

# The Road to Cynicism

## The Political Consequences of Online Satire Exposure in China

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines two competing theories explaining the effects of political satire on citizens in an authoritarian context. The “activism” proposition argues that political satire works as a form of resistance to erode people’s support for the regime and encourages collective action. The “cynicism” proposition argues that while satire discourages regime support, it also discourages political participation. Our online survey experiment on young Chinese Internet users provides evidence supporting the cynicism proposition. Satire consumption reduces audiences’ political trust, deflates their political efficacy and discourages them from participating in politics, as it reduces the perceived severity of political problems and implies that audience participation is useless. We conclude that the dissemination of political satire may stabilize the authoritarian regime temporarily but induces it to become erosive in the long run.

**Keywords.** Political Satire, Online Activism, Experiment, China, Authoritarianism, Political Effect

Word Count (8923 words)

# 1 Introduction

For a long time, political satire has been considered a weapon to resist authoritarian rule (Oring 2004; Pi-Sunyer 1977; Zlobin 1996). O'Donnell and Schmitter (2013, p. 57) argue that “[t]he talent and courage of... satirists poke holes in the regime’s pretense of incarnating supreme ‘national values and virtues,’ often by subjecting this pretense to ridicule and humor.” Such a notion is also applied to understand online political satire in China – especially because satire provides an indirect and creative form of expression that is difficult to be detected clearly by censorship mechanism. Therefore, satire helps Internet users evade censorship when they criticize the government (Lee 2016; Yang 2009). In other words, citizens’ political criticisms of authoritarian regimes may survive as the form of satire in the public realm, which could in turn destabilize the regime’s rule.

However, the consequence of online satire exposure has yet to be tested empirically under authoritarian regimes (Yang and Jiang 2015). The previous literature suggests two competing explanations. The “activism” proposition contends that satire yields further resistance. After reading satire, audiences will be more concerned about the problems of dictatorship and willing to participate in contentious politics to resist the regime. This speculation, however, is challenged by studies from both the Soviet Union and United States (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Davies 2007). These opposing voices suggest the “cynicism” proposition: satire leads to low political trust and unwillingness to participate in politics, such as voting and protest.

We argue that these seemingly contradictory findings may originate from how satire differs from other types of criticism in that it has an additional humorous component. When the critical component aggravates audiences’ perception of the government’s problems, its humorous component reduces the estimation of severity and impairs confidence to influence politics.

To examine the effects of satire, we distinguish between these two components. We compare the effects of satire exposure and those of formal critique exposure within the same policy topics. Our survey

experiment randomly assigned Chinese Internet users to read passages of political satire, formal critiques and nothing on the topics of corruption and pollution. We investigated the between-subject differences in their policy confidence, political trust, political efficacy and participation willingness. We found that satire did not have a consistent effect on their confidence in specific policies, but it reduced people's trust in the regime and discouraged their online political participation, regardless of whether "institutional" or "noninstitutional" forms were used.

Our findings confirm the "cynicism" proposition and reject the "activism" proposition. The effects of the humorous component of satire can overwhelm those of the critical components, thus discouraging audiences from trusting the government or participating in politics. In China, due to censorship, satire is a more prevalent form of political communication than formal critiques. Satire discourages political participation and thus stabilizes the regime in the short term. For the long run, however, satire gradually erodes popular support of the regime. Meanwhile, satire also discourages the kind of participation that is desirable to the regime and thus weakens the regime's capability to collect information. Therefore, when serious criticism is suppressed, satire can be detrimental to authoritarian rule in the long term.

## **2 The Effects of Political Satire: Activism or Cynicism**

Political satire is a specific form of criticism that ridicules political figures, events or phenomenon (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Oring 2004). Compared to formal criticism, satire carries critical messages more implicitly, which facilitates political discussion when open political dissent and criticism are restricted (Sorensen 2008; Yang 2009). The forms of political satire vary. In a democratic context, satirical TV programs and dramas are usually carried out by professional comedians, while online user-generated posts and memes are more popular in non-democracies.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the effects of satire in a non-democratic context remain relatively unexplored (Yang and Jiang 2015).

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<sup>1</sup>For satire in democracies, see: Baumgartner and Morris (2006) and Becker (2012); in non-democracies, see Lee and Kwak (2014), Lee (2016), Sorensen (2008), and Yang (2009).

Previous studies suggest contradictory arguments on the effects of political satire. One group of scholars argues that satirical TV programs, such as *The Daily Show*, ‘may dampen participation ... by contributing to a sense of political alienation from the political process.’ (Baumgartner and Morris 2006, pp. 362-363). Others, however, observe a positive relationship between political satire exposure and political participation (Lee and Kwak 2014; Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005). The third explanation argues that the type of participation matters. Exposure to political satire enhances political engagement in civic activities but not connections with politicians and officials (Cao and Brewer 2008).

These contradictory findings can be summarized into two propositions. The cynicism proposition, indicates that political satire inspires low political trust and non-participation. The concept of cynicism provides a potential explanation for this mechanism: The “powerless ‘outsider-cynics’” operate as the passive, excluded “public” of the political system (Mazella 2007, p. 9), giving rise to significant alienation and abstention from participation (Keenan 2003). Cynicism is “the disenchanting, disillusioning of the alienated and distrustful” (Mazella 2007, p. 10). People with this kind of cynicism would “[be] more than willing to abstain entirely from a system design to minimize the impact of their participation” (Mazella 2007, p. 10). Empirically, scholars have found that satirical shows inspire cynicism (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Becker 2012; Guggenheim, Kwak, and Campbell 2011). Cynicism, in turn, generates negative attitudes, low trust and low participation (Morris 2009; Pattyn et al. 2012; Towner and Dulio 2011; Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr 2001).

