

# The Dilemma of Criticism: Disentangling the Determinants of Media Censorship in China

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## **Abstract**

Recent literature claims that China censors information that has the potential to ignite collective action. This paper extends this finding by arguing that Chinese censors respond differently to political challenges as opposed to performance challenges. Political challenges call into questioning the Party's leading role, whereas performance challenges are directed at the failures of public goods provisions. A survey experiment of about 60 media professionals finds that censors are inclined to block political challenges and to tolerate criticism of the government's performance. However, when criticism contains both performance and political challenges, censorship is far more likely. By exploring the range of censorship activities, the results suggest that the Chinese regime's reliance on popular support constrains its censorship decisions.

**Keywords:** Censorship, China, Legitimacy, Media, Journalist, Survey Experiment, Collective Actions, Conjoint Experiment, Political Criticism

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## **Introduction**

What kind of information do authoritarian regimes block from the public? The answer to this question is important insofar as it provides us with a window to understanding how regimes perceive their own strengths and weaknesses. Conventional wisdom on censorship dictates that authoritarian regimes will censor any information critical of their hold on power (Lee 1998; Marolt 2011; Morozov 2011; MacKinnon 2013). More recent literature demonstrates that censors are quite tolerant of criticism, as long as it does not raise the collective action potential, “regardless of whether they are critical or supportive of the state and its leaders (King, Pan, and Roberts 2014, 1).”

The collective action hypothesis is compelling well supported by a growing body of evidence, but it cannot explain the full range of censorship decisions. Specifically, the collective action hypothesis cannot account for censorship in the absence of collective action potential, nor can it account for the lack of censorship of material with clear signs of collective action potential.

This paper proposes that we should reconsider the effects of political criticism in a more nuanced way. It assumes that the Chinese regime tries to maximize its popular support for the Communist Party’s continued monopolized rule. To make a censorship decision on a certain piece of content, censors need to consider whether this piece has potential to reconstitute an attack on the one-party rule. Thus, China’s censors differentiate two types of criticisms: challenges to the Party’s political leading role and those to the performance of the government—i.e. the provision of public goods to the public.

This paper argues that these two types of criticism generate different effects of censorship. Criticism of the one-party's rule is censored more intensely because it directly challenges the standing of the Chinese Communist Party. However, criticism that targets the government's performance is more tolerated. Pacifying such criticism requires the government to respond actively and positively. Enhancing censorship on performance challenges will stimulate further criticism by showing that the government could do nothing but cover-up their failures. It undermines the government's effort to demonstrate its responsiveness (Distelhorst and Hou 2017).

This logic generates clear empirical predictions which I test using a survey experiment involving Chinese media professionals, who are constantly exposed to guidelines from the government censors. By doing so, I capture the censorship happening before the publication and provide evidence of censorship from a new lens different from social media: the professional news outlets. The results confirm that, in addition to its collective action potential, criticism to the Party's rule or "political challenges," increases censorship intensity. Performance challenges do not have effects independently, but they increase censorship intensity when the political challenges are also strong. When authoritarian regimes need to maximize popular support, they tolerate criticism that highlights the flaws of governance. By responding rather than censoring those flaws, the regime can maintain the popular support (Tang 2016). Once the criticism assails the fundamental components of the regime's rule, censorship will be exerted comprehensively.

## **Studying Media Censorship in China: Divergent Effects of Political and Performance Challenges**

Studies on media censorship in China follow two traditions. The first tradition is interested in the institutions, mechanisms, and strategies that the regime uses to block unfavorable information. For example, Zhang and Fleming (2005) examine the institutional channels of the regime to control media coverage of SARS. Other studies are interested in how the Chinese regime adapts to the spread of Internet service. This literature demonstrates that the regime is confident in taking advantage of this technology while minimizing its impact on the one-party rule .

A more recent line of research explores the breadth of censorship across content in China, such as political terms in social media, blog posts, and censorship directives (Bamman, O'Connor, and Smith 2012; Fu, Chan, and Chau 2013; King, Pan, and Roberts 2014, 2013; Tai 2014). Some of these studies argue that “CCP tends to ban news that directly threatens the legitimacy of the regime.”(Tai 2014, 188) In contrast, King et al., provide a collective action explanation. Censorship is caused by the fear of collective action. The regime has the goal of “restricting the spread of information that may lead to collective action, regardless of whether or not the expression is in direct opposition to the state and whether or not it is related to government policies.”(King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 328) This logic is consistent with the idea that authoritarian regimes encourage a certain degree of freedom of speech to provide incentives to spur local bureaucrats, reduce corruption, and guide public opinions (Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; Lorentzen 2014); it explains why some critiques of the state remain uncensored.

The main drawback of previous theories is that they failed to recognize different types of criticism may associate with different dimensions of legitimacy, which leads to different concerns for the censors. This paper contends that criticism of the regime may or may not affect censorship given its different natures. I identify two types of criticism – criticism of the Party’s authoritarian rule and criticism of the government’s performance. Criticism of the Party goes against the Party’s principle as a “vanguard party” that exercises the “leading role” over the country – the foundational ideological justification of the party-state (Joseph 2014, 13–14). I call such criticism “political challenges” because it targets on the regime’s political power. For two examples, a radical version of political challenges will claim that one-party rule should be replaced by a multi-party system. A more moderate version may criticize that the party-state constrains too much on personal freedom or political liberty. The vast spread of political challenges erodes the effects of ideological control, damage popular support for the Communist Party’s rule and facilitate the mobilization of its opponent’s anti-regime movement. Therefore, we should expect that the censors work hard to block information that challenges one-party rule, i.e. to the Party’s political leadership in the country.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** Strong political challenges increase censorship intensity.

However, not all criticism directly aims to demolish the one-party rule. A significant portion of criticism of the government in China only involves complaints regarding failures to deliver decent public service. In this paper, I call such criticism a “performance challenge.” Performance challenges emerge when the public is convinced that the government is failing at providing public services, such as environmental protection, unemployment safety nets, or education. The government can appease such

challenges by improving policy outcomes. Actions such as providing general welfare, responding to natural disasters or economic crises, and enhancing responses to the public's needs will attenuate people's anger.

Censoring performance challenges will deteriorate the image of the government because censoring a policy issue could discourage citizens from providing valuable information to fix the governance problems; thus, censorship damages the capacity of the government to provide quality public service (Lorentzen 2014; Dimitrov 2013). In the long term, censoring performance challenges generate greater damage to the popular support towards the regime.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the regime would not block relevant information but rather respond to citizens. For better policy output, the regime welcomes criticism of the government performance (Nathan 2003; Teets 2013; He and Thøgersen 2010; Dimitrov 2013).

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Strong performance challenges has no effects censorship.

The conceptual distinction between political and performance is also supported by previous research, such as Lipset's differentiation between "the effectiveness" and "legitimacy" of a political system (Lipset 1959, 86). Such distinction is also consistent with past studies on the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Guo Baogang distinguishes two justifications in Chinese political legitimacy:

"Original justifications refers to the origin of the ruling authority, and the utilitarian justification defines the rulers' staying power or capacity to maintain people's belief in their ruling authority. *Original justification may derive from a divine being*, or from a leader of moral characters or some unique quality, or simply from the will of the people...*The utilitarian justification derives from the capacity of the rulers to meet people's needs*, such as material well-being or

physical security.” (Guo 2003, 3) (Emphasis is added by the author of this paper)

In the context of censorship, criticism does not have to be an explicit condemnation, it could also refer to a piece of information that highlights the government’s problems, provides resources and reasoning for fault-finding and encourages disapproval. For example, a primary school student wrote a letter to suggest President Xi Jinping on his weight management. This news, which was quickly censored on Chinese Internet, by no means intended to criticize and embarrass Xi’s body shape.<sup>2</sup> However, it can still constitute a political challenge because the letter facilitates a potential attack on Xi and thus the Party leadership. Therefore, in this paper, political and performance challenges also include the topics that do not directly attack the Party or the government, but facilitates such attack.

Finally, this paper sees political criticism’s effect on censorship as orthogonal to that of collective action potential. Since collective actions cause uncertainty over social stability, the threat of collective action should elevate censorship intensity no matter what nature of the criticism is. Therefore, this paper builds on the work of King et al. and uses collective action potential as a control variable.

