

Message or Messenger? Source and Labeling Effects in Authoritarian Response to Protest¹

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Abstract

Authoritarian regimes in the 21st century have increasingly turned to using information control rather than kinetic force to respond to threats to their rule. This paper studies an often overlooked type of information control: strategic labeling and public statements by regime sources in response to protests. Labeling protesters as violent criminals may increase support for repression by signaling that protests are illegitimate and deviant. Regime sources, compared to more independent sources, could increase support for repression even more when paired with such an accusatory label. Accommodative labels should have opposing effects—decreasing support for repression. The argument is tested with a survey experiment in China which labels environmental protests. Accusatory labels increase support for repression of protests. Regime sources, meanwhile, have no advantage over nongovernmental sources in shifting opinion. The findings suggest that negative labels de-legitimize protesters and legitimize repression while the sources matter less in this contentious authoritarian context.

¹ Pre-Analysis Plan registered with Evidence in Governance and Politics (ID: *redacted*)

Introduction

How do authoritarian regimes respond to the threat of mass protests? In the 21st century, regimes rely less on kinetic force such as repression (Davenport 2007) and increasingly on controlling information flows and shaping citizens' beliefs about events (Guriev and Treisman 2019). Among the strategies of information control, particularly for mass threats, are censorship and distraction in which the regime attempts to prevent the spread of information about protests which could undermine the regime's authority (King, Pan and Roberts 2017, Roberts 2018). Yet the regime also communicates information about contentious actions directly to its citizens through state media outlets and official statements (Baum and Zhukov 2015, Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018, Rozenas and Stukal 2019). Despite the ubiquity of regimes' information-based responses to protest, we know little about their effects on public opinion. Existing research suggests that attributes of protests affect public opinion (Hou and Quek 2019, Manekin and Mitts 2020, Wasow 2020), but regimes also present additional information in the form of "editorializing" their responses to protest events which could shape opinion (Carter and Carter 2021).

In this paper, we argue that protest events in authoritarian regimes receive labels which describe the perceived legitimacy of their participants. Labels of protests may be accusatory or accommodative, either defining the events as illegitimate and their participants as criminals or acknowledging protesters' underlying grievances (Baum and Zhukov 2015, Cohen 2011). Accusatory labels are expected to increase citizens' support for repression of protest by pitting them as deviants against the ordering influence of security forces. Accommodative labels, meanwhile, decrease support for repression. Given that regimes often deploy these labels in response to protest events, it could be the case that the regime complements and enhances labels' effects when serving as the source for a statement. Dictatorships' statements have several known effects: inducing compliance (Huang 2015*b*, Trinh and Truong 2020), favorably shifting policy positions (Hou and Quek 2019, Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018), and sending signals of strength or trustworthiness (Frye and Borisova 2019) that make citizens

more likely to support or oppose repression depending on whether the regime accuses or accommodates protesters, respectively.

We test the empirical implications of the argument with a survey experiment in China, an authoritarian regime in which control of information is a central strategy in managing public opinion (Huang 2015*b*, 2018, King, Pan and Roberts 2017, Roberts 2018). It is also a regime which uses a variety of labels—and in which a variety of sources comment—in response to domestic protest events. We focus on different informational responses to environmental protests, events which have become a salient issue drawing significant media and scholarly interest over the past two decades.² In the experiment, respondents were randomly presented with vignettes which employed different labels—accusatory, accommodative, and a baseline neutral condition—about an environmental protest which originated from either a government source or a non-government scholar source. We evaluate respondents’ post-treatment perceptions, attitudes, and stated behavioral intentions with respect to environmental protests.

Our experimental results reveal a stark contrast between the effects of labels and the effects of sources. On one hand, accusatory labels have substantively large effects on the support for repression of protests and decreased willingness to support protests. These effects are consistent across different estimation strategies. On the other hand, the regime has no advantage over a non-government scholar in shifting citizens’ attitudes in the direction intended by the label’s content: regardless of whether the label is accusatory or accommodative, the effects of a state media statement about the event are indistinguishable from the effects of a scholar’s statement across our key outcome measures. Ultimately, our findings indicate that the message, rather than the messenger, shapes attitudes when authoritarian regimes issue informational responses to protests.

Following the results of our main hypothesis tests, we probe the mechanism through which labels affect citizens’ response to protest and repression and consider alternative ex-

²See for example studies by Deng and Yang (2013), Van Rooij (2010) and others noted by Goebel (2019).

planations. We show that accusatory labels deter respondents' sympathy with protests not by shifting attention away from the underlying issue motivating the protest, but rather by changing their perceptions of the protesters and their behaviors. In particular, respondents do not shift attitudes toward local officials or the underlying policy stakes of the protest even when the central government is the source of the label. We also examine our null finding for source effects, inferring that both government and scholarly sources persuade respondents by showing that perceptions of source credibility and indicators of intimidation do not vary between the government and non-government scholar sources. Our results suggest that, as a commonly observed yet rarely studied response to protests in authoritarian regimes, accusatory protest labels de-legitimize protesters and legitimize repression. It also shows that manipulating the views about an existing protest may also prevent future protest. Moreover, while literature on propaganda focuses on effects of messages from state media (Adena et al. 2015, Pan, Shao and Xu 2021, Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018, Yanagizawa-Drott 2014), we compare the content of the message between governmental and non-governmental sources in an autocracy and find the content plays a more important role in shaping citizens' perceptions.

By showing how statements about protest events in autocracies can divide and demobilize citizens, this paper builds a bridge between research on repression and on authoritarian propaganda. Recent scholarship has tended to divide into a focus on a "hard" repression involving state use of kinetic force to contain mass threats (Gohdes 2020, Sullivan 2016, Svolik 2012) and a "soft" repression involving the use of state media and information control to shape citizen attitudes and behavior on issues unrelated to mass threat (Huang 2015*b*, Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018, Rozenas and Stukal 2019). The findings in this paper, particularly outcome tests showing a decrease in willingness to protest when presented with accusatory labels—consistent with Carter and Carter (2021)—builds on research studying how media and official statements responding to protest may occur simultaneously with and reinforce a coercive response (Potter and Wang 2022).

Finally, in linking hard and soft repression, this paper also contrasts protest labeling with more ostentatious propaganda designed to achieve social control through generating cults of personality, for example. The ostentatious efforts, described variably as “preposterous” (Huang 2018, 1035), “phony” (Wedeen 2015, 6), and “empty” (Kubik 1994, 42), are designed to enforce compliance through signaling a ubiquitous and unchallenged state. The protest labeling we study, on the other hand, is a plank in 21st-century autocracies’ strategy of controlling information through “leading citizens to believe” perspectives on events that favor the regime and disfavor dissidents (Guriev and Treisman 2019, 101). Such pro-regime belief modification may come through distraction (Munger et al. 2019), warnings (Trinh and Truong 2020), salience (Pan, Shao and Xu 2021), or persuasion. Our evidence suggests persuasion is the most likely—though not exclusive—channel through which protest labels affect beliefs. Our findings complement this recent research on different mechanisms explaining the effectiveness of regimes’ more subtle 21st-century information control and manipulation strategies.

Information-Based Responses to Protests

Protest events—in which a group demands a change in status quo policy in a state³—can threaten the survival of a regime in the absence of official response. As these events grow into larger movements, they attract supporters and apply increasing political pressure to a regime (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, Tilly 1978). A lack of official response to a movement only fans the flames of resistance. For example, as protests broke out in Soviet-dominated Hungary in summer 1956, the USSR dithered in its response. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev took more than four months to decide to crush the uprising rather than accommodate its demands, in which time the protests grew into a full-fledged violent revolution (Taubman 2003).

³This is based directly on the definition of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001): “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims, and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants” (5).

A similar dynamic occurs in democracies. In 2011, the incumbent Socialist government in Spain struggled to respond to protests driven by economic grievances and dissatisfaction with the political system which drew hundreds of thousands of participants (Della Porta 2015). The Socialist Party was roundly defeated in elections that year.

