

Doublespeak: Limits of China’s Hard and Soft Propaganda during Political Crises

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Abstract

This research note examines authoritarian propaganda strategies’ effectiveness during political crises and policy changes. Although extensive research showcases the efficacy of propaganda, limited attention has been given to its shortcomings. We posit that various propaganda strategies, including “hard” and “soft” rhetoric, have significant limitations during political crises. Hard propaganda’s heavy-handed slogans could signal regime strength but may also legitimize “rightful resistance” against local authorities, limiting its protest-deterrence effects. Soft propaganda may lose persuasiveness due to presenting contradictory arguments during policy changes. We leverage China’s COVID policy reversal and political turmoil to conduct an original, pre-registered survey experiment in December 2022. Our findings reveal that pro-reopening hard propaganda weakens its protest-deterrence effects by reinforcing belief in protest righteousness. Moreover, inconsistent soft propaganda lowers public evaluations of China’s COVID response, diminishing its persuasive effects. Our study highlights significant limitations of authoritarian propaganda, particularly during political crises when they are most needed.

Keywords: Authoritarian Regimes, Propaganda, Public Opinion, Protest, China

Word Count: 4,038

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1 Introduction

Although an extensive body of research showcases the efficacy of authoritarian propaganda in manipulating the information environment and influencing public opinion (Adena et al. 2015; Carter and Carter 2021; Dukalskis 2021; Huang 2015; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Pan, Shao and Xu 2022; Rozenas and Stukal 2019; Wedeen 2015), limited attention has been given to its limitations. This gap in the literature is partly due to the reliance on surveys conducted during relatively “normal periods” (e.g., Huang 2018; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Pan, Shao and Xu 2022), when citizens have fewer incentives to critically scrutinize regime propaganda. Consequently, the lack of studies conducted during crucial moments when authoritarian regimes face significant threats leads to a potential “positive bias” in the propaganda literature. This research note fills in this gap by examining the effectiveness of different authoritarian propaganda strategies during political crises. We show that propaganda has significant limitations, precisely when regimes need it most.

Priority research has identified two main goals of authoritarian propaganda. The first goal, known as “soft propaganda,” involves persuading and indoctrinating the public about the merit of the regime (Adena et al. 2015; Pan, Shao and Xu 2022; Rozenas and Stukal 2019). For example, Adena et al. (2015) finds that pre-World War II Germany used pro-Weimar and pro-Nazi propaganda radios to cultivate support for their respective patrons. Soft propaganda also involves broadcasting negative news about foreign countries to distract the public from domestic problems or to portray alternative regimes, such as democracies, as undesirable (Mattingly and Yao 2022; Rozenas and Stukal 2019; Dukalskis 2021).

In contrast, some scholars argue that the primary purpose of authoritarian propaganda is not persuasion but intimidation, termed “hard propaganda.” Hard propaganda is designed to create cults of personality around supreme leaders, facilitating the domination of both the general public and junior officials (Crabtree, Kern and Siegel 2020; Huang 2015; Shih 2008; Wedeen 2015). It can also signal regime capacity and deter potential rebellion. Rather than intending to persuade or indoctrinate, hard propaganda’s crude and heavy-handed content

itself signals regime strength, which poses a threat to political oppositions (Huang 2015, 2018; Arendt 1973; Carter and Carter 2021).

We theorize that both “soft” and “hard” propaganda strategies have significant limitations, especially during political crises. When the propaganda message is hard, taking on a firm tone, it often underscores the government’s unwavering commitment to executing its objectives irrespective of costs. While such heavy-handed and top-down style slogans signal the regime’s overall strength and the central government’s policy resolutions, they could also inadvertently legitimize resistance to local authorities. These grassroots contentions, a predominant form of collective action within authoritarian regimes, often harness the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful central government to curb the exercise of power at the local level (O’Brien and Li 2006). This problem becomes especially pronounced during political crises and policy changes when local governments, responsible for implementing central government’s policies, are often left behind central directives or unwilling to change existing practices. Hard propaganda from the center can embolden grassroots protesters to challenge local authorities when citizens deem themselves to be more aligned with the central policy than the local governments and perceive their protests and resistance as “rightful” (O’Brien 1996; O’Brien and Li 2006).