The opponents of the cynicism proposition believe that satire increases political participation. We call it the activism proposition. First, satire exposure can increase political efficacy. Political efficacy is defined as people’s belief in self-competence and the feasibility of making political and social changes. Many studies argue that exposure to political satire may evoke ‘common experiences and opinions among viewers’ (Cao and Brewer 2008, p. 91) and retrieve information from their memories (Young 2008). This information-enhanced process increases viewers’ efficacy, especially internal efficacy that refers to one’s self-perception of her capacity to affect politics (Baumgartner and Morris 2006; Hoffman and Young

2011). Greater efficacy, in turn, encourages political participation (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Finkel 1985). Satire may also encourage political participation by arousing people's negative emotions about the government (Lee and Kwak 2014). Exposure to political satire may also increase people's interests in engaging in political talk (Landreville, Holbert, and LaMarre 2010) as well as electoral politics and legislative processes (Baym and Jones 2012).

Some studies on satire in authoritarian regimes tend to take the activism proposition for granted. In China, online satire is seen as a powerful tool for resistance, since it makes the regime appear ridiculous (Tang and Bhattacharya 2011). Given China's severe Internet censorship, people have to use creative ways to bypass censorship and spread their political opinions. Such views are summarized by Yang (2009, p. 3) as "online activism", an "Internet-based collective action". This notion implies that people's activities challenge and undermine the Chinese authoritarian regime. As Lee (2016) concludes, "(online political) satires can create or grow a group of dissenters who are committed to undertaking further actions to challenge the power of the state." In other words, online satire destabilizes authoritarian regimes by cultivating potential participants for regime-challenging collective actions. Similar opinions can be found in studies outside China. Chen (2016) finds that political engagements result from political memes in Singapore. Sorensen (2008) finds that the humor of the Serbian Otpor movement reduced fear and apathy among people and thus encouraged participation.

Activism proposition is also questioned in the authoritarian context. Davies (2007) argues that although political jokes are products of the extensiveness of political control, "they do not feed back into the social processes that generated them to any significant extent." (Davies 2007, p. 300). Furthermore, as Yang and Jiang (2015, p. 226) said, political satire may even lead to cynicism and political apathy, which can discourage participation. "Any enhancement of mood, any exaltation-of-self afforded by the jokes, may have been bought at the expense of real action" (Oring 2004, p. 228). In this case, satire actually helps the regime to demobilize rather than stimulate potential collective actions. Nevertheless, "there is no systematic empirical research in support of this argument (online activism) in China" (Yang

and Jiang 2015, p. 226). We still know little about which proposition can better describe the effects of satire on political behavior in authoritarian regimes.

Satire's effects in authoritarian regimes have different implications from those in democracies. In democracies, political participation refers to voting, engaging in political discussions, and other forms of civic engagements, all of which are essential for a well-functioning democratic system (Putnam 2001). Thus, if political satire encourages participation, it is beneficial to democratic systems. In contrast, political participation in authoritarian regimes can be threatening (Kuran 1991). Therefore, if political satire creates cynicism and thereby reduces citizens' interest in political participation, it helps the regime maintain its survival and stability. However, recent studies also show that autocrats need citizenry input (Lorentzen 2017; Stromseth et al. 2017). Thus, satire can be beneficial, as long as it encourages participation in the forms that the regime prefers, rather than those it dislikes. Examining satire's effects is helpful to understand how it affects the survival of authoritarian regimes.

### **3 The Dual Nature of Satire**

Following the previous literature, this paper tests online political satire's effects over political participation by examining the competing cynicism proposition and the activism proposition. Here, we define political participation as citizens' activities that can potentially generate significant effects on the outcomes of public policies or the operation of governments. It includes participation both online and offline, since online collective actions can also be effective in shaping policy outcomes.

We argue that scholars' disagreement on the consequences of satire can be ascribed to their failure to distinguish satire from formal criticism. Satire stands out among the various forms of criticism because of its unique humorous component. The effects of satire should be a combination of the effects of two components: its critical component shared by other forms of criticism and its humorous component. Nevertheless, previous studies did not hold criticism constant when they assessed the effects of political

satire. Baumgartner and Morris (2006) and Fox, Koloen, and Sahin (2007) try to compare the differences between satire and ordinary news reports, but news reports are not as critical as satirical pieces. Therefore, the extent to which the effects of satire are different from normal criticism remains unknown.

We argue that satire's two components indicate discrete effects on participation. First, the critical component highlights the weakness and defects of its targeted issues. Like other forms of criticism, it can increase people's grievances regarding the political status quo. The substantive information contained in criticism can also enhance people's internal efficacy. When people have grave concerns about an issue, they feel more compelled to participate and change the status quo (Yang 2009, p. 6). Thus, exposure to criticism can increase the willingness of participation. On the other hand, the humorous component includes sarcastic and amusing elements. Amusement can dissipate tensions and hatreds toward politics (Benton 1988, p. 41). In turn, satire readers cannot feel the need to change the status quo and become less likely to participate compared to the readers of formal criticism.

In other words, when the critical component solely affects people's political trust, the two components generate contradictory effects on political participation. Satire's effects, therefore, depend on which component's effect is stronger. This relation is described in Equation 1.  $E_c$  denotes the positive effects of the critical component on the participation probability  $P_{par}$ , while  $E_h$  denotes the negative effects of the humorous component on participation.

$$P_{par} = E_c - E_h \quad (1)$$

When  $E_c > E_h$ , the activism proposition applies. Satire exposure can increase people's political efficacy and stimulate participation. According to past studies, this means that satire readers are either more willing to participate in general or only more willing to participate outside the institutional channels as their trust of the government declines. When  $E_c < E_h$ , however, the cynicism proposition applies. Exposure to online political satire lowers political participation willingness because the humorous com-

ponent reverses the effects of critical component.

We generate several testable hypotheses in this respect. The first three articulate the common grounds of both the cynicism and activism propositions—their negative effects on policy confidence, i.e., their confidence of the prospect of specific policies (Hypothesis 1), and political trust, their overall confidence on the political system (Hypothesis 2). Second, we expect that satire readers are less willing to participate compared to formal criticism readers because of the humorous component (Hypothesis 3).