The challenge for governments is both deciding *whether* to respond to protest events, and deciding *how* to respond. Repression, as in the Hungarian Revolution, is one response option. Yet even authoritarian regimes are constrained in the use of repression, as using violence against civilians can both lead to military overthrow (Svolik 2012) or backlash. Under backlash, with emotion and moral indignation when they witness repression, drawing them off the sidelines and against the government (Pearlman 2018). Another option for government is to make policy concessions or attempt to co-opt protesters. However, the government may have already be constrained by concessions needed to keep political elites in line (Gandhi 2008) and by the inefficiency of co-optation (Thomson 2017). Constrained in their ability to act decisively when faced with protest, leaders respond where they are less constrained: words.

Public statements by regimes are a quick and nearly costless responses to protest. We know that leaders use public statements to "craft their own narrative...in the face of heightened social unrest" (Barberá and Zeitzoff 2019, 124). Leaders' statements about protests are an effective response because citizens "[seek] guidance from credible elites," delegating opinion formation on an issue to these elites (Druckman 2001, 1045). Political elites are especially likely to be trusted in their statements about issues when those issues are complex or vague (Nicholson 2011). Protests are often fast-moving and multi-faceted events, involving many tactics, participants, and claims simultaneously. This provides political elites an opportunity to influence opinion about protests with their statements by strategically calling attention to certain tactics or participants in a protest which could build support for the government and/or undermine support for protesters (Edwards and Arnon 2021).⁴

⁴Elites may exert this influence through direct statements such as speeches or through the content of state-sponsored media outlets (Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018, Rozenas and Stukal 2019).

One way in which the public statements influence opinion is the *label* given to a protest event and its participants. Labels are descriptive, evocative terms that elites apply to protests, and range from sympathetic and accommodative to hostile and accusatory.⁵ Tilly (2006) observes "the very labeling of a performance as one thing or another regularly has consequences for the participants. During the years of the Riot Act [in Great Britain], authorities who called a worrisome assembly a "riot" assumed the right to use force against the assembled crowd" (47). O'Donnell (1988) makes a similar point: " 'Rebelliousness', 'subversion', 'disorder', and 'lack of discipline' are labels affixed to situations that threaten the continuity of what previously were assumed to be the natural attitudes and practices of the dominated classes" (25). Similarly, labeling a contentious event as "terrorism" delegitimizes participants and justifies state repression (Huff and Kertzer 2018).

Labels of protests do not have unlimited influence, however. Public statements may be received poorly if they run against the audience's prior beliefs or come from a source with whom the audience disagrees (Boettcher and Cobb 2009). As a result, unpopular governments could inflame the threat posed by a protest with their response. To sidestep this problem, governments can choose the *source* which issues a statement. Officials can make statements anonymously, or make them with the imprimatur of an institution, as through a press release or spokesperson (Barberá and Zeitzoff 2019).

Strategies of Sources and Labels

Despite the ubiquity of these labels and their use by dictatorships in response to protest events, we know little about their effectiveness. Just as coercive responses to protest can sometimes backfire and at other times deter resistance, so could statements about protest increase or decrease opposition to those protests. Generally, we argue that citizens follow a logic of proportionality in the repression they demand in response to protest (Armstrong, Davenport and Zeitzoff 2021). A label which portrays protesters harshly will increase citi-

⁵Labels are a subtype of framing, which involves emphasizing aspects of an event (Druckman 2001).

zens' demand for coercion, while a label which portrays protesters generously will decrease demand for coercion. A label which originates from a government source may also accentuate these effects. We outline these expectations in turn.

Accusation and Accommodation

Consider a protest event which makes a claim against the regime, attempting to change a status quo policy or making a maximalist demand such as a change in government (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Participants in the protest event use some mixture of nonviolent and violent tactics, as these events often involve multiple groups of participants carrying out a spectrum of different actions (Pressman 2017). Further, police used force to break up the protests in an act of repression.⁶ In a setting with some amount of media freedom, this sequence of events reaches public awareness. As part of media reporting, or in an official response from the government, articles, press releases, and other statements about the event reach print and digital platforms for citizens' consumption.

The content and tone of these statements in response to the event may vary. An *accusatory* response questions the underlying motives of the protesters and asserts the protests are illegitimate on the grounds of law-breaking (Baum and Zhukov 2015). This response could be justified through claiming protesters are criminals, terrorists, or thugs. For example, as the 2011 Arab Spring protests in Egypt gained traction, Egyptian government officials took to state media to label participation in the protests as “dangerous” on account of the presence of agitators stirring up resistance to the Mubarak government (Lindsey 2012). The regime's ultimately futile effort was to persuade Egyptians to support the regime's initially repressive response to the protests. In Argentina, during the country's Dirty War from 1976 to 1983, the military dictatorship referred to the unarmed victims of state repression—of whom there were up to 30,000—as “subversive elements,” “delinquents,” and “criminals” (Feitlowitz 2011). These labels were part of a regime strategy to persuade Argentines that

⁶Repression here follows the minimalist definition of Tilly (1978), in which repression is simply any act which raises the cost of collective action.

repression was justified.

Cohen (2011) provides an authoritative account of how labels which accuse their targets of criminality and delinquency shape public attitudes. Beginning with a judgment of those deemed to be “deviant,” such labels are taken up by “moral entrepreneurs” on media platforms and come to acquire “descriptive and explanatory potential” about their targets (38). Leveraged in this way, accusatory labels link targets to broader societal problems and thus infuse the targets with additional negative connotations for the audience. What begin as ambiguous social situations become threatening, creating a division between the targets and those presented as “the real heroes”—police and security forces (108). The end product is “public support for the use of violence against [alleged] criminals,” particularly violence from the police (182). Accusatory labels should function similarly in the context of protests in authoritarian regimes: increasing public support for the use of repression and decreasing sympathy with the protesters.

Hou and Quek (2019) show that reports on protester violence may generate more support for repression of ethnic minority groups in China through the suggestions that protesters are criminals or terrorists. It implies that citizens may be persuaded that a strong state response is necessary when they are exposed to protest which appear to threaten the government. This produces the following observable implication:

Hypothesis 1a: *When a protest is labeled with accusations, citizen support for repression of the protest will increase compared to when the protest is labeled neutrally.*

In contrast from accusatory labels which gin up public hostility, *accommodative* labels validate the underlying motive for the protest, even if statements fall short of making concessions or endorsing protesters’ methods. While these words are typically not in themselves credible commitments to action when originating from the regime, they can mollify protesters and buy time for the government until concrete steps can be taken to remedy grievances.

A famous historical example is King Richard II's response to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Confronted by rebels in London, the king expressed sympathy and promised to abolish serfdom. Satisfied, the rebels dispersed (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006).⁷ More recently, in Egypt, after labeling protests as "dangerous" failed to prevent their escalation, dictator Hosni Mubarak held a press conference in which he announced that he was "attached to the suffering of the Egyptian people" and pledged to resolve the crisis (C-SPAN 2011).

Accommodative labels trigger a reverse process from accusatory labels, defining protesters not as deviants but as having legitimate claims for material benefits or policy change. By thus minimizing the social distance between protesters and the audience of citizens, the citizens become more supportive of the protesters and less willing to support the use of state violence against them (Manekin and Mitts 2020). The next implication follows:

***Hypothesis 1b:** When a protest is labeled with accommodation, citizen support for repression of the protest will decrease compared to when the protest is labeled neutrally.*

Regime Sources

Besides the content of the label, its source could also influence opinion. The government, especially in authoritarian regimes with state-dominated media sectors and with censorship of opposing viewpoints (Guriev and Treisman 2019), is a frequent source for statements about protest. Officials may hold a televised press conference in which they are visibly associated with a statement, they may visit the site of a protest, or issue a written statement in their name through state media outlets. This involvement usually benefits the authoritarian regime. Issuing official statements about events, particularly when coupled with empirical evidence, increases trust in the government and its official narrative (Huang 2015b) while also raising the salience of policy issues important to the regime (Pan, Shao and Xu 2021). Messages deployed through state media tend to cast the regime in the most favorable light

⁷The king almost immediately reneged on his words.

possible (Rozenas and Stukal 2019), while shifting observers' views in the regime's preferred direction—particularly on contentious political issues (Peisakhin and Rozenas 2018).

The process of attributing response to protest—even at the local level—to the regime establishes an official narrative about the events and links them with the regime for the audience. Evoked by the regime's use of official statements is its added effectiveness in shaping public opinion about the underlying events when serving as the source of the statement. In contrast with statements issued by non-governmental sources about events, such as subject-matter experts or commentators unaffiliated with state media, government sources by their regime connections are freighted with extra meaning, which may accentuate the effects of the messages' content.

