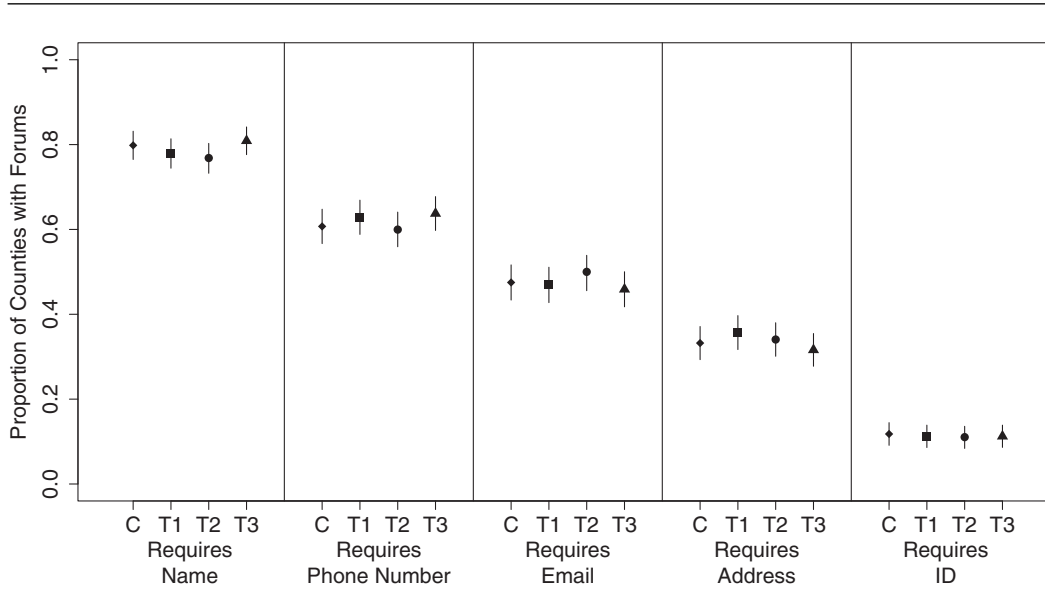
We begin by looking at whether or not county governments responded to submitted requests to evaluate overall responsiveness. The response rate to our control group was 32% (95% confidence interval of 28% to 36%). The black dots in Figure 4 show the point estimates for the causal effect of our three treatments on county government responsiveness. The vertical lines are 95% confidence intervals.<sup>16</sup>

The causal effect on responsiveness is more than 10 percentage points for threats of collective action. Since the base-level government response rate to the control group is approximately 30%, this means that threatening collective action causes county government to be one-third

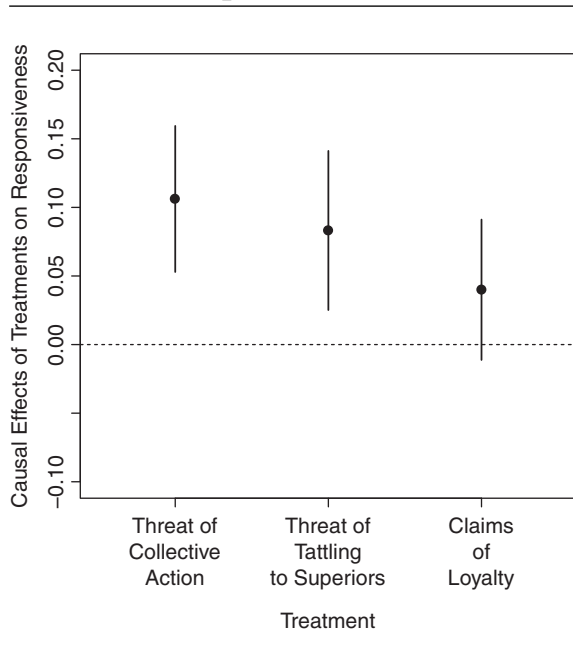
<sup>16</sup>Confidence intervals shown in the figures of the results section are based on Huber White robust standard errors. Confidence intervals based on alternative methods, including clustering at the prefecture or provincial level, produce basically identical because of the large sample size and stratified randomization scheme.



