

Citizens and Condemnation: Strategic Uses of International Human Rights Pressure in Authoritarian States

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Abstract

Governments with strict control over the information that their citizens hear from foreign sources are regular targets of human rights pressure, but we know little about how this information matters in the domestic realm. I argue that authoritarian regimes strategically pass on certain types of external pressure to their public to “internationalize” human rights violations, making citizens view human rights in terms of defending their nation internationally rather than in terms of individual violations, and making them more likely to be satisfied with their government’s behavior. I find strong support for this model through statistical analysis of Chinese state media reports of external human rights pressure and a survey experiment on Chinese citizens’ responses to pressure on women’s rights. This analysis demonstrates that authoritarian regimes may be able to manipulate international human rights diplomacy to help them retain the support of their population while suppressing their human rights.

Keywords

China, human rights, intergovernmental relations

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In its annual report on China in January 2012, Human Rights Watch (HRW) called China an “authoritarian one-party state that imposes sharp curbs on freedom of expression, association, and religion.” Instead of censoring these denunciations, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) mouthpiece, the *People’s Daily*, devoted a surprising amount of attention to the report and reserved a large proportion of space for the organization’s condemnations of the CCP’s respect for human rights. An article on the 27th detailed HRW’s admonishments of forced relocation in Tibet, directly quoting the observation that “80% of the population of Tibet—including all herdsmen and nomads—were moved elsewhere” (*People’s Daily*, 2012b; 2012). Another article the next day discussed the report’s criticisms of forced confessions, failures to respect defendants’ rights, and the widespread use of torture (*People’s Daily*, 2012a; 2012).

None of the responses shied away from informing the public of HRW’s detailed criticisms of the Chinese government’s policies on sensitive issues—criticisms that it is hard to imagine Chinese citizens would have heard about through other sources, given the limited international media coverage. Despite an extensive censorship system and Internet firewall, the CCP has regularly appeared to actively pass these kinds of otherwise unremarkable foreign exposures of the country’s human rights situation on for public consumption. As I demonstrate in this piece, the *People’s Daily* has, between 1979 and 2011, reported at least 228 separate instances of international pressure over human rights in China in its pages, many as unremarkable as that from HRW.

Given that autocrats are hardly renowned for their willingness to entertain criticism, this behavior is something of a puzzle. What exactly are they choosing to pass on to their citizens and why? How do these citizens respond?

Understanding the impact of this critical information on the domestic public is especially relevant in authoritarian states, not just because of the peculiar control that leaders have over the information, but because these countries are more often than not the target of public invocations from the international community. In 2016, for example, eight of the nine countries targeted for country-specific draft resolutions by the United Nations Human Rights Council were countries with “not free” media,¹ five of which were in the world’s worst eight offenders. For China, since Deng Xiaoping’s government cracked down on protestors on June 4, 1989, the international human rights community has singled out the country for intense and very public scrutiny. China has faced economic and military sanctions, as well as regular condemnation from Western leaders, parliaments, media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the UN (Foot, 2000).

And even in these more authoritarian states, public opinion can have a powerful effect on whether the government chooses to put in place more liberal or conservative human rights policies. For example, perhaps unexpectedly, the Chinese government has taken steps in recent years to control its use of the death penalty, leading to a 75% decline in convictions from 2002 to 2013 (*The Diplomat*, 2014). According to Kinzelbach (2014), public uproar at high-profile wrongful executions has been the driving force behind these changes. She points to the case of Nie Shubin, who was exonerated of the killing of Kang Juhua when another man confessed his guilt—10 years after Nie was executed. The public outcry, media coverage, and mobilization of the legal community sparked a chain of events that led to reforms in criminal justice policy.

Making a target country's citizens more aware and concerned that their government is abusing their human rights is one important means by which international activism helps domestic movements pressurize governments to change their policies (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Risse, Ropp, & Sikkink, 1999). Hendrix and Wong (2013) argue that foreign naming and shaming will be most effective in authoritarian states, precisely because in such an information-scarce environment, foreign condemnation will have a comparatively large impact in letting citizens and activists know that their rights are being violated. But target governments are also actors when facing foreign pressure, and authoritarian rulers can take steps to manipulate any information about pressure that reaches their people. And scholars have very little understanding of whether, and in what form, international pressure actually reaches citizens living under authoritarian rule. Without a full account of what actually happens to information about international pressure in autocracies, and how the information affects citizens' willingness to oppose oppressive government policies, we are missing an important part of the puzzle of how international actors can affect autocratic behavior.²

I assume that authoritarian regimes have some control over information coming in from abroad and want their public to hear only information that does not reduce their support for the government. Many instances of human rights pressure will have the expected effect of increasing citizens' dissatisfaction with the conditions in their country (Davis, Murdie, & Steinmetz, 2012) and the target regime will, therefore, censor information about that pressure. However, when they hear pressure that looks like it is deliberately targeting their nation's geopolitical standing, citizens will consider the human rights issue in terms of defending this standing, rather than in regard to the rights violations themselves. This will make them more likely to believe that human rights are good enough in their country and less likely to support efforts to change their government's behavior. This threat will be particularly

salient when pressure comes from a hostile geopolitical rival and the government will actively pass on this information to its public.

I find support for this “internationalizing” model of human rights.³ Not only does Chinese state media report a surprisingly high amount of sensitive foreign pressure on to its public, but it also primarily does so when that pressure comes from the United States, China’s major geopolitical opponent, especially when tensions are high. Articles actively link the criticism to this geopolitical competition. A survey experiment shows that reading pressure from the United States over women’s rights makes respondents significantly more likely to believe that those rights are respected well enough in China and significantly less willing to sign petitions to call for improvements. These effects can be eliminated when people are informed that pressure explicitly targets the Chinese government, rather than the country as a whole. Pressure from a neutral source, the African Union (AU), however, sees no effects in either direction.

This study provides a plausible account for why authoritarian regimes might continue to maintain broad public support for their behavior in the face of international opprobrium and shows that, in China at least, 30 years of foreign efforts may have contributed to citizens holding fewer grievances over their human rights.

Authoritarian States and Foreign Pressure

How do authoritarian regimes deal with information about foreign pressure on their human rights? For traditional theories of authoritarian politics, information that criticizes the regime is damaging for the country’s leaders as it will make dissent public and increase the likelihood that others will also become emboldened to oppose the regime (Anderson, Regan, & Ostergard, 2002; Kuran, 1991). In these accounts, the goal is to “make the sum total of available public expression more favorable to those in power” (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013, p. 2) and censor any dissenting voices, domestic or foreign. According to Freedom House, part of what makes regimes authoritarian is that they “censor or punish criticism of the state.”⁴

This is also a premise of theories of how transnational activism and international pressure can influence human rights.⁵ The greater the negative information about a government that reaches the public from outside actors, the more likely people will be to support efforts to change government policies.⁶ As foreign pressure tells people that their country does not respect human rights, and denounces it for doing so, their grievances about human rights conditions in their country increase after hearing it. As grievances grow, this will “empower and legitimate the claims of domestic opposition groups

against norm-violating governments” (Risse et al., 1999, p. 5), mobilizing them against the regime. Davis and colleagues (2012) and Ausderan (2014) demonstrate that, cross-nationally, foreign shaming does indeed make a country’s citizens less likely to believe their government respects human rights the following year.⁷

Powerful repressive and censorship apparatuses mean that authoritarian regimes like the CCP can exert strong control over this information. While concerned “netizens” can relatively easily uncover foreign human rights pressure through virtual private networks or access to English language websites (Roberts & Stewart, n.d.; Shirk, 2011; Timmons, 2015), efforts to completely censor some prominent human rights issues, such as the Nobel Peace Prize given to Liu Xiaobo in 2010, demonstrate that authorities can often successfully prevent the majority of their citizens from hearing any offending foreign pressure.

