

Selective Responsiveness for Authoritarian Control

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Abstract

Lacking electoral incentives, why do authoritarian rulers invest in deliberative institutions to respond to citizen grievances? Previous research on authoritarian responsiveness largely contends that autocrats prioritize the appeals of potential dissidents. Instead, this paper argues that autocrats strategically provide responses of different qualities to different segments of population for social control. Using original data of over 156,000 citizen appeals and government responses on *Weibo* (Chinese equivalent of *Twitter*), I show that local officials in China selectively provide substantive responses—responses that resolve the appealed problems—to citizens who demonstrate higher conformity to the regime’s surveillance and censorship policies on *Weibo*. In contrast, officials selectively provide symbolic responses—responses that are rhetorical without solving the problems—to citizen appeals that are more likely to elicit collective action. Using interviews with local officials in East, Central, and West China, I find that officials engage in this selective responsiveness primarily to send the signal to petitioners and potential petitioners that compliance, not organized opposition, will open doors for satisfying their demands.

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1 Introduction

The continuing responsiveness to citizen preference is a defining characteristic of democracy (Dahl 1971; Elster 1998). Studies of political accountability in democracies have shown how the incentive of winning elections shapes officials' responsiveness to the public (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987; Dipoppa and Grossman 2020). Lacking electoral incentives, officials in nondemocratic regimes nonetheless provide numerous deliberation channels designed to respond to citizen appeals (Fu and Distelhorst 2018; He and Warren 2011; Nathan 2003; Stromseth et al. 2017; Todd et al. 2020). According to the 2020 E-government survey conducted by the United Nations (UN), 25 out of 58 authoritarian regimes are rated as offering "high quality" or "very high quality" online deliberative institutions for their citizens (United Nations 2020).¹ Since 2003, the E-government survey independently assesses the provision of digital deliberative institutions in all UN member states using a unified measure called "E-Participation Index" (EPI, on a scale of 0 to 1). Higher EPI means the government provides citizens with more online channels designed to respond to citizen requests in governance. Figure 1 shows that the EPI of major autocracies on the world today such as China, Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have all been steadily increasing over the past decade. Strikingly, the figure shows that highly authoritarian regimes like China and Russia receive EPIs that are substantially higher compared to the average EPI of all democratic countries in 2020.

What motivate unelected dictators to respond to citizen appeals? Existing literature on authoritarian responsiveness largely contends that dictators prioritize the requests of potential dissidents. One popular view is that authoritarian regimes respond to citizen appeals in order to collect information about potential sources of social instability (Cai 2004; Dimitrov 2014; Gunitsky 2015; Lorentzen 2013). Existing research on participatory institutions under autocracy generally views that a key objective of these institutions is to convey information to higher-level authorities regarding the preferences of regime outsiders, so that regime leaders can adapt their actions accordingly (Gueorguiev 2021; Magaloni 2006; Manion 2016; Svulik 2012; Todd et al. 2020; Truex 2016). According to

¹The coding of regime type is based on a dataset introduced by Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2014).

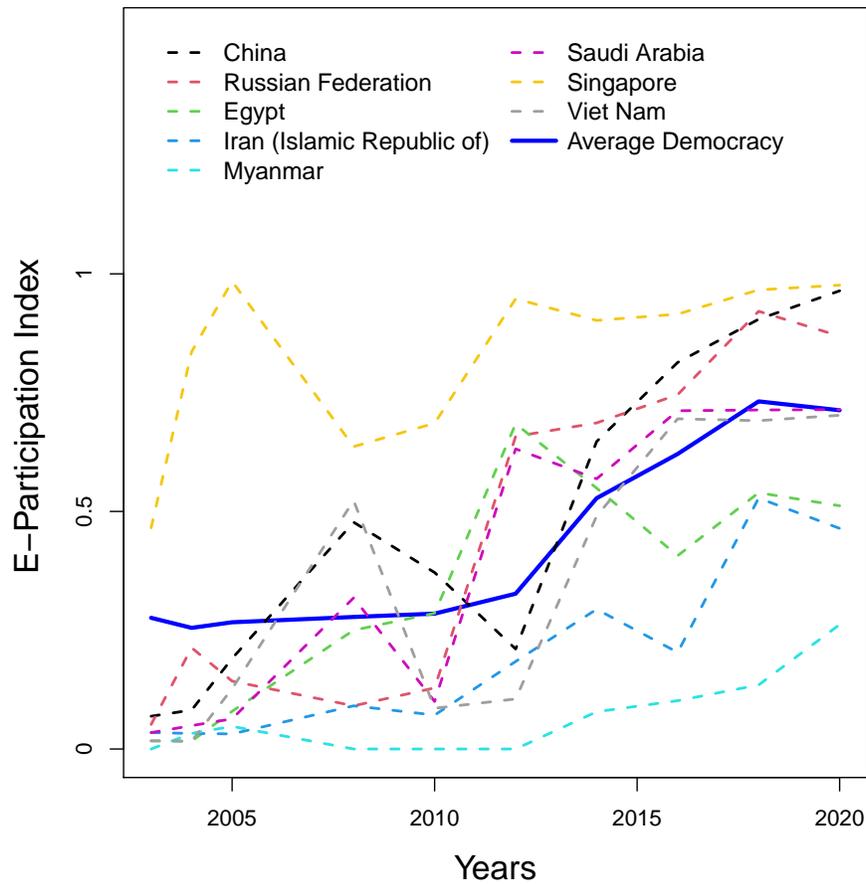


Figure 1: Provision of E-Deliberative Institutions in Major Autocracies

this explanation, to sustain this informational benefit, government responsiveness should increase in citizen demands (Distelhorst and Hou 2017).

Another related, common claim is that autocrats respond to citizen requests in order to co-opt potential dissidents (Chen, Pan and Xu 2016; Lust-Okar 2005; Pan 2020; Svulik 2012). Researchers have studied electoral and non-electoral mechanisms through which autocrats use their responsiveness to co-opt opposition. While authoritarian elections are often nontransparent and uncompetitive (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2018), existing studies show that elected officials in autocracies sometimes do represent public criticism in legislature (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Malesky and Schuler 2010), answer critical petitioners (Lueders 2021), and make policy concessions to appease citizen dissatisfaction (Miller 2015). Aside from elections, previous research contends that unelected officials in autocracies prioritize responding to the appeals of potential organized opposition (Chen

2012; Chen, Pan and Xu 2016; He and Warren 2011; Pan 2020) and provide favorable social policies and public goods to potentially threatening social groups (Albertus, Fenner and Slater 2018; Tsai 2007; Wallace 2014). As Wallace (2014, 35) puts it, “the squeaky wheel gets the grease”.

Despite this enormous progress, two important questions are yet answered about the source of authoritarian responsiveness. First, existing studies mostly focus on whether autocrats respond to citizen appeals rather than *how* they respond. “Responsiveness” is often measured by survey responses among government officials, or by whether and how fast any response is provided. However, we have yet to differentiate the source of *substantive responses*, responses that resolve the appealed problems, from the source of *symbolic responses*, responses that do not solve the petitioner’s problems. The distinction between substantive vs. symbolic response is essential because responsiveness, by definition, means the government takes actions to *enact* the preference of citizens (Manin, Przeworski and Stokes 1999).

Second, the prevailing view that autocrats prioritize responding to potential dissidents may not be an equilibrium. If the regime selectively responds to the needs of political opponents, opponents will have the incentive to stay resistant against the regime. Moreover, upon observing this, other citizens including regime loyalists will also have the incentive to copy the dissenting behaviors of opponents for a better response. Hence, from the perspective of autocrats, it does not appear sensible to allocate resource primarily to resolve appeals for regime dissidents. Recent research suggests that more than 70% of responses from authoritarian officials are symbolic responses that do not resolve the appealed problems (Cai and Zhou 2019). In this way, what previous studies actually show may be that appeasing opposition is the source of symbolic response rather than substantive response. This again calls for differentiating the sources between these two types of responses.

This paper fills in this gap by examining how local governments in China respond to citizen appeals.² China is rated by the United Nations as providing “very high quality” online deliberative institutions for its citizens, outperforming 92% of democracies

²Throughout this paper, I use “appeal” and “petition” interchangeably. I call citizens who submit appeals “petitioners”. I also use “obedience” and “compliance” interchangeably in this paper.

on the world on this rating (United Nations 2020, 311). Recent studies show that local officials in China reply to 40%–60% of citizen appeals submitted through government-run petition channels (Distelhorst and Hou 2014; Su and Meng 2016), which is similar to the response rates to 311 calls in the United States (Christensen and Ejdemyr 2020) and FixMyStreet complaints in the United Kingdom (Sjoberg, Mellon and Peixoto 2017). This makes China a suitable and important case to understand the source of authoritarian responsiveness.

I argue that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime strategically maneuvers responses of different qualities to control the public. More specifically, to signal to the public that political obedience is rewarded with real benefits, Chinese officials selectively provide substantive responses to citizens who demonstrate higher conformity to the regime's control, and officials selectively provide symbolic responses to citizen appeals that are more likely to elicit collective action.

To test this selective responsiveness of the regime, I use quantitative and qualitative methods. First, I scrape over 156,000 real citizen appeals that were submitted on *Weibo* (Chinese equivalent of *Twitter*) to municipal governments across China. Among these appeals, I measure the levels of substantive and symbolic responses from local governments and identify factors that increase these two types of responses separately using machine learning techniques and quasi-experimental methods. I then illuminate the rationales for why the CCP regime provides substantive and symbolic responses to citizen appeals using interviews with local officials in East, Central, and West China.

I find that within the same topic of appeals, a better record of conforming to the Chinese regime's surveillance and censorship policies on *Weibo* significantly increases the likelihood of obtaining a substantive response from local governments. In contrast, more comments and support from other citizens on an appeal only increases its likelihood of getting a symbolic response.