**FIGURE 3 Requirements for Posting to County Government Web Forums by Treatment Group**



**FIGURE 4 The Causal Effects of Treatments on Responsiveness**



more responsive. For threats of complaining to upper levels of government, the causal effect on responsiveness is also large at 8 percentage points. The causal effects of the two treatments are not statistically different from each other. Finally, the effect on responsiveness of claiming long-standing CCP membership and loyalty to the CCP is 4 percentage points, and the result is not statistically significant.

We go a step further and examine these causal effects while controlling for regional dummies and county-level characteristics. Table 2 shows the regression results including these controls for the set of all counties (unconditional) and for the set of counties where posts were successfully made (conditional).<sup>17</sup>

Columns 1–3 in Table 2 show the results for all Chinese counties (unconditional models), where the coefficient estimates represent the causal effect of treatments on government response. In column 1, government response is regressed on our treatment indicators. Column 2 performs the same analysis with the addition of prefectural dummy variables. The inclusion of prefectural dummies only changes the coefficient estimates very slightly while reducing the size of standard errors as expected. Finally, column 3 includes a set of sociodemographic controls in addition to prefectural dummies, and the estimated coefficients of the treatment indicators remain stable. The sociodemographic controls include log population, the proportion of nonagricultural households, the proportion of permanent urban residents, average years of education, the unemployment rate, and the proportion of ethnic minorities for counties in 2010.

<sup>17</sup>Results are based on regression adjustment. In addition to the dummy variables indicating treatment conditions, we include demeaned covariates and their interactions with the treatment dummies in the regressions (Lin 2013). Huber White robust standard errors are shown, though errors are virtually identical without using robust standard errors. Moreover, because treatment conditions are randomly assigned within each province (the variation in treatment is at the county level), standard errors clustered at the provincial level are almost the same as those in Table 2.

TABLE 2 The Causal Effects of Treatments on Government Responses

Dependent Variable	Government Response (0 or 1)					
	Unconditional			Conditional		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
T1: collective action threat	0.077 (0.023)	0.065 (0.021)	0.066 (0.022)	0.101 (0.030)	0.090 (0.029)	0.100 (0.029)
T2: tattling threat	0.068 (0.023)	0.061 (0.022)	0.061 (0.022)	0.083 (0.030)	0.094 (0.029)	0.092 (0.029)
T3: claims of loyalty	0.033 (0.023)	0.025 (0.021)	0.026 (0.021)	0.040 (0.029)	0.030 (0.029)	0.040 (0.028)
Constant	0.232 (0.016)	0.238 (0.015)	0.238 (0.015)	0.320 (0.020)	0.322 (0.020)	0.325 (0.020)
Prefectural dummies		yes	yes		yes	yes
Sociodemographic controls			yes			yes
Forum characteristics						yes
Observations	2,869	2,869	2,869	2,103	2,103	2,103

Note: Huber White robust standard errors are in parentheses.

Columns 4–6 in Table 2 show the results for Chinese counties where we successfully submitted our requests to government web forums (conditional models). Column 4 shows the regression results of government response on our treatments, similar to the unconditional results in column 1. Column 5 shows the regression results of government response on treatment variables controlling for prefectural dummies, and in column 6, we include the variables of column 5 as well as sociodemographic controls and a set of forum characteristics collected during the experiment. These forum characteristics include whether the government forum contains any posts along with replies, whether it contains posts and replies made within 30 days of the start of the experiment, whether a submission is immediately viewable, and various posting requirements, as described in the previous section.<sup>18</sup> As expected, the causal effects of the treatment increase in the conditional models but remain stable with the inclusion of prefectural dummies and additional control variables. Table 2 shows that our results are robust regardless of whether the analysis is based on all counties or the subset of counties where posts were successfully made. Threats of

