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Research Article

Who is afraid of the Chinese State?
Evidence Calling into Question Political Fear as Explanation for Overreporting of Political Trust

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Abstract: Public opinion polls show that political trust tends to be higher in authoritarian regimes compared to liberal democracies. Many scholars have argued that respondents may provide false answers out of fear about repercussions by the state, thereby skewing survey results in a positive direction. Using an unobtrusive measure based on affect transfer, we find that adult participants in experiments conducted in China transfer positive affect toward the state onto evaluations of television advertisements upon mere exposure to the name of a central party institution. Participants did not have incentives to lie because they did not associate the advertisements with the state. Furthermore, people who evaluated the ads more positively upon viewing the name of the state also reported more positive levels of trust in government. Together these findings raise doubt that Chinese misrepresent political trust in surveys out of political fear.

Keywords: Political trust, affect, hot cognition, priming, fear, social desirability, World Value Survey, experiments.

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Introduction

Public opinion polls on political trust reveal that political trust tend to be, on average, higher in authoritarian regimes compared to liberal democracies. This higher level of political trust in authoritarian regimes is often explained by measurement error: researchers argue that comparatively higher levels of political trust in authoritarian regimes result from untruthful responses to survey questions, because a large part of respondents intentionally overreport their affect towards the authoritarian regime out of fear that disclosing their lack of support for the regime could have political repercussions.

To address potential doubt in the veracity of survey results, scholars working on political trust in authoritarian regimes have included questions for interviewers and survey respondents in surveys (see, for example, Li, 2004) but since these measures often rely on the frankness of respondents or interviewers, they cannot resolve concerns over response bias. Other methodological innovations such as anchoring vignettes (King, Murray, Salomon, & Tandon, 2004), list experiments (see, for example, Corstange, 2009), or endorsement experiments (see, for example, Bullock, Imai, & Shapiro, 2011) measure the degree of bias when asking sensitive survey questions. In these works political fear is assumed to drive dishonest responses, but the underlying emotional responses are unobserved.

Here we show evidence that calls into question political fear as the main source of bias in survey questions on political trust in China, an authoritarian regime led by a single political party since the late 1940s. Public opinion polls consistently show that the Chinese government, particularly the central government, enjoys high levels of political support and trust. In national surveys conducted between 1993 and 2011, over 90 percent of respondents expressed trust in the central government, although people shifted from expressing the highest level of trust towards expressing high trust (Xueyi Chen & Shi, 2001, Wang, 2006; Wang and Yu, 2016). Trust in local governments tends to be somewhat lower, decreasing as it moves from the center

to provinces, counties, townships, towards villages (see, for example, Li, 2004). While Chinese officials are naturally delighted about these survey results, scholars and policy practitioners, mostly at conferences, vigorously debate the extent to which these data provide evidence for true support of the regime. Just as in other authoritarian regimes, public opinion polls in China are often dismissed as evidence for regime support, assuming that political fear leads to overreporting.

In this study, we advance the interpretation of survey research on political trust in China by relying on insights from theories related to affect transfer. Affect transfer, a term first coined by Brader (2006), emerges out of scholarship on political advertising where the goal of advertising is to use audiovisual cues to tap into existing emotions. Television ads, in particular, can increase the salience of existing feeling by displaying a symbol that already has meaning to the viewer, such as a national flag, for example. In doing so, television ads transfer the preexisting feelings primed by the symbol onto the evaluation of the political candidate displayed together with the symbol. More broadly, a large literature on emotions in psychology shows that emotions are transferred onto objects, when made salient by an external stimulus. For example, fear induces negative reactions to the object with which it is associated with (see, for example, LeDoux, 1995; Zajonc, 1998). In China emotional associations concerning the state are largely unexamined. Therefore, it is unclear how Chinese citizens truly feel about their government.