Interviews with local officials in China suggest three rationales for why they prioritize resolving the appeals of regime conformists. First, officials report desiring to set an example to petitioners and potential petitioners that compliance, not organized opposition,

will open doors for satisfying their demands. In doing so, local officials aim to incentivize more conformist behaviors among citizens within their jurisdiction. Second, officials view conformists as more trustworthy than non-conformists and hence more likely to continuously conform to the regime upon satisfaction of their demands. Finally, local officials report believing that political conformists tend to make “reasonable requests” that local governments are able to resolve within their capacity.

My findings challenge the prevailing view on authoritarian responsiveness that autocrats prioritize the appeals of potential dissidents (Chen, Pan and Xu 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Pan 2020). Moreover, the signaling consideration underlying officials’ selective responsiveness in China suggests the need to reconceptualize accountability under autocracy not only as a reactive approach to appease opposition, but also as a proactive strategy to cultivate conformity. While the history of advanced democracies suggests that citizen petitions may push ruling elites to democratize (Carpenter 2021), I show how contemporary autocrats use petition institutions to contain potential forces of democratization and instead, bolster authoritarian control.

My finding of selective responsiveness bears similarities to the core voter theory in authoritarian elections, in which ruling elites distribute material benefits to their core supporters and deny their opponents’ access to private transfers or public goods (Blaydes 2011; Diaz-Cayeros, Estévez and Magaloni 2016; Magaloni 2006). I show that when political appointment does not depend on popular elections, autocrats reward conformists using deliberative institutions in exchange for their continual conformity. One difference between selective responsiveness and core voter theory is that while the primary mechanism of core voter theory is to retain existing conformists, the primary mechanism of selective responsiveness is to signal to both conformists and non-conformists that political obedience is rewarded with real benefits. In other words, the goal of selective responsiveness is not only to retain existing conformists but also to cultivate conformity among weak and strong opponents. Another difference between selective responsiveness and core voter theory is while core voter theory means punishing dissidents, selective responsiveness also includes providing soothing, symbolic response to appease potential

organized opposition.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 theorizes sources of authoritarian responsiveness and derives observable implications. Section 3 describes my data and empirical strategy. Section 4 presents the main results, showing how the Chinese government selectively satisfies the demands of regime conformists. Section 5 discusses local officials' rationale for their selective responsiveness. Section 6 concludes.

2 Theorizing Authoritarian Responsiveness

In their seminal work on regime accountability and responsiveness, [Manin, Przeworski and Stokes \(1999, 10\)](#) argue that “public officials are ‘responsive’ if their actions follow the preferences signaled by citizens”. According to this definition, responsiveness means that officials take actions to *enact* constituents’ objectives. In formulating policies, a government is responsive if it adopts the policy that citizens express they favor. In processing citizen appeals on particularistic demands, a government is responsive if it resolves the problems reported in the appeals and substantively satisfies citizens’ requests.

When dealing with citizen appeals on deliberation channels, authoritarian ruling elites (e.g. government officials) have three possible reactions. First, the elites can give no response at all. Second, they can provide substantive responses that resolve the problem citizen reports. This makes the petitioner happiest and can potentially increase popular support for the regime. However, resolving the appealed problem requires political and logistical resources (e.g. funding), which the ruling elites may be unwilling or unable to provide. Instead of substantively satisfying citizen requests, the third option of ruling elites is to provide symbolic responses, where they provide some response to appease the petitioner—such as saying that officials are researching on the issue or comforting the petitioner with psychological counseling—without solving the problem. In essence, symbolic response is a form of “performative governance”, which means that the government uses “theatrical deployment of language, symbols, and gestures to foster an impression of good governance among citizens” ([Ding 2020, 525](#)).

Both democratic and non-democratic governments provide a combination of substan-

tive responses and symbolic responses to win the legitimacy among citizens (Alexander 2010; Mertha 2009). In democratic regimes, citizens have institutionalized mechanisms to sanction the government if the government fails to resolve their requests. For example, citizens can vote for the opposition party in the next election, sue the responsible bureau in court, or expose the governance problem to media (Bussell 2019; Fishkin 2011; Gibson 1989). In this way, democratic governments have limited room to play around between symbolic response and substantive response.

However, in authoritarian regimes, since citizens lack credible mechanisms to hold the government accountable, the ruling elites have more room to maneuver between these two types of responses. Intuitively, performing symbolic response is less costly for officials than resolving the problem. So, authoritarian officials lacking electoral constraints should always prefer giving symbolic responses. Yet, recent studies show that authoritarian governments also provide a non-trivial proportion of substantive responses to citizen requests in addition to giving symbolic responses (Cai and Zhou 2019; Meng and Yang 2020). Then, under what circumstances authoritarian officials would perform symbolic responses? More importantly, what motivate authoritarian officials to spend resources to substantively satisfy citizens' demands?

Source of symbolic response: I hypothesize that authoritarian governments selectively give symbolic responses to citizen appeals that are more likely to elicit collective action. Appeals with bigger threat of collective action tend to receive higher public attention, which has two-fold effects on the government. On one hand, this attention can impose higher pressure on ruling elites to provide a response to the petitioner (Ding 2020). Problems that are more likely to provoke organized opposition may have a negative impact on a broader group of people or may be more severe to individual well-being and elicit more people to sympathize with the petitioner.

On the other hand, the high public pressure on an appeal can also make officials become more careful about what message their response sends to the petitioner and the broader swathes of population. When more people pay attention to an appeal, the official's response can also in turn shape this broader group of people in how they choose

to appeal to the government in the future. More specifically, I propose that when facing appeals that are more likely to elicit organized opposition, authoritarian officials are less willing to substantively satisfy the demands of the petitioner because officials do not want to signal to citizens that collective action is an effective way to resolve their problems. This signaling consideration is more salient when the appeal and official's response are observable to a larger segment of citizenry, such as when local officials have to deal with a large-scale protest on the street or have to respond to citizen appeals publicly on a national platform.

In addition to attracting more public attention, problems that are more likely to trigger protests may also be more difficult to resolve. Hence, officials who interact with citizens on a day-to-day basis, who are often at the street level, may not have enough capacity to satisfy citizen demands on these problems. Issues that affect a bigger crowd or affect individual well-being more seriously, such as appeals on housing, land seizure, and employment, generally entail considerable political and logistical challenges to resolve (Li, Wang and Day 2015; Mattingly 2019; O'Brien 2009; Yang 2015). Yet, existing studies have shown that even in regimes of high capacity, street-level bureaucrats are often endowed with very limited resources and political authority (Ding 2020; Gerth and Mills 1946; Evans and Rauch 1999).

Source of substantive response: I hypothesize that authoritarian officials selectively provide substantive responses to citizens who show higher conformity to the regime's regulatory policies over the society. Since every citizen appeal demands government resources to resolve, ruling elites in autocracy can allocate the same amount of resources to resolve requests from conformists or requests from non-conformists. Then, why would ruling elites prioritize resources to resolve the appeals of conformists? I propose three rationales.

First, ruling elites need to retain existing conformists to the regime in the public. While ruling elites need to manage potential opposition, they also need to make efforts to ensure the support of their backing coalition in the society because citizens' continual support is conditioning on repeated benefits provided by the regime (Calvo and Murillo

2004; Cox and McCubbins 1986; Diaz-Cayeros, Estévez and Magaloni 2016). Existing literature has shown how elected officials in authoritarian regimes lock in support of their societal base through making economic concessions (Wintrobe 1998), distributing public and private goods (Albertus 2015), and censoring materials that their supporters dislike (Esberg 2020). In single-party regimes like China where the appointment of officials do not depend on popular elections, officials also need to take care of their societal base because they need citizens' continued compliance to sustain their rule. Moreover, research on authoritarian elections has shown that when officials distribute goods to voters, regime opponents are more capricious than supporters in whether they would vote for their patron in the end (Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros and Estévez 2007). By the same logic, I contend that: conditioning on their requests being satisfied by officials in the current period, conformists are more likely to keep complying with the regime in the next period than non-conformists since loyalists already have a good record of obeying the regime. In this way, from the perspective of authoritarian rulers, it is both necessary and efficient to reward existing conformists with government responsiveness.

Aside from retaining existing conformists, the second and perhaps more important motivation for authoritarian officials to satisfy the demands of conformists is to set examples to the broader swathes of population that political obedience is rewarded with real benefits. While ruling elites may be unwilling to “surrender” in public to petitioners who pursue their requests through organized opposition, ruling elites should be happy to incentivize more conformist behaviors in public through their substantive services. Observing this signal not only motivates existing conformists to keep complying, it may also induce non-conformists to voluntarily change their behavior and show more conformity to the regime, particularly among weak opponents of the regime and among those who have a stronger demand for government services. In other words, from the perspective of authoritarian rulers, resolving problems for conformists generates a more positive externality for their social control compared to rewarding non-conformists. Again, this signaling consideration of ruling elites is more salient when they interact with citizen petitioners in a more public setting and also, when the compliance record of the petitioner is publicly

observable.

Thirdly, compared to politically non-conformist citizens, regime conformists are also more likely to make appeals that ruling elites are willing and capable to solve. For example, scholars have found that in authoritarian regimes, regime conformists are less likely to protest on politically sensitive issues such as corruption and electoral fraud compared to regime opponents (Rosenfeld 2017). In this way, officials are on average capable of satisfying the demand of a conformist at lower cost and also at higher probability compared to those of satisfying a non-conformist's request.

Given these three mechanisms, resolving the appeal of a conformist generates higher utility (i.e. obtaining the conformity of more people) at lower cost for authoritarian regimes compared to resolving the appeal of a non-conformist. Using the same amount of resource, ruling elites can satisfy a greater number of conformists than non-conformists. Since local officials—who often have to deal with citizen requests directly—have limited resources and authority, they will prioritize their resources to resolve the problems for regime conformists rather than opponents.