Third, if the cynicism proposition is correct, we should verify that reading satire decreases political participation compared to non-readers (Hypothesis 4). On the other hand, if the activism proposition is correct, we should verify that readers of online political satire are more likely to participate in politics than non-readers (Hypothesis 5a). Finally, satire may not have a homogeneous effect on all kinds of participation (Cao and Brewer 2008). It may discourage, for example, voting while also stimulating protests. If this situation is true, the activism proposition remains correct, as satire does encourage political participation. Therefore, Hypothesis 5b is as follows: readers of online political satire are less prone to participate via institutional channels but are more prone to participate via non-institutional channels than non-readers.

In other words, we expect both propositions will predict the effects of Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3. To prove the cynicism proposition, we need to find evidence to support Hypotheses 4. In proving the activism proposition, we should find evidence to support either Hypothesis 5a or 5b.

## **4 Research Design**

### **4.1 Experimental Manipulation**

Previous scholars conducted experiments to study satirical TV shows in the United States (Baumgartner 2007; Baumgartner and Morris 2008; Baumgartner and Morris 2006). Similarly, we chose to



conduct the survey experiment on Chinese Internet users. China has a large population of Internet users and one of the most developed Internet services. With censorship on political discussion, the Chinese Internet nurtures flexible forms of expression that can evade information control (Lee 2016; Yang 2009). In addition, as an authoritarian regime, China has various channels of political participation (Stromseth et al. 2017), which conveniently allows the exploration of satire's effects on political participation in an authoritarian context.

We prepared two topics of satire, environmental pollution and political corruption, both of which are salient public topics on the Chinese Internet.<sup>2</sup> Researches found that related policy issues can be discussed as long as they do not involve collective actions or directly challenge the legitimacy (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Shao Forthcoming). The experimental design guarantees that each group has a similar level of concern for both topics at the aggregate level.

We randomly assigned respondents into three groups: the treatment group, the placebo group and the control group. The treatment group read two satirical jokes about corruption or two jokes about pollution. The texts of the satire were constructed based on the user-generated content on the Chinese Internet. The placebo group read two short paragraphs of formal critiques of either of the two topics. The paragraphs were excerpted from articles published in Chinese newspapers.<sup>3</sup> The placebo group enabled us to test the effects of the humorous component when the critical component is controlled. Finally, the control group read nothing. After reading the materials, all three groups of respondents were asked questions about the dependent variables of interest.<sup>4</sup>

The pieces were selected by the following procedure: we collected a large amount of candidate materials, and then selected pieces of similar length and content. The only difference was that the satirical piece was constructed as a joke. Such procedure is consistent with recent scholarly work in both China

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<sup>2</sup>The leadership in China launched a massive anti-corruption campaign in 2013; see <https://goo.gl/BCAGUQ>, accessed September 1, 2017. Pollution is a topic of concern among Chinese citizens and activists; see <https://goo.gl/pkPPxK>, accessed September 1, 2017

<sup>3</sup>We did not disclose the sources of the reading materials.

<sup>4</sup>The satire and placebo texts were kept with the length that typically literate Chinese adults can finish reading within 30 to 60 seconds.

and the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

## 4.2 Dependent Variables

For all respondents, we examined the effects of satire material on policy confidence, general political trust, political efficacy and political participation. The questions were shown in a random order.<sup>6</sup>

No matter which topic of satire (or critique) respondents read, they were asked all three policy confidence questions, how much confidence they have in the regime's performance on corruption, environment and economic inequality. We wanted to determine whether the effects of satire were only with respect to a corresponding topic or whether they spillover to other topic areas. All respondents answered three questions on general political trust: the government's policy-making competence, the fitness of the political system, and their satisfaction of with the government's performance.

We asked two questions on political efficacy. Internal efficacy measures the self-assessment of capacity to affect politics. External efficacy measures their confidence on the government's acceptance of citizens' input.<sup>7</sup> The efficacy questions can help us to cross-check satire's effects on participation, since political efficacy is seen as a useful predictor of political participation (Hoffman and Young 2011).

We used the willingness of participation to measure political participation. Since we wanted to observe the post-treatment effects in an experimental setting, measuring participants' actual participation was not feasible. Second, willingness of participation should be positively correlated with the actual participation. People with low participation willingness would still be less likely to participate than the ones with high willingness, with all other conditions being equal. Admittedly, willingness of (future) participation generates errors as a proxy of measuring true participation. Our findings, however, depend on a comparison across three randomized experimental groups. Even though willingness of participation

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<sup>5</sup>See Berinsky (2017), Huang (2017), and Huang and Yeh (2017);

<sup>6</sup>The reading materials and wording of all the questions are available in the Online Appendix (OA).

<sup>7</sup>Question wording: I have better knowledge about the political issues than most other people (Internal Efficacy); The government officials do not really care what ordinary people think (External Efficacy, reverse coded)

cannot accurately measure actual participation, it should not generate a biased estimation of the relation between the independent variables and the dependent variable.

In the treatment group and control group, people who read about environmental pollution answered questions only about political participation on pollution. The same was true for people who read about corruption. Respondents in the control group answered participation questions on both topics.

Surveying all types of political participation within one survey was not realistic. We followed two principles to choose participation: first, they should be self-organized or self-mobilized (bottom-up), realistic in the Chinese context and able to generate substantial political effects for the policies or government officials; second, it should cover a broad range of participation types. Thus, we excluded some forms of participation, such as voting for local representatives, which is usually manipulated by the government in Chinese politics. We used *institutional involvement (Insti\_Inv)*, i.e., how much the government would be involved in the process of participation, as a scale to cover the breath of participation types.

We designed three questions about online participation for each topic according to institutional involvement since asking offline participation can be too sensitive to get honest answers. “Reporting corruption and pollution to the government” requires that the government solve the problem. These activities do not challenge the government’s authority. They are the most “institutional” ones, and fully compliant with the government’s need (*Insti\_Inv* coded as 3). Citizens are less compliant when they proactively choose to “monitor the government’s corruption / pollution information” because, in these two activities, citizens retrieve information from the government rather than provide information to it. However, the government still tolerates such activities to some degree in that it has created such channels to citizens (*Insti\_Inv* coded as 2). Citizens’ self-organized activities are least tolerable since they are bottom-up collective actions outside institutional channels (*Insti\_Inv* coded as 1). Given the sensitivity of the topic, we used two crowd-sourced online activities as self-organized participation to avoid using words like “protest” or “demonstration.”