And as Table 1 shows, the intense shaming of the 1990s had little effect on Chinese citizens, who in 2001 had the second most positive perceptions of human rights conditions of the countries surveyed.⁸

However, recent studies of authoritarian politics in China have indicated that the regime takes a more sophisticated approach to censorship. King et al.’s (2013) influential analysis finds that, contrary to traditional theories, the CCP does permit social media criticism of the government as long as this criticism does not promote social mobilization. The implicit assumption is that the costs to the CCP of carrying out censorship are greater than the potential damage done from allowing the public to hear criticism. Jones-Rooy (n.d.), Roberts and Stewart (n.d.), and Chen and Xu (2017) have argued that with the growth of the Internet, many citizens of authoritarian countries are already aware of some high-profile news stories, including prominent foreign criticism of human rights in their own country. If state media does not mention this criticism, it may lose credibility, making it less effective as a trusted propaganda tool. Preemptively addressing the issue in state media avoids this risk and allows the regime to frame the discussion the way it wants. In this account, the more “high-profile” the foreign pressure, the more likely it should be reported in Chinese media.

A second approach from the literature on authoritarian resilience argues that autocrats may permit public protests or social media criticism because learning about public discontent provides a way for them to gain information about that discontent before it spirals into large-scale mobilization (Lorentzen, 2013, 2014). Others have proposed that permitting criticism also signals that the government is willing to listen to citizens’ concerns, making rulers appear more responsive (Plantan & Cairns, 2017). It is not clear how this would extend to foreign criticism as leaders presumably have little need to signal

Table 1. Human Rights Perceptions 2000 to 2004.

Country	Respect for human rights in country (% say positive—% say negative ^a)	Total Newsweek and <i>Economist</i> articles on human rights in country from 1990 to 2000 ^b
1. Canada	66	4
2. China	64	53
3. Philippines	58	8
4. Sweden	50	5
5. United States	48	72
—	—	—
—	—	—
27. Algeria	-27	15
28. Zimbabwe	-33	20
29. Macedonia	-36	8
30. Turkey	-41	43
31. Argentina	-55	8

a. Countries in the World Values Survey, from 2000 to 2004. “How much respect is there for individual human rights nowadays in [. . .]” (www.worldvaluessurvey.org). b. Proxy for international attention on human rights.

responsiveness to foreign critics and will already be aware of the criticism before passing it on to a domestic audience.

Similarly, Chen and Xu (2017) argue that rulers may allow their citizens to freely discuss sensitive issues if they believe that enough of the population already support government policy. In this way, potential opponents may find out that a large proportion of the public hold views that conflict with their own, dissuading them from collective action. But while this desire to increase the preponderance of proregime voices might explain why a regime would report heavily on foreign praise for human rights in their country, it makes the decision to allow critical foreign voices to enter the public discourse appear even more puzzling.

A final, more duplicitous, possibility is that permitting the public to hear human rights criticism may be an underhand way for elites to criticize their own country’s leadership. If true, media should primarily report foreign criticism when the propaganda chief is from a political faction different from the current leader. In China, in recent years, for example, there have been reported tensions between Xi Jinping and his propaganda chief, Liu Yunshan, an ally of former leader Jiang Zemin.

A Theory of Citizens' Responses to International Pressure

A common thread in these arguments is that criticism itself is damaging for the regime. This damage may not be great enough to worry about, or may be outweighed by the benefits from being seen to report it, but the assumption is that all else being equal, rulers would rather their population not hear disparaging remarks about their rule. In this view, citizens are rational Bayesian updaters (Gerber & Green, 1999), taking in information from credible sources that human rights are not well respected in their country and downgrading their views about human rights conditions. They will then be more likely to support domestic activism and challenge their government over these conditions.

But citizens are not always rational actors. They bring their own biases and motivations, which may influence how they respond to new information about their country. If we are to fully understand the impacts of international pressure, we need to examine how individuals actually respond to critical information and what this means for their support for their government's actions. Studies of transnational persuasion have shown that people may not act in a Bayesian manner, but instead rely on their own partisan political identities to cue how they interpret foreign comments (Bush & Jamal, 2014; Dragojlovic, 2015; Hayes & Guardino, 2011). Marinov (n.d.), for example, shows that disparaging foreign comments about democracy in Turkey could downgrade people's beliefs about freedoms in the country—but only if those comments were supported by their partisan political elites.

However, in autocracies like China with few political parties, partisan political identities are not the clear identity markers that they might be in the United States or Turkey. Pan and Xu (n.d.) argue that there is little clear political polarization in the country due to the lack of political opposition and, as a result, the ideological spectrum in the country “does not delineate a cleavage between those who support regime policies and those who oppose them” (p. 1). Instead, the main source of group identity is the nation: In the 2012 World Values Survey, 98% of Chinese citizens said that they saw themselves as part of the Chinese nation, while 90% said they were proud of their country.⁹ According to Rosen and Fewsmith (2001), nationalist sentiments are some of the main ways through which citizens express their opinions in public in China.

In countries like China, people's attachment to their nation is likely to be a major factor in determining their response to foreign pressure. According to social identity theory, part of a person's self-concept comes from his or her membership in this kind of social group (Tajfel, 1978). The theory argues that

people wish to maintain a positive image of their group in relation to other groups to maintain their self-esteem (Abrahms & Hogg, 1988; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986), such that “the better one’s group looks in comparison with other groups, the more status the group gains, and the more self-esteem it can provide for its members” (Morton, Postmes, Haslam, & Hornsey, 2009, p. 661).

People are therefore motivated to defend their group against anything that might threaten that positive comparison (Sherman & Kim, 2005; Steele, 1988). One direct way in which the group’s image (and its members’ self-esteem) may be threatened is through information that frames the group in a bad light. International pressure on one’s nation’s human rights situation may do precisely this, by suggesting that the nation does not respect human rights, and that other countries or organizations disapprove of its actions.

In this case, when citizens hear criticism of their country’s treatment of its minority groups, for example, this may evoke not just concerns about minority rights, but also concerns that the country is being denigrated internationally. To defend their country (and their self-worth) from this kind of threat, group members have a number of options. One way is through defensive biases in how they process the threatening information (Sherman & Cohen, 2002). According to the theory of motivated reasoning, people do not just look to form accurate opinions, but also opinions that fit a particular self-interested goal, such as maintaining a positive self-image (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Extensive scholarship has shown that people undergo “biased assimilation” of new information to fit it to their partisan prior beliefs (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Kunda, 1990; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979) and the prevalent beliefs of their social group (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

Others have shown how people are “emotionally” motivated to interpret new information in ways that defends their group’s image (Green et al., 2004; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015; Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Steele, 1988). On hearing information that threatens the positive image of their social group, people disregard any desire to form accurate opinions, and instead reject the information (De Hoog, 2013). If the threatening information comes from outsiders, people may be even more likely to reject it (Hornsey, Trembath, & Gunthorpe, 2004). This effect appears to be limited to critical information (people are no more likely to believe praise from ingroups than outgroups), leading Hornsey and colleagues (2004) to argue that group-based criticisms are a “unique subset of persuasive messages in the sense that they directly threaten the (collective) self-concept” (p. 501).

