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Meeting the Dalai Lama and Perceptions of Democracy in China: A Quasi-Natural Experiment

ABSTRACT

How does the international human rights community affect the likelihood of democratization? Scholarship on Chinese citizens' preferences about their political system has not explored the importance of the external environment, perhaps surprising given the extensive foreign pressure on China's authoritarian system over the last thirty years. I use a quasi-natural experiment around the meeting between President Obama and the Dalai Lama in 2011 to examine the impact of foreign pressure on citizens' perceptions of democracy in China in real time. I show that the meeting significantly increases the Chinese public's belief that their country is democratic, with those of above average patriotism over eleven percentage points more likely to believe China is democratic in the five days following the meeting than before. The findings suggest that some kinds of external pressure may help to increase satisfaction with authoritarian rule, ultimately boosting autocrats' ability to hold on to power.

Democratization is implausible if citizens do not desire political change. To understand whether a country is likely to move towards a more democratic system we need to know the extent to which the people want more democracy - whether they value democratic rights, but also whether they think they need to be improved in their country. While studies have shown that support for democratic values is strong in China¹, the majority of Chinese citizens also believe that their country is already democratic².

Scholars have attributed these beliefs to factors from political culture and propaganda³ to economic conditions and government responsiveness⁴. Given the huge external pressure on China since 1989 - pressure with the explicit purpose of shaping a more free and democratic China⁵ - one factor notably absent is the impact of the international world. Information about this external pressure has been widely available for Chinese citizens – the state-run *People's Daily* reported over two hundred separate incidents of human rights pressure on to the public between 1989 and 2011⁶. How these efforts affect public beliefs about their political system is an important missing element in understanding the prospects for democratization.

In this article I examine the impact of one such effort - world leaders' meetings with the Dalai Lama - on Chinese perceptions of the level of democracy in their country. These meetings are regularly framed as pressure on the Chinese government over human rights in Tibet. I take advantage of a unique opportunity that arises from a highly publicized meeting between President Obama and the Dalai Lama at the time of a nationwide *Asian Barometer* survey in China in 2011. The meeting significantly increases the public's belief that their country is democratic, an effect driven by national pride, with those of above average patriotism 11.6 percentage points more likely to believe China is democratic in the five days following the meeting. These findings support the argument that pressure from abroad may evoke a defensive response in members of the public, strengthening their positive perceptions of their system of government. The meeting also makes citizens seven percentage points more likely to say that they support democracy.

Perceptions of democracy

Studies of democratization in China find that support for democracy is strong in the country⁷, leading authors like Zhengxu Wang to say that “more and more people are growing up with the belief that political rights and freedom supersede economic wellbeing or other materialist goals...We can be cautiously optimistic about the prospects for democratic change in China.”⁸ On the other hand, the lack of enthusiasm for democratization amongst the Chinese public in recent years has led some to cast doubt on this optimism⁹, and other scholars have shown that support for democracy amongst the Chinese middle classes is not developing as quickly as expected¹⁰.

These debates obscure the fact that support for democracy is not enough to encourage popular mobilization¹¹. Crucially, to agitate for political change citizens need to both value a political system and believe that the system does not apply in their country. The perception that one’s country is undemocratic is essential to push for a more democratic system in the future. And opinion polls suggest that while support for democracy may be high, most Chinese citizens believe that their system is already democratic¹², despite most international organizations continuing to designate it as a one-party authoritarian regime¹³.

According to Dickson, this is because Chinese people see ‘democracy’ not just as a means by which leaders are chosen, but how well the political system reflects the needs of the public¹⁴. Lu and Shi find that Chinese citizens generally conceive of democracy as ‘taking the majority’s view into consideration’ rather than ‘majority rule through popular vote’. They argue that the government’s propagation of this concept through media and education has been the major factor in making Chinese citizens believe that their country is democratically ruled¹⁵.

However, whether citizens see democracy as rule by the people¹⁶, or on behalf of the people¹⁷, the puzzle remains. What makes Chinese citizens satisfied with how their country is run, and unwilling to call for reforms? This question has attracted extensive scholarly attention. One view is that economic growth is responsible¹⁸, while Nathan argues that the system's resilience comes from public participation in decision-making¹⁹. Others have found that in areas from the National People's Congress²⁰ to social welfare²¹, the CCP has shown responsiveness to citizen demands (with the assumption that this responsiveness increases public satisfaction with their system²²).

A neglected part of the literature is the impact international actions have on people's belief that their government is acting democratically. How three decades of pressure on China's human rights and political system have affected the beliefs of Chinese citizens about their domestic circumstances remains a mystery. This is not just limited to China: as Hyde and Lamb argue, the democracy promotion literature in general does a poor job of addressing how external actions affect attitudes towards democracy²³. As a result, in recent years, this question has begun to receive growing attention from political scientists, and recent studies have found that exposure to NGO naming and shaming²⁴ and international law²⁵ can increase citizens' support for human rights.

The influence of international actions on perceptions of human rights conditions is less conclusive however. Davis and colleagues, and Ausderan show that naming and shaming campaigns make citizens less likely to believe their government respects human rights.²⁶ These studies provide only an aggregate effect however, and the paucity of observations means that the positive impact may be limited to liberal democracies. Scholars have begun to use experiments to break down this aggregate effect in less democratic states, finding that citizens' reaction to foreign comments may depend on their political identities, or 'partisan cues'. Bush and Jamal show that in Jordan, only regime supporters responded positively to US endorsements of

government policies²⁷, while Marinov finds that foreign condemnation of political freedoms in Turkey had positive effects on citizens' perceptions only when it was supported by political leaders²⁸.

These analyses may be less relevant for places like China, one-party states where political identities are less clearly defined. As Pan and Xu argue, the spectrum of ideologies in China "does not delineate a cleavage between those who support regime policies and those who oppose them"²⁹. Perhaps more importantly, experimental studies do not capture how citizens respond in real life to foreign pressure. In authoritarian states, information will be heavily censored and reach the public through a mass of propaganda and other news. Does news of the international community's actions even reach people? If so, can we extend people's immediate responses to a manipulated prompt to their real-time responses?

President Obama and the Dalai Lama

To test this, I take advantage of the meeting between President Obama and the Dalai Lama on 17 July 2011, as a quasi-natural experiment. At this time the *Asian Barometer Survey* was in the middle of administering its nationwide survey. 3197 of the 3473 total interviews took place in July. As the meeting was announced only late on the previous day, and fell in the middle of the survey, this provides a perfect opportunity to examine how it affected views of democracy in China. To minimise the influence of other events, I examine responses in the five days before and the five days after the meeting (1525 respondents).

The survey was carried out face-to-face on a randomized selection of adults to reflect national probability samples, weighted to ensure coverage of minority and rural populations in all provinces of mainland China except Tibet, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang³⁰. Since the survey is randomly assigned, these respondents should primarily differ in their exposure to the

news that passed through on 17 July (I control for other demographic differences). The control group are those not yet aware of the meeting, while the treatment group are those able to hear about the meeting.