We included a manipulation check question, “do you agree that this piece is fun,” for the treatment

group and placebo group to examine whether respondents complied with the survey. Finally, we used demographic questions and three ideological questions as control variables to check the group balance and examine the robustness of our findings.<sup>8</sup>

### 4.3 Data

We conducted the online survey experiments from 23-28 December 2016. The sample was recruited by a large online survey company in China.<sup>9</sup> We received 573 valid responses; 252 respondents in the treatment group, 161 respondents in the control group, and 160 respondents in the placebo group.<sup>10</sup> We conducted robustness tests by excluding those who spent less than 10-15 seconds on the reading materials. The results remained mostly similar.<sup>11</sup>

Our sample concentrated on educated, young Internet users. This has several advantages. First, it reaches a certain level of external validity in that the participants have diverse socioeconomic backgrounds compared to college students. The participants come from all provinces except four (Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai and Tibet). In addition, the sample recruited the most likely satire readers. Since political satire is severely censored in most traditional media channels, Internet users are more likely to be exposed to satire. Furthermore, the readers of political satire are usually educated, young urban residents (Yang 2009, p. 15) because understanding satire requires knowledge of political affairs and implicit rhetoric. Studies in western countries found that educated young population are most likely to be affected by satire (Boukes et al. 2015; Matthes and Rauchfleisch 2013). This group is also more politically active. Thus, their attitudes and preferences have significant political implications. Moreover, online political engagement and actions have become more popular than traditional political participation among young educated Chinese (Lei 2011; Yang 2009). Lastly, an online sample can better protect respondents'

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<sup>8</sup>The question wordings are available in the OA.

<sup>9</sup>See KurunData (<https://goo.gl/NakqaA>).

<sup>10</sup>The proportion of experimental groups was set by researchers. The average time to finish the entire survey was approximately 6 minutes, 10 seconds (excluding 44 respondents with no finish time recorded). Exposure to satire averaged 45 seconds; exposure to the placebo averaged 40 seconds.

<sup>11</sup>See OA.

anonymity as they answer sensitive questions (Kays, Gathercoal, and Buhrow 2012). The respondents are more likely to reveal their true thoughts than in face-to-face representative surveys (Huang and Yeh 2017). Therefore, online samples have been widely used by previous works (Ahler 2014; Huang 2017; Huang and Yeh 2017; Pan and Xu 2018; Ryan 2017).<sup>12</sup> However, we do admit that this sample is not completely representative, and we should be cautious to generalize the conclusion of this study.

## 5 Empirical Analysis

### Main Findings

Table 1 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the three groups. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  test shows the answers are consistent. Most demographic features are not significantly different across the experimental groups, suggesting successful randomization. People felt that the satirical pieces in the experiment group were significantly funnier than the critiques in the placebo group (Diff.=0.850, S.E.=0.083, p=0.000). This result shows that respondents do pay attention to the different natures of materials and that the manipulation was successful.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Figure 1 through Figure 3 compared confidence interval plots (Ciplots) on each question of dependent variables across three experimental groups.<sup>13</sup> The subtitle of each plot is the targeted question of the plot.

The first row of Figure 1 presents the comparison of three questions concerning political trust. Compared to the control group, the treatment group had lower political trust across these three questions. Satire readers also expressed less trust in the government than placebo readers, although the differences

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<sup>12</sup>Our sample has a similar demographic distribution as samples used in other works conducted in China, see Huang and Yeh (2017) and Pan and Xu (2018).

<sup>13</sup>Here we do not differentiate the topic of satirical pieces and control for demographic variables. Regression analysis with controls show the results remain the same. See OA for detailed results on t-test and regression.

are not significant. On the other hand, the second row of Figure 1 shows that the effect of satirical material was not consistent for the three policy confidence questions. We cannot make a conclusive finding regarding the effect of the satirical material on policy confidence. These findings confirm Hypothesis 2 but not Hypothesis 1.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

Figure 2 presents the experimental results on political efficacy. Satire readers' internal efficacy and external efficacy are the lowest among three groups. Compared to formal critique readers, satire readers' internal efficacy was significantly reduced. Satire readers' internal efficacy was also lower than the control group at the edge of conventional statistical significance level. This result indicates that humorous component decreased respondents' self-confidence to influence politics. Satire readers' external efficacy was significantly lower than that of the control group. Although satire group showed lower external efficacy than formal critique readers, such difference is not significant. Since satire can reduce both components of efficacy, its effects on political participation should also be detrimental.

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

Figure 3 confirms the findings on political efficacy by comparing willingness of political participation. The first row shows the participation in political corruption, and the second row shows the participation on environmental protection. Three columns, from left to right, show the degree of institutional involvement from highest to lowest. To all participation questions, the estimated means of willingness of the satire group are lower than those of the control and placebo groups. The differences are larger when institutional involvement is low (the right column). The discouraging effects of satire are larger on non-institutional collective actions than the other two types of participation. The results confirm Hypothesis 3 and 4 and reject Hypothesis 5a and 5b. They show that the effects of the humorous component are detrimental to participation.

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

To examine whether institutional involvement may change the effects of satire on participation, we conducted regression analysis of satire on political participation. We used per question per respondent as the unit of analysis. We controlled the specific questions respondents answered as well as the topic of satire to which they were exposed. We also controlled a collection of demographic and ideological variables. The results are shown in Table 2.