Patriots rejecting out of hand information that criticizes their nation is, perhaps, not surprising. However, importantly, studies have also shown that

on encountering information that threatens their preexisting beliefs or group image, people do not merely reject the information, but also spend longer time processing it, taking time to develop counterarguments (De Hoog, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006). De Hoog (2013) shows that on reading a passage that criticized their social group, people who identified with that group perceived the information to be more threatening and spent considerably longer time reading the passage. By developing these counterarguments, people may develop stronger opinions in the opposite direction, in what is known as a “boomerang” or “backfire” effect. A number of authors have shown that upon encountering information incongruent with their prior opinions, people may hold their original belief even more strongly (Lodge & Taber, 2000; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Nyhan, Reifler, & Udan, 2013; Redlawsk, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Schaffner and Roche (2016) find, for example, that Republicans surveyed following news of the drop in the unemployment rate in 2012 believed that the level of unemployment was higher than those surveyed before the news.

This backfire effect may be particularly strong when people encounter information that directly threatens their social group. Trevors, Muis, Pekrun, Sinatra, and Winne (2016) find that people feel confusion and frustration when they encounter information that challenges a valued part of their identity, and that the backfire effect in response to this challenging information comes as a direct result of these negative emotions. For human rights pressure, this implies that when citizens hear that their country has been denounced over its human rights conditions, if they feel the need to defend against the threat to their nation’s image, then they may develop counterarguments, thinking through reasons for why human rights are in fact well respected at home, and as a result become more likely to believe that human rights are indeed well respected.

When do people respond to critical information as rational actors, and when does pressure backfire in this manner? Nyhan and Reifler (2015) acknowledge that the backfire effect in response to the correction of misperceptions is itself rare and has only been documented on certain issues, what they call the most “affect-laden” issues. It is only on controversial topics that have come to symbolically represent bipartisan competition in the United States, like the war in Iraq (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010) or the Affordable Care Act (Nyhan, Reifler, & Ubel, 2013)—topics that people see in terms of their partisan disagreements, not the content of the issues themselves—that partisans strengthen their misperceptions. On matters less clearly linked to this competition, people generally act in a Bayesian fashion (Wood & Porter, 2016).

In the same way, I argue that in most cases citizens do indeed interpret human rights pressure in terms of the human rights issue being discussed.

They respond as rational Bayesian updaters to the information that human rights are not well respected, becoming more likely to believe that those rights need to be improved. However, when there is a salient link between the pressure and citizens' sense of their country's standing in geopolitical competition, citizens consider the issue not just in terms of the content of the human rights issues themselves, the individual injustices or repression, but also in terms of a threat to their nation's standing. This should be especially likely when the pressure appears to be part of a deliberate attempt to denigrate the nation. If this occurs, then the sense of threat to their own self-worth is activated, and so is the need to fight back. They develop counterarguments against this threat and, as a result, become more positive about their country's human rights.

One way in which this sense of geopolitical competition will be particularly salient is if human rights pressure comes from a source that is a major geopolitical rival. As Rousseau (1999) shows, people's attention to relative versus absolute gains increases significantly when they are considering states that are economic or military opponents. Pressure on the Soviet Union from the United States would have been intimately tied to relative standings in Cold War competition, in a way that pressure from Cuba would not. Pressure from a geopolitical rival like the United States would have been more likely to appear hostile, a deliberate attempt to use the pressure to denigrate the Soviet nation and its image, to bring the country down in Cold War competition. The threat to the nation's image becomes particularly clear and salient, and so does the need to fight back, to defend against this attempt to denigrate the nation. This threat will also vary over time, as the rivalry increases and decreases in intensity. If the Soviet Union were involved in an ongoing conflict or geopolitical dispute with the United States, then international competition would have been even more salient, pressure would have been seen as even more hostile, and should have evoked an even greater backfire effect. If relations were benign, then this sense of hostility (and therefore the backfire effect) should have been lower.

This argument implies that authoritarian rulers have incentives to "internationalize" human rights violations—to make their public interpret information about those violations in terms of defending their nation. Leaders therefore have incentives to use their control of state media to strategically pass on pressure from geopolitical rivals, especially when that rivalry is most hostile, and to censor pressure from other sources.

Hypothesis 1a: Authoritarian regimes will be more likely to allow their public to hear information about international pressure from major geopolitical rivals than from neutral sources.

Hypothesis 1b: Authoritarian regimes will be more likely to allow their public to hear information about international pressure from major geopolitical rivals when the rivalry is most hostile, and less likely to do so when relations are benign.

Reporting Foreign Pressure in the *People's Daily*

I examine the case of China, a one-party state with a powerful censorship apparatus. According to Shambaugh (2007, p. 28), “virtually every conceivable medium which transmits and conveys information to the people of China falls under the bureaucratic purview of the CCP Propaganda Department.” I examine how the CCP deals with foreign pressure in its state newspaper outlet the *People's Daily*, a tightly controlled government mouthpiece that Xi Jinping has called “the Party’s battle position.”¹⁰ As such, we can be confident that any news contained within it has been approved by the Propaganda Department for dissemination to the public (Stockmann, 2013).

My universe of cases is all international pressure on human rights in China from 1979 to 2011,¹¹ from which I draw a sample of 1,337 separate instances (taken from English language sources—I address this bias below). For my dependent variable, I searched for whether each of these 1,337 instances was reported in the *People's Daily* between 1979 and 2011.¹² A surprisingly large 228 instances were reported in the paper, ranging from 0 to 12 reports for each instance. This means that after 1989 even Chinese citizens who only read state newspapers would be consistently aware of foreign pressure on their country’s human rights record.

I split the data into three main groups: pressure originating from the United States, other non-U.S. Western sources,¹³ and non-Western sources.¹⁴

My prediction is that pressure from the United States should be most likely to be reported, followed by non-U.S. Western sources (while part of the “West” they are not direct rivals of China in the same way as the United States). Pressure from non-Western sources should be the least likely to be reported as these are generally either geopolitical allies or less powerful. Pressure is less likely to arise from these sources in the first place and, because of the use of English-language sources, may be underrepresented in the database. However, if anything, we might expect that only including the most prominent instances of pressure from these sources (that has reached English-language media) should bias my results in the opposite direction; their relative prominence should make them more likely to be reported in the *People's Daily*. This leaves two “non-national” groups, the UN, and international NGOs, which I test separately.