<sup>18</sup>We report the correlations between sociodemographic controls and the overall response rate and between forum characteristics and the overall response rate in Tables A7 and A8, respectively, in the supporting information. We find that four variables, including total government revenue, existence of any replies, existence of any recent replies, and whether an individual's post is instantly publicly viewable after being submitted, are highly predictive of the overall response rate.

collective action and tattling generate greater responsiveness from county governments, whereas claims of loyalty do not.<sup>19</sup>

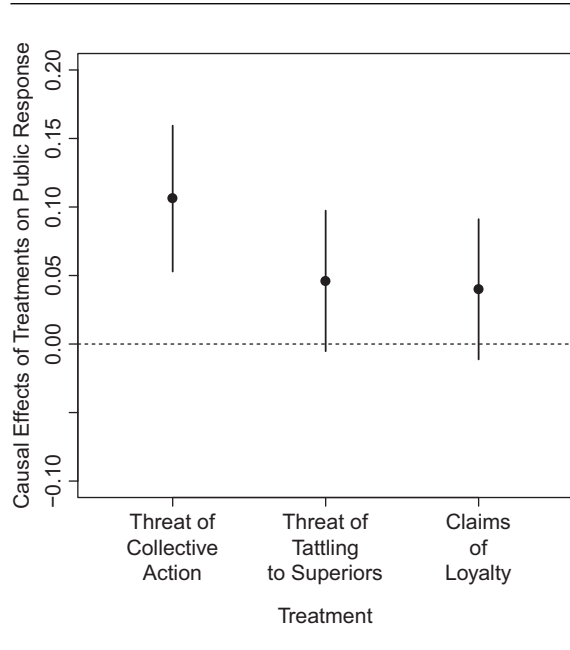
### Public and Private Responses

In addition to overall responsiveness, we also examine whether the reply to our request is made publicly viewable, or whether the response is kept private between the individual submitting the request and the government. A response is publicly viewable if any person can view the response along with the original request online without logging into an account on the forum. A response is private if it is only accessible to the individual who posted the request when that person logs into his or her account, or if the reply is e-mailed rather than posted to the forum.<sup>20</sup> If a response is private, we code the binary outcome variable *publicly viewable response* as 0. The rate of publicly viewable responses to our control group was 21% (95% confidence interval of 18% to 25%).

<sup>19</sup>The difference between the treatment effect of threatening collective action and the effect of threatening to tattle to upper levels of government is not statistically significant. In contrast, we can reject the null hypothesis that the treatment effect of threatening collective action and the treatment effect of claims of CCP loyalty are the same, at the 5% level.

<sup>20</sup>It is rare that a response is viewable to all individuals who have accounts. In part, this is because on county government forums, anyone can register an account.

**FIGURE 5 The Causal Effects of Treatments on Receiving Publicly Viewable Responses**



As shown in Figure 5, for publicly viewable responses, the causal effect of threatening collective action is again over 10 percentage points. Given that the publicly viewable response rate in the control group is just over 20%, threatening collective action increases publicly viewable responses from the county government substantially. In contrast, the effect of threatening to tattle to upper levels of government and the effect of claims of loyalty on public responses are small, at 5 percentage points and 4 percentage points, respectively. Neither effect is statistically significant. The causal effect of threatening collective action is significantly larger than the effects of the other two treatments at the 5% level.<sup>21</sup>

Table 3 shows that the causal effect of threatening collective action on publicly viewable responses is robust regardless of whether the analysis is based on all counties, columns 1 and 2, or the subset of counties where posts were successfully made, columns 3 and 4. The effect of tattling to upper levels of government on publicly viewable responses becomes statistically significant when we include regional dummies and additional variables. However, claims of loyalty do not lead to greater public responses regardless of model specifications.

<sup>21</sup>We did not expect to see the causal effects on publicly viewable responses until we gathered the data. Of course, because we were always interested in the publicity value of government responsiveness, we collect this information.