In Table 2, the first model compares the satire and placebo groups. Compared with placebo readers, satire readers were 5.4% less willing to join non-institutional participation. Regarding quasi-institutional participation, satire readers' willingness dropped 4.2%. Regarding institutional participation, their willingness dropped 3.0%, but the result was statistically insignificant.<sup>14</sup>

The second model shows that the comparisons between the satire and control groups are less robust. Compared with the control group, the satire group showed lower non-institutional participation willingness by 5.1%, lower quasi-institutional participation by 3.1% and lower institutional participation by 1.1% (not significant).<sup>15</sup>

[Insert Table 2 Here]

In general, our findings confirm the cynicism proposition but not the activism proposition. Although not every result can pass the conventional statistical test, the effect of satire is consistently negative on political trust compared with the control group. We find consistent patterns that satire readers are also less willing to participate in politics than formal-critique readers and the non-readers. Satire readers also have lowest political efficacy (both internal and external), which further supports the cynicism argument. The effects of the satirical material are larger when the institutional involvement of participation is low. Regarding participation with a high degree of institutional involvement, the effect of satire remains neg-

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<sup>14</sup>The percentage is calculated by transferring the scale [1-4] to [0-100].

<sup>15</sup>The same scale as Footnote 14.

ative, but statistically insignificant. This suggests that satire is more effective at stopping people from non-institutional participation.

We failed to find consistent effects of satire on policy confidence to confirm Hypothesis 1. It could be that the satire's effect is "deeper" – that is, it is not based on specific political issues but more general attitudes toward politics. It could also be that policy issues are usually complex, and the short-term exposure is not sufficient to change people's prior attitudes. Nevertheless, the relation between satire exposure and policy attitudes is worth further investigation.

## 5.1 Extended Analysis and Limitations

By comparing the effects of formal critique to satire, we show that political trust is mainly reduced by the critical component shared by formal critiques and satire. The humorous component is detrimental to political efficacy and participation willingness.

There are two explanations for why the humorous component could deflate participation.

First, satire can pacify people's impulse to resist the unpleasant political status quo. The humorous component of satire may reduce the perception of salience and severity of the topic and thus demotivate them. In the survey, after people read the pieces of satire, we asked two additional questions: whether they agree that (1) the topic was important to their country or (2) that they are personally very interested in the topic (both on a 4-point scale). It turns out that people who read the placebo text felt that the topic was more important and that they were more interested in it.<sup>16</sup> Thus, satire reduced the perceived severity of the problem compared to the formal critique.

Second, satire may reduce people's political efficacy, and the reduced efficacy may lower people's propensity for participation. Current literature suggests that efficacy is important in moderating the effect of satire (Holbert, Lambe, et al. 2007; Polk, Young, and Holbert 2009). We used a structural equation

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<sup>16</sup>Result of Importance (Treatment-Placebo): Diff=-0.139, SE=0.040, p-value≈0.047; Result of Personal Interest (Treatment-Placebo): Diff=-0.061, SE=0.042, p-value≈0.24.



model to test whether two types of political efficacy can be a mediator between satire exposure and political participation. The results show that satire lowered internal efficacy compared to the placebo group with a mediation proportion of 40.1% (Confidence Level=90%). The control group's proportion of mediation is 24.6%, but the result is not statistically significant. On the other hand, external efficacy has little effect on mediating between satire treatment and participation willingness. The results suggest that satire mainly reduces people's self-confidence to participate in politics. We cannot find evidence on how their perceived influence to government mediates their participation. Nevertheless, such exploratory evidence is not sufficient to provide irrefutable evidence to the mechanisms we explore. We expect further studies to address this issue.<sup>17</sup>

Although this paper does not have sufficient evidence to tap into how satire translates into non-participation, our finding on the effects still make a contribution to the literature. The current literature has a very strong presumption of the activism effect of political satire in authoritarian regimes (Lee 2016; Oring 2004; Yang 2009). The general public also holds strong expectations in the anti-regime effects of political satire.<sup>18</sup> Instead, this paper tries to show that such expectation is questionable. Political satire, contrary to what many people believe, may actually create political cynicism and reduce the willingness of (online) political participation.

One limitation of our results concerns the external validity. The effects of the satirical material used in this study were estimated from a short-term treatment – two pieces of satire with the same topics. In ordinary life, however, people have chances to be constantly exposed to satirical texts for days and years. Will the results still hold over the long term? Although we do not have long-term data, we used the length of exposure as a proxy to explore. We regressed the length of respondents' exposure time (in seconds) to satire and placebo materials on the dependent variables. Longer exposure to satirical material reduces

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<sup>17</sup>We also integrated all four mechanism variables into one SEM model. They can only explain limited proportion of the causal effects. The also model has a poor fit of the data(SRMR=0.127). The evidence is not sufficient either. For complete results, see OA.

<sup>18</sup>For example, see the news article <https://goo.gl/2TpxFB> and <https://goo.gl/xBb8vP>, accessed on February 25, 2018

participation willingness and external efficacy, while longer exposure to formal critiques enhances trust, participation willingness and external efficacy.<sup>19</sup> The scale of time length has relatively small effects (one hundredth to one thousandth of the treatments' effects). This is not surprising given that the difference in exposure time in our survey is very small. Nevertheless, this evidence suggests that, in the long run, the accumulation of differences in satire exposure might have significant impacts on individuals' political attitudes and participation in the direction of our findings.

Another potential limitation is that the experiment cannot perfectly control the level of criticism between the placebo and satire groups, such as the persuasiveness and the effectiveness of critique. Therefore, the different outcomes we witnessed between the treatment and placebo groups could be caused by different levels of criticism while the humorous component could have no effect. If such a challenge were true, we should expect the results of the treatment group and the placebo group to be in the same direction but on different scales. However, the results for the two groups were in the same direction for political trust but in the opposite direction for participation willingness – compared to the control group, the placebo group showed higher participation willingness in four out of the six types of participation, while the treatment group's participation willingness was lower in all six types (see Figure 3). Thus, the critical component alone cannot explain the results for participation. The humorous component still affects the outcome. In addition, if the critical component is the only source that affects participation, we should have found satire to be less critical; however, our results suggest that satire lowers political trust no less than formal critique.