I estimate the data using logistic regression models, as the outcome variable is either reported (1) or not (0). I estimate versions of the following equation:

$$\text{Report} = a + b_1 \text{Source} + b_2 \text{Territorial} + b_3 \text{Type} + b_4 \text{NewYorkTimes} + e$$

Controls

To test whether the international prominence of the news is responsible, I include a control for whether the pressure has been reported in the *New York Times*, a plausible measure for the level of international coverage. Second, some pressure should be harder to internationalize—make citizens think about geopolitical rivalry rather than the content of the human rights violation—than others. It should be particularly difficult to minimize the specific, damaging, content of foreign pressure when that pressure itself reveals new, specific information about the issues, such as individuals tortured or protestors killed. On the contrary, general pressure that references generic government failings over human rights will be much more weakly tied to the content of individual violations and therefore much more easy to link to geopolitical competition. “Specific” pressure is also likely to provide new information about an issue that, maybe, citizens did not know much about before, while “general” pressure is likely to provide little new information. The CCP should see far more positive effects from passing on “general” pressure than “specific” pressure.

I make one further distinction. Hendrix and Wong (2013) argue that for “overt” issues that people already know about, like the one-child policy or gender equality, foreign condemnation is likely to be less damaging for authoritarian states as the violation itself is already in the public eye and indeed may be explicit government policy. Just like “general” pressure, “overt” pressure is less likely to provide new information, and the CCP will face fewer costs from passing it on to the public. I test this prediction here and, as the types of pressure may be correlated with the source, also test using fixed effects by type.

Results

As expected by the “high-profile” argument, pressure reported in the *NYT* was almost twice as likely to be reported in Chinese state media as less prominent pressure.¹⁵ Even controlling for prominence in foreign media, however, pressure that originated from the United States was significantly more likely to be reported, as much as 118% more likely than pressure from other Western

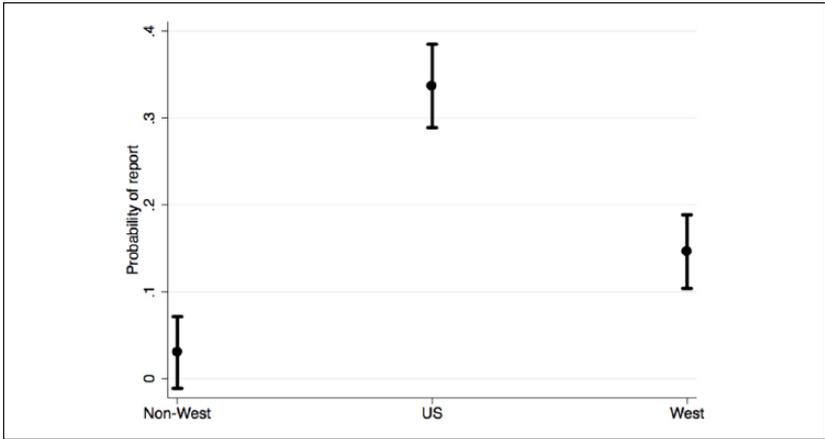


Figure 1. Predicted probability of pressure reported in *People's Daily*, by source. 95% confidence intervals.

sources. While pressure from other Western sources was sometimes reported, pressure from non-Western countries was barely reported at all (8.9% as likely as U.S. sources and 19.3% as likely as other Western sources, see Figure 1). These results all hold when using fixed effects.¹⁶ As shown in Figure 2 overt and general pressure were significantly more likely to be reported, with only 0.4% of instances of specific pressure featuring in the *People's Daily*.¹⁷

Discriminating by Source

The CCP response in the periods after domestic crackdowns demonstrates the importance of the source of pressure. In 1989, countries across the world issued strongly worded protests against the violence on June 4. However, the Chinese state media focused almost purely on the criticisms from the United States. The first reports concerned President Bush's statements about the massacre, the sanctions applied on China, and the refuge of dissident Fang Lizhi in the U.S. embassy (*People's Daily*, 1989a; 1989b; 1989c). This theme continued over the following weeks, with articles about foreign pressure almost universally featuring only pressure arising from the United States.

In 2008, critical reactions also arose across the globe, but again Chinese state media attention focused heavily on the U.S. response. Reports in the *People's Daily* noted House speaker Nancy Pelosi's stated support for the Dalai Lama (*People's Daily*, 2008a), Tibet resolutions in the House of

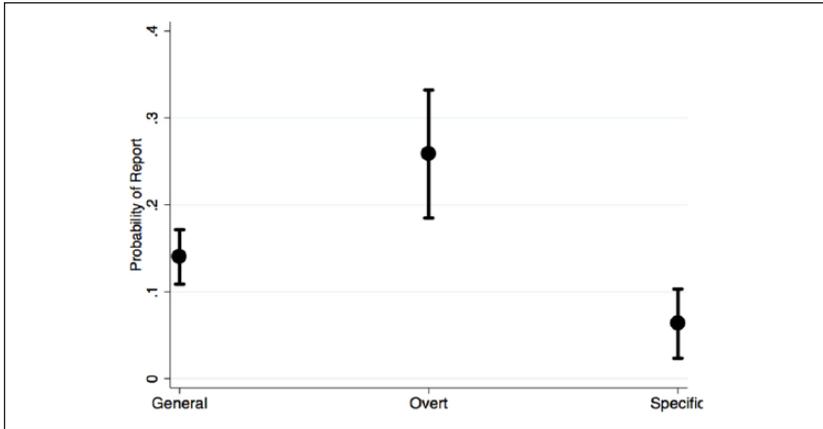


Figure 2. Predicted probability of pressure reported in *People's Daily*, by type. 95% confidence intervals.

Representatives (*People's Daily*, 2008b), as well as purported media bias from CNN and the BBC (*People's Daily*, 2008a). The United States was joined as a hostile protagonist in the Chinese media by France, viewed as particularly hostile to China because of an attack on the Olympic torch relay in Paris by pro-Tibet protestors. Reports of French criticism focused on President Sarkozy's statement that he may not attend the upcoming Beijing Olympics and launched stinging critiques of French motives (*People's Daily*, 2008c; 2008d). These reports and attacks on the relay contributed to public calls for a boycott of French goods in China. Yet Sarkozy was not the most outspoken in his comments on Tibet and the Olympics. Polish leaders were the first to threaten a boycott (*Polskie Radio*, 2008), joined by Angela Merkel in Germany (*The Guardian*, 2008); yet neither piece of pressure was reported in China.

Perhaps chastened by the Chinese public's response, after the Urumqi violence in July 2009, Western criticism was much more equivocal. While some leaders appealed for calm (*Agence France-Presse*, 2009), the most explicit censure came from Islamic sources. The Turkish government (*BBC*, 2009a), Iranian newspapers (*BBC*, 2009b), and Azerbaijani politicians (*BBC*, 2009c) all harshly criticized Beijing, with Turkish ministers calling the subsequent crackdown "genocide" (Blanchard & Lim, 2009). The Organization of Islamic Cooperation complained vehemently about the "disproportionate use of force."¹⁸ None of these criticisms were reported in

Chinese state media, however, which having realized it had a receptive audience, limited its reports to again attack French and American media for their coverage of the clashes (*Beijing Daily*, 2009). In each case, there was plenty of prominent non-Western criticism of Chinese activities, but state media almost exclusively reported pressure from sources perceived to be hostile to China.