If the regime is the source of an accusatory message about protest events, the regime associates itself with law and order by labeling protests as threatening social stability. In authoritarian regimes in particular, incumbents who challenge the legitimacy of protests remind the audience of the regime's authority and, especially, its power to repress. Studies show that citizens reminded of the regime's authority and coercive power are more likely to express public support for regime repression of protests (Truex and Tavana 2019) while also becoming less willing to protest (Carter and Carter 2021, Huang 2018). These effects from the source complement and exceed the effects of a negative label, which, without a regime source, influences citizens' beliefs only about the protest rather than the regime.

Non-government sources, by contrast, are less likely to evoke the authority and coercion of the state with their use of labels. While citizens may believe, due to selection effects from a controlled information environment, that a non-government source is sympathetic with the government's ideology with respect to protests, this source still does not speak in an official capacity nor signal that a policy response such as repression could directly result from their statement.

Hypothesis 2a: *When the regime provides an accusatory message about protest re-*

sponse, the accusatory message increases citizen support for repression of the protest compared to the effect of the message when it is provided by a non-government source.

If the regime is the source of an accommodative message about protest events, the regime associates itself with the possibility of concessions. Regime accommodation has the opposite effect as regime accusation. When the government takes such a “soft-line” response to protests, citizens—both regime supporters and opponents—interpret the label in a way which increases sympathy for the protesters. Among citizens who sincerely support the regime, receiving an accommodative message from the regime triggers motivated reasoning: they become more likely to follow the message provided them because of their prior loyalty. Among citizens who are indifferent or even opposed to the regime, an accommodative response to protest can signal the regime’s permissiveness toward political challengers, increase these citizens’ trust in the regime and make them more receptive to its message of protest accommodation (Frye and Borisova 2019).

These effects work together to decrease support for a repressive response for the protest when the regime signals accommodation, more so than the moral and factual beliefs about a protest an accommodative label changes by itself:

Hypothesis 2b: *When the regime provides an accommodative message about protest response, citizen support for repression of the protest decreases compared to when the message is provided by a nongovernment source.*

Note the combination of Hypothesis 1 with Hypothesis 2 has theoretical significance. For example, it is possible that giving a protest an accusatory label (H1a) affects support for repression, yet the source of that label (H2a) does not condition the effect of the label. If this is the case, then labeling effects dominate source effects. Whether the regime responds to the protest, or citizens receive information from any other type of source, is inconsequential.

If the reverse is true and source effects dominate labeling effects, then the regime’s strategy to issue responses becomes more important (Barberá and Zeitzoff 2019, Steinhardt 2017). If both sources and labels have effects, then this would suggest the two strategies are strategic complements for regimes.

Though we position the argument in an authoritarian context, key parts of the logic generalize to democracies. The process by which accusatory labels generate support for violence, and by which accommodative labels reduce such support, applies to settings such as labeling individuals or groups as terrorists in the United States (Huff and Kertzer 2018). Yet while labels have similar opinion effects across regime types, the context—and sources—from which they arise are distinct. Labeling in democracies, more so than in authoritarian regimes, tends to be a bottom-up process originating from social demand for categorizing contentious actors, and the business model of independent, for-profit media—as Cohen (2011) documents in analyzing moral panics—only exploited by governments or parties which do not want to “let a good crisis go to waste.” Labeling in stable authoritarian regimes with limited media freedom and political competition, on the other hand, tends to be a top-down process derived from government objectives vis-à-vis contentious politics. Bottom-up labeling of such events or actors in these regimes which scholars observe tends to be that which regimes permit, encourage, and direct (Roberts 2018, Weiss 2014).

Research Design

Background

We test our hypotheses using a survey experiment fielded in China and designed around a salient topic within domestic politics: environmental issues. China is a prototypical case for studying protest labeling for several reasons. First, our theory suggests that central governments respond to contentious events strategically. In China, the range of sources—both governmental and non-governmental—and the labels applied to protest vary widely.

In recent years, the number of local protests in China have increased substantially (The Economist 2018), with wide variation in governmental responses ranging from accommodating to demands to systematic repression. For example, environmentalists in Sichuan Province won a victory after massive protests, both violent and non-violent, against a copper smelting complex. The US\$1.6 billion project was permanently canceled in response to a long protest campaign (Bradsher 2012). People’s Daily, the Chinese central government’s official media reposted a commentary showing compassion for protesters and criticizing the lack of transparency and participation during the local policy-making process.⁸ In contrast, protesters against several destructor plants in Jiangxi Province were arrested and sentenced in the name of “collectively disturbing social order.”⁹

Like in other authoritarian countries, the accusatory labeling of protesters in China occurs regularly, regardless of whether the protesters used violence or intentionally abstained from violence during protest. A prominent example is the 2019 protests in Hong Kong, in which mostly non-violent protesters were labeled thugs, criminals and violent gangs by the central government (Myers and Mozur 2019). Interestingly, even within this increasingly escalating protest environment, the local police chief opted for an accommodative response in ordering that his police officers not label demonstrators as cockroaches, regardless of protesters’ actions (Dixon and Kirkpatrick 2019).

Moreover, China is an authoritarian regime, with a vibrant, yet heavily monitored and regulated, information and media market. Importantly, local protests, sparked by grievances over issues such as environmental damage, do receive wide coverage on national, local, and social media, in more traditional formats and through the Internet. Yet, the Chinese media market is also wrought by information and disinformation campaigns by both government officials and civilians opposed to protests (Huang 2018, Huang and Yeh 2018, Lorentzen 2013, 2014). The survey seeks to answer how the manipulation of government responses, specifically in an authoritarian context, modifies support for repression against protesters.

⁸<http://www.people.com.cn/h/2012/0705/c25408-246509309.html>

⁹<https://news.sina.com.cn/o/2021-12-23/doc-ikyarmz0816484.shtml>

Conducting experiments within an authoritarian context also requires adjudicating considerable ethical concerns. We intentionally select environmental issues, because they are salient and directly impact citizens' lives but are not considered politically threatening to the central government. Posing little threat to the government, respondents are more likely to respond truthfully without fear of retaliation. We can reasonably expect, therefore, that survey responses have no impact on real-world outcomes for our respondents. Although the messages in our survey are based on a real case and actual government responses, we also inform respondents at the end of the survey that the information they read in our treatment vignettes (described below) was fictional, to ensure they are left with no false impressions.

A Survey Experiment in China

We fielded our experiment in China to a sample of 2,428 internet respondents from July 25 to August 5, 2021. Respondents were required to be adult citizens of the Chinese mainland recruited through the internet (mobile device or computer) without stratifying on a demographic group, although those who do not use the internet will be excluded by nature of the collection method. Compared with national-level statistics, our sample is at least representative of gender, income, and rural background of the Chinese population. We field our survey online not only because it is the best way to collect a large sample which avoids direct censorship and monitoring in China, but also because the internet has become a center of dissident and collective action (King, Pan and Roberts 2017).¹⁰

As part of the survey, respondents answer a series of pretreatment questions. In this section, we collect data on potentially predictive covariates which include gender, age, province of residence, rural-versus-urban residence, marital status, education level, occupation, income, party membership, news consumption, exposure to protests, and several indicators of opinion on political and local issues such as the salience of environmental issues. The full

¹⁰The survey experiment was designed through Qualtrics, one of the leading survey design platforms. The whole survey, including survey questions, a consent form and a debrief that contains the sources and links to the original news articles we edited is written completely in Mandarin Chinese. Participants receive the same amount of monetary compensation regardless of their answers.

list of pretreatment covariates on which data are collected can be found in the appendix.

Treatment Arms

Following the pretreatment questions, respondents are exposed to a short message in the style of a news article describing an environmental protest event which occurred in Qidong, Jiangsu in July, 2012. The residents of Qidong protested against the city government for passing a waste-water pipeline project. They took to the streets and ultimately entered a local government building with both peaceful and violent confrontations with the police and the bureaucrats. The local government was forced to admit fault and scrap the project. The protest was widely reported in China and around the world. In China, opinions on the protest are divided: while some insist that the protesters were guilty of inciting violence, others believe the event was effective political participation which protected citizens' rights. Even the official media was ambivalent. It criticized some of the actions, but not the protesters themselves, and indicated that the reason for the protest was legitimate.¹¹

After reading the message, respondents then see a fictionalized statement of a response to the event. We induce random variation in the content and source of this response—making it the experimental treatment. The content of the response is a label: a descriptive, evocative, and short statement about the event by a specific source. We hold constant the details of the event itself outside the source's response.