While the White House has been at pains to say that official meetings are in the Dalai Lama's capacity as a religious leader, foreign leader assemblies with activists are a common part of democracy promotion. In 2007 President Bush called official meetings with dissidents a central pillar of the American "commitment to promote democracy worldwide"³¹, and presidential gatherings with Soviet dissidents were publicized as part of American efforts to engender political liberalization³². As former dissident Natan Sharansky said, these meetings "had a tremendous influence on our movement, on people around us and on the authorities"³³.

Meetings with the Dalai Lama have followed a similar script. The White House statement following the 2014 meeting stated Obama's "strong support for...the protection of human rights for Tibetans in the People's Republic of China."³⁴ The Chinese media has explicitly portrayed the meetings as human rights criticism³⁵. As such, they allow us to examine how a common piece of pressure on China's domestic politics from the international community affects Chinese citizens' perceptions of their political system.

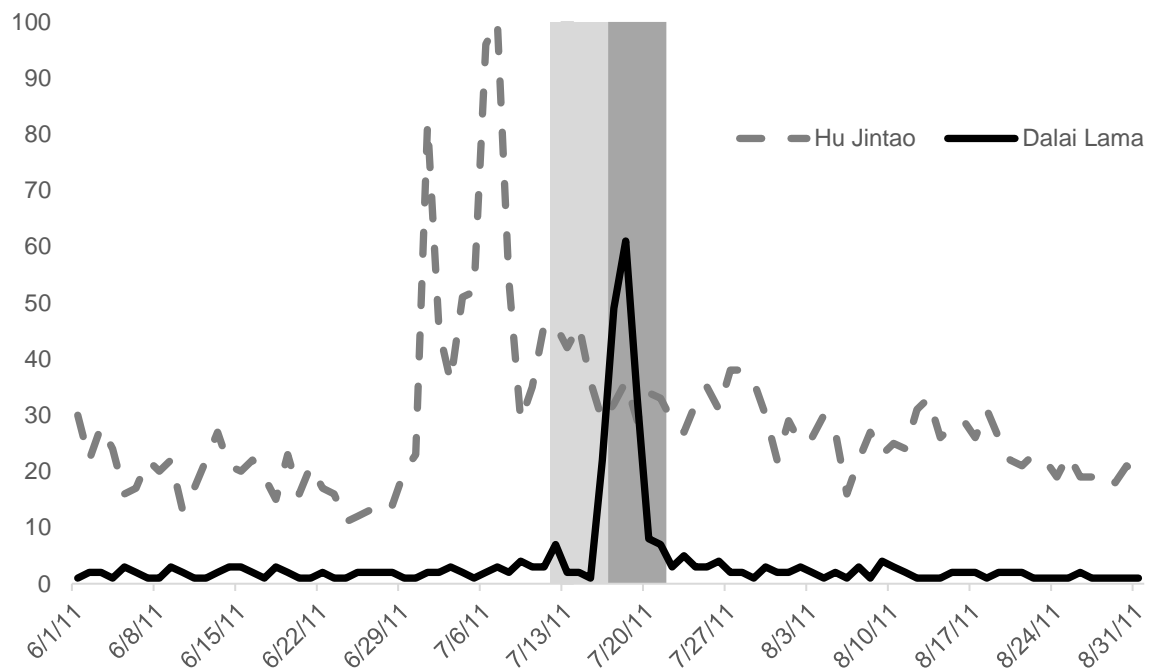
The Dalai Lama took part in an 11-day Buddhist ritual in Washington, D.C. in July 2011. President Obama had stayed cool over a potential meeting, but on Saturday morning Chinese-time (the 16th), the White House announced they would meet the following day. The two had a private discussion around 11.30pm Saturday night Chinese-time, a White House statement saying that Obama "underscored the importance of the protection of human rights of Tibetans in China"³⁶, while the Dalai Lama said that Obama expressed his "genuine concern about suffering in Tibet"³⁷. These comments hit the international press the following day³⁸.

The Chinese government only had time to issue one diplomatic warning on the 16th³⁹, a warning

repeated in the *Global Times*⁴⁰. The meeting was, however, discussed heavily in state media on the Sunday: a *People's Daily* editorial denounced the gathering and US criticism of political and religious freedoms in Tibet (they “call the human rights situation in Tibet ‘evil’”⁴¹), while a series of articles in the *Global Times* over 17 and 18 July noted that Obama had met the Dalai over his “concern for human rights in Tibet”, and the President’s call for “attention to the human rights situation in Tibet”⁴².

The last-minute announcement of the meeting meant that Chinese citizens had little prior knowledge that it might occur. Trends of Google searches show few searches for the ‘Dalai Lama’ until 16 July, with interest peaking between the 17th and 19th. While we can only read so much into this trend, since Google is banned in China, it does demonstrate that even for citizens willing to breach the internet firewall, there was no awareness of the meeting before 16 July, and that interest was high (18 July saw just under twice as many searches for the Dalai as for Hu Jintao, the leader at the time⁴³). The five-day window covers the period of peak interest in the Dalai Lama.

Figure 1: Google searches for 'Dalai Lama' and 'Hu Jintao' in China. Shaded area denotes period analysed in this study



Impact of the meeting

How do world leader meetings with the Dalai Lama affect whether Chinese citizens hold grievances with their political system? To provide a more nuanced account, we need to first distinguish between people's perceptions of the level of democracy and their stated support for a democratic system.

Perceptions of democracy

The meeting highlights not just the political and civil rights essential to a western conception of democracy, but also the CCP's relationship with its citizens, a fundamental part of the

‘guardianship’ conception of democracy. The literature predicts that hearing this kind of human rights pressure should reduce how well people believe that their rights are respected⁴⁴. A negative assessment of their country’s respect for its citizens’ rights should make them less likely to believe that their country is democratic.

I argue in contrast that human rights pressure may *increase* popular satisfaction with the target government’s political system – at least in one-party states like China.

A tenet of social identity theory is that people wish to maintain a positive image of their social group, and defend that image against anything that might threaten it⁴⁵. If this social group is the nation, then the threat might include information that suggests the country’s political system or human rights are not good enough. Meetings with the Dalai Lama, if perceived as an attempt to attack China or bring down its status in the international community, will do precisely this, directly challenging the nation’s status, and its citizens’ self-esteem.

Since the CCP controls the propaganda apparatus, it is able to portray meetings in the way that will make them most threatening to the nation’s status – a deliberate and hostile attack from the West. In 2011, the *People’s Daily* reiterated that “Western anti-China forces”⁴⁶ were using the Dalai Lama as a political tool, in order to “embarrass”⁴⁷ China, and challenge its “territorial integrity”⁴⁸. In interviews with thirty-one Chinese students in the US after the 2016 meeting, a common interpretation was that the meeting was a deliberate political attack on China.