Low and High Tensions

To account for “hostile” China–U.S. relations, I create a moving sum for whether there has been a geopolitical incident between the United States and China in the previous 28 days.¹⁹ To account for “benign” relations, I create a moving sum for whether there has been an official visit by Chinese leaders or foreign ministers to the United States in the previous 28 days. As Nitsch (2007) notes, one purpose of official visits to another state is to improve bilateral relations, and I assume that the CCP will therefore strive to keep bilateral relations more positive after the visits and portray them positively to the public. I then test whether *People’s Daily* reports of pressure from the United States are higher in these periods. I estimate the data using a time series model,²⁰ using versions of the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Report}_t = & a + b_1 \text{USIncident}_{t-1, t-29} + b_2 \text{Bilateralvisit}_{t-1, t-29} \\ & + b_3 \text{InternationalPressure}_{t-1, t-29} + b_4 \text{Controls}_{t-1, t-29} \\ & + \text{lag}(7) + f(\text{Time}) + e \end{aligned}$$

Controls

I first control for a moving sum of the amount of U.S. pressure leading up to the reports, and the level of foreign news (number of reports in the *New York Times*) about U.S. pressure, over the previous 28 days. As reporting foreign pressure may be a consequence of domestic conditions in China, I include controls containing 28-day moving sums for the level of social unrest and regime repression using the Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone. I also include the period of the annual meetings of the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Constitutive Consultative Conference, which may see increased domestic and international scrutiny. Finally, I include a control for the date to account for increased availability of information through technological development.²¹

Results

The tenor of bilateral relations with the United States strongly influences how American human rights pressure is reported in Chinese media. In the 28 days following geopolitical incidents, the *People's Daily* on average reports an impressive 419% more pressure from the United States compared with other 28-day periods. Pressure that did not come from the United States showed no difference. However, in the 28 days following official Chinese visits to the United States, the *People's Daily* on average reports 166% less pressure from the United States than at other times.²²

And at times of high bilateral tension Chinese state media has actively sought to link U.S. human rights pressure to the country's aggression against China. After the United States bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, for example, the barrage of anti-American propaganda in the Chinese media included extensive reports of how the United States was continuing to criticize Chinese human rights. The reports included both new pressure from the United States—a congressional resolution to commemorate the anniversary of Tiananmen Square²³ (something otherwise rarely discussed in Chinese media)—and also referenced old efforts to condemn China over its rights situation (*People's Daily*, 1999a). The reports were seemingly designed to link the attempts to denounce the CCP over human rights with a physical attack on Chinese property and civilians, both incidents reinforcing the idea that the United States is set on “undermining China's stability” (*People's Daily*, 1999b). In some reports, this link was made explicit. The *People's Daily* (1999b) article on the Tiananmen Square resolution, published a few weeks after the bombing, reads,

They fly the flag of so-called “human rights,” “democracy,” and “freedom” in order to interfere in others' internal affairs and trample upon their sovereignty, in order to impose their social system and values onto other countries and dominate the world. US actions in Yugoslavia fully illustrate this point.

Reports from non-Western sources, when they are featured in Chinese media, are generally still portrayed as driven by the U.S. drive to attack China. UN human rights draft resolutions that targeted China, for instance, were so prominent in international media in the 1990s that they invariably also featured in Chinese state media. While the resolutions often included numerous non-Western signatories, and were regularly led by European countries, Chinese media condemned each one as driven by the United States in a predictable “anti-China attempt,” a pretext to prevent China's rise (*People's Daily*, 1996; 1998a, 1998b, 1998c).

Internationalizing Human Rights

The prominence of human rights pressure in international media does not fully explain why Chinese state media reports on certain kinds of pressure but censors others. If state media is just reporting cases they believe the people will find interesting or have already heard, this does not tell us why some of the most high-profile and dramatic pieces of foreign pressure are not reported, such as the accusation of “genocide” from Turkish ministers. There are also cases of obscure pressure reported to the whole Chinese population by the *People’s Daily* that are barely reported in international outlets, cases that even interested Chinese citizens would be unlikely to otherwise pick up on. The 2012 HRW report discussed earlier is just an example of highly sensitive pressure on human rights in China that barely caused a stir internationally, but was discussed in great detail across Chinese state media.²⁴

In 2016, Ilham Tohti, an imprisoned Uighur academic, was given the Martin Ennals Prize for human rights. While news of the prize was scarce even in international press agencies, the CCP allowed domestic media to play up the news, Xinhua (2016) calling it a “blasphemy and mockery of human rights,” and the *Global Times* (2016) fulminating that the West was using the issue to “tear up” China. Indeed in recent years, news of arrests and sentences of lawyers and dissidents have often been introduced to the people by referencing unheralded Western criticism. In August 2017, an *People’s Daily* (2017) editorial trawled through former Hong Kong Chief Executive Chris Patten’s relatively obscure condemnations of the rule of law in the city from more than 2 months before as a way of justifying the recent sentencing of democracy activists, calling the comments an attack by “foreign anti-China forces.”

The findings also cast doubt upon the “factional” explanation. Pressure was reported in the *People’s Daily* equally heavily under Jiang Zemin from 1992 to 2002 (see Figure 3), who had few obvious conflicts with his propaganda chief, Ding Guangen. Factional differences also do not explain why state media has reported U.S. pressure in such disparaging terms.

However, the finding that state media takes obscure pieces of American human rights pressure and passes it on to its entire public does not prove the argument of this piece: that the CCP is doing so because this pressure makes its public more satisfied with the government. In the absence of direct evidence about CCP leaders’ true intentions, a key implication of the argument is that American pressure should indeed reduce Chinese public grievances about human rights. To test this, I employed an online survey experiment that randomly exposed Chinese citizens to different types of pressure on women’s rights, before testing their grievances about the state of women’s rights in the country.

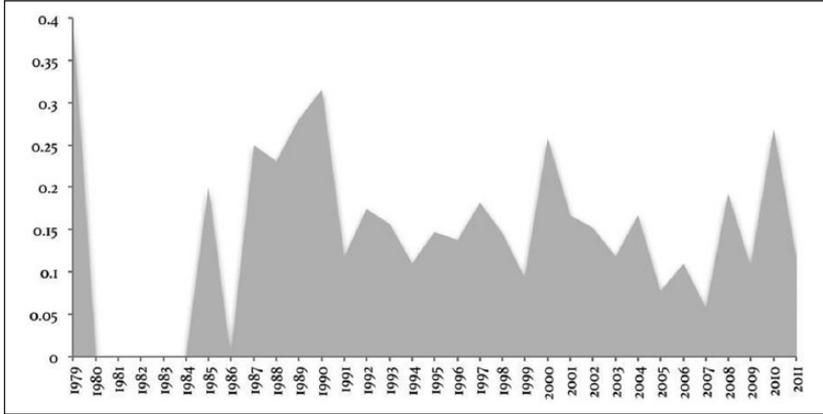


Figure 3. Proportion of instances of foreign human rights pressure reported in the *People's Daily*, 1979 to 2011.

Women's Rights

Research ethics determined the choice of women's rights. The research environment in China prohibits surveys on more sensitive human rights topics, and there is an obligation to respondents to ensure that they are not asked questions where their answers may put them at risk. The CCP has, since its inception, portrayed itself as a liberator of women (Mao, 1955) and as a result the issue is relatively freely discussed in traditional and social media. This relative freedom also means that social censure is less of a concern and, in previous surveys, Chinese citizens have been unafraid to show their concerns over gender equality—In one recent survey, 73% of women said they were dissatisfied with the status of women in the country.²⁵ Social desirability should also not affect how participants respond to the experimental manipulations.