Observable implications: I test the source of symbolic response and the source of substantive response by examining how local governments respond to citizen appeals in China. My theoretical framework predicts that citizen appeals of higher collective action potential increases symbolic responses from local officials. On the other hand, I expect that for petitioners, a better record of conforming to the CCP's regulatory policies increases substantive responses from local governments.

3 Data and Empirical Strategy

To test the sources of government responsiveness systematically, I analyze citizen-government interactions on government-run petition accounts on *Sina Weibo* (the Chinese equivalent of *Twitter*, hereafter *Weibo*). Since the Chinese central government issued the directive “Opening Government Initiative” in 2007, local governments across China have created a variety of digital institutions for citizens to express grievances, make policy input, and

appeal for public services. One of these digital participatory institutions is *Weibo* petition accounts that are dedicated to address citizen appeals.³ Any citizen with a *Weibo* account can submit appeals through messaging or commenting on these government-run accounts. Figure 2 shows an example of such petition account owned by the Beijing municipal gov-



Figure 2: The left panel shows a post composed by the Beijing municipal government on its petition account; The right panel shows the thread of citizen appeals, as well as government replies, below this post.

ernment. For each appeal, it is publicly observable who submit it,⁴ what they petition for, and what response (if any) they get from the government.

Compared to other deliberative institutions (e.g. mayor’s mailbox, forum on government website) that are frequently used in prior research, *Weibo* enables researchers to study the impact of petitioner characteristics (e.g. online network, political compliance) on regime responsiveness. Also, since *Weibo* is a national social media platform, local governments have no direct control over the platform to delete certain citizen appeals (Cai and Zhou 2019).⁵ For one thing, national social media sites like *Weibo* require the operating licenses issued by the central government rather than local governments.⁶ For

³See Nathan (2003); “Zhong Hua Ren Min Gong He Guo Zheng Fu Xin Xi Gong Kai Tiao Li [Open Government Information Regulation of People’s Republic of China]” (<https://bit.ly/33qdPgb>), accessed May 30, 2019.

⁴This includes the *Weibo* ID of the petitioner, his/her self-reported demographic and employment information, and the petitioner’s *Weibo* activity record such as number of followers, posts, and a rating of compliance with *Weibo* policy.

⁵Local governments can approach Internet companies like *Weibo* for assistance in managing the circulation of local information, but they have no authority to order these platforms to censor certain posts or sanction the platforms for not doing so.

⁶*Sina Weibo* requires four major licenses to operate, all issued by central government agencies. These

another thing, most citizen appeals on government-run *Weibo* accounts pertain to issues that directly affect citizens' daily life or affairs in their local community rather than issues of "high politics" such as regime change or selection of central leaders (Bialer 1980). Existing studies have shown that citizens' particularistic requests on the local level are rarely censored by the Chinese government (Su and Meng 2016). Furthermore, to assess the potential impact of censorship, I checked all citizen appeals in my sample, which cover a number of politically sensitive issues such as corruption and police misconduct, in 60 days after the appeals being submitted on *Weibo*. I confirmed that no appeal was censored by the government within this time period.⁷ Next I will describe my sample.

Sample: I collect all *Weibo* accounts owned by prefecture-level and provincial-level governments in China. Among them, I identified 26 prefecture-level cities and 2 provincial-level cities (Beijing and Tianjin) that run a specialized *Weibo* account for answering citizen appeals. These cities come from 20 out of 31 provinces across East, Central, and West China—regions of different levels of economic development. Compared to all cities⁸ in China, those that run petition accounts on *Weibo* have higher levels of economic development, government revenue, and larger populations (see Appendix A.1). Many of these cities are also the capital of their provinces, which implies that they have higher political importance for the CCP regime. Local governments in China often own several *Weibo* accounts, each specializing on a particular function (e.g. propaganda). I focus on the subset of "petition accounts" that the governments explicitly declare are responsible for resolving citizen appeals because by creating these accounts, the local governments make a commitment to citizens that they would provide helpful solutions to citizens' appeals. In this way, if a local government fails to respond to citizen requests on these petition accounts, that means the government is unresponsive, not that answering citizen requests

licenses include the "Internet information service" license issued by State Council's Information Office; "Value-added electronic information service" license issued by Ministry of Industry and Information Technologies; and the "Internet audiovisual programs" license and the "Online publication" license both issued by State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television.

⁷It is possible that some appeals are so sensitive that they were never allowed to be posted on *Weibo*. Such appeals probably concern high politics issues such as criticism on CCP's leadership or central government leaders. However, such appeals are rare because ordinary citizens mostly express particularistic demands through government-run deliberation channels.

⁸"Cities" here means prefecture-level and provincial-level cities.

is simply not a function of the account.

For each *Weibo* petition account run by local governments, I scrape all citizen appeals submitted to the account in 2019, including messages to (“@”) and comments on the account, as well as government replies (if any) to these appeals. In total, I collected 156,035 posts in 2019.

These appeals cover a wide range of substantive issues. 92% of appeals require the government to take concrete actions to resolve problems, and the remaining 8% of appeals are information inquiry about government policies. I use unsupervised machine learning—specifically a structural topic model (STM) (Roberts et al. 2014)—to see how citizen appeals cluster into issue areas (“topics”). This unsupervised analysis clustered all scraped appeals into 41 distinct topics, which empirically achieve the best fit with the textual data.⁹ I then hand-labeled each topic using the key words and appeals that are most strongly associated with each topic. As Figure 4 in Appendix shows, all the 41 appeal topics are issues that directly affect citizens’ daily life and workplace conditions and most appeals are particularistic requests. The breadth of issues covered in these appeals is not unlike “FixMyStreet” requests (Dipoppa and Grossman 2020), 311 calls (Christensen and Ejdemyr 2020), or pothole complaints (Burnett and Kogan 2017) in advanced democracies. In particular, there is a considerable variation in the level of political sensitivity across the 41 appeal topics, ranging from traffic jam and maintaining public parks to land seizure, police misconduct, and corruption.

To manually code substantive vs. symbolic government responses, I randomly sample 1,500 unique citizen petitioners from all the scraped appeals using stratified sampling such that the proportion of petitioners coming from each province in my sample is the same as the corresponding proportion in the population of the Chinese Internet users.¹⁰ For each sampled petitioner, I scrape their socio-demographic profile and their activity record (e.g.

⁹Since the STM method assumes a user-specified number of topics, I first compare the performance of models under a range of topic numbers between 5 and 50, and choose $K=41$ for the preferred specification. This specification performs relatively well on a series of empirical tests (residuals fit, held-out likelihood, semantic coherence, and exclusivity of topics) that are conventionally used to assess the relative performance of models (Mimno and Lee 2014; Roberts, Stewart and Tingley 2019).

¹⁰Population data of Chinese Internet users come from *China Statistical Report on Internet Development 2017* (<http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxyzbg/>). It is the latest nationwide survey that provides a provincial breakdown of Internet users in mainland China.

number of followers) on *Weibo*. Finally, I randomly sample one appeal each petitioner submitted in 2019. In this way, the analyses below are based on a dataset of 1,500 unique appeals submitted by 1,500 unique citizens randomly sampled across China.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of citizen petitioners and their appeals in

Table 1: Summary Statistics of Petitioners and Appeals

	Mean	Min	Max	Missing
Descriptives of Petitioners:				
Female	0.44	0	1	None
Age (years)	29.2	15	65	0.5
Bachelor or above	0.78	0	1	0.74
Number of followers	19,563 ^a	1	> 5 millions	None
Number of posts per year	378 ^a	0.1	33,757	None
Number of years on Weibo till appeal	5.5	0	10	None
Upper-tier Sunshine Credit Ratings	0.87 ^b	0	1	None
Length of appeal (characters)	87	3	929	None
East China	0.51	0	1	None
Central China	0.23	0	1	None
West China	0.23	0	1	None
Overseas	0.03	0	1	None
Descriptives of Appeals:				
Number of Comments	0.9	0	155	None
Number of Reposts	1.5	0	383	None
Number of Likes	3.6	0	1,200	None

^a The median number of followers is 177 and the median number of posts per year is 68.

^b The specific distribution by level is: excellent (16%), good (71%), average (11%), bad (2%). *Weibo* designates “excellent” and “good” as upper-tier Sunshine Credit Ratings.

my sample. Petitioners vary by age, geographical regions, and activism on *Weibo*. 44% of petitioners identify as women. Petitioners are relatively young and highly educated, but note that the majority of petitioners do not self-report their age or degree on *Weibo*. Since young and highly educated people are probably more willing to disclose their age and educational level in public, I speculate that the overall petitioner population is older and has a lower educational attainment than those shown in Table 1. In addition, 74% of

citizen petitioners have been using *Weibo* for three years before they post appeals on the government-run accounts, suggesting that most petitioners in the sample are familiar with how to use *Weibo* and have an extended period of activity record on *Weibo*.

Outcome measures: My dependent variable is government responsiveness. I differentiate between substantive responses and symbolic responses. Substantive response is a dummy variable that takes on the value of 1 if the government provides a response within 30 days after the appeal was submitted and the response offers an effective solution to the reported problem, and 0 otherwise. Effective solution means that the government sanctions the accused party in the appeal or implements measures to stop the reported problem. For example, if an appeal is about water pollution from a chemical plant, a substantive response includes any of the following actions: 1) the government levies fines on the plant; 2) the government monitors the plant to make sure it stops pollution; 3) the government takes actions to clean the water area polluted by the plant.

Symbolic response is a dummy variable that takes on the value of 1 if the government provides any other response that is not a substantive response within 30 days after the appeal was submitted, and 0 otherwise. In general, a symbolic response takes one of the three forms below:

1. Notification: tell the petitioner that the request has been received without solving the problem, such as saying “we will look into this” or “please wait for our response patiently”.
2. Referral: tell the petitioner that they should appeal to another bureau/agency, or transfer the request to another bureau/agency and ask the petitioner to follow up on their own.
3. Investigation: conduct an investigation on the reported problem and tell the findings to the petitioner. But the government does not take any actions to implement the petitioner’s desired outcome in the appeal.