In the face of this kind of threat to their self-esteem, people will do what they can to maintain the positive image of their nation⁴⁹. This might include rejecting or counterarguing the threatening information⁵⁰, or derogating its source⁵¹. One way to maintain the nation’s status is to find other ways to bolster the status of the group. Branscombe and colleagues show that when

people (who feel valued by their in-group) feel disrespected by another group, they will take steps to improve their group's image⁵². Others have found that if people actively affirm the positive aspects of their group, they effectively reduce the threat felt in response to critical information, particularly if they identify strongly with the group⁵³. This means that if people feel a threat to their nation's standing from human rights pressure, then by expressing the ways in which the nation is good, they should be able to offset the cost to their self-esteem. This suggests that if people do feel that meetings with the Dalai Lama are an attempt to attack China, its political system and its international standing, then they may deliberately bolster their positive views about their country and its political system, making them more likely to believe that their country is democratic.

This is similar to the concept of a rally effect, whereby threats like terrorist attacks may increase public trust in political institutions⁵⁴. Since the CCP portrays the Dalai Lama as seeking the breakup of China, a meeting may heighten the salience of this existential threat, potentially making people more positive about their political system.

I test this alternative in two ways. Firstly, scholars have shown that existential threats lead to greater support for authoritarian values⁵⁵. If there is a rally effect, then support for democracy should go down, in contrast to hypothesis 2. Secondly, the rally effect should increase patriotic sentiment⁵⁶. In contrast, if people are defensively bolstering their nation's image, it should be those who are already strongly identified with their nation who see the largest increase in perceptions of democracy⁵⁷. Those for whom the status of their nation is most important to their self-esteem will be those who feel the threat to that status most closely, and will be those most willing to bolster it. This gives my primary hypothesis:

H1: World leader meetings with the Dalai Lama will make Chinese people believe their country is more democratic, especially if they have a strong attachment to their nation.

Support for democracy

If this argument holds, then we might also expect human rights pressure on China to reduce support for democratic values. Chinese anger at the meeting may translate into anger at US efforts to promote human rights and democracy, and in turn the very idea of democracy.

However, it is feasible that negative views about the US and its democracy promotion may not extend to views about democracy itself. Chinese citizens may instead view the US as less democratic for meeting with the Dalai Lama against the wishes of the Chinese people. Moreover, I argue that defensiveness to foreign pressure should make patriotic Chinese citizens more likely to affirm positive aspects of their country, in particular its level of democracy. This argument would not hold if those Chinese citizens did not believe that democratic rule is a positive thing for their country. To feel good about believing that one's country is democratic, one also needs to believe that democracy is a good thing for one's country. So if Chinese citizens are taking steps to affirm how democratic China is in order to make them feel better about their country, then it makes little sense for them to, in the same breath, also denigrate the importance of democracy. Some may even end up supporting it more.

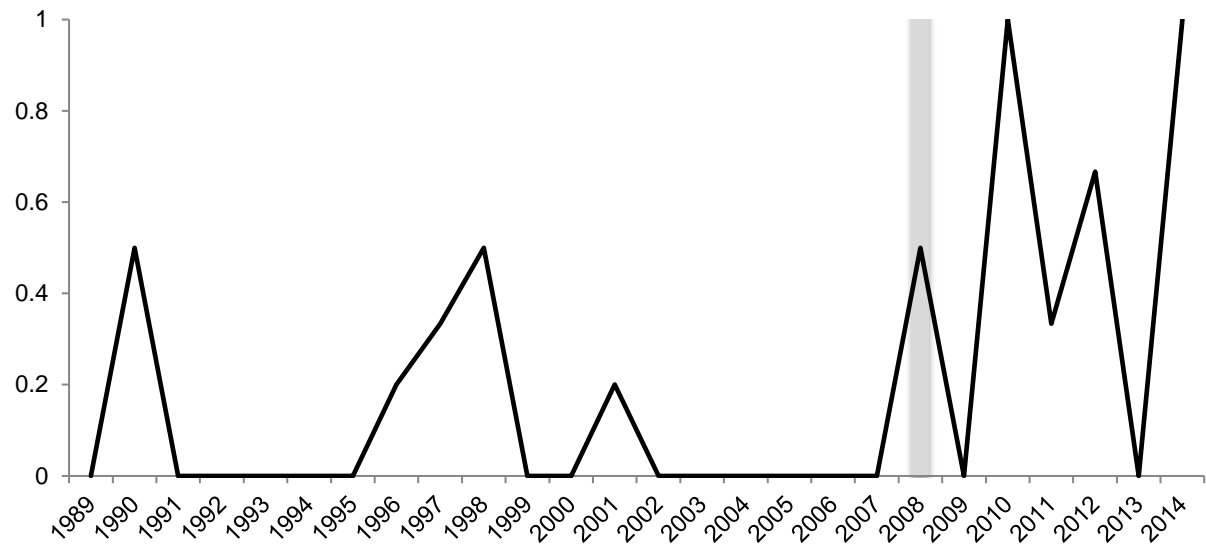
H2: World leader meetings with the Dalai Lama will have little effect on how much Chinese citizens value democracy in their country.

Together, the two hypotheses imply that after hearing about the meeting, Chinese citizens should be more satisfied with the state of democracy in their country, and should therefore hold

fewer grievances with their political system. By ‘grievances’ I refer to those citizens who actively support the concept of democracy, but do not believe that their country currently is a democracy. ‘Grievances’ are the real focus of the authoritarian resilience literature: whether Chinese citizens are content that their country upholds the values they believe are important. While I split this concept into perceptions and support for democracy to examine the mechanisms of international pressure, I also explore directly the subset of people who support democracy but believe China is undemocratic.

This means that the CCP can use the meetings for its own purposes. And since 2008, foreign meetings have been trumpeted widely to the Chinese public, as shown in figure 2, arguably due to the public reaction following the 2008 Tibet riots. Following international criticism of the CCP’s response, Chinese netizens began an online campaign against foreign ‘bullying’, building to mass protests against Carrefour and CNN⁵⁸. State media seized on the opportunity to tie the Dalai Lama into this reaction⁵⁹, and when Nicolas Sarkozy met the Dalai in December, there were renewed calls for a boycott against Carrefour⁶⁰.

Figure 2: Proportion of Dalai Lama meetings with foreign heads of state reported in *People's Daily*, 1989-2014. (Grey bar denotes Tibet unrest)



Design

My main dependent variable is the response to a scale from 1 (completely undemocratic) - 10 (completely democratic), that asks “where would you place China today on this scale”. This question addresses the extent to which Chinese people believe that their country is democratic. There are no questions directly about national attachment, with the closest measure about national pride, which I interact with the meeting. For hypothesis 2, I examine whether people choose “democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government” or “under some circumstances, an authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one”, coding ‘1’ if they chose democracy as always preferable, and ‘0’ otherwise. A higher response indicates an increase in support for democracy. It is worth noting that ‘perceptions of democracy’ and ‘support for democracy’ are measured in different ways across different studies⁶¹. For this study I choose the simplest measures available in the *Asian Barometer* survey, to strip down the concepts of ‘support’ and ‘perception’ as much as possible. I test other measures in robustness checks.