The survey assigns respondents to each treatment group through simple random assignment. There are two main dimensions along which the treatment is randomized corresponding with our main hypotheses. The first dimension we randomize is the *label* given to the protest. The labeling dimension is the tone and meaning of the label, corresponding to the first hypothesis. In the *accusatory label* treatment condition, the headline informs them of an official stating that “We need to stop the violence now and restore order.” In the accompanying vignette respondents read, they are told that criminals were the ones who orchestrated

¹¹See for example, “*People's Daily* Comments on Qidong Incident: We Need Transparent Government More Than Calm Citizens” <http://news.sohu.com/20120730/n349344413.shtml>

the protest and they “violently stormed” the government building and “attacked government workers.”

In the *accommodative label* condition, respondents read a headline noting the official stating “we need to listen to our citizens, if common sense shall prevail.” Survey participants are informed that people, a nondescript and generic label unlike “criminals”, were the perpetrators of the protest. The actions are described as entering the government building regardless of the restriction and protest impulsively but not violently. It is important to note that, while the accusatory label includes mention of both criminality and violence, these terms only enter the vignette through the statements of the quoted source itself, rather than the background conditions for the event described in the news article.

We also create a *control* condition in which the protesters similarly “entered the building” and “confronted with” the government workers but without further descriptions. The headline of the control condition makes the official comment about the incident simply: “we need to pay attention.”

Given the nature of a contentious protest, each of these treatment arms are plausible descriptors of the *same* event and underlying facts. The difference lies in the labels used, the description of their actions, and the source’s attitude corresponding to the descriptions. The control is designed to suggest neither criminality nor sympathy with respect to the protesters. We expect that an accusatory label increases support for repression and that an accommodative label decreases it, consistent with Hypothesis 1a and 1b.

Next is the *source*. We randomly vary who describes and labels the protest event. In the non-government condition, the source of the protest label is a scholar, whereas in the treatment condition the label comes from “the official media.” In China, the term appears commonly in news articles and are widely interpreted as representing the regime. We do not specify the ideological position or the identity of the scholar because we would like to avoid priming survey participants on this information. The goal of the study is not to compare effects from two sources of different partisanship or ideologies. Rather, we would like to

investigate how citizens respond to labels from sources based on their actual perceptions of a non-government actor who publishes comments on protests as they would in a real-world authoritarian context. In accordance with Hypothesis 2a and 2b, we expect this change in the *source* to lead to divergent responses in support for repression conditional on whether the government gives the protest an accusatory or accommodative label.

An example treatment vignette with the government source and different labels is shown in Figure SI.1. All respondents are shown the introductory paragraph. Treatment manipulations are in the second paragraph and the headline. A full list of vignettes are included in the appendix.

Outcome Measures

Following exposure to the environmental protest vignette with a randomly-varied label and source, survey respondents answer a series of questions related to the outcome measures of interest. Of primary importance is *support for repression*, which we measure through both retrospective and prospective questions. First, we mention that the government carried out arrests and also concessions in response to the protest—in particular canceling the pipeline project—and gauge respondents’ support for each measure retrospectively. Second, we probe respondents’ *support for protest* in various forms. Specifically, we ask respondents if they would support a future protest similar to the one described in the vignette, including supporting it through posting on social media, signing letters, providing material support, joining the protest, or organizing the protest. The protest formats are adapted from the questions on the China Panel of the World Values Survey.

We next benchmark this support for repression against respondents’ attitudes toward the protesters and the environmental issue motivating the protest as potential mechanisms explaining their support for repression: asking them their opinion about whether protesters were too violent, whether their actions are improper, and whether environmental pollution is a serious problem.

Estimation of Treatment Effects

The main quantity of interest we estimate in this experiment is the average treatment effect (ATE). This is estimated by taking the difference in means between a treatment condition and different reference categories. We then re-estimate these quantities using regression estimates which include additional individual-level covariates and province fixed effects. The regression estimation for Hypotheses 1 takes the following form:

$$\text{Repression Support}_i = \alpha + \beta \text{Label}_i + \zeta X_i + \mu_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where Label_i is assignment status for either the *Criminal* label for respondent i , X_i is a vector of pre-treatment covariates, μ_i is a province fixed effect and ϵ_i is a robust error term. The coefficient of interest is β , the effect of the label on repression support. The regression estimation for Hypothesis 2 takes the following form:

$$\text{Repression Support}_i = \alpha + \beta \text{Label}_i + \delta \text{Govt}_i + \gamma \text{Label}_i \cdot \text{Govt}_i + \zeta X_i + \mu_i + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where Govt_i is assignment status for the government source treatment. The coefficient of interest in this estimation is γ , the effect of the label—criminal—on repression support among those respondents who received the randomly-assigned government source treatment.

Table 1 illustrates the comparison groups. Under Hypothesis 1, the effect of the accusatory label treatment compares the average support for repression among those assigned to the accusatory condition—cells 3 and 4—and those assigned to the control conditions—cells 1 and 2. We later discuss estimates comparing the accusatory label groups to the pooled control and accommodative groups.

The comparison of interest for Hypothesis 2 is the interaction of the accusatory label and government source, estimating the change in the labeling treatment effects among those assigned to a government source—the right column—and those assigned to a scholarly

Table 1: Full Enumeration of Treatment Arms

		Source	
		Scholar	Government
Label	Control	1	2
	Accusatory	3	4
	Accommodative	5	6

source—the left column. In particular, Hypothesis 2a predicts the effect of the government’s accusatory label (cell 4 compared to cell 2) is expected to be larger than the effect of the scholar’s accusatory label (cell 3 compared to cells 1). Hypothesis 2b predicts the effect of the government’s accommodative label (cell 6 compared to cell 2) is expected to be larger than the effect of the scholar’s accommodative label (cell 5 compared to cell 1).

Treatment Balance and Manipulation Check

We report results from balance tests in the appendix. Tables SI.1, SI.2, and SI.3 contain difference in mean estimates across the three treatment conditions for each pretreatment covariates. Of the 54 individual difference in means tested, only two (income for the government source compared to the scholar source and marital status for the accommodative label compared to the control) are significantly different at the $p = 0.05$ level. This rate is what would be expected if the significant results arose by chance. We include income and marital status in all models with covariates, and this does not change the results.

To ensure that our results are not influenced by respondents’ potential inattention, we ask an attention check question before introducing the treatment. Twelve percent of the participants fail the check. Neither conditioning on the failure nor interacting it with the treatments in the models changes our results. We also ask two post-treatment factual questions to check respondents’ comprehension of the treatment. The two questions ask about the city where the protest happened and the source of the news report, and the failure rates

are merely three percent and eight percent, respectively.

Results

Labeling Effects

We first present results for Hypotheses 1a and 1b in Table 2, examining the effects of the accusatory and accommodative labels on respondents' expressed attitudes toward repression and willingness to participate in an environmental protest similar to the one described in the vignette. Each table presents estimates of average treatment effects from linear regression with and without province fixed effects and individual-level covariates.

The results suggest consistent statistically significant results across all models for the accusatory label. An accusatory label causes an increase of 0.23-0.27 in support for repression on a five-point scale. Even numbered models include covariates and region fixed effects, while odd numbered models withhold controls and fixed effects. Models 1-2 compare the accusatory label and control (or neutral) label, and Models 3-4 compare the accommodative label with the control label. Coefficients for the accusatory label are in the expected direction: support for arresting protesters increases across the different comparison groups (Hypothesis 1a). However, coefficients for the accommodative label (Hypothesis 1b) are not significant, suggesting respondents are no more supportive of protests when reading a label sympathizing with protesters than a neutral label conveying no sympathetic tone. Overall, the difference in outcome variables between the accommodative and neutral labels is minimal—preventing us from rejecting the null for Hypothesis 1b.