An increase in publicly viewable responses could be due to two reasons: First, there are simply more responses; second, the proportion of responses made public is higher. In order to better understand local governments' strategies of making a response public, we calculate the percentage of responses made public in each of the four treatment and control groups and compare the differences across groups. The results are shown in column 5 of Table 3. The control group received 166 responses in total, among which 110 are publicly viewable, so the proportion of publicly viewable responses is 0.663. The proportion of responses that are publicly viewable for the first treatment, threats of collective action, is the largest at 0.756 (the publicly viewable response rate of the control group, 0.663, plus an increase of 0.093). The proportion of responses that are publicly viewable for threats of tattling to upper-level government is very similar to the control conditions at 0.638, and the proportion of publicly viewable responses for claims of CCP loyalty is 0.700, also similar to the control condition. The standard errors reported in column 5 are produced by a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure. Broadly consistent with the results presented in columns 1–4 of Table 3, column 5 shows that threats of tattling to upper levels of government and claims of loyalty to the CCP do not increase the chances that a response will be publicly viewable in a statistically significant manner, whereas threats of collective action do lead to a statistically significant increase in the rate of publicly viewable responses in comparison to the control condition.

### Content of Responses

We examine the content of replies from county governments that responded to the request for *Dibao*. We coded responses by hand into three categories: (1) Deferral, (2) Referral, and (3) Direct Information. The content of these three categories roughly increases in terms of length of text and likely increasing effort on the part of the government respondent. We achieve 99% intercoder reliability for agreement in classifying responses into these three categories.

Replies are coded as Deferral if the response does not provide an answer to the question of how to obtain *Dibao*. Sometimes a rationale for the lack of information is provided, but other times none is given. Oftentimes, the government response states that some piece of personal information is missing in the request. Replies in the Deferral category are on average the shortest replies and likely require the least amount of effort on the part of

TABLE 3 The Causal Effects of Treatments on Publicly Viewable Responses

Dependent Variables	Publicly Viewable Response (0 or 1)				Public/All (5)
	Unconditional		Conditional		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	
T1: collective action threat	0.079 (0.021)	0.077 (0.020)	0.106 (0.027)	0.105 (0.027)	0.093 (0.047)
T2: tattling threat	0.038 (0.020)	0.038 (0.019)	0.046 (0.026)	0.063 (0.026)	-0.025 (0.049)
T3: claims of loyalty	0.032 (0.020)	0.032 (0.019)	0.040 (0.026)	0.047 (0.027)	0.037 (0.049)
Constant	0.153 (0.013)	0.154 (0.013)	0.212 (0.018)	0.220 (0.018)	0.663 (0.036)
Prefectural dummies		yes		yes	
Sociodemographic controls		yes		yes	
Forum characteristics				yes	
Observations	2,869	2,869	2,103	2,103	2,869

Note: Huber White robust standard errors are in parentheses in columns 1–4. In column 5, standard errors are based on nonparametric bootstrapping of 1,000 times.

the county government. The example below is a typical Deferral response:

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

Replies are coded as Referral when the government response suggests contacting another agency for further assistance and provides the contact details of that agency.<sup>22</sup> For example:

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.

When replies state that the initial request does not provide sufficient information, but also provides details on how to obtain additional resources and assistance (e.g., a telephone number), the responses are coded as Referral instead of Deferral. For example:

Comrade, hello! Because the situation you describe is not specific enough, to obtain assistance on your question, please call: \*\*\*\*3211, thanks!

<sup>22</sup>We do not show the telephone number or identity of the local governments in accordance with the experimental protocol approved by the institutional review boards of our universities.

Finally, responses are coded as Direct Information when the reply directly provides the information required to answer the questions posted in our request. These replies are generally the longest in length. Direct Information replies provide the most detailed information on what is required to obtain *Dibao* as well as specific next steps for the requester, which may include contact information for relevant agencies. For example:

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*.<sup>23</sup>

Looking across our treatment conditions, Table 4 shows the number and percent of responses for each of the content categories by treatment. For requests that threaten collective action and requests with claims of CCP loyalty, there is the highest proportion of responses in the Direct Information category and the lowest proportion of responses in the Deferral category. For requests that threaten to complain to upper levels of government, the largest proportion of responses is also in the Direct Information category, followed by the Deferral category, and the smallest proportion of responses fall in the Referral category.

