Dissertation Outline
Information environment and personal protest participation in autocracies

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1 The Main Question

In autocracies, how messages of policy-oriented protests affect people's future participation of a protest? How do citizens make their decision to participate?

2 The Main Theory

To a policy decision or a policy status quo that has generated sufficient grievances, an audience estimates the effectiveness of a protest and makes a decision on whether to participate into it. His willingness of participation is affected by his estimated likelihood that the government will change the policy to satisfy protesters. The previous literature emphasizes the power of structural conditions that change people's incentives(the classic model). This dissertation argues that protest-related information will moderate the influence of structural conditions to people's perception and thus their behaviors(the information environment model). Protest information's moderating effect has three aspects:

1. the content of a protest message, especially the behaviors of the government and the protesters reflected by the message;

2. the information environment, shaped by censorship, that selectively displays certain behaviors and covers the others;

3. individuals' personal attributes that influences their interpretation of the message and moderates the effects of the message.

3 The Chapters Arrangement

3.1 Chapter 1: Introduction and The Limitation of current data

This chapter introduces the research question of the project and why studying the effects of protest message is important. It will also discuss what evidence the existing observational data (surveys) can provide and the limitations.

3.2 Chapter 2: Literature and Theoretical Background

This chapter reviews how the current literature would explain the factors that affect people's behavioral decision, which I generalize as the "classic model". Then, I propose the information environment model, which emphasizes that protest-related information can moderate the causal relation of the classic model in three ways. Finally, I discuss the research strategy of this dissertation, the reason to choose messages about domestic protests as the research focus and the general empirical approach.

3.3 Chapter 3: Information Environment

This chapter demonstrates the evidence that a porous censorship system will create different information environments, and thus produce different versions of protest messages. It includes a comparative text analysis of protest messages of social media and those of professional media in China. It also uses qualitative materials to compare the information provided by different media channels in detail. Finally, I will draw a regression analysis from the online survey experiment to examine how different media channels change people's perception of domestic protest in China.

3.4 Chapter 4: Protest Message

By a survey experiment on Chinese Internet users, this chapter demonstrates that behaviors of the protesters and the government reported in a protest message change people's willingness of protest. It finds that the most influential behavior is the government's response to the protesters, which encourages audiences for future participation. The violence of protesters can discourage the participation willingness while the evidence is weaker. The sole protest message and government repression do not have significant effects.

3.5 Chapter 5: Interpretation of Audiences

By further analyzing the survey experiment, this chapter shows that audiences' interpretation of the protest message generates heterogeneous effects of the content, i.e. the behaviors reflected by the message. This chapter mainly examines three influential factors that are

meaningful in theory: political trust, education and preference to read about protest-related messages.

3.6   Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter will conclude the current findings and limitations. It discusses the future direction and potential research questions to study how messages influence protest behavior.