Effects of Labeling by Source

We present the results for labeling effects disaggregated by source in Tables 3 and 4. Here we test Hypotheses 2a and 2b, examining whether the source of a label differentially affects respondents' attitudes when interacted with the labeling treatment. Table 3 examines the

Table 2: Main Results: Labeling Effects

	Support Arrest			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Accusatory Label	0.27*** (0.05)	0.27*** (0.05)		
Accommodative Label			0.04 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Adj. R ²	0.02	0.03	-0.00	0.01
Observations	1609	1598	1626	1616
Covariates and FE		✓		✓
Reference Category	Control	Control	Control	Control

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors are shown in the parentheses.

same outcome as Table 2, and is structured similarly. Models 1-2 compare the accusatory and control conditions, and Models 3-4 compare the accommodative label treatment with the control condition. Odd-numbered models include no controls and fixed effects, and even-numbered models include both.

As described in Table 3, we find consistent effects of accusatory labels on support for repression but no evidence for a source effect. Whether labels are issued by the regime, with the power of the state behind them, or by a scholar unaffiliated with the regime, the effects remain statistically and substantively similar. In this test, the accommodative label remains similarly ineffective in shaping respondents' attitudes towards protesters, regardless of the source from which the label emanates. Because the accommodative label's effects are indistinguishable from the neutral label, in the tests that follow we focus on probing additional outcomes and mechanisms to substantiate the findings for the accusatory label.

In Table 4 we also examine several additional auxiliary outcome variables related to protest support for the accusatory label which produced significant effects on support for repression in the main analysis. The outcome variables below refer to the question, asked post-treatment: "If there is a similar protest against pollution or other public welfare issues, are you going to support it, and how?" The options are adapted from World Values Survey, including (1) not support in any form, (2) post support on social media, (3) sign name on

Table 3: Main Results: Label Effects by Official Source

	Support Arrest			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Government Source	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)
Accusatory Label	0.25*** (0.06)	0.26*** (0.06)		
Accusatory * Govt.	0.03 (0.09)	0.02 (0.09)		
Accommodative Label			-0.02 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)
Accommodative * Govt.			0.10 (0.09)	0.08 (0.09)
Adj. R ²	0.02	0.02	-0.00	0.01
Observations	1609	1598	1626	1616
Covariates and FE		✓		✓
Reference Category	Control	Control	Control	Control

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors are shown in the parentheses.

letters for support, (4) provide material support, (5) participate in the protest actions, and (6) organize or lead the protest. We measure responses with each type of support, coding 1 if the corresponding option is selected and 0 otherwise.

We focus on the first three options, no support, media support, and letter support, as they are moderate and thus more feasible for most respondents. Very few people select the other three options and the results are not significant. Figure SI.2 in the appendix presents the distribution for each option across treatment conditions. An accusatory label is associated with a 0.1 increase in the probability of supporting future protests or actions, and in some models the label also decreases public support for the issue through social media and a letter signing campaign. As with previous results, we see no source effect, as the source interaction term is statistically and substantively insignificant.¹² In the following section we discuss possible mechanisms for these findings.

¹²These models compare the accusatory label with the control only. Results remain similar when pooling the control and the accommodative label group. Results do not change when estimated with a logistic regression model. The probability change is calculated from estimation with this model.

Table 4: Results: Forms of Protest Support

	No Support		Media Post		Sign Letters	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Accusatory Label	0.09*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.03)	-0.06** (0.02)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.07* (0.03)
Government Source		-0.01 (0.02)		0.01 (0.03)		-0.04 (0.03)
Accusatory * Govt.		-0.00 (0.04)		-0.04 (0.05)		0.09 (0.05)
Adj. R ²	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Observations	1612	1612	1612	1612	1612	1612
Covariates and FE		✓		✓		✓
Reference Category	Control	Control	Control	Control	Control	Control

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors are shown in the parentheses.

Mechanisms: What Perceptions Do the Label and Source Change?

To determine why accusatory labels shape support for repression and opposition to protests, we examine which of respondents’ perceptions about protesters the labels affect. A story about protest is complex, and the labels may trigger various changes in how respondents perceive the protest facts in the vignette. The most direct mechanism in our theory is that accusatory labels elicit negative views on protesters and their behaviors’ legitimacy. Another, related mechanism is that an accusatory label redirects respondents’ attention, taking focus away from the underlying cause of the protest (Munger et al. 2019)—an environmentally harmful project—and redirecting it to protester conduct. Through this mechanism, an accusatory label would improve perceptions of government officials who are perceived to be less culpable for the social instability. Moreover, by labeling a protest as committed by “criminals,” the accusatory labels challenge the legitimacy of the protesters’ demands, which, in this case, is to cancel the project.

Our findings support the mechanism of the accusatory label changing respondents’ perceptions of protesters. We ask the survey participants to report their agreement with three statements: “the protesters’ behaviors were violent,” “the protesters’ behaviors were improper,” and “the protesters’ behaviors deserved support.” Table 5 shows that the accusatory

label affects responses to all three questions regardless of the source. It makes citizens more likely to view the protesters as violent and improper and tend to believe that protesters did not deserve support.

Table 5: Accusatory Labels and the Perception of Protesters

	Violent		Improper Actions		Deserve Support	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Accusatory Label	0.39*** (0.05)	0.38*** (0.05)	0.28*** (0.05)	0.28*** (0.05)	-0.31*** (0.05)	-0.32*** (0.05)
Adj. R ²	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03
Observations	1609	1599	1612	1601	1612	1601
Covariates and FE		✓		✓		✓
Reference Category	Control	Control	Control	Control	Control	Control

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Standard errors are shown in the parentheses.

However, we do not find evidence that the accusatory label shifted attention away from culpable government officials or the controversial project. To test this, we create outcome questions based on the factual conclusion of the Qidong Protest—the project was canceled and none of the officials in charge of introducing or allowing the project were sanctioned. We ask the respondents how much they agree that the local officials responsible for the project should not be sanctioned (pardoned) and that the project should be canceled. Table 6 shows no clear treatment effect on the two outcomes, either as a baseline effect or varying according to the source. The results suggest that the accusatory labels simply inflame negative perceptions of the protesters but may not change their attention to the local government or its culpability for environmental damage.

Accounting for No Source Effects

We also explore three explanations for the lack of source effects in our main results: the perceived credibility of sources according to survey respondents, the distinction between government intimidation and persuasion, and respondents' understanding of scholars as non-governmental sources in China.

Table 6: Accusatory Label on the Perception of Government and Project

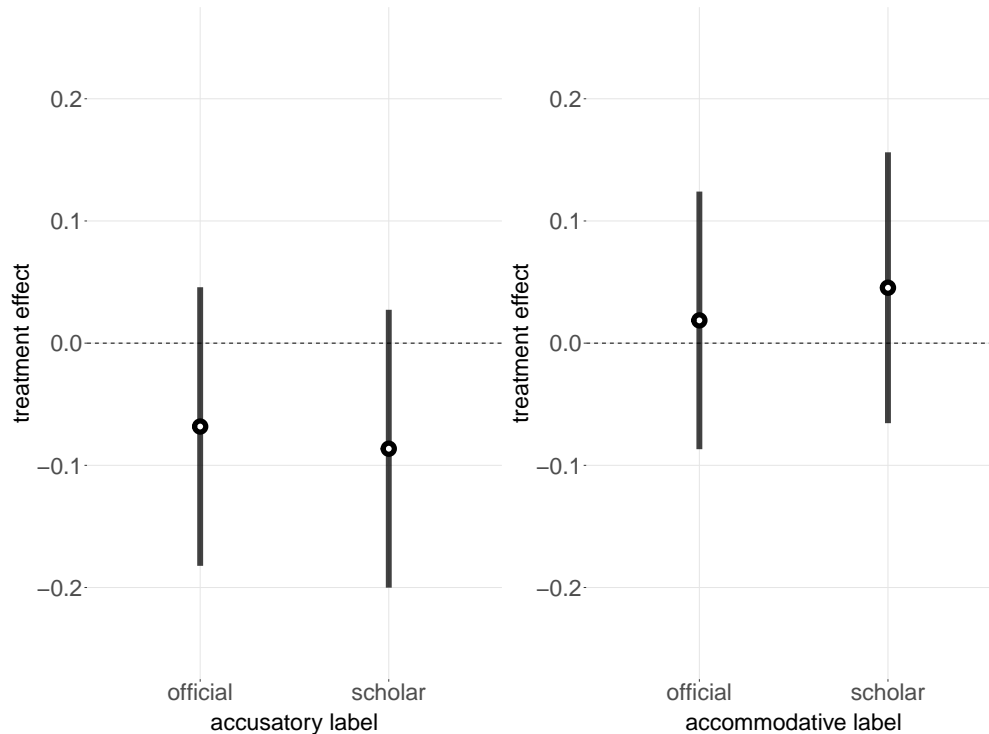
	Pardon Officials		Cancel Project	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Accusatory Label	0.07 (0.04)	0.09 (0.06)	0.01 (0.05)	0.02 (0.07)
Government Source		0.03 (0.06)		-0.05 (0.06)
Accusatory * Government		-0.05 (0.08)		-0.03 (0.09)
Adj. R ²	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01
Observations	1537	1537	1597	1597
Covariates and FE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reference Category	Control	Control	Control	Control

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors are shown in the parentheses.