To determine whether an appeal receives substantive response or symbolic response from the government, I read all the posts on each petitioner’s *Weibo* account and all the

posts on the government’s account where the appeal took place within 30 days of the appeal being submitted (48,135 posts in total). If the petitioner or the government reported the problem being resolved within this time period, I code the appeal as getting a substantive response. Since local governments create these petition accounts to improve their legitimacy among citizens, if the government does spend efforts and resources to resolve the petitioners’ demands, the government will have an incentive to report so in public. To guard against that local governments over-report the number of appeals they resolve, I cross check governments’ posts with the posts of the citizen petitioners. There are six cases where after the government posted that they had resolved the problem, the petitioner replied saying that is not true. In those cases, I code the appeal as receiving a symbolic response.

Explanatory variables: My key explanatory variables are the political conformity of citizen petitioners and the collective action potential of their appeals. I measure political conformity using petitioners’ “Sunshine Credit Rating (阳光信用评分)”, a rating of five levels calculated by *Weibo* for each user to reflect “how healthy, positive, and rational their posts are on *Weibo*” (Sina Weibo 2021).¹¹ These five ratings are “excellent”, “good”, “average”, “low”, and “very low”. Introduced in 2016, the Sunshine Credit Rating is a composite score of five dimensions of a user’s *Weibo* activity, each dimension taking an equal weight:

1. Identity verification: A person gets higher score on this dimension if he/she is more cooperative with the Chinese government’s surveillance policy over *Weibo* users, such as uploading a photo of government-issued ID to their *Weibo* accounts and filling out home address and work address.
2. Health of online speech: A person gets higher score on this dimension if he/she has fewer cases of being censored on *Weibo* or being accused by other users for disseminating “unhealthy opinion online” (quotes from *Weibo*).

¹¹The five levels of Sunshine Credit Rating are based on a score on the scale of 300 to 900. While this score is only observable to the individual *Weibo* user, the level of each user’s score is publicly observable. For details, see <https://service.account.weibo.com/sunshine/guize>.

3. Credit of friends: A user gets higher score on this dimension if a higher proportion of his/her *Weibo* friends (people who are mutual followers with the user) receive a good score on the first two dimensions, identity verification and health of online speech.
4. Activism on *Weibo*: A user gets higher rating on this dimension if he/she uses *Weibo* more frequently and creates more posts.
5. Payment on *Weibo*: A person gets higher rating on this dimension if he/she makes more donations to charities or makes more payments (e.g. red packet) to other users via *Weibo*.

Three out of the five dimensions pertain to how well the user complies with the Chinese government's surveillance and censorship policies on *Weibo*. To account for the fourth dimension, activism on *Weibo*, I control the number of posts a user composed per year between the year the user registered the *Weibo* account and the year of 2019 in all regressions involving Sunshine Credit Rating. In this way, we can interpret the coefficient on the Sunshine Credit Rating as the effect of political conformity netted the effect of online activism. To assess the potential impact of the fifth dimension, payment on *Weibo*, I checked all the posts of each sampled petitioner within one year before his/her appeal being submitted and I did not find any petitioner who made donation or payment via *Weibo* in this period. This indicates that the sampled petitioners rarely do payment on *Weibo* and hence, this dimension contributes little to the difference in Sunshine Credit Rating between the sampled petitioners.

Weibo designates a Sunshine Credit Rating on the "excellent" or "good" level as an upper-tier rating (信用极好或信用较好). In line with this, I create a dummy for higher political conformity that equals 1 if the petitioner's credit rating is on these two levels and 0 otherwise.

A potential concern for Sunshine Credit Rating is that rather than a measure of petitioners' online behavior before they submit their appeals, this rating may be endogenous to the content of appeals. For each petitioner in my sample, their Sunshine Credit Rating

was scraped within 30 days after their appeals being posted. To assess the impact of this endogeneity concern, I randomly select a day in July 2021 and scraped all appeals on *Weibo*, as well as the Sunshine Credit Rating of their petitioners, as soon as the appeals were posted on that day (150 unique petitioners in total).¹² Then, I tracked the Sunshine Credit Rating of these 150 petitioners on a daily basis for 30 days. The 150 people appealed on diverse topics, including politically sensitive issues such as official corruption, government's incapability in handling the re-emergence of COVID, and criticism on government-run appeal channels. If Sunshine Credit Rating is endogenous to the appeal content, I should see that this rating changes after the submission of the appeal and that people who appeal on more sensitive issues receive a lower rating. But this is not what I saw. Over 30 days after the appeals took place, all the 150 petitioners' Sunshine Credit Ratings remain the same as when they just posted their appeals.

To measure an appeal's potential for eliciting collective action, I use the number of comments an appeal received from other citizens on *Weibo*. Comments by other citizens is a direct measure of the public attention an appeal gets. Also, since leaving comments takes more time and thoughts than reposting and giving "likes", the number of comments also indicate how many people care and feel strong about the governance problems reported in the appeal. Therefore, I assert that appeals that receive more comments from other citizens are more likely to elicit organized opposition against the government. As a robustness check, I also proxy collective action potential using three other measures, the number of reposts, likes, and the number of followers of the petitioner on *Weibo* separately, to see whether results using these different measures converge.

Related to the theory of collective action potential, another explanation for authoritarian responsiveness in the existing literature is that autocrats respond to collect information of potential sources of social instability. According to this explanation, in order to sustain the informational benefits, government responsiveness should increase in citizen demands for government service. Previous studies on China measure citizen demand for public service using the economic modernity in a region and proxy modernity using the share

¹²Specifically, I monitored all the 28 government-run petition accounts in my sample simultaneously on the randomly selected day between 6am and 12am Beijing time.

of secondary and tertiary sectors (i.e. manufacturing and service) in the local economic output (Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Landry 2008). In line with this, I also use the share of non-primary sectors in the GDP of a prefecture to measure local citizens' demand for government service.

Controls: A potential confounding variable is the topic (issue area) of appeals, which can be correlated with government responsiveness and also the petitioner's political conformity. Therefore, I control the topic proportion of appeals in all model specifications. In addition, petitioners' socio-demographic background and activism on *Weibo* may also be associated with their political conformity and government response to their appeals. So, in all model specifications I also control the petitioners' age, gender, education level, number of *Weibo* posts per year, as well as province fixed effects. For covariates with missing data (age and education level), I multiply imputed the missing values, ran the regression on each imputed dataset, and combine results using Rubin's rule (Honaker et al. 2011).

Furthermore, the rhetoric citizens choose in communicating with government officials may also be associated with their level of conformity and government responses. Previous research has identified three main types of rhetoric Chinese citizens use when appealing for government service online (Distelhorst and Fu 2019): The first is "subjecthood script" which portrays the citizen petitioners as weak, helpless subordinates before powerful and virtuous rulers; The second is "legal script" which appeals to the government's formal, legal commitments and invokes the language of "rights" to press for claims; The third is "socialist script" which appeals to the government's moral commitment to provide collective welfare and invokes the language of "performance legitimacy" to demand government services. In line with this typology, I manually code each of the 1500 sampled appeals into one of these three categories and control for this rhetoric variable in all models.

4 Sources of Symbolic and Substantive Responses

Among the 1,500 randomly sampled petitioners, 39% get a symbolic response from the Chinese government and 6% get a substantive response. The overall response rate (45%) is similar to that in previous research on responsiveness in China (Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Su and Meng 2016). Table 2 presents the main results. All columns control for the topic proportions of appeals, the rhetoric used in the appeal, province fixed effects, as well as petitioners' age, gender, education level, and the number of posts created per year on *Weibo*. All columns use OLS regression, but the results remain substantively unchanged when using other parametric models (see Appendix A.4).

Table 2 shows that only higher political conformity increases the likelihood of *resolving* the appealed problems. On average, citizens with a lower-tier Sunshine Credit Rating have 1.2% probability of receiving a substantive response from the Chinese government. An upper-tier Sunshine Credit Rating increases this probability by 4.3 percentage points regardless of the topic of appeals, amounting to 3.6 times of the baseline responsiveness.

In contrast, Table 2 shows that more citizen comments on an appeal has no effect on substantive responses. This result remains substantively unchanged when I measure the potential of collective action using the number of likes and reposts on an appeal and the number of followers a petitioner has on *Weibo* (see Appendix A.4.2). Moreover, the topics of appeal that are more likely to get a substantive response also appear to have lower threat of collective action. The top three topics that are most likely to get a substantive response are “information inquiry about highway opening”, “maintenance of public parks”, and “water quality in individual household”. The bottom three topics that are least likely to get a substantive response are “land seizure”, “waste of taxpayer money”, and “wage and labor disputes”. Clearly, the less resolved appeals have a stronger potential to elicit organized opposition against the government since these appeals are more sensitive politically and are also of higher importance for the petitioners' livelihood. Overall, these results suggest that stronger threat of collective action has no statistically significant effect on the likelihood that the Chinese government resolves the appealed problems.

When we look at symbolic response, Table 2 shows that more comments from other

Table 2: Sources of Government Responsiveness

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Effects on Substantive Response				
Higher Sunshine Credit	0.041** (0.017)			0.043*** (0.016)
Citizen comments on appeal		-0.0001 (0.0004)		0.0001 (0.0005)
Manufacture and service share			-0.004 (0.004)	-0.004 (0.004)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Province fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500
Panel B: Effects on Symbolic Response				
Higher Sunshine Credit	0.142*** (0.041)			0.137*** (0.040)
Citizen comments on appeal		0.004*** (0.001)		0.003*** (0.001)
Manufacture and service share			0.022*** (0.006)	0.021*** (0.006)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Province fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. All columns use linear regression. Controls include the topic proportion of appeal, rhetoric used in the appeal, and petitioners' age, gender, educational level, and number of posts per year. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

citizens on an appeal, a higher Sunshine Credit Rating of the petitioner, and residing in prefectures of higher economic modernity all have a positive effect. On average, receiving 10 more comments from other citizens increases the probability of obtaining a symbolic response by 3 percentage points, which amounts to 8% of the average probability of symbolic response in the whole sample. This result remains qualitatively unchanged when alternative measures are used to assess an appeal's collective action potential.¹³ In other words, more attention and support from other citizens do increase the chance to obtain a

¹³For details, see Appendix A.4.2.

soothing, rhetorical response from the Chinese government, even though such response does not satisfy the petitioner’s demands.