International and domestic attention on women's rights in China has increased dramatically since March 2015, when feminist activists were arrested and held without trial for a month. Condemnations poured forth from across the globe (Wee, 2015) and, even after the activists' release on bail, continued throughout the year (*Foreign Policy*, 2015). The experiment was conducted in February 2016, just after the forced closure of Guo Jianmei's high-profile Zhongze women's legal center, which had symbolized the country's growing women's rights movement. The closure again drew international disapproval, with Hillary Clinton tweeting, "Women's rights are human rights. This center should remain—I stand with Guo" (Washington Post, 2016). Of course, we cannot be sure whether pressure on women's rights

would evoke the same reaction as pressure on physical rights. It may be that people's reaction to these more "visceral" issues would overwhelm any defensive response, so pressure on women's rights may share more in common with pressure on other civil and political rights in China.

The survey was conducted with an online sample of 1,200 Chinese people from across the country, using the Qualtrics survey provider and panels in China. With the exception of age and gender, where respondent numbers were weighted to match the overall population, the sample more closely resembles the online population—richer, more well-educated and urban,²⁶ but was drawn from almost all provinces and walks of life. We should not neglect these demographic differences, nor that respondents were able to choose whether to join a panel, and take part in a survey on "social attitudes" so may be disproportionately interested in social issues in China. Nonetheless, I argue that the survey provides a broadly representative sample of the online population in China. The online population (over 50% of the population in mid-2016 (China Internet Watch, 2016)) are arguably the most likely to pick up on foreign comments about China, and some have argued that among the country's middle class, political and civil society participation is now more likely to be online (Yang, 2009). I test the following interlinked hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: International pressure on a country's human rights that comes from geopolitical opponents will reduce citizens' grievances about human rights conditions.

Hypothesis 2b: International pressure on a country's human rights will be more likely to reduce citizens' grievances about human rights conditions when it comes from major geopolitical opponents than when it comes from neutral sources.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three groups: a control group (given no prompt) and two treatment groups who were asked to read a short paragraph taken from a recent news item, with only the source varied, as follows:²⁷

Yesterday a United States/African Union spokeswoman criticised China's women's rights conditions. She said: "The Chinese government must improve the rights of women in China."

This kind of brief condemnatory statement is often how human rights pressure is presented in international and Chinese media. In its criticism of human rights in China in December 2016, for example, the European Union

was reported as being “extremely troubled” by the human rights situation in China in the headline in Reuters (2016) and merely as having “accused China over its human rights” in the *Global Times* (2016).

I choose two sources that maximize variation in geopolitical opposition with China. The CCP portrays the United States as a major geopolitical rival, while the AU (at least before any criticism occurs) is at worst a neutral actor for the Chinese people, and at best a geopolitical ally. Since the Maoist period, Beijing has portrayed itself as the leader of the developing world, and recently the *People's Daily* has described the relationship as “friendly” and “a community of mutual support” (*People's Daily*, 2015). While criticizing China may be enough to make the AU no longer seem completely “neutral” in the future, I contend that by itself this criticism should not be enough to make it appear to be a geopolitical opponent like the United States.

After receiving the treatments, respondents were then questioned on their attitudes and beliefs about women’s rights in China, in particular their level of agreement with the statement “At present women’s rights in China are not good enough” (on a 4-point scale from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*). I also ask whether respondents would be willing to sign a petition calling for improvements in women’s rights.²⁸ I normalize the outcomes, to measure change from the control group.

Results

Pressure from the United States significantly reduced Chinese citizens’ grievances about the state of women’s rights in their country in comparison with the control group, with an average treatment effect (ATE) of -0.244 ($p = .02$), as shown in Figure 4,²⁹ representing a decrease of around 6.6 percentage points. US pressure also significantly reduced grievances in comparison to pressure from the African Union (ATE = -0.247 $p = 0.021$), which itself had no effects in either direction compared to the control. US pressure also made respondents significantly less willing to sign the petition to improve women’s rights in comparison to the control,³⁰ a decrease of around 7.7 percentage points.

Mechanisms

If the drop in grievances is due to the feeling of threat to the nation’s image, we should find evidence for two observable implications:

National identity. The effect should be greatest in those with the strongest national attachment, those whose sense of self-worth is most closely linked to

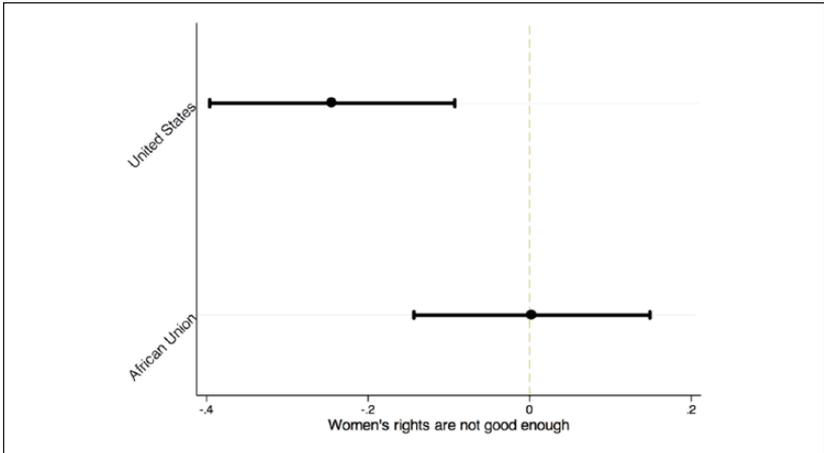


Figure 4. Influence of treatments on grievances over women’s rights (higher score means higher grievances, normalized—dotted line is control, 95% confidence intervals).

their nation, and should be most likely to feel a sense of threat (De Hoog, 2013; Steele, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As expected, there is a significant interaction effect between the U.S. treatment and respondents’ preexisting level of national pride (on a 1-10 scale), with the backfire effect stronger in those with higher national pride.³¹

Nation and party. Pressure should also only evoke a defensive reaction if it appears to directly attack the nation and its status. If citizens can lay the blame of human rights violations purely at the hands of their leaders, then they may dismiss pressure as an attack on those leaders, rather than on their nation’s image: to blame it on the ruling CCP, not the Chinese nation as a whole. To test this, for those groups who had earlier received information about pressure, at the end of the survey I include a sentence that reads, “The spokeswoman continued: ‘Rather than the Chinese people, it is the Chinese government that has not ensured women’s rights are good enough.’” Respondents were then asked again about their grievances on women’s rights in China.³²

Strikingly, I find that when people are explicitly told that the pressure they heard from the United States actually targets only the CCP leaders and not the Chinese people, the counterproductive effects vanish, as shown in Figure 5. The ATE is now 0.024 ($p = .768$) against the control.