I use the following estimation strategy, using ordered logits for perceptions and logistic regressions for support, as well as OLS models for ease of interpretation:

$$\text{Perception/Support of Democracy} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Meeting} + \beta_2 \text{National Pride} + \beta_3 \text{Pride} * \text{Meeting} + \beta_4 \text{Individual level controls} + \beta_4 \text{Provincial Fixed Effects} / \beta_4 \text{Provincial level controls} + \varepsilon_t$$

The variable ‘Meeting’ indicates whether the respondent was interviewed on or after 17 July. There are some significant differences between demographic variables in the control and treatment group (see appendix). I employ individual and group-level controls, including gender, age, education, interest in news about politics and foreign issues, a dummy for Buddhism, and whether the respondent’s location is urban or rural⁶².

Differences between the two groups in respondents’ interest in politics and foreign news in particular may correspond to differences in their knowledge about the Chinese political system. In addition to controls, I address this concern with entropy balancing to match covariates across pre- and post-meeting groups⁶³. To check further that the differences in interest in politics or foreign news between groups does not have a significant influence on knowledge about democracy in China, I analyse two placebo questions: on the levels of democracy in Japan and India. If differences in political knowledge between groups explain respondents’ diverging views about democracy in China, then we should also see significant differences in responses to these questions, which require some general knowledge about politics and foreign news. No such differences exist⁶⁴.

Finally, since differences may come from the possibility that the survey was carried out at different times in different settings, especially from differences between richer and poorer provinces, I control for provincial Purchasing Power Parity in mid-2011. I also control for whether the province contains a Tibetan minority of over 1%, as well as using provincial fixed

effects. The meeting was reported on a Sunday, so both groups contain one weekend-day and four weekdays.

Results

Perceptions of democracy

The meeting between President Obama and the Dalai Lama made Chinese citizens significantly more likely to see their country as democratic. In the five days following the meeting, the belief that China was a democracy increased by 0.565 on a 1-10 scale, significant at $p < 0.01$ (table 1:2). This effect was markedly larger for more patriotic citizens, with every increase in national pride on the 1-4 scale increasing the belief that China is a democracy by 0.418 ($p < 0.05$) (table 1:4). This translates into a 11.6 percentage point increase in those who believe China is democratic in some form. The results also hold for an alternate measure of perceptions of democracy, ‘under the current system’⁶⁵.

The meeting also strengthens people’s positive outlook about the country as a whole, including the belief that people have basic necessities⁶⁶ and freedom of speech⁶⁷, that corruption is not widespread⁶⁸, and that the economy is doing well⁶⁹. All have positive but non-significant interactive effects with national pride.

Table 1: Impact of Dalai Lama meeting on support for democracy and perceptions of democracy

	Perceptions: DL meeting only		Perceptions: Interaction of meeting and national pride		Support: DL meeting only	
	1 Ordered Logit Province- Controls	2 OLS Province- Fixed Effects	3 Ordered Logit Province- Controls	4 OLS Province- Fixed Effects	5 Logit Province- Controls	6 OLS Province- Fixed Effects
Dalai Lama meeting	0.357*** (0.106)	0.565*** (0.141)	-1.263** (0.582)	-0.928 (0.665)	0.613*** (0.202)	0.0737*** (0.0269)
National Pride			0.289*** (0.101)	0.323*** (0.115)		
DL*Pride			0.454*** (0.161)	0.418** (0.183)		
Urban	0.288*** (0.112)	0.517*** (0.144)	0.259** (0.112)	0.439*** (0.142)	-0.313 (0.194)	0.00122 (0.0275)
Birth year	-0.0170*** (0.0037)	-0.0238*** (0.0045)	-0.0173*** (0.0037)	-0.0230*** (0.0044)	-0.0208*** (0.0067)	-0.00312*** (0.001)
Education level	-0.0880*** (0.03)	-0.0779** (0.036)	-0.0954*** (0.03)	-0.0902** (0.036)	0.0377 (0.0533)	0.00846 (0.007)
Female	0.00376 (0.108)	0.196 (0.132)	-0.00909 (0.109)	0.172 (0.131)	-0.0882 (0.188)	0.000487 (0.025)
Buddhist	0.225 (0.183)	-0.0196 (0.221)	0.285 (0.182)	0.0558 (0.217)	-0.282 (0.299)	-0.0268 (0.043)
Tibetan minority	0.196 (0.171)		0.174 (0.172)		-0.163 (0.294)	
PPP	-5.24e-05*** (1.81e-05)		-6.09e-05*** (1.83e-05)		-3.48e-05 (3.24e-05)	
Interest in politics	0.0162 (0.0454)	-0.0244 (0.0548)	0.0324 (0.0457)	-0.00469 (0.054)	-0.0411 (0.0821)	-0.00397 (0.0104)
Interest in foreign news	-0.0351 (0.0505)	-0.0196 (0.0594)	-0.0215 (0.0513)	-0.00469 (0.0588)	0.320*** (0.0936)	0.0369*** (0.0113)
Constant cut1	-37.80*** (7.17)		-37.57*** (7.213)		-42.52*** (12.94)	
Constant cut2	-37.08*** (7.168)		-36.84*** (7.211)			
Constant cut3	-36.40*** (7.166)		-36.15*** (7.209)			
Constant cut4	-36.02*** (7.165)		-35.74*** (7.208)			
Constant cut5	-34.96*** (7.163)		-34.64*** (7.205)			
Constant cut6	-34.29*** (7.161)		-33.96*** (7.204)			
Constant cut7	-33.58*** (7.158)		-33.22*** (7.201)			
Constant cut8	-32.56*** (7.154)		-32.17*** (7.197)			
Constant cut9	-32.03*** (7.153)		-31.63*** (7.195)			
Constant		52.78*** (8.602)		50.29*** (8.552)		4.817*** (1.621)
N	1,212	1,212	1,207	1,207	967	967
R-squared		0.070		0.095		0.033
Number of provinces		21		21		20

***p<0.01,**p<0.05,*p<0.1

Support for democracy

The meeting between Obama and the Dalai Lama makes citizens value democracy more. In the five days following the meeting, survey respondents were significantly more likely to believe democracy is preferable to other forms of government (table 1:6), and also significantly more likely to want democracy in the future⁷⁰. The meeting increases the proportion of the population who see democracy as always preferable from 81.3% to 88.7%.