Figure 6 shows the difference in means of each category of response between each treatment group and the control group.<sup>24</sup> This difference in means represents the causal effect of each treatment on the content of the response. The largest causal effect on content of response is the threat of collective action on Direct Information. The threat of tattling has a smaller causal effect on receiving Direct Information as well as Deferral.<sup>25</sup>

The content of these three categories of responses likely corresponds to differences in terms of the effort expended by the government respondent, and it may also reflect substantive differences in the government's intention to act. For example, while Referral and Deferral suggest rather superficial engagement with citizen concerns, Direct Information reveals greater attention to the complaints as well as care in addressing them. Although we do not assess government action beyond the online response, localities responding with Direct Information

may be more willing to take concrete actions to address citizen concerns than localities providing the other two types of responses.

**Speed of Responses.** We find that over 20% of responses were provided within one business day, and 70% of responses were provided within 10 business days. We do not find any significant differences in the speed of response between treatment groups.<sup>26</sup>

**Heterogeneous Effects.** In the online supporting information, we conduct a series of analyses to investigate heterogeneous treatment effects across different subgroups, including (a) urban versus rural areas, (b) areas where the proportion of ethnic minorities in the population is over 10% versus areas dominated by Han, (c) places with relatively high economic growth versus places with relatively low economic growth, and (d) counties with active forums (where we observe recently made posts and replies before the experiment was conducted) versus counties with inactive forums (Tables A3–A6).

We find that, across all subgroups, the threat of collective action generates the largest causal effect on government responsiveness, followed by threats of tattling to upper levels of government and claims of CCP loyalty. This empirical pattern holds across subgroups for all measures of responsiveness, including the overall level of response, the rate of publicly viewable responses, and the proportion of responses with direct information, suggesting that the mechanisms behind the treatment effects are similar across localities.

## Discussion

By measuring the direct interaction between local governments and citizens, our results provide causal evidence of sources that increase authoritarian responsiveness. The causal effect of threatening to engage in collective action reveals the concern county officials have over pressures from below, even when the risk of potential collective action is low and the scope of potential collective action is extremely limited. The causal effect of threatening to tattle to upper levels of government shows clearly that county officials care about superiors' perceptions of their performance, which means that some mechanism of oversight is structuring the incentives of county officials. Finally, the limited causal effect of claims of loyalty to the

<sup>23</sup> Again, we do not release the Chinese versions of the four examples in order to protect human subjects of this experiment.

<sup>24</sup> The category of no response exists for each group, but it is not shown here. Because the four differences in means are correlated with each other, we conduct a bootstrap procedure (of 1,000 times) to obtain the correct standard errors. In each round of bootstrap, prefectures are randomly drawn with replacement from universe of prefectures to make sure the treatment conditions are balanced. Counties belonging to the newly drawn prefectures constitute a new sample. See Table A1 in the supporting information for full results.

<sup>25</sup> The tattling treatment causes a slight increase in the Deferral responses, whereas the threat of collective action treatment does not. This is likely because the government wants to preempt potential collective action by openly reassuring dissatisfied citizens that it takes their concerns seriously. In the case of threat of tattling, it may be preferable for the government to directly solve the problem of the tattler instead of openly providing information.