In addition, Table 2 shows that while a higher share of manufacturing and service sectors in economic output increases symbolic responses from the Chinese government, it does not increase substantive responses from the government. In fact, it appears that higher economic modernity decreases the likelihood of getting the appeals resolved, but the effect is not statistically significant. Previous research argues that to sustain the informational benefits from participatory institutions, the Chinese regime should increase its responsiveness in citizen demand for government service (Distelhorst and Hou 2017). My results suggest that while the need for information elicits more performative governance from the Chinese regime, this information need does not motivate the regime to provide helpful, substantive solution to citizens’ grievances.

Altogether, these results show that while collective action potential and citizen demand lead to symbolic responses, they do not lead to substantive help from the Chinese government. Instead, compliance with government surveillance and censorship policy leads to responsiveness in the sense of actually solving the reported problems.

4.1 Robustness checks on the effect of political conformity

Matching on appeal content A potential concern on the effect of political conformity is that instead of selective responsiveness within the same topic of appeal, it simply reflects that people of high vs. low conformity appeal on different types of issues. To assess the impact of this concern, I matched treated petitioners (those with upper-tier Sunshine Credit Rating) and control petitioners (those with lower-tier Rating) on the topic proportions of the text of their appeals, and then test the impact of higher Sunshine Credit Rating on substantive response within these matched pairs.¹⁴

Table 3 shows the results using three most commonly used distance metrics in matching (Euclidean, Mahalanobis, and Genetic matching). Columns (2), (4), and (6) also add bias correction.¹⁵ Across all these models, an upper-tier Sunshine Credit Rating consis-

¹⁴In Structural Topic Model, the text of each appeal is represented as a vector of topic proportions, where each element in this vector is the proportion of the text that belongs to the corresponding topic (issue area).

¹⁵To determine how many matches should be used for each treated unit, I check the balance between

Table 3: Effects on Substantive Response within the Same Topic of Appeals

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Higher Sunshine Credit	0.066*** (0.024)	0.047** (0.024)	0.066*** (0.024)	0.048** (0.024)	0.067*** (0.023)	0.048** (0.024)
Distance metric	Euclidean	Euclidean	Mahalanobis	Mahalanobis	Genetic	Genetic
Bias adjustment	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y

Notes: 1272 matched pairs. Matching with replacement. Dependent variable is a dummy of substantive response. Abadie-Imbens standard errors are in the parentheses. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

tently increases the probability of receiving substantive responses from local governments in China. This suggests that on the same topic (issue area) of appeals, local governments selectively favor helping citizens who have a better record of obeying regime control on the Internet to resolve their problems.

Sensitivity analysis Another possible concern on the effect of political conformity is unobserved confounding variables. To assess the impact of this concern, I conduct a sensitivity analysis. A confounding variable creates bias on the estimated treatment effect because the confounder is simultaneously correlated with the treatment (in this case, political conformity) and the outcome (in this case, substantive response from government). The idea of sensitivity analysis is to find how strong the correlations should be between an unobserved confounder and the treatment, and between this confounder and the outcome, such that the confounder can fully explain the observed treatment effect and hence render the observed effect insignificant (Imbens 2003).

Figure 3 shows the result of the sensitivity analysis. The x-axis represents the partial correlation between a confounding variable and the probability of getting substantive response from the Chinese government; the y-axis represents the partial correlation between a confounding variable and upper-tier Sunshine Credit Rating.¹⁶ In this way, each con-

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treatment and control on a range of numbers between 1 and 100. The best balance is achieved when 50 control units are matched for each treated unit. For details of the balance checks, see Appendix A.4.3.

¹⁶Both axes show the absolute value of partial correlations. Partial correlations are obtained by regressing the outcome on the treatment, the confounder of interest, and other controls; and by regressing the confounder of interest on the treatment and other controls.

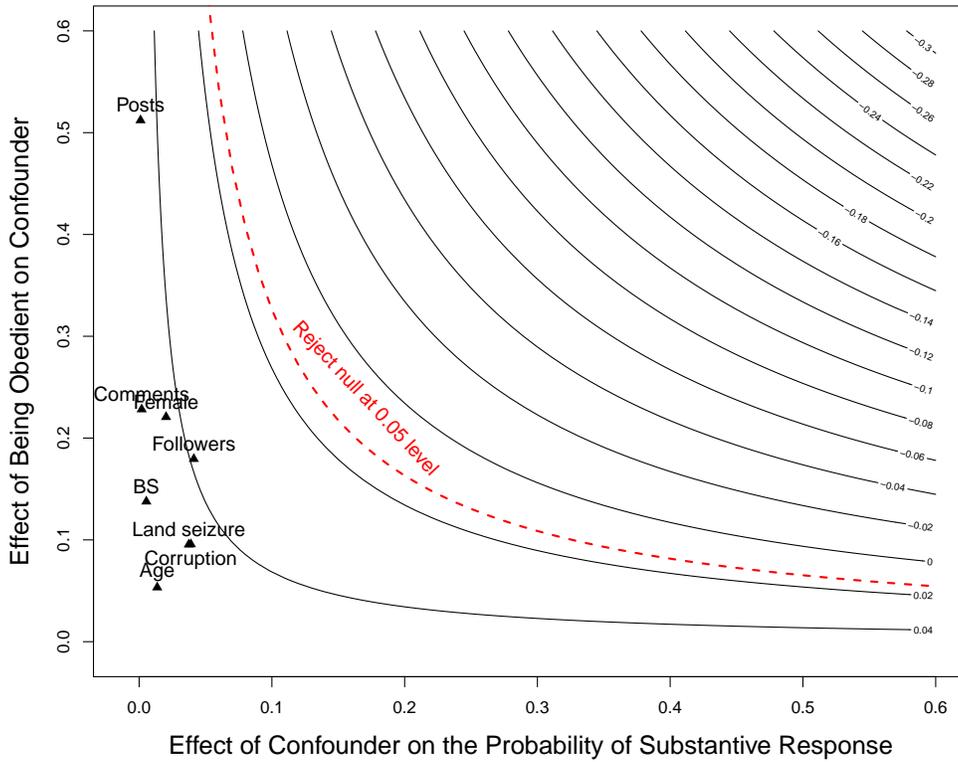


Figure 3: Sensitivity Analysis on the Effect of Political Conformity

founding variable is represented as a point (i.e. a pair of partial correlations) on this plot. The contour line in red is the threshold beyond which a confounding variable can render the observed treatment effect insignificant at 0.05 level. In other words, any confounder located in the bottom-left area of the threshold line is unable to eliminate the statistical significance of the observed effect of political conformity on substantive responses.

To assess how realistic an unobserved confounder that can overturn the observed effect exists, I compare the observed control variables against the threshold line. Since the control variables are those I believe are most likely to confound the relationship between political conformity and government responses, if they all fall beneath the threshold line, there is little chance that any other confounder can be strong enough to render the observed effect insignificant. In previous research, using the explanatory power of observed controls as reference is commonly employed in sensitivity analyses (Hazlett 2020; Imbens 2003; Tsai and Xu 2018).

Figure 3 shows that all the observed control variables fall far beneath the threshold

line. This includes the number of *Weibo* posts petitioners create per year, which is directly involved in the calculation of Sunshine Credit Rating and hence, it is hard to imagine that any other confounding variables could have a stronger association with the treatment than this covariate. The 41 topics of appeal also all fall far under the threshold line. For the purpose of clear illustration, in Figure 3 I show two appeal topics—land seizure and corruption—that are highly correlated with political conformity. On average, citizens with upper-tier Sunshine Credit Ratings are less likely to appeal on these two topics than citizens with lower-tier Sunshine Credit Ratings. However, controlling the proportions of these two topics is not able to eliminate the significant effect of Sunshine Credit Rating on substantive responses from the Chinese government. Overall, this sensitivity analysis suggests that the observed effect of political conformity on substantive government response is very robust to unobserved omitted variable bias. An unobserved confounding variable has to have much stronger correlations with the treatment and outcome than the observed controls in order to overturn the observed effect, which seems unlikely.

Alternative coding of substantive response In the main results table (Table 2), I code a government response as “substantive” only if the response offers an effective solution to the appealed problem. Three remaining types of government responses are coded as non-substantive or symbolic, including “notification”, “referral”, and “investigation” (see Section 4.1). An alternative interpretation of substantive response also includes “investigation”, where the government takes concrete actions to investigate into the appeal and report their findings to the petitioner even though the government does not implement the petitioner’s desired outcome.

To see if the effect of political conformity holds under this alternative interpretation of substantive response, I re-code a dummy of substantive response that equals 1 if the response offers an effective solution or reports the investigation findings, and 0 otherwise. Correspondingly, the dummy of symbolic response is also re-coded such that it equals 1 if the government response is notification or referral, and 0 otherwise. Under this alternative coding of substantive and symbolic responses, all the results in Table 2 remain qualitatively unchanged (for details, see Appendix A.4.4).

5 Why Local Officials Selectively Satisfy the Demands of Regime Conformists?

To understand the rationale for local government responsiveness in China, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 31 local officials working in prefecture-level governments across Beijing, Jiangxi, and Guangxi, three provinces that represent high, medium, and low levels of economic development in China. In each province, I spent several months building relationships and getting organizational buy-in through personal networks and the help of local scholars in China. The 31 interviewees include officials who were responsible for managing the local government's websites and social media accounts, as well as officials from a variety of functional departments (职能部门) such as education and family planning who had experience answering online appeals from citizens. During the interviews, I asked officials how they and their departments make decisions on whether to answer a citizen's appeal and how to answer, as well as their general workflow of handling online appeals and how the upper-level government evaluates their responsiveness to citizen requests. To put interviewees at ease, I spent between half of a meeting and three meetings building rapport with each interviewee before conducting the actual interview.¹⁷ All interviews were conducted in one-on-one settings in the field between 2017 and 2019.