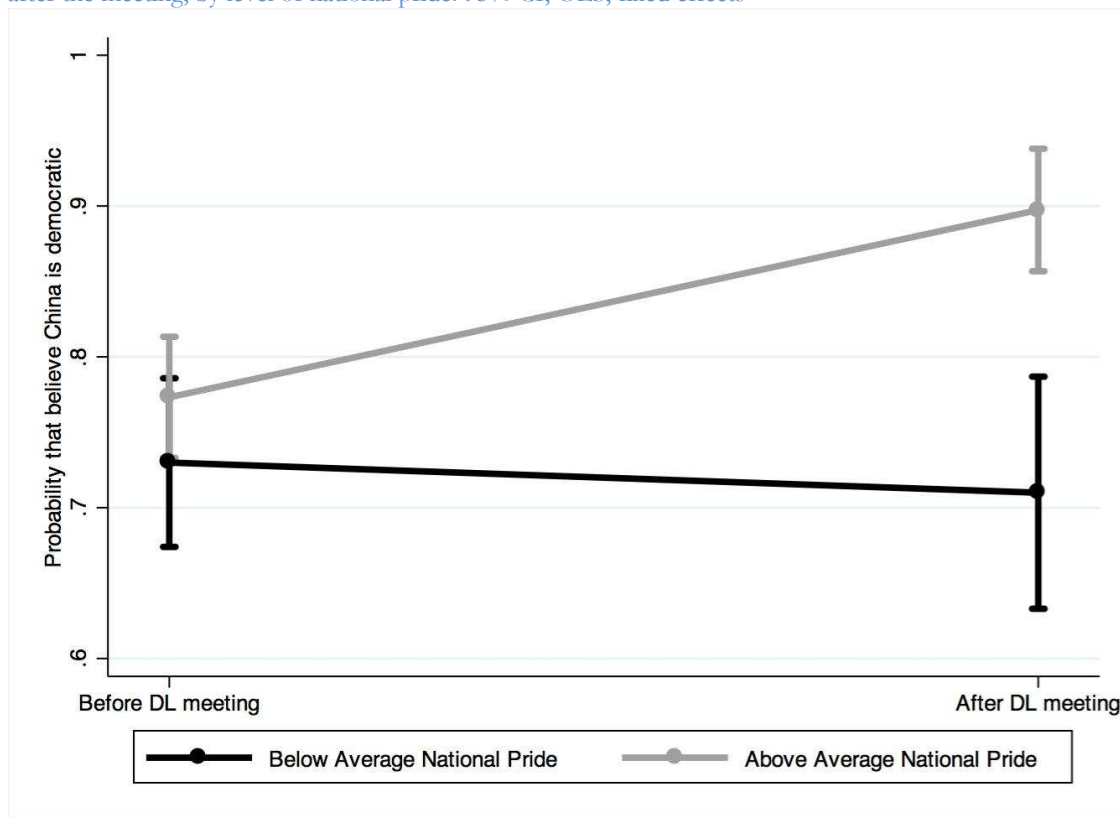
Grievances

For there to be a popular will to reform the system of government, citizens need to both want democracy, and believe that their country is not democratic. And when we analyze the subgroup of people who do prefer a democracy, we find that the percentage who believe China is undemocratic (below 5 on the scale) drops by almost half, from 9.83% to 4.95%⁷¹. The meeting also makes Chinese citizens significantly more likely to believe that their political system deserves their support⁷² and is capable of solving the country's problems⁷³; and makes them significantly more satisfied with the level of democracy in their country⁷⁴.

Table 2: Predicted Probabilities of perceived democracy on 1-10 scale, using OLS, fixed effects

	All	Above average patriotism	Below average patriotism
Perceived level of democracy: 5 days before meeting	6.63 (0.079)	6.77 (0.096)	6.37 (0.133)
Perceived level of democracy: 5 days after meeting	7.20 (0.106)	7.66 (0.132)	6.49 (0.177)
Observations	1212	769	443

Figure 3: Probability respondents believe China is democratic (5 or above on a 1-10 scale), in five days before and after the meeting, by level of national pride. 95% CI, OLS, fixed effects



Robustness

My argument implies that changes in perceptions and support for democracy may be part of the same process. Error terms in regression equations may therefore be correlated, and so I also test the two through seemingly unrelated regressions (SUR). The SUR model yields similar results to independent estimations⁷⁵. Secondly, as mentioned above, important characteristics such as age and political interest are unevenly distributed across control and treatment. As well as controlling for these characteristics, I use entropy balancing weights to balance them across groups⁷⁶. As shown in the appendix, after balancing, the difference between the pre- and post-meeting groups on the relevant covariates (including political interest) is zero. Estimation following this balancing does not substantially change the main results⁷⁷.

While the meeting was not fully reported until 17 July, some would have heard about the

announcement on the 16th. Using 16 July as a cut-off leads to, if anything, a stronger impact on perceptions of democracy⁷⁸. These results also hold over longer periods. In ten and fifteen days either side of the meeting, positive impacts on perceptions and support for democracy both remain significant⁷⁹. The interaction with national pride weakens⁸⁰.

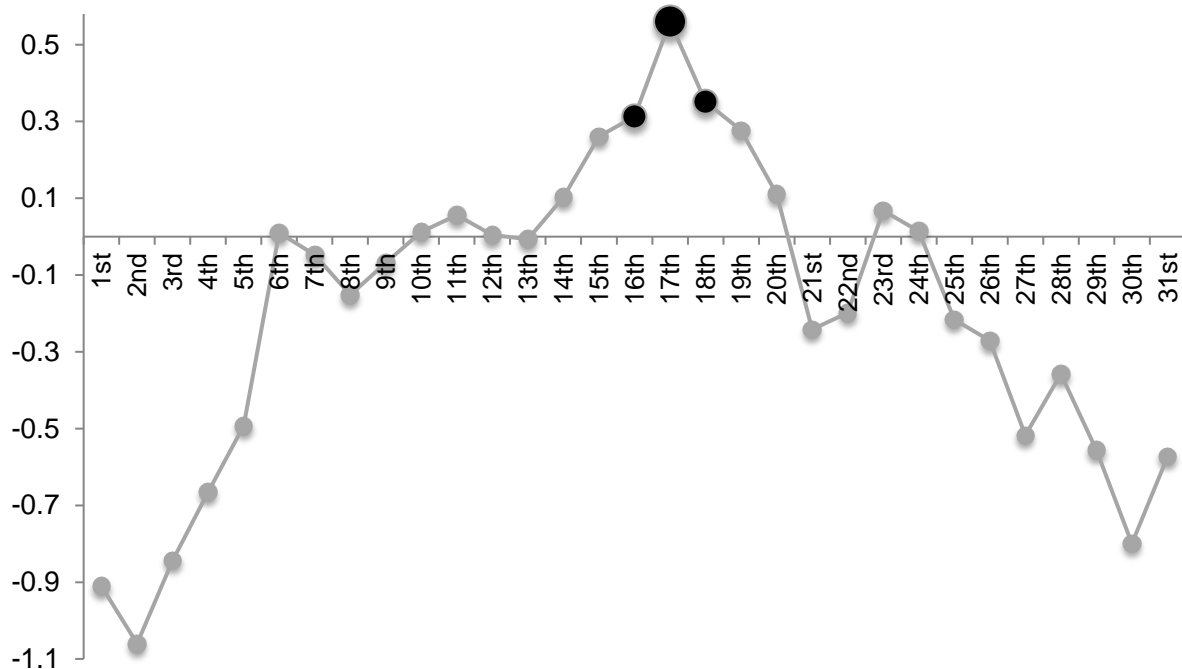
Is the effect on perceptions only limited to those who see democracy as ‘guardianship’? The survey asks people what they feel are the most essential features of democracy, and while the meeting does increase perceptions of democracy amongst the third who see it primarily for narrowing income inequality⁸¹, it has stronger effects amongst the (richer, more urban) third who believe it is about whether the people can choose their leaders⁸². There are also significant effects on those who see democracy as the legislature controlling the government⁸³, and as courts protecting people against government abuses⁸⁴.