Here we critically test the common assumption that political fear is the main source of overreporting when respondents answer survey questions related to political trust. The evidence demonstrates that mere exposure to the *name* of a central-party institution among a group of adults in Beijing induces a positive emotional reaction, which the participants in the experiment transfer onto a television ad associated with it. Participants did not have incentives to lie because they did not associate the advertisements with the state. A comparison with a

non-sensitive name displayed – a commercial enterprise – strengthens our confidence that these results are not just caused by seeing any name, but one associated with a political institution. Furthermore, we use these emotional reactions as a baseline for comparison against reactions to a sensitive question regarding political trust where participants have incentives to lie. Surprisingly, those who transfer positive affect onto the ad upon seeing the name of the central-party institution also tend to report higher levels of trust in political institutions.

These findings suggest that measurement error resulting from political fear is much smaller than commonly assumed, challenging the common interpretation of public opinion polls on political support in China. Rather, we claim – and find – that response bias stemming from political fear may be much less a problem than previously thought.

Is Political Fear the Source of Overreporting?

Survey questions are considered potentially sensitive for respondents for a number of reasons: they may perceive the question as intrusive, they may be concerned that their answer to the question will be considered socially undesirable, or they may fear potential repercussions by third parties not directly involved in the survey (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Survey questions regarding political trust in authoritarian regimes fall into this third category, because they raise concerns about the potential consequences of disclosure of answers to the authoritarian regime for the individuals expressing it.

Fear and anxiety are often used interchangeably to refer to a negative emotion that is central to people's behavioral reactions to their environment. If the brain detects a threat, a person experiences mental and physical changes associated with fear. Anxious feelings prompt defensive reactions, whereby individuals seek out information related to the threat and reconsider their course of action to diminish danger. Marcus and colleagues (2000) term this the "surveillance system," which monitors the environment for cues about potential threats.

When people feel threatened, they have incentives to change their behavior; when everything is safe and as expected, people's behavior is governed by routines (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000).

Cues that trigger fear are usually learned by experiences that teach people to associate objects with undesirable or dangerous outcomes (Brader, 2005). These experiences are stored as negative affective associations with the object in long-term memory. It is useful to think of long-term memory as a web of interconnected conceptual nodes or objects (Anderson, 1983). Objects are related to each other semantically and affectively. Semantic association links together concepts representing, for example, the names of political institutions or politicians. China's President Xi Jinping, for instance, is linked more closely with the central government than local government. Affective association connects these objects based on the extent to which they are associated with positive or negative affect. All objects in long-term memory representing sociopolitical concepts are affect laden, with the affect varying by positivity, negativity, and strength (Lodge & Taber, 2005).

Work concerning "hot cognition" has shown that information about objects is inevitably charged with affect. When one object in memory is activated, affect connected to the stimulus object is also activated. Hot cognition is immediate, unintentional and beyond the conscious control of the individual (see, for example, Abelson, 1963; Fazio, 2001). Shortly after the arousal of the positive or negative feeling, activation will spread through associated affective and semantic pathways. As a result, a feeling associated with an object can directly influence the evaluations of the stimuli object or associatively related objects. This direct way in which emotions can influence evaluations is often referred to as affect transfer (Brader, 2006; Erisen, Lodge, & Taber, 2014; Lodge & Taber, 2013).

Affect transfer has been studied in order to reveal the importance of unconscious, implicit thinking on attitudes and behavior. For example, in the 2000 US presidential election the

Republican National Committee aired a TV ad attacking presidential candidate Al Gore's proposed Medicare policy. The ad displayed the word "RATS" for one-thirtieth of a second in capital letters. The word RATS increased negative assessments of candidates (Weinberger & Westen, 2008), reduced support for Al Gore, and diminished trust in the Democrats' ability to protect Medicare (Stewart & Schubert, 2006). As in this example, studies in laboratory settings primarily used subliminal primes as the strongest experimental control for automatic processing. However, affect transfer also applies to consciously noticed but unappreciated (supraliminal) primes (Lodge & Taber, 2013). In this case people may see the prime and be consciously aware of it, without realizing its influence on their thoughts, feelings, or choices. In this study, we are dealing with such a supraliminal prime, which is more common than subliminal primes in people's everyday lives.