My theoretical framework in Chapter 1 of this book predicts three mechanisms for why authoritarian officials selectively satisfy the demands of politically conformist citizens. First and foremost, officials want to set examples to the petitioner and other citizens that compliance and cooperation, not oppositional activities, will open the doors for resolving their problems. Second, officials view people who have a better record of obeying government regulations as more trustworthy and hence more likely to continuously obey upon satisfaction of their requests in the current period. Finally, conformist people tend to report issues that are less costly to resolve. Interviews with local officials in China suggest evidence for all these three mechanisms.

¹⁷How many meetings I could have with each interviewee largely depends on how much time they had and how cooperative they were.

5.1 Government response as signaling

The interviews reveal that when responding to citizens, officials not only consider the current problem in the appeal but also how their responses might affect the petitioner's future behavior. In particular, when the appeal and government response are public, officials will also consider how their response might affect other citizens' behavior in the future. For example, one interviewee working in the Health Commission of a prefectural-level city in Guangxi said: "How we deal with citizen appeals will also shape how citizens choose to interact with us. So, we aim to cultivate a cooperative and compliant public in our jurisdiction, such that our future work can go more smoothly."

Another official in a district of Beijing who had experience answering appeals that were posted on the local petition account on *Weibo* explained the same rationale in more detail:

Since *Weibo* is a public, open space, we need to be more careful about what we say on this platform. When the Office of Letters and Calls (信访办) forwards the appeals to us, they often attach the petitioner's user ID and Sunshine Credit Rating on *Weibo*. Sometimes we also look at the petitioner's *Weibo* page on our own. If a person gets a bad Sunshine Credit Rating, that indicates this person may have been alleged to disseminate some unhealthy or unreal information on *Weibo*. For such people, we are not sure how credible the information in their appeal is. Moreover, while we encourage citizen participation in governance, I don't think law-breakers should have equal rights as other conformist citizens. If a person does not abide by government rules on *Weibo*, this person and his/her followers ought to know that this does affect how much their voice counts.

Symbolic response to organized opposition In contrast to showing more willingness to satisfy the demands of regime conformists, the interviewed officials described a number of cases where they performed symbolic responses to petitioners who organize collective action. In line with the rationales outlined in my theoretical framework, officials report

that while the high public attention on such appeals pressure them to respond something to appease the organized opposition, officials do avoid signaling to citizens that protest is an effective way to resolve their problems. Two representative cases below illustrate this signaling consideration.

The first case happened in Jiangxi province in Central China, and was told by an official working for the education bureau in the prefectural-level city I visited. One year before the interview, the city government opened a high-tech industrial park (高新技术产业园), aiming to attract investment and skilled workers from firms in economically developed regions of China and firms outside of China. The industrial park is located on the outskirts of the city, so there are only a few schools in that region. Among those schools, there is one “star primary school” and one “star middle school” which have relatively better facilities and better teachers in that region. As part of the incentive package for external investors, the party secretary and mayor of the city ordered the education bureau to redraw the school districts in that area such that people working and living in the industrial park can send their children to the two “star schools” for free. However, this irritated local parents who used to live in the district of these “star schools” but are excluded after redistricting. Many of these parents purchased apartments in the old school district three or four years ago in order to send their kids to the “star schools”. After the education bureau announced the redistricting plan, these parents organized protests outside the building of the education bureau.

“While I sympathize with these parents, protest is really not what the government wants to see,” the official who told me this story said during the interview, “Given the heavy emphasis on maintaining social stability by the top leaders of our city, if these parents can easily change government decision through protesting, we are worried that more and more people will get encouraged and copy the same behavior in the future”.

In order to stop the protest outside the government building, several officials of the education bureau came out and talked to the protesting parents. They sent bottled water to each protester and assured them that the government will listen to, record, and study their requests carefully if they agree to express their demands in an orderly manner. Then, the

officials invited two leaders of the protesters into the government building, sat down with them in a meeting room, recorded their demands, and promised again that they would look into the issue. Importantly, the officials asked these leaders to persuade other protesters to go home and to trust that the government will take their requests seriously.

After that, some parents kept protesting for a few weeks. In response, the education bureau kept repeating that they are still investigating into the issue and discussing internally. As time goes by, more and more parents became exhausted and gave up. In the end, the protest stopped but the redistricting decision was never overturned.

When I asked the official whether the education bureau worried that these parents would protest again later since their requests are not satisfied, the official said:

That didn't happen. If they did come again last year, we would explain that we discussed internally but this is a very complicated issue and we are sorry. You know, people protest because they are angry, so we provide these appeal channels for them to vent their anger. As long as we respond with a nice attitude, people's anger will gradually die down. We call this strategy "soft stability" (柔性稳定) within the government.

This shows that while symbolic responses do not resolve the problems of protesters, local officials believe such responses are still effective at appeasing opposition because at least, protesters make their feelings and requests heard and considered by the government. More importantly for the government, symbolic responses send a message to the protesters and the broader swathes of local population that collective action may not be an effective way to pursue their substantive demands.

The second case took place in Guangxi province in West China, and I heard this story from a local official working for the Civil Affairs Bureau in one of the prefectures I visited. The unit of the official is responsible for managing economic assistance to the entitled groups (优抚), mostly local veterans in their 70s or 80s. These veterans have a very strong network among themselves and they are unsatisfied with the assistance provided by the government. Therefore, every year, the veterans organized protests outside the building of the Civil Affairs Bureau asking for raising the standard of their assistance.

Similar to the case of education bureau in Jiangxi, this interviewed official in Guangxi report that when dealing with the veteran protesters at the moment, the local government is also careful to guard against similar protests in the future. The official said:

We cannot set a bad example that as long as anyone protest, we give them what they want. These veterans have lots of free time and a very strong network among themselves. They protest because they think that will work, but the government is not afraid of protests and we want the public to see this.

To disorganize the protesters outside the government building, the city government performed symbolic responses. First, the Civil Affairs Bureau told the protesting veterans that the government would look into their cases individually after each protester registered their case in the Bureau for Letters and Calls (信访局). Then, the government arranged buses to transport all protesters to an office for Letters and Calls located in the suburban area, which is far away from the city center and has no bus or subway nearby. At this suburban office, some government staff listened to and recorded the complaints of the protesters, and also offered them a free meal there. “What did you do with their complaints after that?” I asked. The official smiled, shook his head, and said “We told the veterans we would look into their cases and then asked them to go home on their own. After all, the leaders just want to move these people away from the government building”.

5.2 Officials perceive regime conformists as more trustworthy

In addition to informing the public that compliance increases the chance of resolving the appealed problems, another reason the interviewed officials reported for why they prioritize the requests by politically conformist people is that they believe such people are more reliable and more likely to report truthful information. In a prefectural-level city I visited in Guangxi, the official who was responsible for managing the city government’s website said:

At the beginning, I transferred all appeals posted on the forum of our website to the relevant functional departments. However, several departments complained to me that some reported problems did not actually exist. As I stay

longer on this job, I find that people who tend to provide detailed, concrete information in their appeals are also those who are more compliant with our website's policy. For example, such people are more likely to provide their work and home addresses when registering accounts on our online forum, and they never say anything negative (“负能量”) or out of bound (“反动”) in the forum. Now I only transfer the appeals from such citizen users to the functional departments because they are more trustworthy.

This echoes my theoretical framework in that authoritarian officials see a higher payoff from satisfying the demands of regime conformists because officials have higher certainty that such people will continuously conform to the government. Local officials in my interviews believe that petitioners who are more compliant with government policies on the Internet participation channels, including government websites and social media accounts, are also more likely to comply with the government in other areas such as providing truthful, concrete information in their appeals.¹⁸ A recent study finds that local governments in China are more likely to resolve online appeals that are backed by concrete evidence such as audio recordings (Cai and Zhou 2019). My findings further suggest that this preference for concrete evidence advantages citizens who have a better record of obeying government regulations for the Internet deliberative institutions.

5.3 Regime conformists tend to report less sensitive issues

Finally, the interviews also suggest that local officials in China prioritize satisfying the demands of politically conformist people because officials believe such people tend to make requests that are less costly to resolve. In one of the prefectures I visited in Guangxi, an official working for the local bureau of Human Resources and Social Security said:

People who are law-abiding and obedient (“守法的良民”) make reasonable demands, rather than asking us to provide goods and services that are beyond our ability or scope of power.

¹⁸Aside from officials' perception that people with higher Sunshine Credit Ratings are more trustworthy, *Weibo* also rewards people with higher ratings by moving their posts upward when they and other petitioners receive similar amounts of comments or likes on their appeals.

Another official who formerly worked for the Beijing Legal Affairs Office echoed this view:

While we always solicited public opinion in the formulation of major policies, some people who left comments online were not rational and just wanted to vent their anger against the government. So, we can only incorporate the opinion of those reasonable people whose requests are feasible to implement within reasonable cost.

On the other hand, local officials report during the interviews that they perform symbolic responses to appeals of higher collective action potential partly because they often do not have enough capacity to resolve such appeals. For example, in the two cases of protest described above in Jiangxi and Guangxi, both interviewed officials recalled that their bureaus did not possess the political or financial resources that are required to deliver what the protesters demand. In the school redistricting case in Jiangxi, the official I interviewed said: “Aside from the desire to discourage other potential protesters, we are indeed unable to satisfy the demands of these protesting parents. The top leaders of our city ordered us to re-draw the school district because they care most about attracting investment (招商引资). Our department [education] has no bargaining power to overturn the leaders’ decision. Citizens tend to protest on things that are really serious for them. But those things are often very complicated and difficult to resolve.”