While the meeting was the main story in Chinese media on 17 July, other news did not stop, notably a major train crash in Wenzhou on 23 July, that may have affected longer timeframes, and bomb-and-knife attacks in Hotan on 18 July. These attacks may have also served as a threat to the nation’s image, which urges caution on my findings. The attacks did not reach the newspapers until 19 July however⁸⁵. Official discussions in newspapers and news websites did not come out until 20 and 21 July⁸⁶. To show that the critical incident was the meeting, I conduct 31 separate regressions for perceptions of democracy where the treatment cut-off is a different date in July (15 days either side), for those with above average national pride. If the meeting is most important there should be a peak around 17 July. Figure 4 shows that as expected, 17 July is a critical point, with the only highly significant difference ($p < 0.01$) from zero coming when the treatment is on that day.

The graph suggests that the Hotan attacks were less important than the Dalai Lama meeting, with positive perceptions of democracy peaking before the incident. Indeed, controlling for

treatments on the 17th and the 19th, the meeting remains significant, while the attacks have a non-significant negative effect⁸⁷. The same holds for support for democracy⁸⁸. Given previous evidence of terrorist attacks engendering more authoritarian attitudes⁸⁹, increased support for democratic values over this period suggests that the attack had little effect on public attitudes.

Figure 4: Coefficients for OLS regression (FE) 15 days either side of date in July: for whether China is democratic or not (for those above average national pride). Black dots are statistically significant increases ($p < 0.1$ for small and $p < 0.01$ for large).



Are people more concerned about giving negative evaluations of the regime after the Dalai Lama meeting? Using a similar design, Jiang and Yang find that a 2006 purge in Shanghai made residents more likely to overtly support the government – something they put down to preference falsification⁹⁰. It is conceivable that the meeting increases citizens’ awareness of freedom of speech, and therefore makes them more likely to falsify their political beliefs. In the survey, respondents can choose not to give a definitive answer - something we might expect more if respondents are concerned about hiding their true opinions. There are no systematic

differences between the control and treatment groups in use of these options however⁹¹. Respondents are also no less likely to admit that they have previously been involved in collective action after the meeting⁹² – behaviour that is arguably even more sensitive than providing negative regime evaluations⁹³.

On the other hand, state media reports of the 2011 meeting were accompanied by glowing portrayals of the prosperity of Tibet⁹⁴, which (rather than the meeting itself) may have pushed people to feel more positively about their political system. The barrage of propaganda might also make citizens more likely to feel the need to match the media voices and ‘cheerlead’ to the interviewer positive views about their country; views that they might not actually believe⁹⁵. While both accounts are plausible, the ‘positive’ propaganda was not unique to the Dalai Lama meeting, and indeed pales in comparison to other times in the month. As an example taken at random, on 9 July, front-page *People’s Daily* stories included praise for China’s military progress⁹⁶, and news of excellent GDP growth⁹⁷. Yet as figure 4 shows, this positive propaganda had little effect on perceptions of democracy.

It is conceivable that there was something special about the propaganda around the Dalai Lama meeting that made people more likely to cheerlead for their political system at this time, rather than actually come to believe that the system is better. There is no convincing theoretical explanation for why this would be so after the meeting but not at other times, and especially hard to explain why they would be *more* likely to say they support democracy. However, a recurring issue with this kind of survey is that it is hard to distinguish respondents’ true beliefs and their efforts to persuade the interviewer. Future use of endorsement or list experiments, or incentives to provide truthful answers might help in follow-up studies⁹⁸.

The Domestic Dalai Lama Effect

This study provides the first evidence to show how, in real time, international human rights pressure affects citizens' beliefs about their political system. I find that meetings between the US President and the Dalai Lama make the Chinese public significantly more likely to believe their country is democratically run. This conclusion is complicated by the fact that Chinese citizens have a variety of conceptions of what democracy is. The meeting made some believe that their government was doing a better job in responding to and looking after its people, and others more likely to believe that the CCP submits to checks and balances. At a minimum, however they view democracy, hearing about the human rights community's pressure on their country appears to make the Chinese public more satisfied with the way that their government interacts with its citizens.

The results fit a theory that Chinese citizens affirm that their nation is democratically governed in order to protect their collective self-esteem. However, using the measures provided by the *Asian Barometer*, it is hard to prove that defensiveness is the primary mechanism. Future experimental work would help to demonstrate that this is indeed the case. In experimental studies, scholars can use response timings to show that when engaging in motivated reasoning, respondents take longer to respond to survey questions⁹⁹. Using survey items that compare the defensiveness argument to plausible alternatives would also help directly test the mechanisms involved.

Yet even in the absence of these measures, other observable implications do receive substantial support. The effect of the meeting on perceptions of democracy is only dependent on people's existing level of national pride, with no other significant interaction effects. This indicates that people's attachment to their nation is the key variable, providing support for the theory that the

meetings pose a threat to the status of the nation. The effect of the meeting on perceptions is not dependent on people's confidence in the central government, suggesting people are not cued by partisan political identities¹⁰⁰. The meeting effect is also only slightly stronger for those with greater interest in foreign news, perhaps surprisingly, since these should be the people more likely to read about news of the meeting¹⁰¹. However, we cannot read too much into this finding, since it may be that those with interests in foreign affairs have other characteristics that make them more open to foreign criticism. Moreover, interest in foreign news alone does not necessarily cover the extent of people's ability or willingness to find out about the Dalai Lama and his activities, especially since the story was front page news in China.

The results do not appear to be driven by a 'rally' effect: the meeting leads to no more authoritarian attitudes, nor increase in patriotism¹⁰². One final possibility is that negative views of the US increase support for a 'Chinese' version of democracy, rather than a Western conception of checks and balances – and therefore people become more likely to believe that China is democratic. There is little evidence that this is the case¹⁰³. Instead of changing their views about the definition of democracy, members of the public appeared to become more positive about their country overall. Citizens judged the economy, levels of corruption, access to food and freedom of speech to all be better after the meeting, suggesting that even on areas unrelated to Tibet or human rights, people looked to bolster their positive opinions of their country.