First, if source effects do not change respondents' perceptions and judgments of protests, respondents should perceive the two sources' credibility similarly. Studies on fake news and rumors have found that the content, the source, or the interaction of the two may significantly influence people's trust in information they consume (Bai et al. 2015, Berinsky 2017, Huang 2015b, Nyhan et al. 2020, Zhu, Lu and Shi 2013). The null findings for the distinction between the government and scholar sources on support for repression could occur because people find the government's accusatory labels less credible than the scholar's for their more obvious bias, but are also intimidated by government accusatory labels—creating offsetting effects. Source credibility also suggests an alternative explanation for our labeling findings: that respondents may perceive an accusatory label as more credible because in the authoritarian context protesters are frequently accused. Thus respondents reading the accusatory labels may not be more likely to support repression, but they are simply more responsive to the message because they tend to trust the content more.

To address the possibility of varying source credibility, we first maximize credibility across treatment arms by drawing on real news reports from official media and mainstream Chinese news platforms. Adopting similar expressions as those in real news about a real protest event is more credible than using fictitious wordings or contexts. At the end of the survey we ask

Figure 1: Treatment Effect on Perceived Content Credibility by Source and Label



respondents to rate the credibility of the news content, and find their average rating of the government (3.38) and scholar (3.34) sources is well within the top half of a five-point credibility scale. Second, Figure 1 shows that government and scholarly sources have similar effects on credibility across both accusatory and accommodative labels. These results suggest respondents did not perceive the sources differently, weakening the possibility the government source is seen as more or less biased. See Table SI.4 and Table SI.5 in the appendix for full results.

Part of our expectation for government source effects is that an accusatory official comment on a protest event carries the connotation of state authority or coercion, intimidating respondents and increasing conformity with the official position (Trinh and Truong 2020).¹³ This is an added effect over non-government scholars, who can only inform and persuade. We evaluate the possibility of government source intimidation effects through two analyses. First, as mentioned above, an intimidating accusatory label by the government would signal

¹³A similar dynamic signaling regime permissiveness affects accommodative official comments.

coercion and generate compliance above and beyond a scholar's accusatory label. This is not the case, as Table 3 shows no interaction effect for government source and accusatory label. Second, if the government source works through intimidation, we would expect respondents to default to the self-evident official position on protests rather than a persuasion effect, which would cause them to weigh and evaluate new information before arriving at an opinion. Intimidation would therefore reduce survey response times compared to persuasion.¹⁴ Tables SI.6 and SI.7 show no change in survey duration for either government sources or accusatory labels, lending support to the notion that both government and scholarly sources' labels persuade rather than intimidate respondents.

Another possibility is that a scholar's use of labels could be seen as indistinguishable from the government's in an authoritarian context like China due to censorship of both media and scholars. We acknowledge that this is entirely possible, but argue that scholars and intellectuals are not necessarily seen as pro-government in the Chinese context. Their criticisms of policies and local governments are to some extent allowed by the regime. Of course, pro-government scholars who endorse repression might be more likely to appear on media than those who support protesters, but criticisms from scholars are not rare. In fact, in the mainstream news media, some scholars published comments on the Qidong protest (on which we base our survey vignettes) that supported citizens' fight for their rights while calling for government responsiveness.¹⁵

In the eyes of Chinese citizens, while some scholars actively support the regime, many others are seen as liberal, dissident, and even pro-Western. In expressing these views, scholars who deviate from a government position are frequently criticized on Chinese social media. It is exactly in this highly censored media environment that citizens frequently observe non-government sources that are labeled as anti-regime.¹⁶ Again, our study aims at examining if

¹⁴This comports with findings that the threat of repression reduces citizens' skepticism and use of more cognitively-demanding System II thinking (Horz 2018).

¹⁵For example, see a column at Sohu.com: <http://star.news.sohu.com/s2012/mjzl/>

¹⁶For instance, people are easily accused as "hostile forces" and even bullied by Chinese netizens even if they post negative opinions about the government or the country on not very sensitive topics (China Media Project 2021).

labeling protesters has any different effect across government and non-government sources in an authoritarian country. A non-government source, pro-government or not, does not alter the significant effects of the accusatory labels on citizens' support for protests or repression.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study shows that information-based responses to protest affect public attitudes about repression and mass mobilization in an authoritarian context. Using a survey experiment in China, we find that accusatory labels generate support for repression and decrease support for protest even when the underlying factual basis of the protest is held constant. Through testing possible mechanisms, we find evidence that respondents change their attitudes toward the protesters but not toward the government or the issue around which the protest occurred.

We also find that it is the *message*, rather than the *messenger* which shapes respondents' attitudes toward repression and protest: a scholarly source produces the same effects when deploying an accusatory or accommodative label as does a government source. This finding contrasts with past work that authoritarian regimes use “hard propaganda” to attempt to signal their power or preferences and prevent citizens from dissenting (Huang 2015a, Wedeen 1998). Our tests support the argument that, in response to protest, the main pathway through which pro-regime messages work is likely persuasion—public support for repression and protest only changes with the labels' content and aligns with respondents' perception of source credibility. Research on fake news, rumors and fact-checking across regimes suggest that source credibility matters for belief change (Berinsky 2017, Huang 2015b, Nyhan et al. 2020, Zhu, Lu and Shi 2013), consistent with our findings that (1) respondents rate government and scholar credibility both highly and at similar levels, and (2) that labels from both sources affect beliefs. However, we do not rule out pathways besides persuasion from credible sources as possible explanations for belief change. Whether labeling works through persuasion, intimidation, distraction, or raising salience could depend

on whether the issue at stake triggers differing perceptions of credibility between government and nongovernment sources.

An important scope condition is the difference in effects when there are visual anchors accompanying protest-related labels. In early 2020, we administered a similar survey experiment using visual anchors that did not find a consistent labeling effect. We included in all labels respondents received the same, real picture of the Qidong protest incident in which a group of protesters overturned and surrounded a police car. Therefore, it is likely that giving respondents a powerful visual anchor of protesters committing property damage washes out the effect of varying text-based labels. Given the prevalence of visual messages on social media today, the difference between these forms can be an interesting path for future research on propaganda in response to protests. In particular, future research could vary the images of protests to which respondents are exposed while holding text-based information constant to determine how this might affect attitudes toward repression and protest.

Finally, to minimize the potential harm to respondents and the fear of expressing truthful opinions regarding protest and repression, we set our experiment on environmental issues, which are less sensitive than more politicized issues such as demands for democratization. It is possible that the government source matters more in that context because citizens may be more likely to believe that the government will sanction its opponents. Nevertheless, our study finds that citizens are susceptible to negative labels of protesters, which is not due to the intentional support of the government's position. This implies that at least the *message* itself can be a useful strategy for the government to cultivate support for repression regardless there is a signal of coercion or not.

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Online Appendix

Treatment Vignettes

Figure SI.1: Example Survey Experiment Vignette

Title: The Official Media Comment on the Qidong Incident:
[*control*]“We need to pay attention.” [*accusatory*] “We need to stop violence and restore order now.” [*accommodative*] “We need to listen to our citizens, if common sense shall prevail.”