When the propaganda message assumes a “soft” tone with the intention to persuade, it frequently employs rhetoric asserting that government policies are prudent and guided by scientific principles. The efficacy of soft propaganda, if achieved, amplifies the public belief in the government’s policy-making expertise, consequently cultivating support for both the government and its policies. Yet, such rhetoric often leaves little flexibility for policy reversals. During political crises, the populace tends to exhibit dissatisfaction with the status quo. Consequently, the government grapples with the quandary of either defending an unpopular policy as prudent and rational or changing course and contradicting previous messages. To make things worse, the more convincing previous soft propaganda was, the harder it became to justify a policy change. Similarly, the more convincing present soft

propaganda is, the more unreasonable the previous policy and its associated propaganda appear to be. As such, in times of political crises and policy changes, soft propaganda is likely to decrease public support due to the conflicting narratives it produces.

To test our theoretical expectations and find evidence for the limitation of authoritarian propaganda, we focus on China, one of the most sophisticated autocracies with a highly institutionalized propaganda apparatus (Shambaugh 2007). Specifically, we leverage China’s COVID policy reversals and political turmoil in late 2022 and conduct an original, pre-registered survey experiment in China in December 2022. For over two years since the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, China steadfastly implemented the most stringent COVID restrictions under the “Zero-COVID” policy. Throughout this “Zero-COVID” era, the state propaganda apparatus relentlessly championed the superiority of China’s COVID responses through both soft and hard propaganda rhetoric. However, in November 2022, social pressure mounted against the draconian COVID restrictions, and the Chinese authorities swiftly reversed nearly all COVID restrictions in early December. Following this policy change, the Chinese propaganda machine started to persuade its audience that COVID is no longer a threat and promote the relaxation of COVID measures. Once again, both soft and hard propaganda strategies were employed advocating for a swift reopening.

During the experiment, we randomly show respondents various propaganda messages featuring either hard or soft rhetoric supporting various COVID policies. We then measure their evaluation of the government’s COVID responses and willingness to protest against local COVID restrictions. Our results show that consistent with our theoretical arguments, when respondents are shown two soft propaganda messages advocating for contradicting COVID policies, their evaluation of the government’s COVID response decreases. Conversely, when multiple hard propaganda messages exhibit contradictions, they appear more heavy-handed and effectively dissuade individuals from participating in protests. However, when respondents are only exposed to hard propaganda advocating for the reopening, they are more likely to believe that protest against local COVID restrictions is justified, thereby

hindering the protest-deterrence effect of hard propaganda. We discuss the significance and contribution of our research in the conclusion.

2 Experimental Design

The survey experiment took place in December 2022 in China.¹ We recruited 3,314 respondents through a Chinese online survey platform primarily oriented toward business-related marketing research. The demographic characteristics of our sample are presented in Online Appendix B. More specifically, our sample’s gender distribution, age composition, and regional representation resemble the demographic makeup of Chinese Internet users, as reported by the China Internet Network Information Center.

The survey began by collecting information about the demographics and political predispositions before presenting the respondents with a short news report from Xinhua News Agency, a state-run media organization. Participants were randomly assigned to one of five groups, with four groups receiving different excerpts related to official propaganda on COVID policy, and the fifth group receiving a placebo vignette. All vignettes are actual excerpts from Xinhua news reports to preserve experimental realism.

We focus on China’s domestic propaganda on COVID policies for three main reasons. First, the “Zero-COVID” policy, in effect for over two years, carries significant implications for the daily lives of ordinary Chinese citizens, with severe disruptions such as forced quarantines and city-wide lockdowns. Moreover, in November 2022, public discontent toward the draconian “Zero-COVID” policy became apparent, and numerous protests across the country emerged. As such, propaganda on COVID policies has significant political implications and might potentially lead to substantial attitudinal and behavioral changes. Second, the recent policy reversal from the “Zero-COVID” policy to reopening in December 2022 aligns well with our survey timing, reducing concerns about unrealistic treatments. Finally, the Chinese