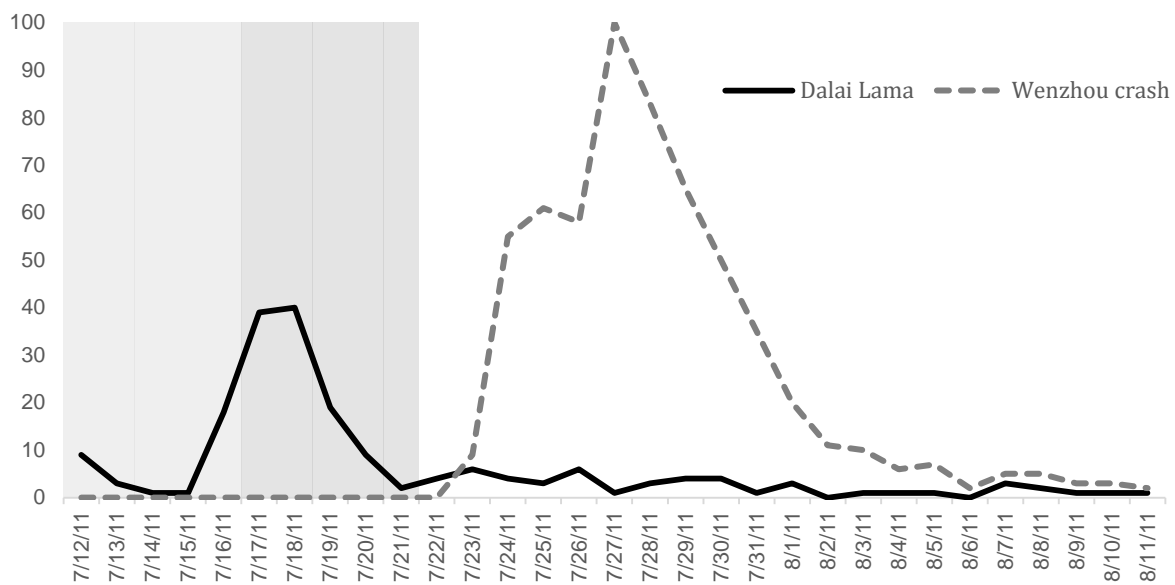
At the same time, the meeting made Chinese citizens more likely to say that they support democratic rule. The reasons for this are more difficult to discern. One plausible reason is that for citizens to successfully boost their self-esteem by appealing to their country's level of democracy, they also need to believe that democracy is a positive quality for a country to have. This should be examined further, but is supported by the finding that the meeting increased

support for democracy in those higher in national pride¹⁰⁴. This suggests that as with perceptions, attachment to the nation plays an important role.

Does the 'Dalai Lama effect' persist? This is difficult to dismiss without a long-term longitudinal study. However, as shown in figure 1, public attention to incidents like the Dalai Lama meeting is fleeting, and the effect may only exist when the incidents are salient. As Zaller's influential (1992) account points out, public opinion is unstable, and determined by whichever issues are most salient in people's minds. In this view, as the meeting fades from the public's awareness, its effects on perceptions of democracy should also fall away¹⁰⁵. There are a number of other local, national, and international events that may become more salient and influence the Chinese public's view of their political system, gradually reducing the positive impact of the meeting. As an example, figure 5 demonstrates that the Wenzhou train crash quickly replaced the meeting in the public eye, right after the five-day period, a crash that may well affect people's views of the competency of their government, and reduce the beneficial impacts of the meeting (not something I have space to address in this study).

It is the aggregate effect of foreign pressure that is important. The Dalai Lama meeting is only one example of many instances of foreign pressure discussed in the Chinese media. While many may not receive the same attention, the level of foreign pressure and its reporting domestically means that even if the effects only last as long as pressure is salient, there is quite enough exposure throughout the years to ensure these effects remain high.

Figure 5: Google searches for 'Dalai Lama' and 'Wenzhou crash' in July/August 2011. Shaded area denotes period analysed in this study



Democratization in China

Decisions made by world leaders can have significant implications for how Chinese citizens consider their domestic circumstances. The literature on authoritarian resilience and public beliefs about democracy in China does not examine the role played by these external dynamics, placing continued support for the CCP on domestic institutional and economic factors¹⁰⁶. Building on recent calls to better understand the so-called ‘second-image reversed’ in Chinese politics¹⁰⁷, I show that one important influence on citizens’ perceptions of their political system comes from the international human rights community. Rather than being unnerved by foreign pressure, authorities may benefit from allowing the public to hear information that is critical of the regime.

Foreign pressure over human rights in China may have, perversely, helped cement the CCP's ability to resist public calls for democratization. The literature on the failures of human rights pressure on China has put them down to China's growing power to resist external actors¹⁰⁸, or the lack of alignment between foreign efforts and the priorities of the domestic population¹⁰⁹. This paper suggests that in one-party regimes like China, external pressure may have itself affected the priorities of the domestic population, making people less likely to believe that reforms need to be made to the political system, and therefore less likely to call for those reforms. This demonstrates that the human rights community plays a more complex impact in influencing citizen preferences than has otherwise been theorized. Studies that emphasize the role international efforts play in promoting liberal and democratic norms are incomplete if they do not address how these efforts affect citizens' perceptions of their own political system.

There also needs to be more attention in models of human rights and democracy promotion to how authoritarian regimes can use and manipulate international efforts for their own domestic purposes. By portraying foreign democracy promotion or meetings with dissidents as deliberate attacks on the country, the regime may be able to successfully engender a defensive reaction from its citizens and bolster its own support. The CCP has launched an extensive propaganda campaign to vilify the Dalai Lama¹¹⁰, and since Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, state media has begun to report more on foreign support for other political prisoners and dissidents in China. International condemnation of crackdowns on activists has been featured heavily in Chinese media¹¹¹, and tied closely to a narrative of Western attempts to bring down China¹¹². More work is needed to examine how the findings for the Dalai Lama extend to foreign pressure over other dissidents and human rights violations, in China and beyond.

¹ Wang, "Public Support for Democracy".

² Dickson, "Dictator's Dilemma".

³ Lu and Shi, "Battle of Ideas".