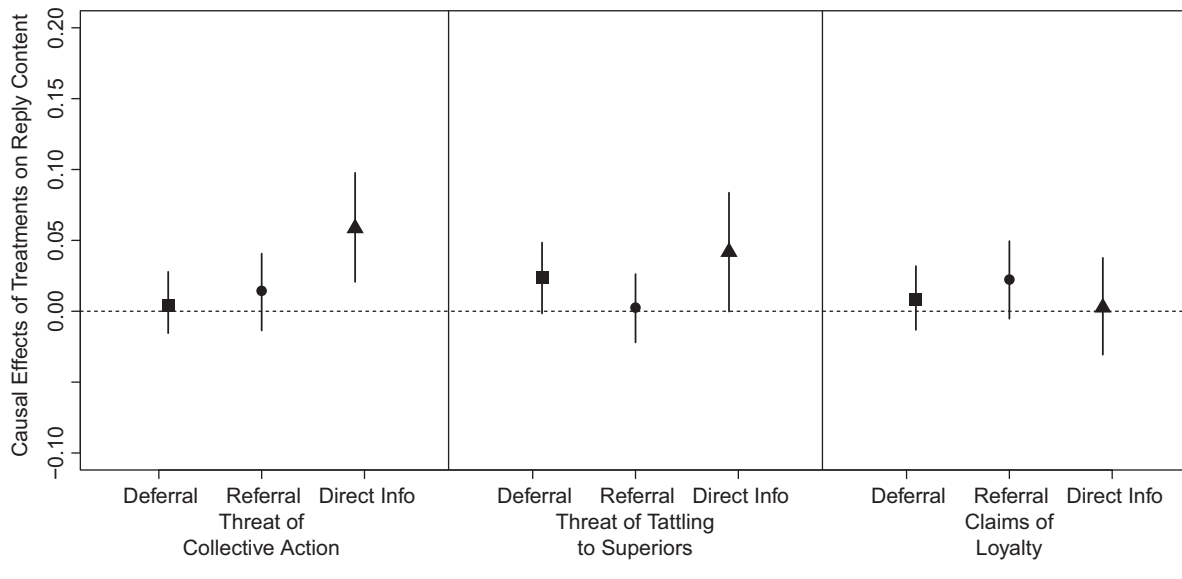
<sup>26</sup> Table A2 in the supporting information provides additional information on the evolution of the treatment effects over the 28-day period.



TABLE 4 Content of Responses by Treatment Group

	No Response		Deferral		Referral		Direct Info	
Control	551	76.9%	33	4.6%	42	5.9%	91	12.7%
T1: collective action threat	496	69.2%	36	5.0%	52	7.3%	133	18.6%
T2: tattling threat	502	70.0%	50	7.0%	44	6.1%	121	16.9%
T3: claims of loyalty	528	73.5%	39	5.4%	58	8.1%	93	13.0%

FIGURE 6 The Causal Effects of Treatments on Reply Content



CCP demonstrates how, absent informal insider channels to reach officials, simply being a loyal party member does not increase responsiveness. In this section, we discuss how each of these findings affects our understanding of Chinese politics as well as the politics of authoritarian regimes.

### Threat of Collective Action

Although collective action and the threat of revolution is a concern for many authoritarian regimes, it is surprising that our treatment describing a vague threat of small-scale collective action entails the largest causal effect on responsiveness. Recall that in this treatment, the *Dibao* request says, “If you can’t help, we’ll try to figure out what we can do together about this situation.” This treatment simply suggests that a few people may do something together, and the term *together* (一起) does not have any of the negative connotations of terms like *mass incident* (群体事件) or *collective behavior* (集体行为). In fact, the majority of those who provided feedback on our experimental design thought this particular treatment condition was

likely too light to generate any detectable causal effects, but we kept this phrasing to avoid the strong reaction that words such as *collective action* might have triggered for ethical reasons.