Similarly, in the Guangxi case where veterans protest to increase their financial aid from the government, the official I talked to said:

The standard of assistance is made at the provincial level, not decided by our city. Also, where would the money come from? Our bureau [Civil Affairs] has no fund. All economic assistance has to be approved and distributed by the city’s Finance Bureau (财政局). The Finance Bureau is much more powerful than us, and they are more obedient to the Finance Department (财政厅) at the provincial level rather than to the mayor of our city. Even the mayor sometimes cannot order the Finance Bureau to give out money. How is it possible that our bureau is able to do that?

These considerations reflect the uneven capacity between different bureaus on the same level of government, which my fieldwork suggests is a serious obstacle in resolving citizen requests at the local level. I find that many bureaus that have to interact with citizens on a day-to-day basis (e.g. Education, Health, Social Security) have little bargaining power or financial resources within the government. However, bureaus that have more resources and decision-making power (e.g. Finance, Development and Reform Commission) rarely need to interact with citizens directly. In this way, these powerful bureaus do not care much about resolving citizen appeals, even though resolving appeals especially those that can elicit protests often require their support and action.

Finally, echoing these interview evidence, my *Weibo* data also reveal that citizens with a higher level of political conformity tend to appeal on less sensitive issues. On 12 of the 41 topics among the scraped petitions from *Weibo*, citizens with higher vs. lower Sunshine Credit Ratings show statistically significant difference in their appealing probability. Among these 12 topics, people with a upper-tier Sunshine Credit Rating are more likely to appeal on socio-economic issues of low sensitivity, such as traffic jam, the planning of local road system, and information inquiry about specific kindergartens. In contrast, people with a lower-tier Sunshine Credit Rating are more likely to appeal on politically sensitive and complicated issues such as land seizure, corruption, and wage and labor disputes. For details, see Appendix A.3. Note that despite this association between political conformity and appeal topic, the matching analysis in Section 4.2.1 confirms that on average, higher political conformity increases the probability of receiving a substantive response from local governments in China within the same topic of appeals.

6 Conclusion

This chapter has tested for the selective responsiveness of the CCP regime using original data of citizen-official interactions on the government-run deliberation channels. Building on existing literature, I differentiate between two types of responses the CCP regime provides when answering online appeals from citizens—symbolic response and substantive response. I find that appeals of higher potential for collective action only increases

symbolic responses from the CCP regime. In contrast, higher conformity to the regime's surveillance and censorship policy increases the chance of substantively solving the appealed issue. Interviews with local officials in China suggest that they selectively satisfy the demands of regime conformists in order to set examples to petitioners and potential petitioners that compliance rather than oppositional activities will open doors for resolving the problem. Officials also report more willing to help regime conformists because they believe such people are more trustworthy and are more likely to appeal on issues that are easier to resolve.

These results shed light on the strategic considerations of the CCP regime when managing citizen petitions. While previous studies largely contend that authoritarian responsiveness targets regime dissidents, I show that authoritarian officials provide real, substantive services to people who demonstrate higher conformity to the regime's control. Furthermore, officials' signaling consideration underlying this selective responsiveness suggests the need to re-conceptualize accountability under autocracy not only as a reactive approach to appease opponents, but also as a proactive strategy to cultivate political conformity among the public.

More broadly, selective responsiveness is documented in both democratic and non-democratic governments. For example, a rich literature in American politics shows how political elites selectively respond to their in-group members based on race, gender, and political orientation (Butler and Broockman 2011; Grose 2011; Harden 2013). In this way, the maneuvering between substantive vs. symbolic responses by Chinese officials calls for more monitoring from civil society as well as the international community not only on whether governments respond to their citizens, but also on *how* they respond.

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A Technical Appendix

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A.1 Prefectures with *Weibo* Petition Accounts

Table 4: Prefectures with *Weibo* Petition Accounts

Prefecture	Province	GDP Top 100 prefectures
Suzhou	Jiangsu	Yes
Xuzhou	Jiangsu	Yes
Anyang	Henan	No
Zhengzhou	Henan	Yes
Ziyang	Sichuan	No
Yinchuan	Ningxia	No
Yulin	Guangxi	No
Urumqi	Xinjiang	Yes
Ningbo	Zhejiang	Yes
Fuzhou	Fujian	Yes
Fuyang	Anhui	No
Suzhou	Anhui	No
Shuozhou	Shanxi	No
Xinyu	Jiangxi	No
Qujing	Yunnan	No
Erdos	Neimenggu	Yes
Chengdu	Sichuan	Yes
Guyuan	Ningxia	No
Anshun	Guizhou	No
Xianyang	Shaanxi	Yes
Zhuzhou	Hunan	Yes
Dali	Yunnan	No
Beijing	Beijing	Yes
Tianjin	Tianjin	Yes
Heze	Shandong	Yes
Jinan	Shandong	Yes
Shantou	Guangdong	Yes
Foshan	Guangdong	Yes

Notes: “GDP Top 100 cities” are the first 100 out of 337 prefectures in China in terms of GDP size in 2018. These 100 cities account for 74% of China’s GDP. The coding was based on <https://bit.ly/3HS4tyR>.

Table 5: Characteristics of Prefectures Running Petition Accounts on *Weibo*

	Prefectures with petition accounts	All prefectures	p-value
GDP per capita (USD)	12,116	9,453	0.065
% of manufacturing and service sectors	91.7	89.0	0.046
Population (million)	6.1	4.4	0.025
Household savings (billion USD)	72.9	36.0	0.07
Government revenue (billion USD)	10.8	4.4	0.07

Source: *China City Statistical Yearbook 2019*, <https://bit.ly/312oWjZ> (accessed Nov. 25, 2021). P-values are from two-sample t-tests between prefectures with petition accounts and all prefectures in China.

A.2 Topic of Appeals

Figure 4 shows the 41 appeal topics clustered by the STM analysis. This specification of 41 topics performs relatively well on a series of empirical tests (residuals fit, held-out likelihood, semantic coherence, and exclusivity of topics) that are conventionally used to assess the relative fit with the original textual data (Roberts, Stewart and Tingley 2019).

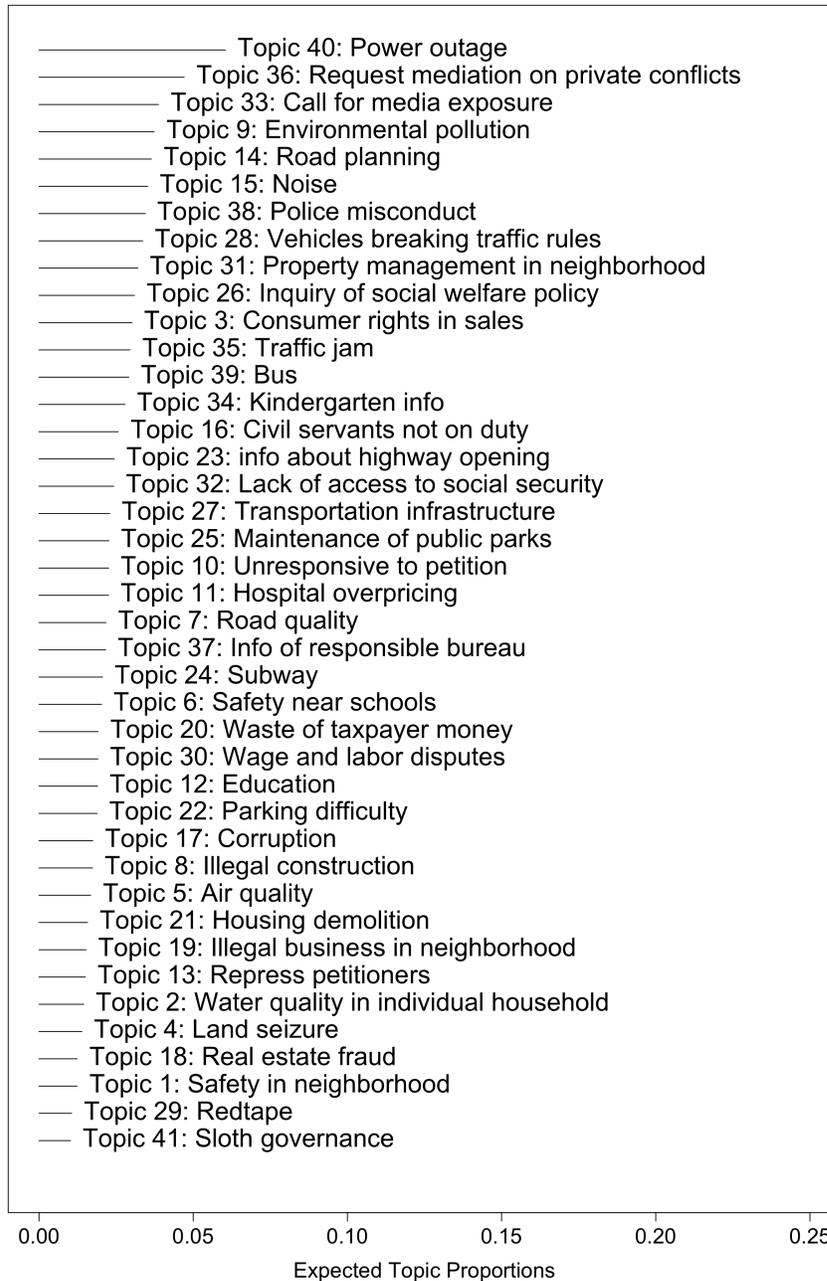


Figure 4: Distribution of topics

A.3 Topic of Appeals and Political Conformity

On 29 out of 41 topics of complaints, citizens with higher vs. lower sunshine credit scores show no statistically significant difference in their probability of appealing on these topics. On the remaining 12 topics, Figure 5 shows differences in the probability of appealing