### **Assessing Censorship on Political and Performance Challenges**

The main obstacle of studying censorship is the shortage of unbiased data. Since governments rarely publicize their censorship strategy, most studies rely on indirect observation of content deletion or, when lucky, leaked directives. This set of data results in selection problems. Tai analyzed 1,403 censorship directives from China Digital Times, but the author admitted that it was hard to assess the accuracy of the data set. Those

directives were reported by anonymous journalists, and thus the sampling process was not random (Tai 2014, 192). On top of this, King et al. (2013)'s observational study admitted that their large-scale data set could not capture the self-censorship and censorship that occurs before they obtained the posts.

King et al. (2014) tried to fix this problem by using a participatory experiment; they used real events to manipulate “pro-government,” “anti-government” and “collective action potential” in their experimental blog posts. Inspiring as their work is, real events may confound the variables of interest for this study. For instance, it is unlikely to find two events that have the exact same level of political challenges while happening to be varying in collective action potential. In fact, among the four collective action events King et al. tested, the Panxu protest involved low-ranked bureaucrats and local government (i.e. it had a weak political challenge to one-party rule). The other three events, Tibetan self-immolations, Ai Weiwei, and protests in Xinjiang, all severely challenge the one-party rule because they defied the Party's ethnic policy claims or democratic claims (Ai Weiwei). Similarly, it is also hard to identify the effects of performance challenges from other confounding factors in real events. Hence, using real cases cannot guarantee that only one variable is manipulated. Online observations of censorship, constrained by the complex setting of real cases, may either generate selection bias or confounding factors that problematize the internal validity of the empirical test.

Therefore, this paper uses hypothetical scenarios as vignettes to survey the media professionals. To minimize confounding factors, I manipulate the variables of interest by only changing the key terms in each scenario so that I can obtain higher internal validity.



Nevertheless, this research design cannot discredit the contribution of observational studies conducted in social media which can test theories of censorship in the realistic setting and reach a better external validity. In the next part, I will discuss the operationalization strategy first and then provide more details on the experiment process.

[Here insert Table 1]

### ***Operationalizing Political Challenges***

Table 1 summarizes the operationalization strategies for political and performance challenges. The regime's maintenance of one-party rule suggests that censorship should protect the reputation of agencies that are essential to the Party. In regards to a specific public topic, the higher the "institutional affinity" towards the central party leadership, the stronger political challenges it provokes. In this paper, institutional affinity is firstly measured by how close an organization is to the Communist Party's core leadership. Government agencies are closer than social organizations. Military organizations are closer than government agencies. Misbehaviors of a PLA official or a party cadre will generate more challenges to the Party than a public servant in the government. The rank of cadres also determines institutional affinity. Higher-ranked officials tend to generate stronger political challenges than lower-ranked officials because they are closer to the central leadership of the Party, which implies that their behaviors and reputation are more tightly bound to the reputation and image of the Party. For instance, the party's reputation is more seriously undermined by a corruption scandal of a Politburo member than of a township party secretary. Thus, the former has higher institutional affinity.

**Hypothesis 1.1 (H1.1):** Higher institutional affinity leads to higher censorship intensity.

Additionally, political challenges are also determined by the degree of (dis-)conformity to the Party's ideological claims. Ideology is an essential part to maintain popular support of one-party rule (Joseph 2014, 186). If a given topic is framed in a narrative that advocates the Party's rightfulness, its dissemination is less likely to arouse opposition against the Party. The censors will be more tolerant of ideology-conforming narratives than they will be of ones that advocate Western liberal democracy. In regards to the topic of anti-corruption, the claim "the Party should impose stronger supervision," generates weaker challenge than the claim "the Party should allow free media and universal suffrage." The reason is that enhancing supervision is consistent with the Party's principle to tackle corruption problems, while free media and universal suffrage belong to the discourse of "Western style of Democracy" (Miks 2011). For another instance, when a corrupt official was arrested, a blog post could blame the inner-party factional struggles or the flaws of supervising institution (*Jiandu Zhidu*). The former blame generates stronger political challenges. The Party's principle of reform and opening tolerates improvement of the current institution, while the factional struggle goes against the fundamental claims of the Party – it erodes the image of a unified party that represents universal interest of people (Phillips 2016). Furthermore, in the international realm, criticism to ideologically close countries like North Korea will also generate stronger challenges than ideologically remote countries like Japan. Finally, news about the government's mistreatment to a minor ethnic group will also result in strong political challenges because it violates the Party's claim to care about minorities in their ethnic policies.

**Hypothesis 1.2 (H1.2):** Higher ideological disconformity leads to higher censorship intensity.

### *Operationalization of Performance Challenges*

In order to confirm that performance challenges have no effects on censorship, this paper also varies the performance challenge levels in the test. First, the Party is more likely to respond to greater grievances (Lorentzen 2017). If a public event generates a higher degree of harm towards citizens, it will generate stronger performance challenges, and the regime will then be more motivated to keep the discussion of the event open and transparent. The degree of harm can be measured by the number of casualties and the geographical sphere of impact. For instance, if an accident involves five injured people, the degree of performance challenge is weaker than the one that involves thirty-five injured people. If an accident affects only one city, it will result in weaker performance challenge than the one that affects multiple cities. This operationalization inevitably captures the scale of an event, but the degree of harm is more concerned about the delivery of public services, such as public safety or general welfare.

Second, the government is under more pressure to demonstrate its quality of performance to policy areas that it has made promises to than those it has not. Fulfilling policy promises demonstrates the regime's capability of governance – the government is confident that it can satisfy people's needs. Moreover, promises also provide reasoning for social actors to resist the government (O'Brien and Li 2006). Thus, performance challenges are stronger when the public expects the government to solve a promised problem than a non-promised one. For example, the Chinese government has promised to protect the environment, but not to report officials' assets immediately to the public. It is committed to protecting the education of poor children, but not to grant legal marriage rights to gay couples. Thus, we can expect that criticisms of the environment and

education will generate stronger performance challenges than criticisms of official assets and gay marriage rights.

### ***Operationalization of collective action potential***

Finally, this paper manipulated collective action potential in two ways. First, at the topic level, nine out of twenty-two experimental scenarios are collective action events, such as nationalist protests and environmental movements. Ten scenarios do not involve any collective action potentials, such as an official's corruption scandal or a policy issue discussion. Second, this paper also manipulates collective action potential at the framing level by adding a call for collective action to the collective action version of a scenario.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Operationalizing censorship***

To reduce confounding factors mingled in real cases, this paper used most-similar hypothetical scenarios to manipulate the independent variables. This method, however, generated practical problems to test their censorship intensity: it was not reasonable to conduct this experiment by posting blogs online and observing how many of them are censored. Because the scenarios were hypothetical, they may not be taken seriously by both the public and the censors. Blog posting also raises an ethical problem – posting hypothetical cases is equivalent to spreading rumors. My solution, therefore, is to directly ask the professionals who have sophisticated experience with censorship at their work.

Thus, this paper measures the intensity of censorship by asking Chinese journalists and editors, as a proxy of the censors, about their perception of the sensitivity of the given scenarios. I recruited journalists via email and social media (who have identified their actual profession).

The advantages of surveying media professionals are:

(1) They are acquainted with censorship patterns. Journalists and editors receive propaganda instructions at work. The censorship authority asks them to strictly follow these instructions as they publish their articles. Therefore, their experiences can best approximate the propaganda cadres' mindset. In fact, many journalists may end up being propaganda cadres in the Party system. The top-two leaders over propaganda affairs in CCP in 2016, Liu Yunshan and Liu Qibao, both have work experience in the media;<sup>4</sup> (2) This measurement also captures pre-censorship or self-censorship – censorship that happens before researchers could collect data. (3) Lastly, journalists are simply more accessible than propaganda officials (the censors).

The survey asked media professionals to evaluate the “political sensitivity of publication” of different hypothetical scenarios. They answered by using a 7-point scale.

The survey provided same criteria for them to evaluate:

Score 1 (*not at all sensitive*): Any information of this event will be allowed. Journalists could report them without any constraints. The blogs discussing it online will be unlikely to be deleted.

Score 3: Journalists could report them, but with constraints on the in-depth investigation or following-up stories, or need to follow strict narrative framework. The websites are allowed to publish it, but may not be allowed to post on the front page. The government will tell “no hyping” on this event. Some blogs on this topic are blocked when they are related to more sensitive information.