The responsiveness of county governments to this relatively vague threat of collective action suggests that the Chinese government is particularly sensitive to collective action. This finding builds on a growing body of evidence showing the importance of collective action to the CCP regime (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2014),<sup>27</sup> and it may reflect the decentralized nature of China’s administrative structure as well as the influence of the cadre evaluation system relative to other authoritarian

<sup>27</sup>Our finding of responsiveness to *threats* of collective action is consistent with the logic of King, Pan, and Roberts (2013, 2014), who find that censorship is targeted at discussion of ongoing, real-world collective action rather than criticisms of the regime. China censors discussion of real-world collective action to prevent collective behaviors from spreading, and it does not censor criticisms, which contain information crucial to governance. Likewise, responding to threats of potential collective action aims to prevent collective behaviors from occurring and also allows the regime to gather information about citizen preferences.

regimes (Landry 2008; Xu 2011). Local officials want to preempt real-world collective action, and they want to show societal actors that they take their concerns seriously. The online government forums where our experiment was conducted facilitate information gathering and allow governments to respond to citizen concerns, which is a crucial counterpart to simply gathering information (Dimitrov 2015, 2014b; Stockmann 2013; Wallace 2015).

Our finding that threats of collective action increase the probability that officials respond publicly shows that when the “bad news” has already spread and collective action, which entails more than one individual, is being threatened, responding publicly is a strategy that costs less time and energy than identifying and contacting all the discontented citizens who share the same problem. For local officials, responding publicly to threats of collective action demonstrates the officials’ concern for the underlying issues and their willingness to resolve citizens’ hardship and problems.

This responsiveness to pressures from below could be explained either by an interaction between China’s cadre evaluation system and citizen participation or by citizen engagement alone. In the former explanation, lower-level officials respond to threats of collective action to control the image they present to their superiors in order not to ruin their career prospects within the party-state system. In the latter explanation, lower-level officials respond to threats of collective action because they want to mitigate social contention to maximize rent seeking and/or minimize administrative burdens, irrespective of career concerns. For example, unrest among citizens could disrupt local officials’ access to rents since protest and collective action could lead to capital flight, diminishing sources of rent. Unrest could also decrease the officials’ control over the locality, hindering the ability to extract rents even if sources of rents remain stable. Local officials could also be adverse to collective action simply due to the disutility of the administrative burden it imposes. Protest and “trouble-making” often seek to disrupt the normal functioning of government (Chen 2009), making it difficult for local officials to carry out day-to-day activities. Added to the increased difficulty of day-to-day operations is the administrative burden of dealing with unrest and resolving social contention, such that managing citizen unrest is an onerous task for any local official. Lastly, there is the interaction between these two explanations: Unrest that consumes an official’s time and resources also reduces the time available for rent-seeking activities. This possibility of intrinsic aversion to social instability is not contradictory or exclusive to aversion induced by the incentives of party institutions; they could in fact be complementary.

## Threat of Tattling to Upper-Level Authorities

Responsiveness to threats of tattling to upper levels of government shows that county officials want to prevent citizens from going to upper levels with their grievances. This could be because county officials care whether their higher-ups learn about citizen grievances.<sup>28</sup> The relatively low rate of publicly viewable responses to threats of tattling reinforce this view. When facing a threat of tattling to the upper-level government, an official prioritizes finding a solution to the problem while preventing “bad news,” which would tarnish his image, from spreading. In this case, a private response is a strategy that provides a solution while limiting the spread of bad news.

Responsiveness to threats of tattling to upper levels of government shows that some oversight mechanism is effective in shaping the behavior of local officials, which reinforces the messages of works such as Xu (2011) and Huang (1996). This oversight mechanism could be institutions for political advancement, namely, China’s cadre evaluation system (Edin 2003). This oversight could stem from fear of losing face with factional sponsors, or it could stem from a desire to avoid unwanted attention to pursue other goals, such as rent seeking or corruption. These results show that factional politics does not completely dilute the incentives of officials to be responsive, lending evidence to findings that the role of factional ties and performance evaluation may be complementary (Jia, Kudamatsu, and Seim 2015).

## Claims of Loyalty

The finding that claims of CCP membership and loyalty to the Party do not, on average, result in greater responsiveness seems to suggest that, absent informal insider channels to reach officials, simply being a loyal Party member does not generate additional influence. This is analogous to concentric circles of constituencies found in democracies (Fenno 1977), and in this instance, a CCP member who is reduced to engaging in demands for welfare through a formal, impersonal channel is in the outer rings of influence.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Preventing citizens from going to upper levels with their grievances could also be because county officials want to ensure that upper levels know that the county is capable of handling citizen grievances, which will inevitably arise, on their own.