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- 4 Inglehart and Welzel, "Modernization"; Pye, "Mandarin and Cadre"; Nathan and Shi, "Cultural Requisites for Democracy"; Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism*; Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience"; Truex, "Making Autocracy Work"; Chen et al., "Authoritarian Responsiveness".
- 5 See, for example, Krintenbrink, D.J. (2011) "U.S. Policy Toward the People's Republic of China". *State Department*, 13 April.
- 6 Author's database. Data available upon request.
- 7 Nathan and Shi, "Cultural Requisites for Democracy"; Inglehart and Welzel, "Modernization"; Wang, "Public Support for Democracy"; Han, et al., "Who Supports Democracy?"; Wu et al. "China's Middle Class".
- 8 Wang, "Public Support for Democracy".
- 9 Chen, *A middle class without democracy*; Nathan, "Puzzle of Chinese Middle Class".
- 10 Chen and Lu, "Democratization"; Tang et al., "Attitudes of Chinese Middle Class".
- 11 Smith, "Legitimate Grievances".
- 12 Dickson, "Dictator's Dilemma".
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 Lu and Shi, "Battle of Ideas".
- 16 The view espoused by liberal elites like Yu Keping, "Democracy is a Good Thing".
- 17 Mao, *People's Democratic Dictatorship*.
- 18 Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism*. Wang, "Public Support for Democracy".
- 19 Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience".
- 20 Truex, "Making Autocracy Work".
- 21 Chen et al., "Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness".
- 22 Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience". See Truex "Consultative Authoritarianism".
- 23 Hyde and Lamb, "Microlevel Consequences".
- 24 McEntire et al., "Human Rights Organizations".
- 25 Wallace, "International Law and Torture"; Chilton, "Influence of Human Rights Agreements".
- 26 Davis et al., "Makers and Shapers"; Ausderan, "Human Rights Perceptions".
- 27 Bush and Jamal, "Anti-Americanism".
- 28 Marinov, "International Actors".
- 29 Pan and Xu, "China's Ideological Spectrum":1.
- 30 See Appendix.
- 31 "Statement of US support for democratic dissidents". *White House Press Secretary*, 1 May 2008.
- 32 "Reagan meets 96 Soviet dissidents". *Los Angeles Times*, 31 May 1988.
- 33 Sharansky, Natan. (2008) "The dissident choice". *Los Angeles Times*, 24 November.
- 34 "Readout of the President's meeting with his Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama". *White House*, 21 February 2014.
- 35 "China opposes Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama". *Global Times*, 16 July 2011.
- 36 "The President's meeting with his Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama". *White House Press Office*, 17 July 2011.
- 37 "Barack Obama meets the Dalai Lama at the White House". *Guardian*, 16 July 2011.
- 38 In Pakistan for example: "Obama meets with Dalai Lama despite Chinese opposition". *Express Tribune*, 17 July 2011.
- 39 Chinese time: "China calls on US to cancel Dalai Lama meeting", *Reuters*, 15 July 2011.
- 40 "China opposes Obama's meeting", *Global Times*.
- 41 "Trying to cover up interference". *People's Daily*, 17 July 2011.
- 42 "Obama meets Dalai Lama". *Global Times*, 17 July 2011.
- 43 The y-axis is a comparative indicator of search volume. A score of 61 for 达赖 (Dalai) on 18 July compares to 36 for 胡锦涛 (Hu).
- 44 Davis et al., "Makers and Shapers".
- 45 Tajfel, *Differentiation*.
- 46 "As long as Tibet is stable, Dalai is just a pawn". *Global Times*, 18 July 2011.
- 47 *ibid.*
- 48 "Obama meets the Dalai, China expresses indignation". *Global Times*, 18 July 2011.
- 49 *ibid.*
- 50 de Hoog, "Social Identity Threats".
- 51 Sinclair and Kunda, "Reactions to Black Professional".
- 52 Branscombe et al. "Intragroup and Intergroup Evaluation".
- 53 Sherman et al. "Group as Resource"; Lüders et al., "Between the Lines"; Spencer-Rodgers et al., "Power of Affirming".
- 54 Mueller, *War, Presidents*; Dinesen and Jæger, "Effects of Terror".
- 55 Davis and Silver, "Civil Liberties vs. Security".
- 56 Skocpol, "9/11 and Terror".
- 57 Castano et al., "Who may enter?"
- 58 Denis-Remis, et al., "2008 Anti-French Demonstrations".
- 59 "China's foreign diplomats and consulates are attacked by Tibetan independence elements". *People's Daily*, 22 March 2008.
- 60 "Chinese web users give Sarkozy a roasting". *Observer*, 12 May 2008.
- 61 For example Wang, "Public Support for Democracy".

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- ⁶² Not including household income, as the number who refused to answer is high, and significantly reduces observations. Including this variable makes little difference.
- ⁶³ Hainmuller, "Entropy Balancing".
- ⁶⁴ Appendix table 1.
- ⁶⁵ Appendix table 5.
- ⁶⁶ Appendix table 13.
- ⁶⁷ Appendix table 10.
- ⁶⁸ Appendix table 11.
- ⁶⁹ Appendix table 12.
- ⁷⁰ Appendix table 15.
- ⁷¹ Appendix table 21.
- ⁷² Appendix table 6.
- ⁷³ Appendix table 8.
- ⁷⁴ Appendix table 7.
- ⁷⁵ Appendix table 1.
- ⁷⁶ Hainmueller, "Entropy Balancing".
- ⁷⁷ Appendix table 9.
- ⁷⁸ Appendix table 22.
- ⁷⁹ Appendix table 3.
- ⁸⁰ Appendix table 4.
- ⁸¹ Appendix table 19.
- ⁸² Appendix table 19.
- ⁸³ Appendix table 20.
- ⁸⁴ Appendix table 20.
- ⁸⁵ "Xinjiang's Hotan police station attacked by a mob". *Xinhua*, 19 July 2011.
- ⁸⁶ "14 rioters shot down in Xinjiang attack". *China Daily*, 20 July 2011.
- ⁸⁷ Controlling for both interactions with national pride, the meeting and patriotism interaction remains positive and significant, while the attacks and patriotism interaction is negative and non-significant. Appendix table 16.
- ⁸⁸ Appendix table 17,
- ⁸⁹ Davis and Silver, "Civil Liberties vs. Security"; Merolla, *Democracy at Risk*.
- ⁹⁰ Jiang and Yang, "Lying or believing?"
- ⁹¹ Neither for support nor perceptions. Appendix table 23.
- ⁹² For 'attending a protest march or demonstration'. Appendix table 24.
- ⁹³ See King et al. "Censorship in China"
- ⁹⁴ "Deep care: a great leap forward". *People's Daily*, 17 July 2011.
- ⁹⁵ Bullock et al. "Partisan Bias".
- ⁹⁶ "Actively promote the military academy education". *People's Daily*, 9 July 2011.
- ⁹⁷ "First half-year GDP grew by 9.6%". *People's Daily*, 9 July 2011.
- ⁹⁸ Bullock et al. "Partisan Bias".
- ⁹⁹ For example, Schaffner and Roche, "Misinformation and motivated reasoning".
- ¹⁰⁰ Appendix table 25.
- ¹⁰¹ Appendix table 25.
- ¹⁰² Appendix table 26.
- ¹⁰³ Appendix table 27.
- ¹⁰⁴ Appendix table 14.
- ¹⁰⁵ Zaller, "Nature and Origin"
- ¹⁰⁶ Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience"; Li, "CCP's Resilient Authoritarianism"; Gandhi and Przeworski, "Authoritarian Institutions".
- ¹⁰⁷ Weiss, "Popular Protest"; Gourevitch, "Second Image Reversed".
- ¹⁰⁸ See Kinzelbach "Resisting Human Rights"; Keck and Sikkink, "Activists Without Borders":118.
- ¹⁰⁹ Kent, "China, United Nations".
- ¹¹⁰ "Tibet ordered to ramp up propaganda education against Dalai Lama". *Associated Press*, 3 April 2008.
- ¹¹¹ Western criticism of the arrest of activist Xu Zhiyong was featured in media accounts of his arrest: "Xu Zhiyong sentenced to 4 years". *Global Times*, 27 January 2014.
- ¹¹² "Supporting Chinese dissidents: the West's conspiracy". *Global Times*, 28 January 2014.

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