Finally, political satire is, by definition, a combination of the humorous component and the critical component. In our paper, the two components were treated independently for parsimonious purposes, although we cannot exclude one potential mechanism that the humorous component may affect participation willingness via an interaction effect that changes how people perceive the critical component. If this were true, the levels of criticism would be different between satire and formal critique, but our theory still

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<sup>19</sup>See the OA for the results.

holds – it is still the humorous component that differentiates the effects of political satire from those of other formal critiques. Our study does not have direct evidence to explore such a cognitive mechanism, i.e., how the humorous and critical components interact. We encourage future studies on this issue.

Our sample is skewed to a young and educated population, which covers the majority of satire audiences and politically active groups. Our findings suggest that political satire has the potential to substantially discourage political participation in China. We used official statistics from CNNIC to weight the age of respondents in the analysis of political participation and the results remain mostly similar.<sup>20</sup> However, we should be cautious in applying our findings to the lower-educated population in China.<sup>21</sup> The lower-educated population has higher trust in the Chinese government (Wang 2005), and is probably less prone to be affected by satire.

Nonetheless, given that low-educated groups are less likely to be affected by satire, we anticipate that having more of these respondents in our analysis would, at worst, mitigate the discouraging effects of satire on trust and participation. By the same token, however, the older and less educated respondents are also less drawn towards activism in response to satire. In short, a more representative sample would be more likely to push the needle towards the non-effect, which is in fact what we have already found on the most provocative hypothesis concerning satire-induced activism. In this sense, even if a more representative sample may, at the worst cases, make our cynical findings less significant, our findings still make a contribution by providing evidence to challenge the current literature’s predominant proposition of Internet-empowered activism.

## 6 Conclusion

For the first time, this study used experimental methods to explore the political consequences of political satire, one phenomenal form of online political expression, in the context of non-democratic China.

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<sup>20</sup>See OA.

<sup>21</sup>Given the small number of low-educated respondents in our sample, re-weighted analysis is not meaningful.

We examined two competing propositions: activism and cynicism. We found that online political satire creates political cynicism among its audience and discourages political participation of young, educated people. This result comes from the distinctive effects of satire's two components. When the critical component ( $E_c$ ) motivates people to participate, its humorous component ( $E_h$ ), which makes satire different from a formal critique, dismisses such motivation. Satire is either not a form of resistance or is a form of resistance that is ineffective in mobilizing political participation.

This paper measures non-institutional participation, or collective action, using questions about online participation, although we believe that our findings can also be applied to offline participation. First, political satire reduces political efficacy, which indicates the reduction of participation generally. In addition, The literature shows that online and offline activists share common demographic backgrounds. Participants usually participate in both types although they may prefer different repertoires (Oser, Hooghe, and Marien 2013). Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) find that "offline types of political engagement are reemerging online" and that political action online is, in fact, "mirroring existing patterns of political behavior". Therefore, we believe satire is unlikely to have distinct effects on online and offline participation. However, we encourage further study to provide more evidence on how satire affects offline participation in authoritarian context.

We also explored the causal mechanism between satire and participation. Compared with formal criticism exposure, satire's humorous component reduces the audiences' perception of the severity of the issues. Their political efficacy drops and thus, participation willingness reduces. Consequently, satire eliminates an audience's power to resist and protest a regime. Nevertheless, this evidence is indicative rather than decisive; more evidence is required from future studies.

The literature also suggests the Horatian type of satire may generate different effects on the interpretation of satire from the Juvenal type (Holbert, Hmielowski, et al. 2011; LaMarre et al. 2014). The satire this paper tests is closer to the Juvenal, since the decrease of political trust suggests that satire exposure brought indignation to respondents. However, we believe that our conclusions should be applied to both

types of satire. Horatian satire, which does not create indignation and urgency (Holbert, Hmielowski, et al. 2011, p. 405), is even less likely to motivate political participation. Nevertheless, we encourage future studies explore the effects of different types of satire.

Our experiment has limitations in its external validity. Although this survey tests satire on two salient topics in China, it cannot cover all public issues discussed by the Chinese people. Constrained by the sensitivity of the topic, we could not choose satirical topics that directly target political leaders and the political system. We hope future studies can examine how topics interact with effects of satire. In addition, although our analysis suggests that long-term exposure to satire should have a similar effect to the short-term one, we need long-term data to further test such speculation. Finally, our sample concentrates on young educated Internet users. This population also happens to be the most likely to read and understand political satire as well as to participate in politics. Therefore, our findings are very close to the effects that satire actually imposes on the Chinese Internet. However, we do not argue that such effects are applicable to the general Chinese population.

The fact that online political satire produces cynicism may have dramatically different implications in democratic societies than in authoritarian societies. In democracies, political participation and civic engagement support the functioning of institutions (Putnam 2001). Satire stimulates cynicism, which challenges the legitimacy of democratic institutions and their daily functioning (Erber and Lau 1990); it impairs people's beliefs towards politics and democracy (Dancey 2012).

In authoritarian societies, non-institutional participation, especially collective actions both online and offline, are intensively repressed because the regime regards them as a threat to its stability (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). The spread of satire, rather than formal critiques, can discourage people's participation. The regime's cost of repression is thus reduced. However, recent studies show that political participation also provides information for the autocrats to supervise their agents and improve governance (Lorentzen 2017; Stromseth et al. 2017). Therefore, in the short term, satire can stabilize the regime by discouraging disruptive political participation. However, if such effects persist long term, satire will gradually erode

government trust and impair the regime's ability to collect information via public participation.