Score 5: Journalists are not allowed to do interviews on their own. Media are only authorized to publish the standard article from Xinhua Agency, CCTV or People's Daily. The negative comments on websites are all blocked.

Score 7 (*extremely sensitive*): No newspaper publishes it. Even Xinhua Agency, CCTV or People's Daily are trying hard not to

respond to it. No blogs or articles related to this event are allowed to survive online once the censors find them.

I use the scores above to construct the dependent variable “censorship intensity”, ranging from 1 to 7. Score 2 to Score 6 indicate that news articles could be deleted and blogs are blocked, but relevant information is still accessible. Such accessibility reduces when the score is higher. Score 7 indicates that the censors do not want to disclose any information. This design of censorship intensity score is able to capture the diverse censorship strategies adopted by the Chinese authority.

The survey experiment on media professionals allows us to observe the patterns of censorship in the professional media settings, in which the censorship guidelines are usually kept as a secret. It provides us a different channel from social media to understand censorship, especially by capturing censorship before publication. The survey experiment design also allows better internal validity. However, several limitations also exist. Hypothetical scenarios can better discern the effects of variables at the expense of limited external validity, compared to studying real cases. In addition, surveying journalists provides an indirect measure to censorship, increasing the potential errors compared to direct observations on social media. After all, media professionals are not censors although I would argue that they are the best available respondents. If censors’ answer is “true censorship standard,” media professionals’ response may have potential errors. Since it is an expert survey, the respondents were not randomly selected. The majority of respondents come from non-state-affiliated media, in which the censorship standard could be different from the state-affiliated ones. In the analysis, I controlled the respondents’ workplace and found that results are consistent. I will discuss how these weaknesses may impact the results in the next section.

## **The Expert Survey on Chinese Media professionals**

### ***Experiment Design***

The survey experiment was conducted from January 26 to May 12, 2015 via Qualtrics survey service. In the survey, I created 22 experimental scenarios. Each scenario contains two versions where I only manipulated one variable or four versions where I manipulated two variables.<sup>5</sup> Respondents were randomly assigned to only one version per scenario. Fourteen scenarios have two versions and eight scenarios have four versions. Therefore, there are in total  $2^{14} \times 4^8$  combinations of versions of scenarios to finish the survey. No participants had read the exact same two combinations of materials. For each scenario, I made the versions as similar as possible, and only manipulated the key value of political challenges, performance challenges, or collective action potential. All independent variables were coded as either 0 or 1. For example, one scenario testing political challenges was about the corruption scandal of a public official. There were two versions. The wording of the two versions were almost identical except in Version One, the official is a director of a provincial department (weak challenge, coded 0) whereas in Version Two the official is a minister in the central government (strong challenge, coded 1).<sup>6</sup> I also randomized the order of questions to prevent any biased priming effects generated by the fixed order of scenarios or by one respondent exposed to two or more versions in the same scenario.

The survey was distributed both via emails and snowballing on social media. According to the report from Qualtrics, the email recruitment message reached 354 inboxes, 141 of which were read. 41 surveys actually started while only 18 completed. The snowballing recruitment via social media reached around 100 journalists in which 40

people finished the entire survey. In total, I collected 68 responses that at least answered one question (1390 questions answered). 59 among them finished most questions, including two demographic questions at the end of the survey. Since I need to include demographic variables as the control, I only use these 59 responses (1293 questions answered) in the regression analysis. The results remain similar with or without control.<sup>7</sup>

I used the respondents who read my invitation for the survey as the denominator. The response rate is around 0.25 (59 out of 241). This rate is acceptable since the content of survey is sensitive in China. Respondents have reported an average of 8.6 years (Std.Dev=6.1) of work experience in Chinese media.<sup>8</sup>

Who the media outlets respondents work for could be a potentially influential factor on their estimation of censorship intensity. This survey categorizes their workplace by how closely the type of media is supervised by the party-state. Figure 1 shows that 56% of the respondents work for marketized media while 12% work for private news websites/social media. These media outlets have a looser connection with the Party and have more flexibility in publication (coded 0 in the state-affiliated variable). Such media is the product of media marketization, which provides “incentives for media practitioners to overstep boundaries of news reporting” (Stockmann 2013). The rest of respondents (about 30%) are from TV or Radio, Party Newspaper, and state-owned websites—media outlets that the Party controls more directly (coded 1 in the state-affiliated variable).

[Here Insert Figure 1]

This sample is by no means representative, and I expect it will generate social desirability bias, selection bias on respondents’ background, and non-response bias. As I



am disinterested in the personal effect on the estimation of censorship intensity, I took several methods to reduce the bias generated by individual preference. First, I randomly assigned respondents to scenarios and only allowed respondents to answer one version per experimental scenario. Two individual-based variables, respondents' workplace and working experience, are balanced across three treatments – political challenges, performance challenges and collective action.<sup>9</sup> Since respondents did not have a reference from another version of the same scenario, they could not intentionally underestimate or overestimate the effect of performance and political challenges within each scenario.

However, respondents could still bias the absolute censorship intensity by scoring all answers lower or higher than that they actually believed. Since I did not inform respondents which variable I tried to test in the survey, such bias was unlikely to correlate with the independent variables. In addition, respondents did not intentionally concentrate their answers to either “not at all sensitive” or “extremely sensitive.” The responses to all scenarios are approximately normally distributed (Mean=3.73, Standard Deviation=1.94, Skewness=0.18).

Also, I use the answer to one scenario per respondent (i.e. per question per respondent) as my unit of analysis and add fixed effect to each scenario, so that I can compare both their average answer scores across different versions of a single scenario and the average of each scenario across different scenarios. This procedure allows my results to be less dependent on respondents' personal answers. I also controlled for a respondents' work experience (measured by self-reported working years) and workplace,

and clustered the standard errors at each respondent, in order to capture error dependencies at the individual level.

### ***Experimental Results***

[Here Insert Table 2]

Table 2 shows a tabulation of the mean censorship score between political and performance challenges without controlling collective actions or including fixed effects for each scenario. Cases manipulated to have stronger political challenges were estimated to have higher censorship intensity. The difference is 1.00 when collective action potential is strong, 1.72 when collective action potential is weak. Strong performance challenges, on the other hand, do not stimulate higher censorship intensity. The average censorship intensities of high performance challenges are actually less than the low ones across high and low collective action potential. In the absence of strong political challenges, strong performance challenges have inconsistent effects on censorship. However, when combined with strong political challenges, strong performance challenges contribute to increased censorship intensity. The simple tabulation is consistent with Hypothesis 1 but not Hypothesis 2.

[Here Insert Figure 2]

Figure 2 displays the coefficient plot of the OLS regression analysis. The baselines are low political and performance challenges as well as low collective potential. Political challenges and collective action potential significantly increase censorship intensity by 1.26 points and 1.50 points (in the range from one to seven). If we assume that nothing is censored when censorship intensity equals 1 while everything is censored

when censorship intensity equals 7, strong political challenges could censor 21% more relevant content and high collective action potential will increase censorship by 25%. As the theory predicts, strong performance challenges have no significant effects on censorship intensity. Working experience and workplace are two respondent-level variables and they do not affect censorship intensity.<sup>10</sup>

However, the experiment has limited scenarios. It is difficult to manipulate variables of interest in a perfectly random way across all scenarios while still maintaining the scenarios as realistic.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, I cannot guarantee that all combinations of variables have equal likelihood to be assigned to respondents. Therefore, I use nonparametric conjoint analysis to examine the robustness of the results (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014b).<sup>12</sup>

### ***Robustness Check***

[Here Insert Table 3]

Table 3 shows the results of conjoint analysis estimated using R package “cjoint” (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014a). The first model is the replication of regression analysis by using the conjoint estimator.<sup>13</sup> The results are similar: political challenges and collective actions have positive effects on censorship intensity while performance challenges’ effects are minimal and insignificant. The second model interacts political challenges and performance challenges in the analysis. The effects of political challenges and performance challenges remain unchanged, while performance challenges have effects that seemingly violate Hypothesis 2. When political challenges are weak, performance challenges, as expected, have no impact on censorship. However,

when political challenges and performance challenges are both strong, censorship intensity increases. Model 3 adds collective action into the mix, but none of the interactions between collective action and the two challenges generate a significant effect. On the other hand, the interaction effects between political and performance challenges found in Model 2 still exist in Model 3.