About 6 am on July 28 in 2012, there was a mass parade in Qidong, Jiangsu Province. Thousands of people joined the parade, protesting against the local government for a plan that allows a paper factory to discharge its outlet to the sea near the city. Citizens held the banner and blocked the region around city government.

The official media such as People’s Daily made a special comment stating that [*control*] protestors entered the local government building and confronted with government workers. [*accusatory*] some criminals broke the police line, violently stormed the government building and attacked government workers. [*accommodative*] some people entered the government building regardless of the restriction and impulsively protested against the government workers. The official media points out that, in recent years, mass incidents about the environment issue happen from time to time across the country. [*control*] Faced with such incidents, the government and citizens should keep a high attention. [*accusatory*] However, any society cannot appease or tolerate extreme violence. Faced with such incidents, the government should promptly beat violence and crimes, and citizens should not assist the rioters. [*accommodative*] However, interest conflicts on environment issues are a reflection of any society’s progress. Faced with such incidents, while citizens need to learn to express their demands peacefully, the government should timely respond to these demands.

Balance

- Balance between government source condition and scholar source condition, Table SI.1.
- Balance between accusatory label and control label, Table SI.2.
- Balance between accommodative label and control label, Table SI.3.

Table SI.1: Balance of Government vs. Scholar Source

variable	diff_mean	t	se	p
male	-0.0174	-0.8692	0.02	0.3849
birthyear	-0.0828	-0.3575	0.2315	0.7208
province	0.351	0.9978	0.3518	0.3186
urban	-0.0119	-0.5881	0.0203	0.5566
married	0.0118	0.7003	0.0168	0.4839
education	-0.0525	-1.3368	0.0393	0.1815
occupation	-0.0961	-0.7466	0.1287	0.4555
public	-0.0065	-0.4198	0.0155	0.6747
party	0.0015	0.1075	0.0142	0.9144
income	-0.1073	-2.0906	0.0513	0.0368
entertainment_news	-0.0364	-1.1897	0.0306	0.2344
social_news	-0.0342	-1.1916	0.0287	0.2337
pollution_care	-0.0447	-1.6447	0.0272	0.1003
social_media_news	-0.012	-1.1944	0.01	0.2326
pollution_serious	-0.0109	-0.3848	0.0282	0.7004
prioritize_econ	0.0551	1.6535	0.0333	0.0985
heard_protest	-0.0118	-0.3258	0.0363	0.7447
attention_check	-0.0209	-1.607	0.013	0.1083

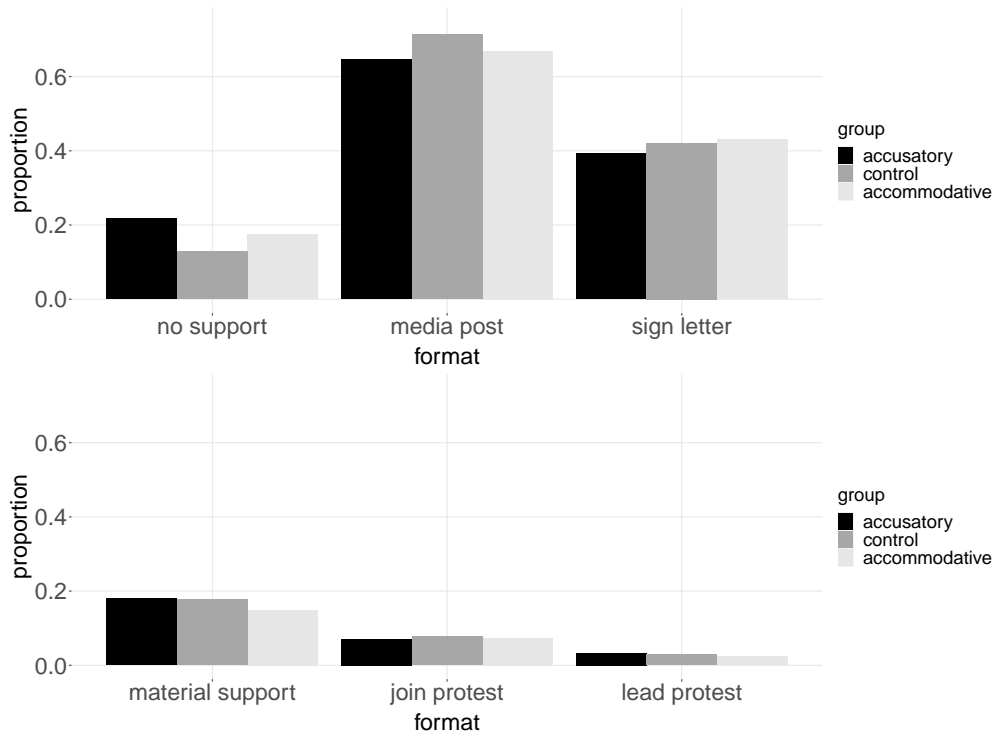
Table SI.2: Balance of Accusatory vs. Control Label

variable	diff_mean	t	se	p
male	-0.019	-0.8977	0.0212	0.3696
birthyear	0.1521	0.6101	0.2493	0.542
province	0.5849	1.5433	0.379	0.1232
urban	0.0056	0.2605	0.0216	0.7946
married	-0.0128	-0.7226	0.0178	0.4701
education	-0.0116	-0.2759	0.042	0.7827
occupation	-0.1436	-1.0683	0.1344	0.2857
public	-0.0066	-0.3987	0.0164	0.6902
party	-0.0272	-1.8484	0.0147	0.0649
income	0.0132	0.2397	0.0553	0.8106
entertainment_news	-0.0204	-0.6279	0.0325	0.5303
social_news	-0.0063	-0.2097	0.03	0.834
pollution_care	-0.0071	-0.2471	0.0287	0.8049
social_media_news	-0.0035	-0.3216	0.0107	0.7478
pollution_serious	-0.0471	-1.5534	0.0303	0.1207
prioritize_econ	-0.0365	-1.0362	0.0352	0.3004
heard_protest	-0.0044	-0.1145	0.0385	0.9089
attention_check	-0.0118	-0.8347	0.0141	0.4042

Table SI.3: Balance of Accommodative vs. Control Label

variable	diff_mean	t	se	p
male	-0.0137	-0.6484	0.0211	0.5169
birthyear	-0.4259	-1.7073	0.2494	0.0881
province	-0.0726	-0.1954	0.3716	0.8451
urban	-0.0052	-0.2417	0.0215	0.8091
married	0.0377	2.0781	0.0182	0.038
education	0.0564	1.3709	0.0412	0.1708
occupation	0.0462	0.341	0.1356	0.7332
public	0.0144	0.8685	0.0166	0.3854
party	0.0082	0.5394	0.0152	0.5897
income	-0.0101	-0.1894	0.0536	0.8498
entertainment_news	0.0321	0.9942	0.0323	0.3204
social_news	0.0326	1.0664	0.0306	0.2866
pollution_care	-0.0018	-0.0607	0.0291	0.9516
social_media_news	-0.0053	-0.4949	0.0107	0.6208
pollution_serious	0.013	0.4303	0.0302	0.6671
prioritize_econ	0.0345	0.9666	0.0357	0.334
heard_protest	0.0206	0.5347	0.0385	0.593
attention_check	0.0082	0.6002	0.0137	0.5485

Figure SI.2: Reported Format of Supporting A Protest



Perceived Content Credibility

- Credibility of accusatory label, including interactions with source condition, Table SI.4.
- Credibility of accommodative label, including interactions with source condition, Table SI.5.