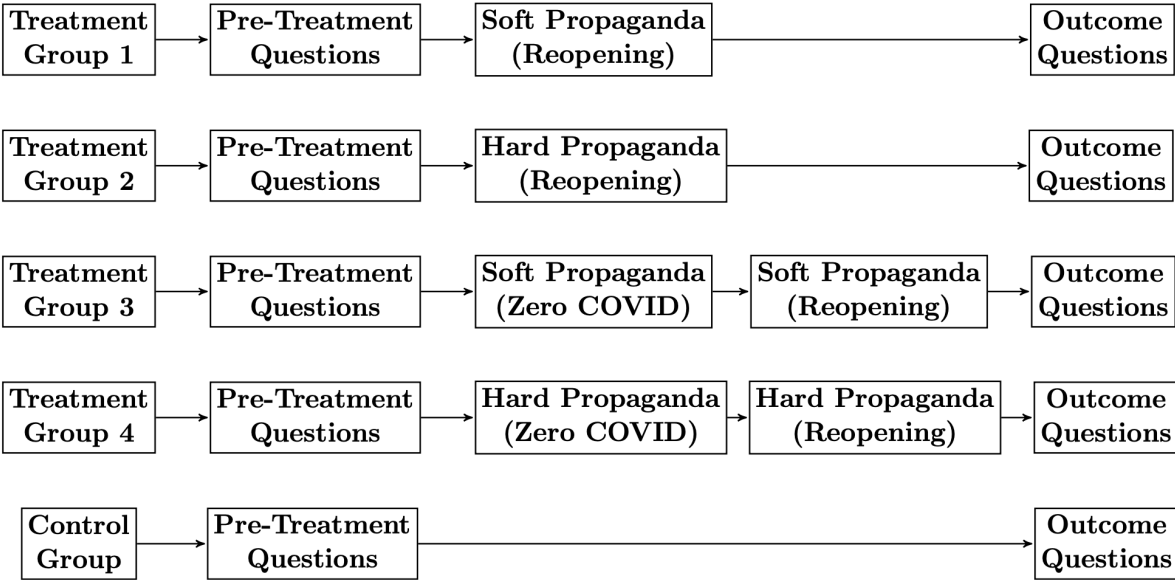
¹The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board at the lead researcher’s home institution and was pre-registered at Open Science Framework.

government employed diverse propaganda messages, from hard to soft, from pro-lockdown to pro-reopening stances, offering a valuable opportunity to study various strategies in a political crisis context.

2.1 Treatment

Figure 1 demonstrates the treatments in each experimental group. In treatment groups 1 and 2, we present respondents with a single vignette containing propaganda messages from December 2022 that advocate for the relaxation of COVID restrictions and the reopening of Chinese society. In the first group, the message is “soft,” rationalizing the reopening by referencing assessments from public health officials and medical experts, suggesting that the Omicron variant of SARS-COV-2 is now comparable to seasonal flu in terms of virulence. In contrast, in the second group, the rhetoric is “hard,” forcefully commanding the reopening and adjustment of epidemic control measures under Xi Jinping’s leadership.

Figure 1: Procedure of the Survey Experiment



Notes: Treatment groups 1 & 2 only receive pro-reopening propaganda, whereas groups 3 & 4 first receive pro-Zero COVID propaganda and then the same pro-reopening propaganda in groups 1 & 2. The rhetoric in groups 1 & 3 is soft, while the rhetoric in groups 2 & 4 is hard.

These two groups resemble existing propaganda and media exposure experiments conducted during “normal” times, where respondents are shown a single vignette (or sometimes video) about a piece of news (Huang 2018; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Pan, Shao and Xu 2022). We are particularly interested in the second treatment group as we theorize hard propaganda during crisis times might not effectively discourage political protests against local authorities. Specifically, exposure to hard pro-reopening rhetoric from Xinhua, a central news outlet, will heighten respondents’ belief that resistance against local COVID restrictions is “rightful” and justified (O’Brien 1996).

To further explore the potential limitations of authoritarian propaganda, we design additional groups mimicking the conflicting propaganda messages during political crises and policy reversals. In treatment groups 3 and 4, before showing the December propaganda messages supporting reopening, we first present respondents with propaganda messages from November 2022 supporting the “Zero-COVID” policy. In other words, respondents in treatment groups 3 and 4 are shown two different vignettes—one promoting lockdown measures and then one supporting reopening. Although, in reality, citizens would not see conflicting propaganda messages right next to one another, the timing of two propaganda messages is close enough during political crises that seeing conflicting propaganda is still realistic. As in the earlier treatment groups, these messages adopt either a “soft” or “hard” rhetoric.