In summary, the conjoint analysis confirms that the positive effects of political challenges and collective action potential are robust predictors of censorship. It also shows that strong performance challenges do not stimulate censorship independently. Only when strong performance challenges coincide with high political challenges, do they increase censorship concerns. Although this finding is not fully consistent with the theoretical prediction, it has implications to realistic censorship scenarios. For example, if a leader of the Communist Party fails to fulfill his promise of a policy issue, criticisms to the policy may finally spill over to the Party leader, which generates distrust to the Party and “induce demand for systemic (regime) changes.”(Li 2011, 291) This mechanism could be illustrated by China’s strict censorship on the news of Panama Paper (Forsythe and Ramzy 2016). Although the regime has committed to curbing corruption, unconstrained media reports on Panama Paper may draw the public attention to the fact that many high-ranked party leaders are involved in the scandal. Since high-ranked leaders are supposed to represent the Party’s image to defend the public rather than private interest, Panama Paper may expose the leaders’ corruption and impairs the Party. Thus, the regime had to censor the story.

Moreover, strong performance challenge may also draw enormous public attention so that the propaganda of the Party’s rule is easier to find flawed. For instance,

the ethnic conflict in Xinjiang 2009, which resulted in at least 197 deaths and a thousand injured, led to the blockage of Twitter, the shutdown of Fanfou and the disconnection of Xinjiang Autonomous Zone from the Internet for ten months (Ward 2009; Wong 2010). In this case, the high degree of harm generated a strong performance challenges as well as tremendous public attention. It also questioned the Party's rule by revealing the severity of ethnic hostility, which deviates the Party's propaganda that all ethnic groups under the Party's rule live a peaceful life along with each other.

One alternative explanation on censorship's indifference on pure performance challenge is that performance challenges usually generate greater public attention. Thus, things that are too hard to hide are less prone to censorship. However, the regime also has a record to censor contents that got too much attention. For example, the viral environment documentary "Under the Dome" was censored after hundreds of millions of audiences watched it.<sup>14</sup> A political challenge with potential to generate tremendous public attention, such as the Panama Paper story, was also heavily censored. To events that have attracted too much public attention, censors may also order media not to conduct further report.<sup>15</sup> Censors seem unlikely to relax their guard when the focal event generates too much public attention.

### ***The Potential Bias from Respondents***

Both the regression and the conjoint analysis show that respondents' individual backgrounds do not affect the variables of interest in this paper. This makes sense because even if survey measures suffer from social desirability or other forms of respondent bias, the randomized treatment design ought to filter these errors out of the main effect estimates.

Randomization, however, does nothing to deal with issues of representativeness and non-response bias. But even such sampling biases are present it is not obvious how they undermine the analysis. If some professionals refused to take the survey because they are not familiar to censorship, missing their answers will not compromise the results with bias. Even if they had answered the survey, they would only add more noise rather than more truth. Only when non-respondents (1) are more familiar with the censorship patterns and (2) have a uniquely different perception of censorship patterns could the survey results be seriously biased. These non-respondents could be experienced media professionals as well as censors.

Given that there is no reliable way to measure how sophisticated this sample would be on identifying censorship patterns, the sampling bias may affect the accuracy of the scale of effects. For example, my respondents could generally be more optimistic than the “truth group” and thus they estimated a lower censorship intensity score than the true one. However, the main purpose of this paper is to compare the censorship intensities at two types of challenges and collective action potential, all of which I manipulated via experimental design. Therefore, respondents’ optimism (or pessimism) on censorship is not likely to correlate with these variables. Therefore, the sampling problem may lead to an inaccurately estimated censorship intensity but not biasing the effects of manipulated variables.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, since this survey is already sensitive, it did not include questions on respondents’ other personal features such as political beliefs, age or party membership. Further studies are needed to study how individual judgment may affect the censorship perception.

## **Conclusion: Dual Effects of Political Criticism**

This paper adopts a survey experiment to explore the causes of media censorship in China. The experimental design with hypothetical cases minimizes the confounding factors and respondents' bias that appears in the analysis of actual cases. The survey of journalists also captures not only the censors' standard but also pre-censorship – censorship that stops information from publishing and the self-censorship of media professionals. Different from previous works that focus on social media, this paper adds new evidence of censorship in professional media outlets. It indicates a new way to collect censorship data in future studies.

The survey experiment reconfirms that the regime is concerned about information regarding collective action, as King et al. argue. Furthermore, the findings show that different types of criticism towards the regime can also affect censorship intensity. This article differentiates two types of criticism, political challenges and performance challenges. The theory predicts that political challenges provoke more censorship while performance challenges do not. The empirical results, however, suggest that strong performance challenges have no impact on censorship when political challenges are weak. When political challenges are strong, performance challenges magnify the severity of political challenges and increase censorship intensity. Such finding is consistent with anecdotal evidence on the harsh repression of Panama Paper discussion and terminating Internet service during Xinjiang Riot. Nevertheless, more work should be done to theorize why and when performance challenges do deteriorate the effects of political challenges.

This paper's framework shares common grounds with information theory of censorship that regards the autocrat (the center)'s tolerance of constrained watchdog journalism as a way to monitor local bureaucrats (Lorentzen 2014, 403). Indeed, by tolerating performance challenges, the regime facilitates its access to local information so that it could monitor its agents more easily. However, while information theory considers the regime's goal is to prevent revolt, this paper argues that the regime aims to maximize popular support. Moreover, information theory treats all negative news as a threat to the regime's rule, but I argue that a portion of negative news, i.e. performance challenges do not produce a direct threat to the regime. Even if citizens go on the street to protest against the government's failure to fulfill its responsibility, the regime could still pacify them and win popular support back by offering compromise and punishing the responsible officials.

Admittedly, the regime cannot offer compromises or punish local officials in every case. There are two possibilities under such circumstances. First, the regime may not be capable of solving the performance challenges, even though it hopes to. Under such circumstances, censorship is still not necessary unless the social activists use such failure to criticize one-party rule. In other words, unless political challenges increase with such performance challenges, the regime does not need to censor. The interaction analysis in Table 3 demonstrates this scenario – censorship intensity increases when strong performance challenges are accompanied by strong political challenges.

Second, the regime does not compromise because when it is faced by a political challenge. For instance, when a local protest breaks out against a policy issue, offering compromises may weaken the regime's control of public affairs. Likewise, punishing



officials may disrupt the internal stability of the bureaucratic system and damage local officials' loyalty. In such cases, the regime will choose to censor relevant information because responding to the protesters weakens one-party's rule. In contrast, if the center believes that punishing officials will not disrupt the bureaucracy, it will not censor its punishment of officials. In summary, in both circumstances, political challenges are the determinants of censorship intensity, not performance challenges.

This paper adopts the survey experiment design that provides a better measurement of different dimensions of political criticism and thus enhances its internal validity. However, its external validity is restricted given the limited variety of topics it was able to cover. The sample of respondents was also small and not representative. The respondents mainly came from traditional media, which may limit the theory's applicability to other forms of media. Exploratory as it is, this paper should inspire the studies of censorship to several promising directions: first, a greater variety of topics and respondents are needed to test the external validity of the framework, especially in other authoritarian countries relying on popular support. Second, the experiment only statically models regime censorship. A dynamic model is necessary to fully estimate whether censorship intensity may change over time. Finally, this framework expects that censors send the same censorship guideline to all types of media platform. The main empirical evidence in this study comes from the professional media, whereas previous work has focused on social media. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that strong political challenges are censored in both media channels, it is likely that the regime's censorship intensity changes with different media platform.<sup>17</sup> This limitation needs to be further explored in the future.

Beyond identifying patterns of censorship, the finding of this paper also contributes to our understanding of China's state-society relation. As long as the authoritarian regime's survival relies on popular support, its excessive use of censorship could be counter-productive. The regime realizes that censorship has dual effects on popular support – it is a “necessary evil” to maintain the regime's legitimacy, but abusing it will also endanger the regime's rule. To maximize popular support, the autocrat needs to tolerate criticism and enlarge responsiveness as long as the criticism does not spill over onto its fundamental legitimacy – the one-party's rule. The constraints on the regime's censorship may create space for social actors to expand their activism. For example, although the regime regards collective actions as a threat to stability, it will become more tolerant if these actions only have moderate challenges to political issues. If the actions have strong challenges on performance issues, the regime is compelled to respond efficiently; it means that social actors could make the state hear them while staying safe from oppression by framing their claims strategically. Such tactics are consistent with the previous findings on peasants' “rightful resistance.” (O'Brien and Li 2006; Chen 2012)

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For a hypothetical example, during the rescue of a train collision accident, the regime needs information from the public to locate the trapped or the wounded people. The public also needs to re-evaluate their degree of support to the regime. They observe whether the government is capable of protecting citizens' life and fixing the cause of such tragic accident. When media and Internet users angrily question the government about how the rescue goes and why the accident occurred, the censors could block relevant discussion on media. However, exerting censorship discourages citizens to offer valuable information for the rescue and investigation of the accident. The government's performance will be impaired.