Table SI.4: Credibility of the Accusatory Label

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Accusatory Label	-0.08 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.04)	-0.09 (0.06)	-0.09 (0.06)
Government Source			0.04 (0.05)	0.04 (0.06)
Accusatory * Govt.			0.02 (0.08)	0.02 (0.08)
Adj. R ²	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Observations	1609	1598	1609	1598
Covariates and FE		✓		✓
Reference Category	Control	Control	Control	Control

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table SI.5: Credibility of the Accommodative Label

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Accommodative Label	0.03 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.05 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)
Government Source			0.04 (0.05)	0.04 (0.06)
Accommodative * Govt.			-0.03 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.08)
Adj. R ²	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	-0.00
Observations	1623	1613	1623	1613
Covariates and FE		✓		✓
Reference Category	Control	Control	Control	Control

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table SI.6: Response Duration with the Accusatory Label

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Accusatory Label	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
Government Source			-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Accusatory * Govt.			0.00 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.04)
Adj. R ²	0.00	0.03	-0.00	0.02
Observations	1612	1601	1612	1601
Covariates and FE		✓		✓
Reference Category	Control	Control	Control	Control

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Table SI.7: Response Duration with the Accommodative Label

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Accommodative	0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)
Government Source			-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)
Accommodative * Govt.			0.01 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)
Adj. R ²	-0.00	0.03	-0.00	0.02
Observations	1627	1617	1627	1617
Covariates and FE		✓		✓
Reference Category	Control	Control	Control	Control

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

Survey Instrument

Part I: Pre-treatment

- 1) What is your gender?
Male; Female
- 2) In what year were you born?
- 3) Which province do you live in?
(Choose from 31 provinces)
- 4) Is your household registration rural or urban? Rural; Urban
- 5) What is your marital status?
Married; Not Married
- 6) Which of the following best describes your level of education?
Primary school or under; Junior high school; Senior high school or secondary vocational school; Junior college; 4-year college; Graduate school
- 7) Which of the following best describes your occupation?
Student; Self-employed; Corporate office worker; Corporate management; Government employee; Professional; Manufacturing worker; Service worker; Migrant worker; Farmer; Unemployed; Retired; Other
- 8) Do you work in government, public sectors, or SOEs?
Yes; No
- 9) Which of the following best describes your family's annual income? (RMB yuan)
<30,000; 30,000-50,000; 50,000-100,000; 100,000-360,000; 360,000-500,000; 500,000-800,000; 800,000-2,000,000; >2,000,000
- 10) Are you a CCP member?
Yes; No
- 11) How frequently do you consume news on entertainment or sports?
Very often; Sometimes; Rarely; Never
- 12) How frequently do you consume news on politics, economy or society?
Very often; Sometimes; Rarely; Never
- 13) How frequently do you follow news about environmental pollution issue?
Very often; Sometimes; Rarely; Never

14) Which of the following best describes the type of media you most frequently use? Traditional media (newspaper, broadcast, TV, magazine) or their websites; Social media (WeChat, Weibo, bbs, video blog, etc.)

15) How serious do you think environmental pollution problem is in our country? Not serious at all, not much serious, a bit serious, very serious, extremely serious

16) Do you agree or disagree the following statement: our country should prioritize economic development over environmental protection? Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree

17) How many mass incidents against environmental pollution in our country have you ever learned about? More than 10; 5-10; 1-5; Never

18) From the below options, choose two sources of air pollution that you think are important. Industrial emissions; Coal burning; Dust; Vehicle emissions; Diffused pollution

Part II: Treatment

Please read a news report in 2012, and answer the following questions.

1. Title: The Official Media Comment on the Qidong Incident: “We need to pay attention.”

About 6 am on July 28 in 2012, there was a mass parade in Qidong, Jiangsu Province. Thousands of people joined the parade, protesting against the local government for a plan that allows a paper factory to discharge its outlet to the sea near the city. Citizens held the banner and blocked the region around city government.

The official media such as People’s Daily made a special comment stating that protestors entered the local government building and confronted with government workers. The official media points out that, in recent years, mass incidents about environmental issues occur from time to time across the country. Faced with such incidents, the government and citizens should keep a high attention.

2. Title: The Official Media Comment on the Qidong Incident: “We need to stop violence and restore order now”

About 6 am on July 28 in 2012, there was a mass parade in Qidong, Jiangsu Province. Thousands of people joined the parade, protesting against the local government for a plan that allows a paper factory to discharge its outlet to the sea near the city. Citizens held the banner and blocked the region around city government.

The official media such as People’s Daily made a special comment stating that some criminals broke the police line, violently stormed the government building and attacked

government workers. The official media points out that, in recent years, mass incidents about the environment issue happen from time to time across the country. However, any society cannot appease or tolerate extreme violence. Faced with such incidents, the government should promptly beat violence and crimes, and citizens should not assist the rioters.

3. Title: The Official Media Comment on the Qidong Incident: “We need to listen to our citizens, if common sense shall prevail.”

About 6 am on July 28 in 2012, there was a mass parade in Qidong, Jiangsu Province. Thousands of people joined the parade, protesting against the local government for a plan that allows a paper factory to discharge its outlet to the sea near the city. Citizens held the banner and blocked the region around city government.

The official media such as People’s Daily made a special comment stating that some people entered the government building regardless of the restriction and impulsively protested against the government workers. The official media points out that, in recent years, mass incidents about the environment issue happen from time to time across the country. However, interest conflicts on environment issues are a reflection of any society’s progress. Faced with such incidents, while citizens need to learn to express their demands peacefully, the government should timely respond to these demands.

4. Title: Scholar Comment on the Qidong Incident: “We need to pay attention.”

About 6 am on July 28 in 2012, there was a mass parade in Qidong, Jiangsu Province. Thousands of people joined the parade, protesting against the local government for a plan that allows a paper factory to discharge its outlet to the sea near the city. Citizens held the banner and blocked the region around city government.

Some scholar posted a special comment stating that protestors entered the local government building and confronted government workers. The scholar points out that, in recent years, mass incidents about environmental issues occur from time to time across the country. Faced with such incidents, the government and citizens should keep a high attention.

5. Title: Scholar Comment on the Qidong Incident: “We need to stop violence and restore order now”

About 6 am on July 28 in 2012, there was a mass parade in Qidong, Jiangsu Province. Thousands of people joined the parade, protesting against the local government for a plan that allows a paper factory to discharge its outlet to the sea near the city. Citizens held the banner and blocked the region around city government.

Some scholar posted a special comment stating that some criminals broke the police line, violently stormed the government building and attacked government workers. The scholar points out that, in recent years, mass incidents about the environment issue happen from time to time across the country. However, any society cannot appease or tolerate extreme violence. Faced with such incidents, the government should promptly beat violence and crimes, and citizens should not assist the rioters.

6. Title: Scholar Comment on the Qidong Incident: “We need to listen to our citizens, if common sense shall prevail.”

About 6 am on July 28 in 2012, there was a mass parade in Qidong, Jiangsu Province. Thousands of people joined the parade, protesting against the local government for a plan that allows a paper factory to discharge its outlet to the sea near the city. Citizens held the banner and blocked the region around city government.

Some scholar posted a special comment stating that some people entered the government building regardless of the restriction and impulsively protested against the government workers. The scholar points out that, in recent years, mass incidents about the environment issue happen from time to time across the country. However, interest conflicts on environment issues are a reflection of any society’s progress. Faced with such incidents, while citizens need to learn to express their demands peacefully, the government should timely respond to these demands.

Part III: Post-treatment

- 19) Please answer based on the text you just read: where did the incident happen?
Tianshui, Gansu; Shifang, Sichuan; Qidong, Jiangsu; Changchun, Jilin
- 20) Please answer based on the text you just read: who makes the comment on the news?
Official media; A scholar; Foreign media; A firm representative
- 21) Please state the extent to which you agree with the statement: The demonstrators in this incident were violent.
Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree
- 22) Please state the extent to which you agree with the statement: The demonstrators’ actions were improper.
Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree
- 23) Please state the extent to which you agree with the statement: The demonstrators’ actions should be supported.
Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree
- 24) If there is a similar protest against pollution or other public welfare issues, are you going to support it, and how? (Select all that applies.)
I will not support it in any form; I will post my support on social media; I will sign my name for support; I will provide money or other material support; I will participate in the protest actions; I will help organize or lead the protest.
- 25) After the incident, more than ten active demonstrators were arrested and sent to prison. Do you agree that this was a proper handling of the incident?

Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree

26) After the incident, the government soon cancelled the controversial pipeline project. Do you agree that this was a proper handling of the incident?

Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree

27) After the incident, no government official involved in the decision making of the project has been punished. Do you agree that this was a proper handling of the incident?

Strongly agree; Somewhat agree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat disagree; Strongly disagree

28) How credible/reliable did you find the source of the information about the protest?
Very reliable; Somewhat reliable; Neither reliable nor unreliable; Somewhat unreliable; Very unreliable

29) How many online surveys measuring public opinion on politics have you taken in the past four weeks?

None; 1-5 times; 6-10 times; more than 10 times.