In treatment group 3, respondents are first presented with “soft” propaganda advocating for the “Zero-COVID” approach, citing public health experts and scientific evidence on the mortality of the Omicron variant of SARS-COV-2, and then presented with the pro-reopening soft propaganda as in treatment group 1. In contrast, in treatment group 4, respondents are first presented with “hard” propaganda, which fervently champions the “Zero-COVID” policy, featuring Xi Jinping’s speech at a Politburo meeting calling for resolute adherence to the “Zero-COVID” policy and the commands of the party center. Our primary focus here is on treatment group 3, where we expect conflicting messages will hinder the persuasiveness of soft propaganda, resulting in lower evaluations of the government.

Finally, participants assigned to the control group are shown a placebo vignette: Xinhua’s report on the simultaneous appearance of the Moon, Mars, and Jupiter in the celestial expanse. While unrelated to COVID policies, this news was published in close temporal proximity to the COVID policy reversal. Thus, it serves as an ideal placebo. The details of all vignettes can be found in Online Appendix D.

2.2 Measurement

Following the vignettes, we measured respondents’ *COVID Policy Preference* and their *Assessments of Government Performance* during the COVID-19 pandemic. These two outcomes measure propaganda’s ability to persuade the public. If propaganda is persuasive, we shall expect citizens exposed to propaganda to prefer the policy that the propaganda advocates for and to have higher evaluations of the government’s performance. The measurement of *COVID Policy Preference* includes three questions asking whether the government should stop the spread of COVID at all costs, including strict lockdowns; whether the government should strictly restrict foreign arrivals; and whether the government should use health code and contact tracing technology as much as possible. We use principal component analysis to compile a score of *COVID Policy Preference* from the three questions. To measure respondents’ *Assessments of Government Performance*, we ask whether they think the last three years’ COVID policy was a success or a failure.

Additionally, we assess the respondents’ *Willingness to Protest*. To achieve this, we illustrate a hypothetical scenario where their neighborhood is abruptly subjected to a 7-day lockdown—an occurrence that Chinese citizens frequently encountered during the “Zero-COVID” phase. In this scenario, some fellow residents express frustration and outline plans to demonstrate against the local lockdown measures. We then ask how likely the respondents would participate in such a protest. This question serves as our primary outcome measure of propaganda’s efficacy in deterring potential protests against the authorities. To further probe if the change in willingness to participate is due to the *Perceived Protest “Rightfulness,”* i.e.,