<sup>2</sup> For the relevant news, see <http://goo.gl/NLWN2E>

<sup>3</sup> Here is an example: Control Setting (weak collective action potential): The air in Beijing is so poisonous. The Party does nothing to protect people's life in the capital! Treatment Setting (strong collective action potential): The air in Beijing is so poisonous. The Party does nothing to protect people's life in the capital! Let's gather to the gate of Zhongnanhai tomorrow morning at 10 am to protest! (The complete designs are available in Online Appendix).

<sup>4</sup> For two leaders' resume, check <http://bit.ly/1DIdoQ0> and <http://bit.ly/1CSTUo5>; Accessed June 07, 2015

<sup>5</sup> The wording of all scenarios are available in the Online Appendix (both Chinese and English).

<sup>6</sup> Scenario 4 in Online Appendix.

<sup>7</sup> The complete regression table is available from the Online Appendix.

<sup>8</sup> There is no official statistics on the experience of media professionals. According to a latest survey, less than 20% senior correspondents have over 11 years' experience. See <https://goo.gl/9XsGzr>; Accessed Feb 04, 2016

<sup>9</sup> I conducted Pearson Chi-square tests between each treatment and respondents' workplace, and One-Way ANOVA between each treatment and their working experience. Both types of test show that the experimental groups are balanced with all Chi-Square statistics approximately to 0.

<sup>10</sup> Since the dependent variable is a 7-point scale discrete variable, I also use Ordered Logit model with the same specification to test. The results remain similar to OLS model (available in Online Appendix).

<sup>11</sup> For example, one scenario is about a hypothetical citizen who voluntarily becomes the candidate in the election of a village director (Version 1, weak political challenge) or a local people's congress representative (Version 2, strong political challenge). In this scenario, the performance challenge remains weak and collective action potential is strong. However, it is unlikely to create a scenario with strong performance challenge or weak collective action potential when keeping the same voluntary election candidate.

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who points this out.

<sup>13</sup> In order to simplify the models, I transform respondents' working year into a binary variable, in which "0" represents their working years are fewer than the average (8.6) and "1" means working years more than the average of the sample.

<sup>14</sup> <https://goo.gl/vnfn7U>

<sup>15</sup> For example, Xi Jinping visited a restaurant to demonstrate his approachability to ordinary people. The censor delivered a "toning down" guidance on this event after two weeks; see <https://goo.gl/uDz6rH>

<sup>16</sup> Admittedly, there is one scenario left that the findings of this experiment are against the true scenarios – the respondents’ perception happens to go the exact opposite against the censors. This scenario is also unlikely. Although media professionals do not completely comply to the instruction of the censors, they should still share lots of common understanding with the authority, especially such understanding could guarantee the security of their vocation and the safety of themselves.

<sup>17</sup> For examples of political criticisms’ effects on social media, the Xinjiang riot brought the shutdown of Fanfou and Twitter, two iconic social media platform. The political challenges of Jasmine Revolution forced Weibo to temporarily close its search function (See: <http://goo.gl/eGrPSW>). Panama Paper also came across key-word bans on Weibo. (See: <https://goo.gl/BdVnLD>)

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<b>Operationalization</b>	<b>Examples of Challenge</b>
Institutional Affinity	Strong: Provincial & Above (Armies, Party Committee); Weak: City & Below (Private firms, Social Organizations)
Disconformity	High: Factional Struggles; Competitive Election, anti-North Korea Weak: Party's Supervision; Institutional Reform, anti-Japan
Degree of harm	Strong: 100 deaths; Five Cities Suffered Weak: 5 deaths; One City Suffered
Commmitment	Strong: Anti-Corruption; School for Poor Children Weak: Gay Marriage Right; Immediate Official Income Transparency

Table 1 Operationalization of Political and Performance Challenges



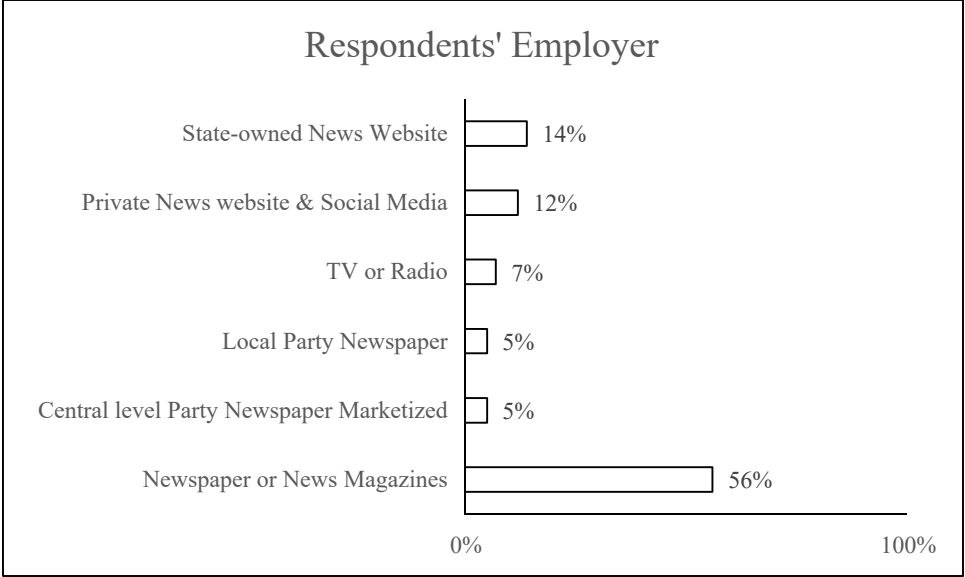


Figure 1 Respondents' self-reported employer

Col.Action=Low		<u>Performance Challenges</u>		
		Low	High	Average
<u>Political Challenges</u>	Low	2.41 (81)	2.71 (238)	2.64 (319)
	High	4.27 (217)	4.48 (162)	4.36 (379)
	Average	3.77 (298)	3.43 (400)	3.58 (698)

Col.Action=High		<u>Performance Challenges</u>		
		Low	High	Average
<u>Political Challenges</u>	Low	3.66 (211)	3.43 (233)	3.54 (444)
	High	4.39 (158)	4.81 (90)	4.54 (248)
	Average	3.97 (369)	3.82 (323)	3.90 (692)

Table 2 Tabulation of Experiment Result: The upper panel shows the results when collective action potential is low, the bottom panel shows the results when it is high. Frequencies are in paratheses. N=1390

## DV: Censorship Intensity [1-7]

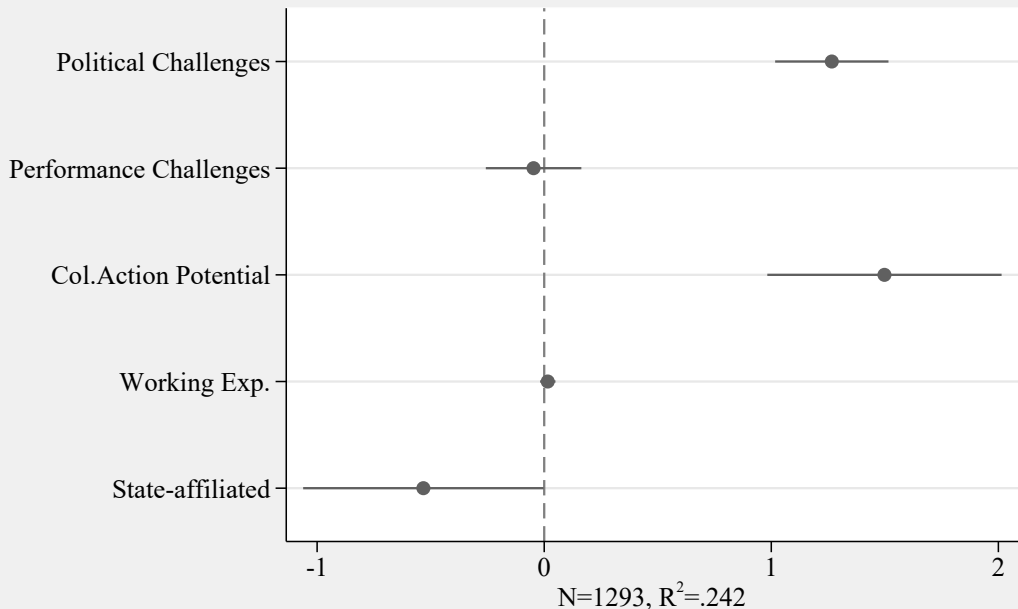


Figure 2 Coefficient Plots of Regression Analysis. CI=95%. Unit of analysis is the answer to per scenario per respondent. Dependent variable is 7-point scale censorship intensity. Baseline is when all variables manipulated are 'low' (coded as 0). All models have fixed effect on each experimental scenario and standard errors clustered at individual respondents.