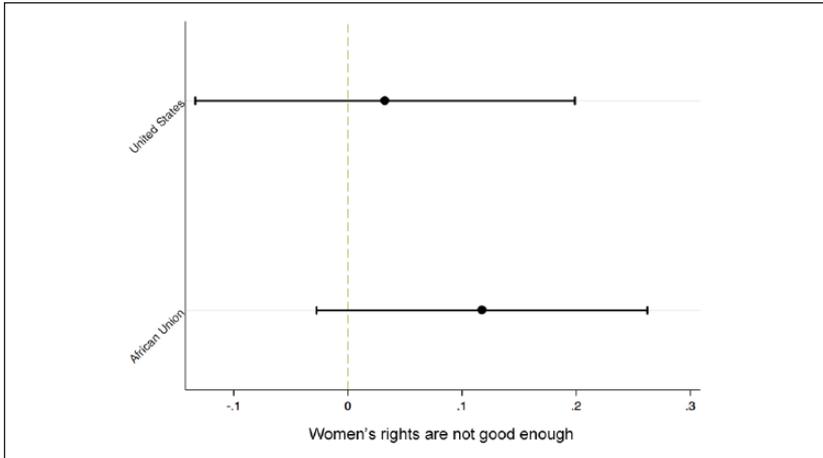


Figure 5. Impact of targeting elites only on grievances over women's rights (higher score means higher grievances, normalised- dotted line is control, 95% confidence intervals).

Alternative Explanations

As expected by the partisan “cues” argument, those who are more satisfied with the CCP are also the most likely to react negatively to pressure from the United States.³³ There is no such interactive effect after hearing pressure from the AU however, difficult to explain with a cues account. Moreover, in the cues theory, pressure that only targets the government elites should be an even stronger cue for government supporters, and should therefore make them become even more likely to be satisfied with how they are treated. But as shown, when pressure is directed at the government alone, the effect disappears. The difference in responses between those satisfied with the regime and those less satisfied with the regime also disappears. This suggests strongly that it is people's national identity, rather than any political identity, that is behind the counterproductive effect.

A more pressing concern is that there are other relevant differences between the United States and the AU, other than competition and perceived hostility to China. Two plausible reasons for respondents to reject pressure from the United States but not the AU are a general anti-Americanism and that the United States is acting hypocritically in criticizing China over human rights. A closer look at the results suggests that anti-Americanism is not the main cause. The effect appears to be driven if anything by pro-Americanism, with those who have a positive attitude toward the United States as a whole

more likely to be affected.³⁴ The negative reaction appears to come not from attitudes to the United States, but beliefs about the U.S. government's approach to China. I find that those who distrust the U.S. government's China policy have significantly fewer grievances about women's rights having heard pressure from the United States³⁵.

This claim is further supported by in-depth interviews carried out with 100 Chinese citizens in spring 2016. Interviewees were approached at random in public places, and the sample was balanced according to gender and age, to match the survey and the population at large.³⁶ As with the survey, interviewees were randomly exposed to pressure from the United States and AU on women's rights in China and spoke through the logic behind their responses in detail. Interviewees were in general highly critical of comments about China originating from the United States. Many said that they believed the United States would only make these comments to try and "attack" China.

The comments were viewed through the prism of international relations, rather than as legitimate concerns about human rights. Very few mentioned any dislike of the United States itself. The AU, despite not receiving the same kind of vitriol as the United States, was perhaps surprisingly not seen as a particularly acceptable source of pressure. While many interviewees viewed the organization's concerns about women in China to be genuine, they often dismissed the comments as hypocritical from a continent with its own problems in gender equality. Hardly any mentioned its distinctive position as an international organization. These comments cast doubt on the argument that the perceived hypocrisy of the United States is driving the backlash.

Another concern is that respondents may just be giving an immediate angry reaction, defensively refuting the pressure, but do not truly believe that women's rights are better. Moreover, people may just form political opinions about women's rights in response to being asked (Zaller, 1992). Their response may just be an immediate reaction to American criticism of China, rather than anything to do with the issue of women's rights per se. This would mean that the study is not measuring longer term changing views, but brief annoyance to the prompt, an objection difficult to refute without long-term field experiments. Yet, in interviews, many Chinese citizens did not instinctively dismiss the criticism and sought to justify why women's rights were still well respected in China, pointing to other achievements or progress over time, providing support for the idea that they were actively developing counterarguments. Moreover, the defensive reaction does not just appear to be among those who had not thought much about women's rights beforehand, as the effect was equally large, if not larger, among young women (the demographic in the control group who believe most strongly in equal rights).³⁷

The brief, stylized nature of the prompt means that it does not incorporate the state propaganda and refutations that are often used in real Chinese news stories on foreign criticism. On one hand, this means that we need to follow up these findings with studies of instances of genuine foreign pressure on China's human rights (as I do, for example, in Gruffydd-Jones, 2017). On the other hand, this kind of short extract functions as a hard test for the theory, and shows how even a minimal prompt mentioning foreign pressure can affect public attitudes, even without accompanying propaganda.³⁸ This helps to dispel one possible counterargument—that it is not the pressure itself that has the impact on attitudes, but instead the CCP's reciprocal attacks on human rights in the United States that drives the reduction in grievances about China.³⁹ It also shows that it is not just extreme or over-the-top human rights pressure that backfires—the pressure in the study is presented soberly and on an issue that, in the control, over half of the respondents thought was a problem.⁴⁰ While it is likely that governments' rhetorical responses to pressure may exacerbate the backfire effect, making it appear even more hostile or absurd, this is a question for a future project.

Human Rights Pressure Within Authoritarian States

We currently have a limited understanding of how foreign human rights pressure matters in authoritarian states. The assumptions from the literatures on authoritarian politics and human rights advocacy are that critical information increases citizens' grievances with their government and, all else being equal, leaders will look to prevent them from hearing this information.

The developing literature on censorship and authoritarian media has challenged these traditional views about how autocrats deal with criticism. Instead, authors have argued that leaders have various incentives to allow their public to hear criticism of their rule: criticism may not be particularly damaging without mobilization (King et al., 2013), overzealous censorship may impose credibility costs (Chen & Xu, 2017; Jones-Rooy, n.d.; Roberts & Stewart, n.d.), criticism may provide credibility benefits from being seen to listen to public concerns (Plantan & Cairns, 2017), may reveal valuable information about discontent (Lorentzen, 2014), or other citizens' proregime viewpoints (Chen & Xu, 2017). This piece adds to these findings by challenging their basic assumption—that whatever its side effects, criticism itself is inherently damaging. Instead, certain kinds of critical information may provide substantial benefits to the regime, perversely increasing rather than decreasing public support for the actions being condemned.

Observable implication	Supported?
Increase in national attachment increases backfire effect	Yes
Distrust in US policy to China increases backfire effect. General negative attitude towards US does not increase backfire effect	Yes
Backfire effect disappears when pressure explicitly targets leaders not the whole nation	Yes

Figure 6. Observable implications of “internationalize” model, tested in survey experiment.

I find that the CCP passes on a surprising amount of foreign criticism on highly sensitive human rights issues to its public, particularly when it comes from geopolitical opponents like the United States (especially when bilateral tensions are high) and addresses general human rights issues or existing government policies. Pressure from neutral non-Western sources is barely reported, and nor is pressure that addresses specific human rights violations. Evidence from a survey experiment finds, moreover, that pressure from the United States makes Chinese citizens significantly more likely to be satisfied with the state of women’s rights in their country, something that does not arise when pressure comes from a non-Western source. The effect appears to arise from people’s attachment to their nation, and belief that the United States is hostile toward China, providing support for a national “threat-based” rather than partisan “cue-based” account. This is supported further by the finding that when people are told the pressure is actually directed only at their political leaders, the effect disappears (Figure 6). It is worth noting that this impact may be limited to the peculiarities of women’s rights in China, and future studies should examine whether the impacts on women’s rights extend to pressure on other civil, political, and physical rights, and indeed whether the effects found for the online population extend to more rural, older, and less internationally oriented citizens.