This study engages in the discussion of the power of the Internet in politics. The Internet is believed to play an important role in many democratization events, from the color revolutions to the Arab Spring (Diamond 2010; Farrell 2012; Lynch 2011). In authoritarian regimes, satirical expressions, because of their implicitness, can circumvent censorship and spread widely across the Internet. Thus, satirical activities are viewed as one of the few forms of expression that can survive under authoritarian censorship and be effective in facilitating regime changes by easily mobilizing resistance. Our study, however, indicates that we should be careful in claiming the effects of online political satire on regime changes and democratization. We should not only focus on the negative messages that satire communicates about a regime but also on what negative effects it exerts on individuals' political attitudes and behaviors. Political satire is likely not the start of political activism against a regime but instead a road to cynicism.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	Satire_C <sup>1</sup>		Satire_E		Placebo_C		Placebo_E		Control		F	Prob>F
	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd		
Fun <sup>2</sup>	2.77	0.79	2.94	0.74	1.95	0.93	2.05	0.86			105.50	0.00
Importance	3.18	0.72	3.24	0.66	3.30	0.75	3.36	0.64			3.18	0.08
Personal Interest	3.02	0.76	3.10	0.68	3.04	0.74	3.25	0.58			1.54	0.22
Authoritarianism	2.42	0.80	2.54	0.84	2.46	0.78	2.70	0.75	2.60	0.82	1.38	0.25
Socialism	2.53	0.83	2.65	0.80	2.81	0.87	2.51	0.76	2.54	0.81	0.92	0.40
Traditionalism	2.87	0.60	3.06	0.67	3.14	0.55	3.05	0.61	3.02	0.60	2.36	0.10
Male[0-1]	0.53	0.50	0.39	0.49	0.54	0.50	0.56	0.50	0.51	0.50	1.33	0.27
Age[1-3] <sup>3</sup>	1.90	0.79	1.82	0.79	2.11	0.83	2.05	0.87	2.01	0.83	3.87	0.02
Education[1-3] <sup>4</sup>	2.03	0.41	1.93	0.36	1.94	0.40	1.94	0.46	1.99	0.39	0.83	0.44
Annual Income <sup>5</sup>	2.67	0.80	2.57	0.84	2.71	0.80	2.69	0.84	2.79	0.83	2.01	0.14
CCP Member[0-1]	0.28	0.45	0.34	0.47	0.27	0.44	0.33	0.47	0.29	0.45	0.06	0.94
State Employee[0-1]	0.32	0.47	0.30	0.46	0.41	0.50	0.40	0.49	0.37	0.49	2.17	0.11
Observations	133		119		80		80		161			

<sup>1</sup> “Insti” means institutional, “Q” means “quasi”, “C” means for corruption topic and “E” for environment

<sup>2</sup> All variables have a four-point scale [1-4] unless specified

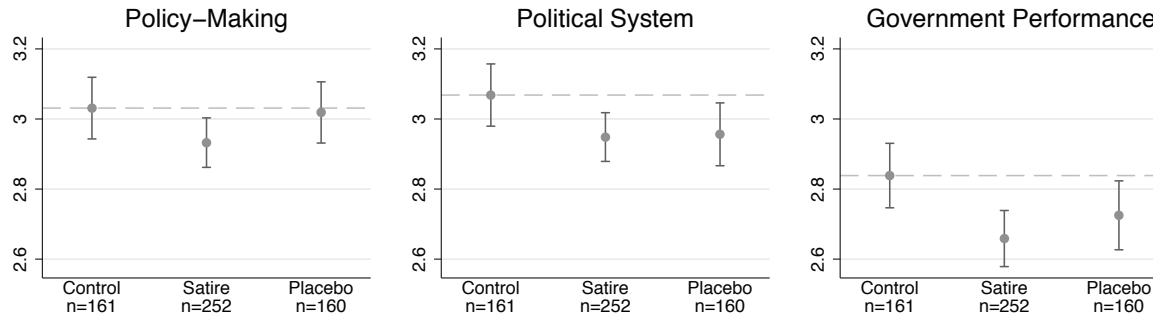
<sup>3</sup> 1 “<=30” 2 “31-40” 3 “>40”

<sup>4</sup> 1 “Below College” 2 “College” 3 “Post College”

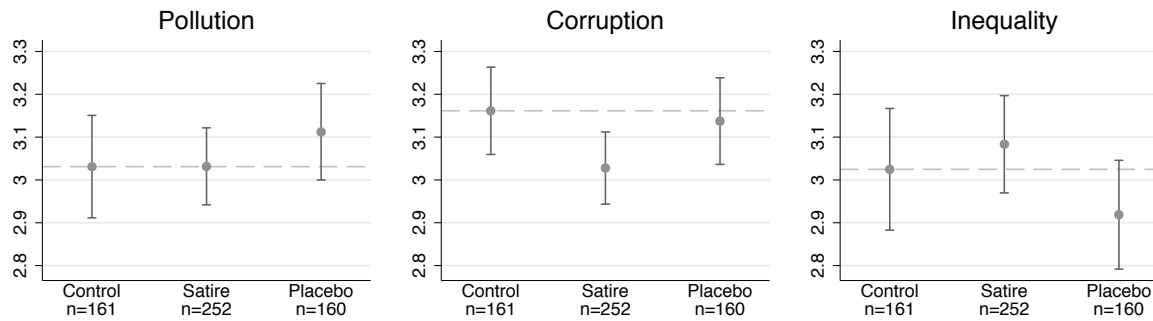
<sup>5</sup> 1 “<30K” 2 “30-60K” 3 “60-150K” 4 “>150K”

Figure 1

Ciplot for Trust [1-4]