**Table 3 Robustness Check: Conjoint Analysis on Interactions**

DV: Censorship Intensity [1-7]	(1) Baseline	(2) Polit#Perform	(4) Polit#Perform#CA
<b>Average Marginal Component Effects</b>			
Political Challenges(Polit.)	1.271** (0.125)	1.241** (0.124)	1.293** (0.121)
Performance Challenges	-0.042 (0.106)	0.003 (0.108)	0.098 (0.111)
Col. Actions (CA)	1.497** (0.256)	1.490** (0.253)	1.621** (0.261)
Working Experience	0.310 (0.251)	0.296 (0.250)	0.298 (0.252)
State-affiliated(State.)	-0.469 (0.278)	-0.467 (0.276)	-0.467 (0.279)
<b>Average Component Interaction Effects</b>			
Polit#Perform.		0.795** (0.193)	0.748** (0.201)
Polit.#CA			-0.398 (0.213)
Perform.#CA			0.149 (0.194)
Polit.#Perform.#CA			0.817 (0.422)
Number of Obs.	1293	1293	1293
Number of Respondents	59	59	59

Table 3: The baseline of all models are weak political challenges, weak performance challenges and weak collective action potential. Working Experience is recoded into binary by its mean(8.6). All models are estimated with fixed effects on each experimental group (not displayed in this table). All models have robust standard errors clustered on respondents. \* $<0.05$ , \*\* $<0.01$

## Appendix 1 Regression Results on Figure 2

DV: Censorship Intensity

	With Control		No Control	
	(1) OLS	(2) Ologit	(3) OLS	(4) Ologit
Political Challenges	1.266*** (0.125)	1.310*** (0.139)	1.273*** (0.122)	1.277*** (0.129)
Performance Challenges	-0.047 (0.105)	-0.085 (0.114)	-0.069 (0.098)	-0.095 (0.103)
Col.Action Potential	1.498*** (0.258)	1.619*** (0.301)	1.504*** (0.257)	1.568*** (0.295)
Working Exp.	0.016 (0.017)	0.015 (0.017)		
State-affiliated	-0.532** (0.265)	-0.548* (0.283)		
Experiment Scenes=1	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Experiment Scenes=2	-0.057 (0.248)	-0.069 (0.273)	-0.113 (0.250)	-0.188 (0.262)
Experiment Scenes=3	-0.835*** (0.266)	-0.790*** (0.301)	-0.751*** (0.252)	-0.732*** (0.271)
Experiment Scenes=4	1.037*** (0.363)	1.182*** (0.417)	1.090*** (0.358)	1.151*** (0.395)
Experiment Scenes=5	1.866*** (0.410)	2.095*** (0.478)	1.945*** (0.391)	2.058*** (0.445)
Experiment Scenes=6	0.234 (0.338)	0.149 (0.401)	0.304 (0.331)	0.178 (0.378)
Experiment Scenes=7	-0.134 (0.283)	-0.155 (0.325)	-0.244 (0.287)	-0.352 (0.324)
Experiment Scenes=8	0.204 (0.239)	0.188 (0.252)	0.181 (0.240)	0.139 (0.243)
Experiment Scenes=9	-0.372 (0.283)	-0.284 (0.304)	-0.313 (0.269)	-0.248 (0.280)

DV: Censorship Intensity

	With Control		No Control	
	(1) OLS	(2) Ologit	(3) OLS	(4) Ologit
Experiment Scenes=10	1.352*** (0.377)	1.498*** (0.423)	1.314*** (0.364)	1.352*** (0.394)
Experiment Scenes=11	1.065*** (0.328)	1.152*** (0.370)	1.060*** (0.320)	1.079*** (0.352)
Experiment Scenes=12	-0.194 (0.347)	-0.306 (0.393)	-0.125 (0.331)	-0.235 (0.365)
Experiment Scenes=13	-0.571* (0.312)	-0.558 (0.349)	-0.508* (0.297)	-0.517 (0.318)
Experiment Scenes=14	-0.049 (0.313)	-0.012 (0.338)	-0.084 (0.306)	-0.091 (0.322)
Experiment Scenes=15	-0.985*** (0.289)	-0.928*** (0.308)	-0.946*** (0.264)	-0.906*** (0.274)
Experiment Scenes=16	0.560 (0.400)	0.724 (0.459)	0.523 (0.385)	0.599 (0.423)
Experiment Scenes=17	1.078*** (0.366)	1.269*** (0.404)	1.184*** (0.361)	1.267*** (0.383)
Experiment Scenes=18	0.249 (0.348)	0.474 (0.399)	0.376 (0.342)	0.530 (0.372)
Experiment Scenes=19	0.683** (0.328)	0.800** (0.370)	0.684** (0.312)	0.710** (0.338)
Experiment Scenes=20	-0.162 (0.263)	-0.219 (0.275)	-0.108 (0.256)	-0.166 (0.268)
Experiment Scenes=21	1.289*** (0.308)	1.562*** (0.370)	1.350*** (0.294)	1.563*** (0.347)
Experiment Scenes=22	1.173*** (0.308)	1.292*** (0.358)	1.176*** (0.297)	1.203*** (0.340)
Constant	2.194*** (0.380)		2.083*** (0.349)	

cut1

DV: Censorship Intensity				
	With Control		No Control	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	OLS	Ologit	OLS	Ologit
Constant		-0.318 (0.417)		-0.138 (0.371)
cut2				
Constant		0.505 (0.415)		0.595 (0.370)
cut3				
Constant		1.692*** (0.416)		1.707*** (0.371)
cut4				
Constant		2.217*** (0.418)		2.205*** (0.380)
cut5				
Constant		3.348*** (0.427)		3.320*** (0.394)
cut6				
Constant		3.948*** (0.426)		3.897*** (0.391)
Observations	1293	1293	1390	1390
(Pseudo)R-squared	0.242	0.072	0.216	0.064
Log Likelihood		-2259.574		-2446.521
Chi-Square		308.035		278.958

Note Unit of analysis is the answer to per scenario per respondent. Baseline is when all three variables of interests are "weak" (coded as 0). Standard errors are in the parentheses. Dependent variable is 7-point scale censorship intensity. All models have fixed effect on each experimental scenario and standard errors clustered at individual respondents. \* p<0.1 \*\* p<0.05 \*\*\* p<0.01

## Online Appendix 2

### Scenarios for the Experiment (in total 22)

Note

- (1) Manipulated Variables; **PolC**: Political Challenge; **PerC**: Performance Challenge; **CA**: collective action potential;
- (2) Coding methods for PolC and PerC:
  - a. PolC: **IA**, institutional affinity; **DC**, Disconformity;
  - b. PerC: **DH**, degree of Harm; **COM**: making commitment(promise)
- (3) For each scenario, Item a is the translation of Chinese scenario. Item b lists variables that are not manipulated in that specific scenario and how they are coded.

Please see the example:

1. 一群学生向政府写请愿书，要求建立一个“真正”的学生会，独立于学校的行政/共青团管理。(2 versions)
  - a. A group of students petition to the government and ask for a “real” student union that is independent from the supervision of *Administration* (**PolC: Weak,IA**) / *Youth League* (**PolC: Strong,IA**).
  - b. PerC: Weak; CA: Strong

The other two variables remain constant, while PerC is coded as weak, CA is coded as strong

Administration is manipulated as weak political challenges due to institutional affinity is lower than Youth League.