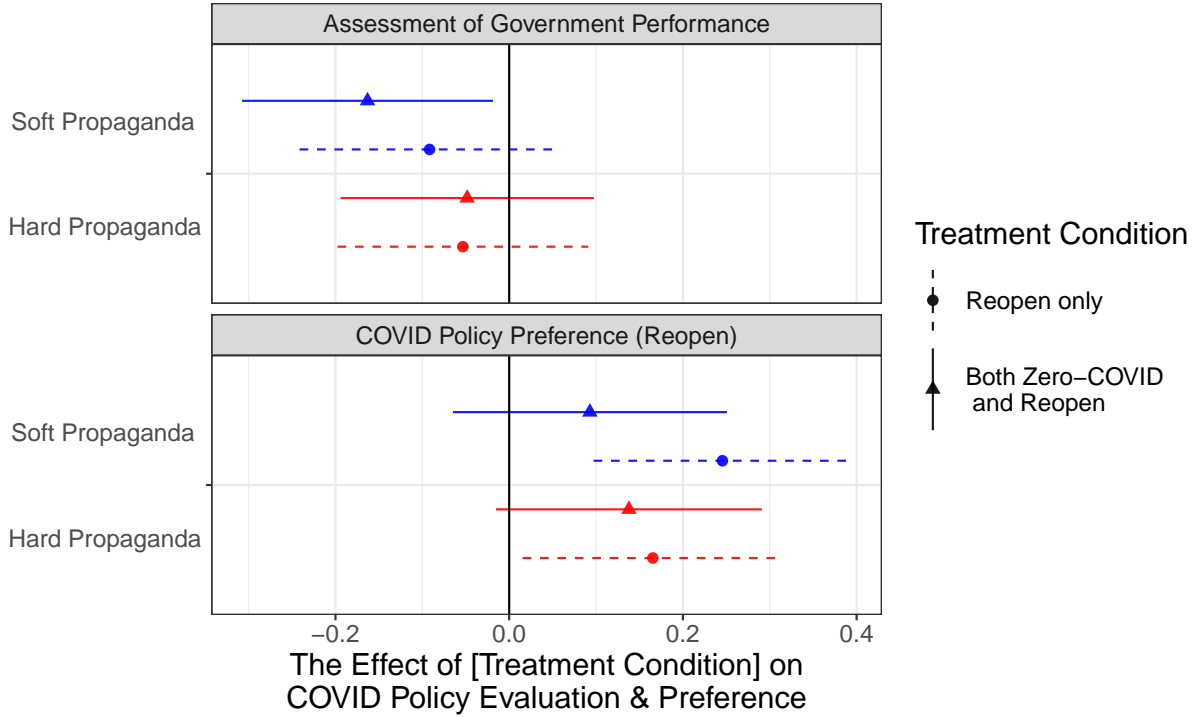
whether the protesters deem themselves to be more aligned with the central policy than the local authorities, we ask whether they believe “the protest described above would be deemed rightful by the state.” All outcomes are measured on a seven-point scale. We use eight pre-treatment covariates to check the balance between the treatment and control groups. The wording of the questions is presented in Online Appendix E.

3 Results

We first focus on the persuasive effects of authoritarian propaganda during political crises. The upper panel of Figure 2 demonstrates the treatment effects of different types of propaganda messages on individuals’ assessments of the Chinese government’s COVID response, while the lower panel presents the results for individuals’ COVID policy preference with higher values indicating higher preferences for relaxing COVID restrictions and reopening. Each treatment group is compared to the control group, and the plots display the mean differences for each outcome variable, along with their corresponding 95% confidence intervals. The dashed lines represent the treatment effects of pro-reopening propaganda messages (treatment groups 1 & 2), while the solid lines represent the treatment effects of conflicting propaganda messages (treatment groups 3 & 4) first advocating for stringent “Zero-COVID” restrictions and then promoting reopening.

As depicted in the upper panel of Figure 2, all propaganda messages, regardless of the rhetoric and content, fail to increase public evaluation of the government’s performance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, all coefficients are negative, with the treatment effect of conflicting soft propaganda (treatment group 3) significant at the conventional level ($\beta = -0.163$, $p = 0.027$). The magnitude of the treatment effect represents approximately 12.5% of the standard deviation of the outcome variable, indicating a sizable decrease in the assessment of government performance. Such a finding is consistent with the theoretical argument that soft propaganda has significant limitations during political crises when the

Figure 2: Treatment Effects of Propaganda on COVID Policy Evaluation and Preference



Notes: Outcomes are measured on seven-point scales; higher values represent higher evaluations of the Chinese government’s COVID response and higher preferences for reopening policies over Zero-COVID measures. The dots are the difference-in-means between each treatment condition and the control groups. Bars indicate the corresponding 95% confidence intervals.