<sup>29</sup> In counties with active forums, claims of CCP loyalty do generate greater responsiveness, suggesting that the treatment is not entirely unrealistic. Indeed, this treatment is consistent with evidence that former insiders—veterans, cadres of state-owned enterprises, village cadres—resort to formal institutions in order to gain personal benefits from the regime (B. Chen 2012).

Our finding suggests that the regime's core supporters might be a much smaller group of people than long-standing, loyal CCP members, and that CCP membership is not necessarily a good proxy for insider status. Our finding is also consistent with emerging findings that the CCP is becoming depoliticized (Zheng 2009) and that there is increasing distance between citizens and officials, especially in urban areas (Tsai and Xu 2015). It is worth emphasizing that the claim of loyal, long-standing CCP membership, in contrast to threats of collective action and tattling, is deferential, which suggests that in this authoritarian context, some forms of threats may be more likely than deference to lead to responsiveness.

## Conclusion

Using an online field experiment to directly measure the responsiveness of subnational officials to citizen requests, we find that almost one-third of county governments in China are responsive to citizen requests related to social welfare. We find that threatening collective action causes a 10 percentage point increase in the overall response rate (or a 30% increase in the overall response rate), a 10 percentage point increase in the probability of providing a publicly viewable response, and a 6 percentage point increase in receiving direct, detailed responses. In contrast, while threatening to complain to upper levels of government causes a 8 percentage point increase in overall responsiveness, these threats of tattling have no detectable causal effect on publicly viewable responses. Finally, deferential claims of long-standing loyalty to the CCP do not on average cause increases in responsiveness.

While the Chinese regime may be particularly sensitive to citizen engagement and while the Chinese state may have outsized capacity to engage in information gathering and to respond to societal actors compared to other authoritarian regimes, responsiveness is an increasingly familiar refrain heard among state actors across many authoritarian regimes. Whether it is driven by a concern for regime stability or due to the influence of international organizations, regimes from the Middle East and North Africa to East and Southeast Asia are increasingly stressing the importance of responsiveness and some form of accountability to citizens (Harris 2013; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Reilly 2013).<sup>30</sup> For scholars focused on other regions of the world, our work shows that in the absence of meaningful electoral competition, responsiveness could stem from top-down mechanisms

of oversight, which we may expect in authoritarian regimes with higher degrees of top-down control and discipline, but responsiveness could also stem from bottom-up pressures from citizen engagement through channels set up by the regime (in our case, forums on government websites). Furthermore, our work shows that top-down mechanisms of oversight are activated by citizen input, that it is the interactions between top-down mechanisms of oversight and citizen engagement that generate authoritarian responsiveness, pointing to a possible refinement of existing theories. Upper-level authorities use citizens as an oversight mechanism on subnational officials, which imbues citizens with the ability to sanction lower-level officials and generates responsiveness among local officials to citizen demands.

These results show that regardless of whether responsiveness derives from top-down mechanisms or bottom-up pressures, citizen engagement is consequential. Citizen engagement provides information that officials pay attention to, and it can result in greater levels of governmental attention and response. Uncontrolled engagement is often a concern for authoritarian regimes, and authoritarian responsiveness appears to be one attempt at diffusing societal tensions and maintaining regime durability.

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## Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

**Table S1:** Content of Responses by Treatment Group

**Table S2:** Speed of Government Responses

**Table S3:** The Causal Effects of Treatments in Urban and Rural Areas

**Table S4:** The Causal Effects of Treatments: Ethnic Homogeneity

**Table S5:** The Causal Effects of Treatments: High and Low Growth Areas

**Table S6:** The Causal Effects of Treatments: Active and Inactive Forums

**Table S7:** Correlations between Response Rate and County Characteristics

**Table S8:** Correlations between Response Rate and Forum Characteristics