1. 一群学生向政府写请愿书，要求建立一个“真正”的学生会，独立于学校的**行政共青团**管理。(2 versions)
  - a. A group of students petition to the government and ask for a “real” student union that is independent from the supervision of *Administration* (PolC: Weak,IA) /*Youth League* (PolC: Strong,IA).
  - b. Constant: PerC: Weak; CA: Strong
2. 公民 W 在互联网上召集网友签名，宣布他要成为一个独立候选人，去竞选**村民委员会主任（村长）/区级人大代表**。(2 versions)
  - a. Citizen W collects netizens’ signature and announces that he will become an independent electoral candidate for the position of *village head* (PolC: Weak,DC) /*district level LPC representative* (PolC: Strong,DC).
  - b. Constant: PerC: Weak; CA: Strong
3. 一群农民在网上向网友求助。当地**市长/军区司令**的亲戚正试图强征他们的土地去建一座度假酒店。(2 versions)
  - a. A group of peasants ask for help online. Local *mayor* (PolC: Weak,IA) /*military commander* (PolC: Strong,IA)’s relatives attempt to forcefully take the lands to build a resort.
  - b. PerC: Strong, COM; CA: Strong
4. 一段在社交媒体上传播的视频显示，**教育部部长/某省教育厅的厅长**接受了一个商人的当面贿赂。(2 versions)
  - a. An online video shows on social media that *the minister of education* (PolC: Strong,IA) /*a provincial head of department* (PolC: Weak,IA) receives the bribe from a businessman.
  - b. PerC: Strong,COM; CA: Weak
5. 周永康的倒台不是什么稀奇事儿，**除非党内监督制度更健全，腐败不会消失/他不是太子党，在党内没有人会救他**。(2 versions)
  - a. The fall of Zhou Yongkang is not surprising. **Unless the inner party supervising mechanism is improved corruption will not disappear** (PolC: Weak,DC) (PerC: Strong, COM) / **He is not a princeling, no party comrades will save him** (PolC: Strong,DC) (PerC: Weak,COM).
  - b. CA: Weak
6. 一个博客帖子评论到，让地方官员对民众负责的惟一办法，就是加强**贯彻《政府信息公开条例》/就是让所有领导官员参与竞争性选举**。(2 versions)
  - a. A blogpost comments that the only way to make local officials accountable is to *reinforce “Government Transparency Guidelines”* (PolC: Weak,DC) (PerC: Strong, COM) /*all officials subject to competitive elections.* (PolC: Strong,DC) (PerC: Weak,COM)
  - b. CA: Weak
7. 一些网民在网上开展自拍活动，号召参加者拿着一块写着**“我想让政府更重视空气质量”/“我想让政府官员公开他们财产”**的标语牌自拍，并将自拍上传到自己的微博账号上。

- a. Some netizens launch a selfie event online, asking participants to take selfies with the banner **“I want the government cares more about air quality”** (PerC: Weak,COM)/ **“I want the officials to report their income to the public”** (PerC: Strong, COM).
- b. PolC:Weak; CA: Strong
8. 微博上流传图片，大量的抗议民众涌上街头游行，呼吁给予**贫困地区更多的教育投入/呼吁同性恋结婚合法化**。
- a. A photo goes viral on Weibo that massive protesters flood onto the street, asking for **more educational investment to poor regions** (PerC: Strong, COM).  
**/legalization of gay marriage”** (PerC: Weak,COM)
- b. PolC:Weak; CA: Strong
9. 一群**民营企业/国有企业的**工人在社保局门前聚集，抗议本市政府缺乏对失业人员的保护。
- a. A group of **Private Sector**(PerC: Weak,COM) /**SOE**(PerC: Strong, COM) workers gather in front of Social Security Bureau, protesting for the lack of protection of unemployment.
- b. PolC:Weak; CA: Strong
10. 一栋由解放军军属企业建造的学校校舍因为质量问题倒塌。这个事故导致 **5/55** 名孩子死亡。
- a. A school building built by military construction company collapses for bad quality, which kills **five**(PerC: Weak,DH) /**fifty-five children**(PerC: Strong, DH).
- b. PolC:Strong, IA; CA: Weak
11. 一个博客帖子评论道，中国互联网管制降低人们生活质量，因为**它是中国经济发展的巨大阻碍/它损害了人们浏览网页信息的自由**。
- a. A blogpost comments that China’s Internet regulation reduces quality of life, because it **impedes economic development**(PerC: Weak,COM) /**invades the freedom of viewing information on websites**(PerC: Strong, COM).
- b. PolC:Strong, DC;
12. 一篇博客帖子抱怨道，某超大城市没有能力给农民工群体提供足够的**定居的权利(户口)/公共安全保护**。
- a. A blogpost comments that a metropolitan fails to provide enough residential rights(Hukou) (PerC: Weak,COM) / protection of public safety for immigrant workers(PerC: Strong, COM).
- b. PolC:Weak; CA: Weak
13. 某个全国闻名的水利大坝项目发生事故，水资源被严重污染。**2 个村庄近 2000 人/4 个城市的 200 万人**将无法获得干净的饮用水。当地居民决定对负责项目的**省级政府/相关建筑企业**提起诉讼。
- a. A famous dam-project has a pollutant accident. **2000 people in two villages** (PerC: Weak,COM) /**2 million people in 4 cities**(PerC: Strong, COM) cannot get clean drinking water. Residents decide to sue **the relevant provincial government** (PolC: Strong,IA) /**construction enterprise**(PolC: Weak,IA).

- b. CA:Strong
14. 由于**朝鲜在黄海附近/日本在钓鱼岛附近逮捕/杀害**了五名中国渔民，群众游行在全国五个大城市爆发。(2 versions)
- a. **North Korea (PolC: Strong,DC) /Japan (PolC: Weak,DC) arrest (PerC: Weak,DH) /kill (PerC: Strong, DH)** five Chinese fishermen around YelWeak Sea/Senkaku Island, massive protests outburst in five large cities.
- b. CA:Strong
15. 一群出租车司机挡住了某市**人大常委/党委**门前的路，**抗议他们的收入过低不足以生活/希望能取消向出租车公司交的“份子钱”**。(4 versions)
- a. A group of cab drivers block the road in front of **People’s Congress (PolC: Weak,IA) /Party Committee (PolC: Strong,IA)**, protesting that **their income is Weak (PerC: Weak,COM) / the share paid to the cab companies should be cancelled (PerC: Strong, COM)** .
- b. CA:Strong
16. 在直辖市 C，一辆保时捷由于司机醉酒驾驶，**撞死了一名行人/造成严重交通事故，共造成35人死亡**。醉驾司机当场逃逸。他是该市**红十字会党委书记/市委书记**的儿子。(4 versions)
- a. In Municipal C, a drunk driver in a Porsche hit and run, **killing one pedestrian (PerC: Weak,DH) / making a serious traffic accident with 35 casualties (PerC: Strong, DH)** . He is the son of the Party secretary of **Municipal C (PolC: Strong,IA) / Red Cross Organization Congress (PolC: Weak,IA)**.
- b. CA:Weak
17. 一个博客帖子显示，地方政府暴力拆迁，导致公民**K 受伤/自杀**。**K 是藏族人**。(4 versions)
- a. A blogpost shows that one local government takes lands violently. Citizen K **hurt (PerC: Weak,DH)/kill himself (PerC: Strong, DH)** during the process. **(PolC: Weak,IA) / K is a Tibetan (PolC: Strong,IA)**.
- b. CA:Weak
18. 一个官员举报他的上司，某市的**市长/市委书记**，经常**收取关系人的贿赂/没有走法律程序就拘留当地市民**。(4 versions)
- a. An official reported that his supervisor, a city’s **mayor. (PolC: Weak,IA)/party secretary (PolC: Strong,IA)**, **often takes bribes (PerC: Strong, COM) / detain residents with no legal procedure (PerC: Weak,COM)**.
- b. CA:Weak
19. 我听说出租车司机今天罢工了。我很同情他们。因为那些公司收太多份子钱了。/**我明天要去他们静坐的地方以表支持，有人跟我一起去吗?** (2 versions)
- a. (A blogpost writes that) “I heard that cab drivers are on strike today, I am very sympathetic. Those cab companies take a huge share from them. **(CA:Weak) / I am going to where they sit in to support them, anyone with me. (CA:Strong)?**
- b. PolC:Weak; PerC: Strong, COM