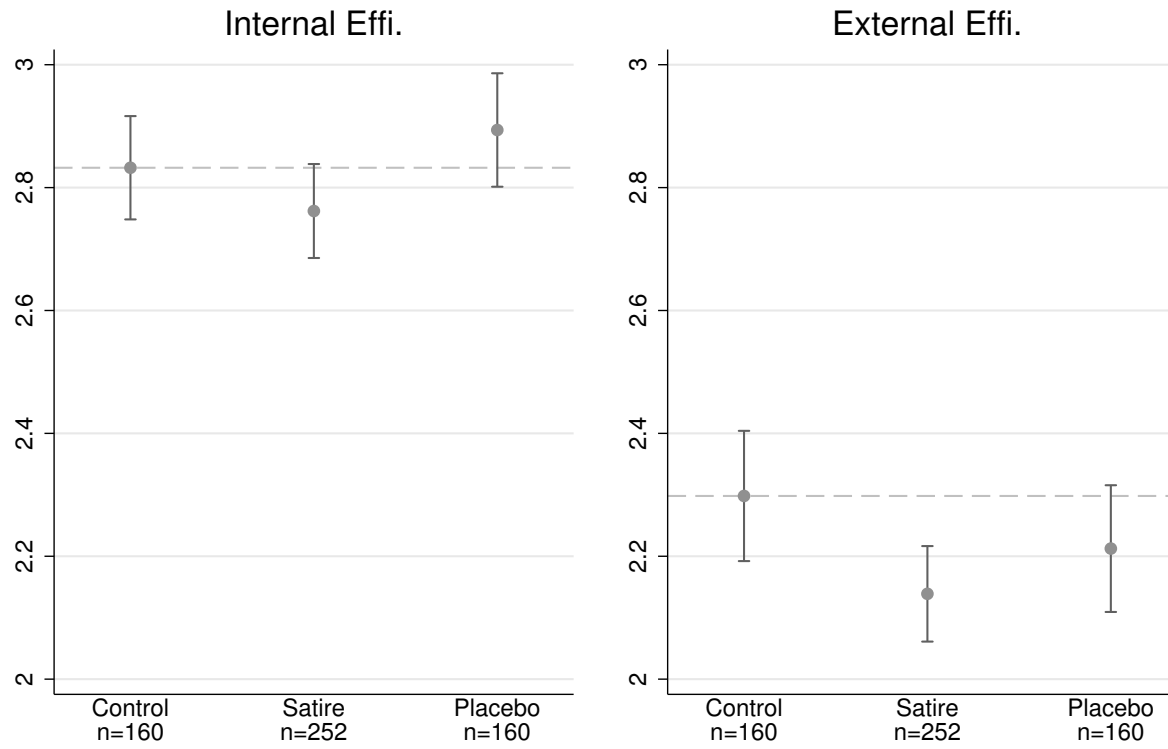
Ciplot for Policy Confidence [1-5]



Note: CI=90%; dashed line is the mean of control group

Figure 2

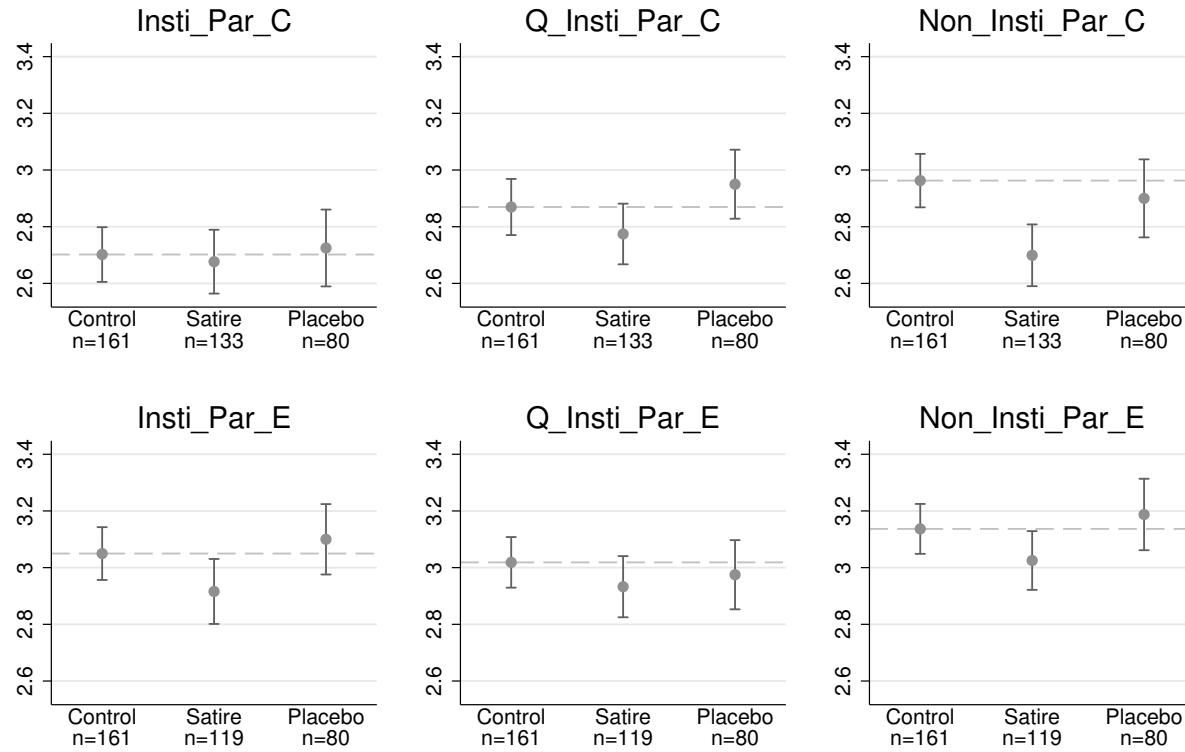
### Ciplot for Efficacy



Note: CI=90%; dashed line is the mean of control group

Figure 3

### Ciplot for Participation[1-4]



Note: CI=90%; 'C' means corruption; 'E' means environment; 'Insti' for 'Institution'; Q for 'quasi'; dashed line is the mean of control group

Table 2: Regression Results on Political Participation

DV: Willingness of Political Participation	(1) Baseline: Placebo	(2) Baseline: Control
Satire	-0.196** (0.086)	-0.213** (0.091)
Insti_Inv[1-3]	-0.063** (0.027)	-0.088*** (0.020)
Satire # Insti_Inv	0.035 (0.034)	0.060** (0.029)
<b>Topic Exposure</b>		
Environment-Corruption	0.182*** (0.056)	-0.023 (0.084)
<b>Participation Question</b>		
Environment-Corruption		0.222*** (0.035)
<b>Control Variables</b>		
<b>Constant</b>	Yes 2.550*** (0.248)	Yes 2.138*** (0.304)
Observations	1221	1701
Respondents	407	408
R <sup>2</sup>	0.171	0.120

Note: The unit of analysis is per question on participation per respondent. Robust standard errors are used clustered on respondents. Satire and placebo groups only answered participation questions within one topic. The control group answered in both topics. Insti\_Inv refers to the "institutional involvement" variable. The complete table is available in the appendix. \* p<0.1, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01