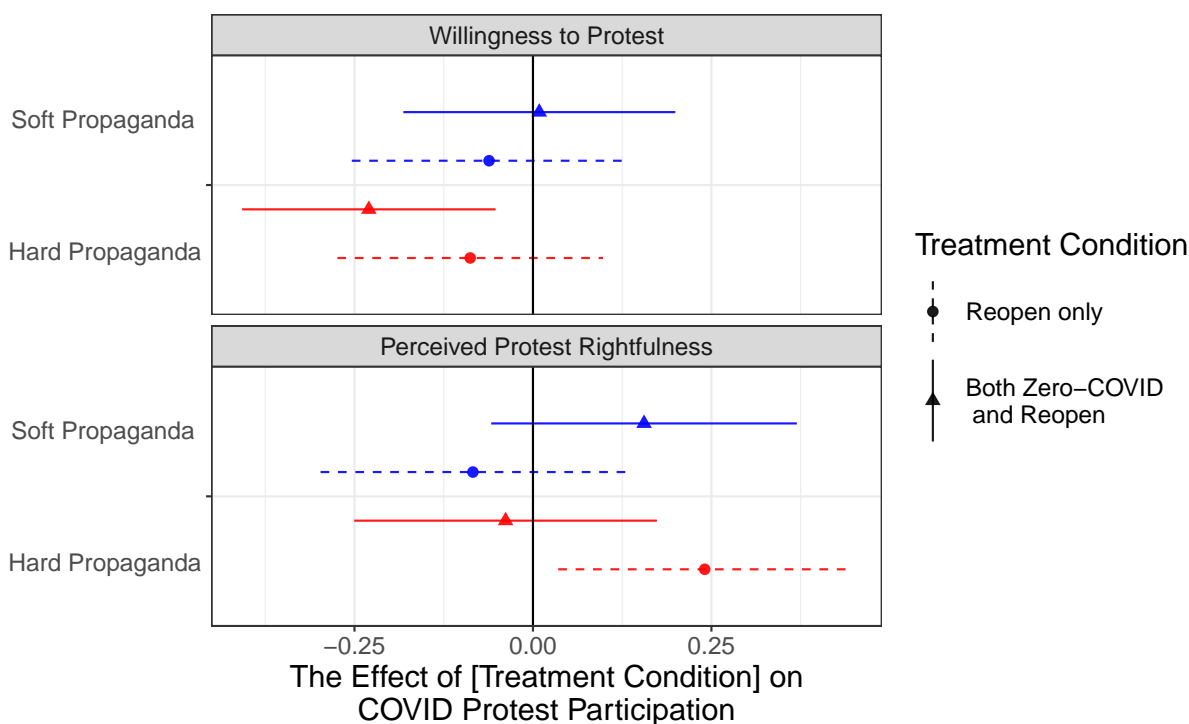
government is forced to produce conflicting propaganda messages, hindering their persuasiveness.

Nonetheless, while propaganda during crisis times fails to boost support for the government, it is more successful in shifting policy preferences. As shown in the lower panel of Figure 2, when respondents are only presented with pro-reopening propaganda (dashed bars), they become significantly more likely to prefer reopening policies over strict COVID measures. Notably, these effects remain significant irrespective of the particular rhetorical approach employed. While the point estimate for the treatment effect of soft propaganda is indeed larger ($\beta = 0.245$, $p = 0.001$) than that of hard propaganda ($\beta = 0.165$, $p = 0.031$), the difference between the two estimates is not statistically significant. This suggests that the effect is less driven by the rhetoric being “soft” and persuasive, and more by the shift

in the official policy position itself. Even when respondents are first exposed to previous propaganda advocating “Zero-COVID” and then to pro-reopening propaganda (solid bars), respondents still tend to favor reopening, albeit with reduced statistical significance.

Next, we examine the protest-deterrence effects of authoritarian propaganda during political crises. Figure 3 plots the treatment effects of different types of propaganda messages on individuals’ willingness to participate in the hypothetical protest against local lockdown measures (upper panel) and their perceptions of the “rightfulness” of such protests (lower panel). Consistent with existing theories, soft propaganda exerts little effect on deterring potential protest. All four estimates for soft propaganda are indistinguishable from zero.

Figure 3: Treatment Effects of Propaganda on COVID Protest Participation



Notes: Outcomes are measured on seven-point scales; higher values represent higher willingness to participate in protests against local lockdown and higher perceived protest rightfulness. The dots are the difference-in-means between each treatment condition and the control groups. Bars indicate the corresponding 95% confidence intervals.

In contrast, hard propaganda demonstrates higher efficacy in shifting individuals’ beliefs and self-report behavioral tendencies regarding protests against local authorities’ COVID re-

restrictions. Similar to the existing studies that underscore the intimidating effects of authoritarian propaganda (Huang 2015, 2018; Arendt 1973; Carter and Carter 2021), when respondents are exposed to conflicting hard propaganda messages (solid bar in the upper panel), they become less willing to participate in a hypothetical protest ($\beta = -0.230$, $p = 0.011$). This could be attributed to the contradicting hard rhetoric further reinforcing the apparent regime strength. Analogous to certain personalistic dictatorships, the unwavering yet inconsistent official stances paradoxically highlight the regime’s uncontested dominance in arbitrarily shaping public discourse. (Wedeen 2015).