20. 电影审查真是烂透了。它不但损害了电影工业的发展，还剥夺了人们选择观看的自由。/请跟我一起签了这份请愿书：《请停止对电影的审查》(2 versions)
- (A blogpost writes that) “Film censorship sucks. It damages the development of film industry, and take freedom of watching away from people. . (CA:Weak) /Please sign this petition with me: ‘Please stop the censorship to films’(CA:Strong)”!
  - PolC:Strong,DC; PerC:Weak
21. 北京的空气真是太毒了。环保部/共产党没做任何事情保护首都人民的生命！/我们明天10点聚集在环保部/中南海门前抗议吧！（4 versions）
- (A blogpost writes that) “Beijing’s air is really toxic! Ministry of Environmental Protection . (PolC: Weak,IA)/ Communist Party(PolC: Strong,IA), has done nothing to protect people’s life of the capital! . (CA:Weak)/Let’s gather in front of MEP/Zhongnanhai to protest! (CA:Strong)”
  - PerC: Strong, COM
22. 一胎政策简直不可理喻。它严重地侵犯了中国人的基本人权/损害中国经济发展的潜力。/我在这里宣布成立“拯救我们未来”委员会，推动政策的最终废止。请加入我们，让我们的声音让更多人听见！（4 versions）
- (A blogpost writes that) “One-child policy is such a nonsense. It seriously insults Chinese people’s basic human rights(PerC: Weak,COM) (PolC: Strong,DC)/ damages the potential of Chinese economic development(PerC: Strong,COM) (PolC: Weak,DC). (CA:Weak) /I am here to announce that we establishes ‘Save Our Future’ committee, promoting the termination of the policy. Please join us and make our voice heard! . (CA:Strong)”

### Appendix 3: Descriptive Statistics for all scenarios

Scenario	Version	Mean Censorship Intensity	SD. Censorship Intensity	Respondents	Workplace l=state- affiliated	Work Experience (Year)	Pol.Challenges	Performance Challenges	Collective Action
1	1	4.235	2.075	34	0.44	9.21	1	0	1
1	2	4.250	1.741	32	0.31	8.10	0	0	1
2	1	3.576	2.136	33	0.36	9.03	0	0	1
2	2	4.710	1.883	31	0.39	8.26	1	0	1
3	1	2.469	1.244	32	0.28	8.52	0	1	1
3	2	4.400	1.499	30	0.40	9.00	1	1	1
4	1	2.781	1.660	32	0.41	9.33	0	1	0
4	2	4.710	1.792	31	0.29	7.93	1	1	0
5	1	3.938	1.999	32	0.28	7.48	0	1	0
5	2	5.323	1.922	31	0.42	9.93	1	0	0
6	1	4.267	2.273	30	0.33	8.86	1	0	0
6	2	1.750	1.164	32	0.34	8.43	0	1	0
7	1	2.242	1.501	33	0.42	6.97	0	1	1
7	2	4.406	2.030	32	0.31	10.27	0	0	1
8	1	4.000	1.807	31	0.35	7.75	0	1	1
8	2	3.485	1.716	33	0.36	9.45	0	0	1
9	1	3.030	1.104	33	0.33	7.84	0	0	1
9	2	3.483	1.455	29	0.34	9.54	0	1	1
10	1	4.355	1.889	31	0.35	8.50	1	0	0
10	2	4.906	1.673	32	0.34	8.79	1	1	0
11	1	4.406	2.030	32	0.34	7.61	1	1	0
11	2	4.355	1.836	31	0.35	9.79	1	0	0
12	1	2.061	1.298	33	0.33	9.13	0	0	0
12	2	1.879	1.193	33	0.42	8.37	0	1	0
13	1	2.813	1.601	16	0.25	6.93	0	1	1
13	2	3.938	1.569	16	0.31	7.81	1	0	1
13	3	4.800	0.941	15	0.47	11.57	1	1	1
13	4	3.250	1.438	16	0.38	8.93	0	0	1
14	1	3.188	1.797	16	0.44	7.60	0	1	1
14	2	4.438	1.711	16	0.38	8.88	1	0	1
14	3	4.667	1.839	15	0.27	8.57	1	1	1
14	4	4.125	1.668	16	0.31	9.57	0	0	1
15	1	3.000	1.265	16	0.31	9.60	1	0	1
15	2	2.750	1.238	16	0.56	6.43	0	0	1
15	3	3.938	1.482	16	0.19	10.56	1	1	1
15	4	3.438	1.632	16	0.38	8.13	0	1	1
16	1	3.563	1.504	16	0.38	6.71	0	1	0
16	2	3.647	2.029	17	0.24	10.59	1	1	0
16	3	2.688	1.702	16	0.38	8.77	0	0	0
16	4	3.000	1.904	17	0.53	8.13	1	0	0
17	1	2.875	1.310	16	0.38	8.14	0	1	0
17	2	2.688	1.078	16	0.50	10.20	0	0	0
17	3	5.235	1.200	17	0.29	9.65	1	1	0
17	4	4.733	2.086	15	0.27	6.71	1	0	0
18	1	3.688	1.537	16	0.25	10.60	1	0	0
18	2	3.188	1.515	16	0.50	8.07	1	1	0
18	3	2.667	1.291	15	0.33	7.36	0	1	0
18	4	2.706	1.160	17	0.35	8.80	0	0	0
19	1	2.548	1.410	31	0.26	9.41	0	1	0
19	2	4.433	1.870	30	0.40	8.07	0	1	1
20	1	3.452	1.981	31	0.29	8.16	1	0	0
20	2	4.625	1.809	32	0.41	9.38	1	0	1
21	1	4.588	2.551	17	0.35	10.44	1	1	0
21	2	4.563	2.190	16	0.44	8.58	0	1	1
21	3	3.118	1.495	17	0.41	6.41	0	1	0
21	4	6.733	0.704	15	0.27	9.73	1	1	1
22	1	4.625	2.125	16	0.19	9.20	0	1	1
22	2	5.800	1.424	15	0.40	8.46	1	0	1
22	3	5.125	1.928	16	0.44	7.79	1	0	0
22	4	2.867	1.846	15	0.33	9.67	0	1	0

## Histogram of Censorship Intensity

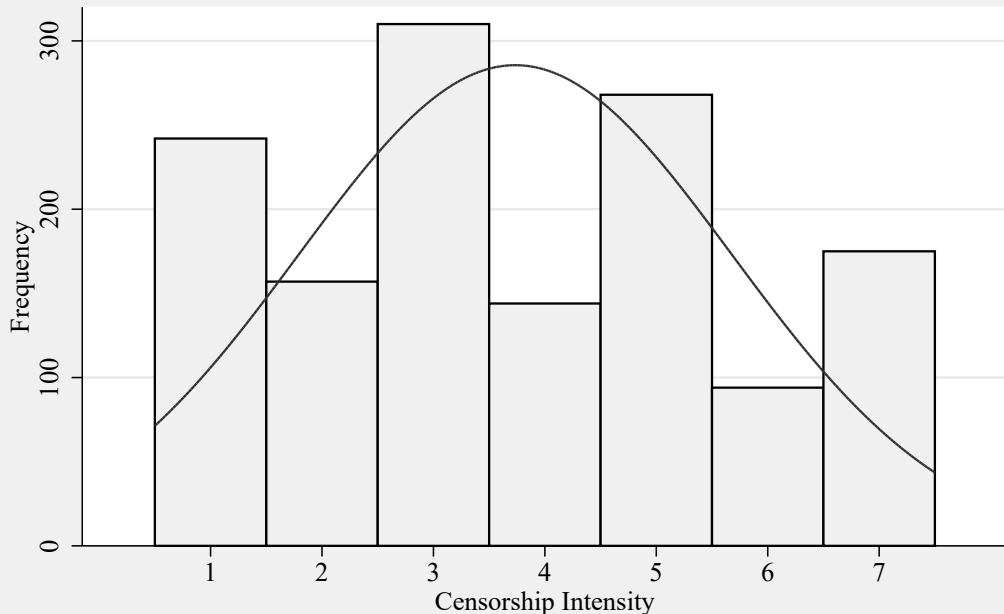


Figure A1: The histogram shows that the answer of censorship intensity is not seriously skewed(.181). The unit of analysis is answer to one scenario per respondent; N=1390