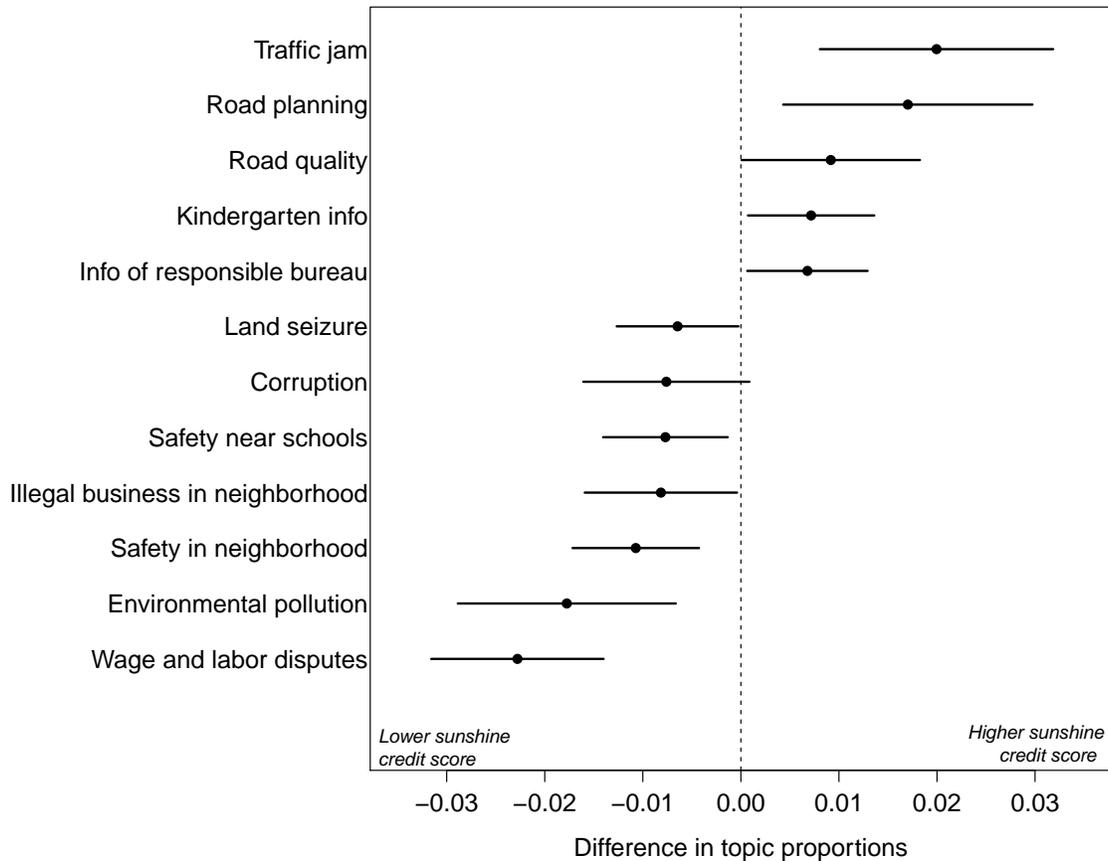


Figure 5: Correlation between political obedience and topics of appeals

between petitioners of high vs. low political conformity. The y-axis lists the 12 appeal topics. The x-axis represents the difference in probability of appealing. Estimates to the right of the zero vertical line represent topics that are more likely to be appealed by people who have upper-tier sunshine credit scores; and estimates to the left of the zero vertical line represent topics that are more likely to be raised by people with lower-tier credit scores.

A.4 Details of Robustness Checks

A.4.1 Alternative Parametric Models for the Main Results

Table 6: Sources of Government Responsiveness

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Effects on Substantive Response				
Higher Sunshine Credit	0.084** (0.040)			0.086** (0.040)
Citizen comments on appeal		0.0003 (0.002)		0.0003 (0.001)
Manufacture and service share			-0.004 (0.002)	-0.004* (0.003)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Province fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500
Panel B: Effects on Symbolic Response				
Higher Sunshine Credit	0.160*** (0.045)			0.156*** (0.045)
Citizen comments on appeal		0.008 (0.006)		0.007 (0.006)
Manufacture and service share			0.018*** (0.005)	0.017*** (0.005)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Province fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. All columns use logistic regression. Controls include the topic proportion of appeal, rhetoric used in the appeal, and petitioners' age, gender, educational level, and number of posts per year. Coefficients are marginal effect on the probability of government response. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

A.4.2 Alternative Measures for Collective Action Potential

Table 7: Effects of Collective Action Potential of Appeals

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Panel A: Effects on Substantive Response			
Citizen likes on appeal	0.00004 (0.00006)		
Citizen reposts on appeal		0.001 (0.001)	
Followers on <i>Weibo</i> (log)			0.001 (0.003)
Controls	Y	Y	Y
Province fixed effects	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1,500	1,500	1,500
Panel B: Effects on Symbolic Response			
Citizen likes on appeal	0.001*** (0.0002)		
Citizen reposts on appeal		0.001 (0.001)	
Followers on <i>Weibo</i> (log)			0.014** (0.006)
Controls	Y	Y	Y
Province fixed effects	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1,500	1,500	1,500

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. All columns use linear regression. Controls include the topic proportion of appeal, rhetoric used in the appeal, and petitioners' age, gender, educational level. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

A.4.3 Balance Check for Matching

Figure 6 shows the standardized mean difference between the treated and control petitioners before and after matching. It shows that compared to the original data, the treatment and control groups are substantially closer on the topic proportions of appeal content after matching.

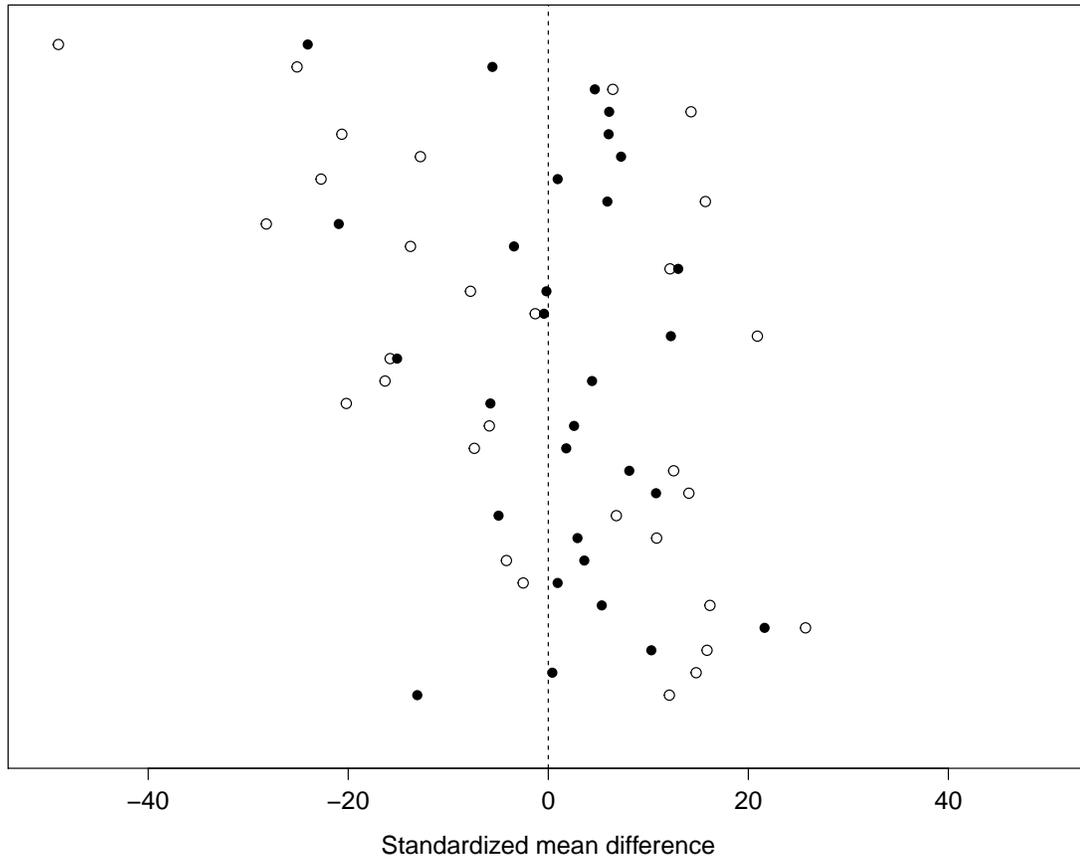


Figure 6: Open circles are standardized mean difference between treatment and control before matching; Shaded circles are standardized mean difference under the optimal matching (50 matches for each treated unit, matching with replacement).

A.4.4 Alternative Coding of Substantive Response

Table 8 replicates the main results of the paper (Table 2) after re-coding the substantive response and symbolic response. Specifically, substantive response in this table is a dummy that equals 1 if the government response offers an effective solution or reports its investigation findings within 30 days of the appeal being submitted, and 0 otherwise. Symbolic response is a dummy that equals 1 if the government provides a notification or referral response within 30 days of the appeal being submitted, and 0 otherwise.

Table 8: Sources of Government Responsiveness

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Effects on Substantive Response				
Higher Sunshine Credit	0.083*** (0.029)			0.083*** (0.029)
Citizen comments on appeal		-0.0003 (0.0008)		-0.0002 (0.001)
Manufacture and service share			0.001 (0.004)	0.001 (0.005)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Province fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500
Panel B: Effects on Symbolic Response				
Higher Sunshine Credit	0.100*** (0.036)			0.097*** (0.036)
Citizen comments on appeal		0.004*** (0.001)		0.003*** (0.001)
Manufacture and service share			0.016*** (0.005)	0.015*** (0.005)
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y
Province fixed effects	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	1,500	1,500	1,500	1,500

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. All columns use linear regression. Controls include the topic proportion of appeal, rhetoric used in the appeal, and petitioners' age, gender, educational level, and number of posts per year. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.