These findings provide support for a “internationalizing” model: Passing on information about foreign pressure helps ensure the public view human rights in terms of geopolitical competition, rather than genuine individual rights violations, and the process of defending their nation in the face of this competition makes them more satisfied with how human rights are dealt with at home. Highlighting this information for the public is a way for a regime to resist liberalizing reforms or take actions that repress the human rights of its people, but continue to retain their support.

Implications for Human Rights Pressure

This implies that public diplomacy designed to pressure authoritarian regimes into improving their human rights performance may end up playing into the hands of autocrats. In the China case, intense human rights pressure from the United States, passed on through state media, may have contributed to the Chinese public's perception that the CCP was respecting human rights. To revisit Table 1, Chinese citizens' lofty opinions of their human rights conditions may not be in spite of international pressure, but partly caused by this pressure.

This is important because encouraging a target state's domestic public to oppose its repressive policies is at the heart of how the international community looks to counter human rights abuses and encourage long-lasting liberal policy changes. Hendrix and Wong (2013) argue that foreign shaming can have decisive effects in making domestic audiences in more repressive states more critical of rights violations—and for some kinds of foreign shaming this may well be the case, if it were to reach the wider public. However, in China at least, while much information about foreign shaming does indeed reach the public, it is rarely the information that does what Hendrix and Wong suggest. Instead, through its control of the media, autocrats only allow their public to hear about shaming that has the opposite effect, making citizens less critical of rights violations.

This does not necessarily call into question models that extol the virtues of external human rights pressure. Indeed, even on the issue of women's rights, many activists have called out to the United States to use its influence to publicly shame the Chinese government (*Radio Free Asia*, 2015). International calculations may well have pushed CCP leaders to release the activists on bail (*Foreign Policy*, 2015). This study shows, however, that even in authoritarian states, if this kind of human rights pressure is public, then it will have more than one audience. These audiences are not just elites and international actors, but also everyday citizens and domestic activists, and the impacts on these groups may conflict with each other.

This challenges commonly held views about the relationship between international pressure “from above” and domestic pressure “from below.” According to these views, foreign shaming, threats, and sanctions impose costs on governments not only directly, but also indirectly, by working in tandem with and providing support to domestic movements. Some scholars have advocated for a “comprehensive approach,” which calls for a combination of these direct and indirect efforts—attacking the elites from above as well as encouraging the inculcation of broader public norms (Cardenas, 2004). The results here, however, show that the two tactics may not work

together particularly smoothly. If it can be manipulated by target governments, then top-down pressure may actively reduce the likelihood that members of the public will call out their government on its behavior, or support the cause of domestic groups looking to fight human rights violations or illiberal policies. In this way, the study responds to Goodman and Jinks' (2013) call for an exploration of how different tactics used by the human rights community may come into conflict with each other.

For policy makers, this means that there is a danger that even if they successfully change autocrats' behavior in the short term, their work may well be reported domestically and give those leaders a propaganda boost. The dilemma of how to minimize this boost is an important question for future research, but for now, this study provides a plausible starting point: International pressure should be led by neutral states or organizations and target specific human rights abuses and individual leaders.

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Supplemental Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online at the *CPS* website <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/suppl/10.1177/0010414018784066>.

Notes

1. See <http://www.universal-rights.org/human-rights/human-rights-resolutions-portal/> and <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2016>
2. By "international pressure" I mean any attempt by foreign actors to change the behavior of governments. These actions might include sanctions, threats, or mere condemnation.
3. By "internationalized," I mean that citizens consider human rights violations not as domestic rights violations, but in terms of winning or losing in an international, geopolitical rivalry.
4. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/worst-worst-2012-worlds-most-repressive-societies>
5. Risse, Ropp, and Sikkink (1999).

6. Davis, Murdie, and Steinmetz (2012), Hendrix and Wong (2013), Krain (2012), and Thomas (2001).
7. In an accompanying experiment, Ausderan provides some individual-level support for this argument.
8. It is worth noting that this table does not take into account how different countries' citizens interpret these questions in different ways (King & Wand, 2007).
9. World Values Survey 2012.
10. <http://cmp.hku.hk/2016/03/03/39672/>
11. See supplementary materials for details of coding.
12. Described in the supplementary materials.
13. If pressure originates from any individual or organization based in those states or regions. I discuss further in the supplementary materials.
14. All other countries and regions.
15. $p < .001$.
16. Figure 2 excludes pressure from the UN and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). While UN resolutions were reported, nonresolution pressure from the UN and pressure from INGOs was barely passed on. See Online Appendix 1a.
17. See Online Appendix 2d Table 9. All statistical analysis included in supplementary materials.
18. <http://www.oic-oci.org/topicdetail.asp?tid=256>
19. Taken from Weiss (2014)—see Online Appendix.
20. Tests for lag selection suggest that it is optimum to use 7 lags.
21. For details of all controls please see the Online Appendix.
22. The results stand in the face of robustness tests, detailed in the supplementary appendix.
23. H. Res.178—<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/106/sres103/text/is>
24. Pressure from INGOs is hardly reported before 2011. However, after the Arab spring, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) started to view NGOs as catalysts of domestic unrest, and stepped up propaganda referring to INGOs as “hostile foreign forces” and tools of the United States. Interestingly, from this point, rather than being more likely to censor these “dangerous” organizations, the CCP began to use state media to regularly pass their criticisms on to the whole population.
25. Accessed at: <http://www.genderwatch.cn:801/detail.jsp?fid=305288&cnID=90050>
26. See supplementary materials.
27. The randomization procedure was successful (see Online Appendix 2a). There are no statistically significant differences in demographic variables or in the pre-treatment attitudinal questions, with the exception of education, minimally significant at the 10% level.
28. This is a rough measure. In reality, petitions in China are unlikely to be on broad social issues like women's rights.
29. I find similar results for three related measures; see Online Appendix 2f.
30. ATE = -0.268, $p = 0.015$.
31. $F = 4.69$, $p = .031$. All interactions see Online Appendix 2e.

32. I examine this argument more fully in Gruffydd-Jones (2017).
33. $F = 4.15, p = .04$.
34. $F = 6.33, p = .012$.
35. $F = 7.89, p = .005$.
36. This sample is not representative of the Chinese population, especially as it overestimates people who visit public places like parks.
37. University-educated respondents are most likely to see a “backfire” effect ($F = 5.19, p = .023$), but I find no interactive effects with any other pretreatment questions, including awareness of international news, age, or gender. See Online Appendix 2e.
38. Recent studies on China have also employed similar brief vignettes. For example, Dafoe and Weiss (n.d.).
39. While this countershaming tactic is occasionally used, in response to the State Department’s annual human rights reports, for example, most reports of human rights pressure in Chinese media focus on geopolitical rivalry rather than tit-for-tat accusations.
40. Chinese state media often reports foreign pressure that is earnest and restrained in its wording or content, such as that from Human Rights Watch discussed above.

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