Yet, hard propaganda is not without its limitations. When its inconsistency and irrationality are less apparent, as in treatment group 4 (dashed lines), where respondents are only exposed to pro-reopening propaganda but not contradicting messages, its protest-deterrence effect disappears ($\beta = -0.088$, $p = 0.354$). The lower panel of Figure 3 further demonstrates that such limitation is likely due to a heightened sense of righteousness regarding protest against local authorities ($\beta = 0.241$, $p = 0.022$). Heavy-handed propaganda messages with a clear policy direction elucidate the central government’s resolutions in implementing such policy. As a result, citizens are emboldened to challenge local authorities, whom they deem as non-compliant with central directives, resulting in collective actions that trouble both central and local governments (King, Pan and Roberts 2013; O’Brien 1996; O’Brien and Li 2006). In summary, the results from the experiment highlight significant limitations of both “hard” and “soft” propaganda strategies, particularly during political crises.

3.1 Discussion

Before concluding, we address an important issue: Can we trust these survey results from an authoritarian regime like China? In other words, are the significant outcomes artifacts of social desirability bias, resulting from respondents providing “politically correct” answers? Our response is two-fold. First, we believe social desirability biases are precisely part of the theoretically relevant outcomes. Authoritarian regimes often rule by fear (Young 2019), and

propaganda is one of the apparatus autocrats frequently employ to disseminate fear among the population and deter rebellions (Wedeen 2015). Therefore, we might be more interested in citizens’ “public lies” than their “private truth” (Kuran 1997), as the ability of propaganda to force the public to lie is sufficient for autocrats to maintain regime stability. Second, we do not believe social desirability bias is the primary driver of our results. While propaganda messages demonstrate some efficacy in shifting individuals’ COVID policy preferences, they fail to improve individuals’ assessment of government performance. Such results precisely show that citizens are sophisticated and willing to update their beliefs about the best policy choice while not easily fooled by propaganda and punishing the government for their mismanagement.

Besides social desirability bias, can those insignificant results be attributed to ceiling effects as regime support questions often encounter or insufficient statistical power? We are inclined to dismiss both notions. The average support for government performance within the control group is not overly high (5.13/7), alleviating concerns about ceiling effects preventing us from detecting potentially positive effects. Additionally, our sample size, around 600 respondents per treatment group, is also significantly larger than similar propaganda experiments (e.g., Huang 2018; Pan, Shao and Xu 2022), alleviating concerns about lack of statistical power.

4 Conclusion

“Propaganda works.” Despite varying perspectives on the mechanisms behind its effectiveness, recent scholarship largely agrees with this central notion that authoritarian propaganda is indeed effective. However, many experimental studies demonstrating propaganda’s efficacy were carried out in relatively stable periods when the populace had little incentive to resist it. Rarely have scholars had the chance to investigate whether propaganda retains its efficacy during political crises, precisely when regimes rely on it most. This lack of attention

to propaganda's limitations is exacerbated by the inherent challenge of showcasing evidence of inefficacy, as null results do not necessarily mean no theoretical relations.

This research note provides a different perspective and highlights the limitations of various propaganda strategies, particularly during political crises and policy changes. Leveraging the critical moment of China's COVID policy reversal in late 2022, we use a survey experiment to provide evidence for the inability of both hard and soft propaganda to garner political support. In particular, hard propaganda even emboldens citizens to perceive protests as rightful when the official narrative can be used to support their course. This explains why sporadic protests gathered coordinated momentum across the country shortly after the central government started to signal a relaxation of pandemic control after November 11, 2022, but not before. By showing that our propaganda treatments are effective in moving some outcomes, such as policy preferences, while concurrently failing to enhance a positive perception of governmental performance, we circumvent the methodological difficulties associated with demonstrating propaganda inefficacy.

Together, our study provides unique insights into the challenges faced by authoritarian regimes during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Propaganda might not be as effective as precisely thought when autocrats need it most. Additionally, we help document a crucial period in recent Chinese history, where nationwide public trust in the Chinese government was in crisis, rarely seen since Tiananmen in 1989.

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