We are not the first ones to study the effects of priming in political advertising to study attitudes towards sensitive issues. Research in the United States has shown that cues contained in political advertising can prime racial attitudes. Mendelberg (2001) demonstrated such an effect in an experiment during the 1988 "Willie Horton" campaign in which an ad for George H. W. Bush used photographs to attack the policies of his opponent Massachussetts Governor Michael Dukakis as contributing to safety problems through the association of African Americans with crime. Such racial priming can have a strong effect on evaluations of political candidates or policy issues (see, for example, Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002; White, 2007). In these studies racial cues trigger immediate emotional reactions that are automatic and consciously unappreciated by the viewer, thus functioning as an unobtrusive measure to tap into attitudes on sensitive issues.

These existing studies on the effects of priming on racial attitudes focus on exposing social desirability bias, which is a product of social norms.[1] Here, we are investigating a different causal mechanism that is assumed to produce bias regarding political trust in authoritarian regimes. That is, scholarship on response bias in authoritarian regimes assumes that citizens overreport their levels of political trust as a result of political fear.

In order to shed light on the emotional reaction of survey respondents, we build on research on the mere exposure effect, which occurs when people evaluate a previously novel symbol, concept, or picture more favorable after it has been repeatedly presented to them. Experiments studying this phenomenon assessed the affective component associated with a concept by exposing people to a simple written concept (such as, for example, Chinese or Japanese ideographs, geometric figures, photographs of faces, letters of a name, odors, flavors, food, actual people), varying the frequency of exposure to the stimuli. After the exposure phase participants were asked to rate the stimuli on some liking, desirability or attractiveness scale, whereby evaluations improved as exposure became more frequent (Ladd & Gabrieli, 2015; Zajonc, 1998; Zebrowitz & Zhang, 2012).

We follow a similar approach combining insights from mere exposure and affect transfer. Similar to mere exposure research, we also vary whether people are exposed once or twice to the concept of the state. Yet instead of asking people directly to rate the stimulus itself, we ask them to evaluate a related object, varying its sensitivity. The idea is simple: in the first instance we expose people to a supraliminal prime and ask them to evaluate a non-sensitive object (a television advertisement); in doing so, the true affective component associated with the state will be transferred onto the respondents' evaluation of the non-sensitive object. We compare

[1] Only recently have researchers of racial priming also started to investigate the emotional reactions associated with the prime (Banks & Bell, 2013; Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2008). These studies examine how emotional reactions to racial or group cues influence public opinion and behavior, but not how those emotions may influence response bias.

these results to people's reactions when receiving the potentially threatening cue a second time, this time contained in a survey question on political trust. When asked directly to evaluate the central government, people's responses will contain bias in an effort to protect themselves from potential harm resulting from their response. A comparison of people's reactions allows us to observe how the true affective component relates to the biased response. If exposure to the concept of the state is perceived as a threat, people evaluate the non-sensitive object more negatively upon receiving the first prime, but will report more positive levels of trust upon receiving the second cue contained in the sensitive survey question.

Because research on mere exposure has shown that repeated exposure to any stimuli can result in more favorable views, we are not only investigating people's reactions upon viewing a stimuli associated with the Chinese state, but compare reactions to this potentially sensitive stimuli to one that looks just the same, except that it represents a non-sensitive concept, in this case a Chinese commercial enterprise. We are able to take advantage of the format of Public Service Advertisements (PSAs) in order to investigate these effects that people experience regularly when watching television in China.

Two Experiments on Affect Transfer

Chinese Television Advertisement

Our experiments are part of a larger study on the production, content, and effects of Public Service Advertisements (PSAs) in China. Content analysis of these ads, focus groups, and a survey conducted in urban areas inform our hypotheses, experimental design, and interpretation of the results (Esarey, Stockmann, & Zhang, 2017; Stockmann, 2011).

PSAs (or *gongyi guanggao*, in Chinese) are commonly used to propagate a variety of issues deemed important by the government, such as building a civilized society, protecting the environment, fighting corruption, spreading legal knowledge, promoting a positive image

of the People's Congress, or fostering nationalism (previous work by the authors). These ads are short (about 60-90 seconds long) and embedded in a series of commercial ads. The name of the sponsoring party-state organization or a corporation is displayed at the end of the PSA.

The format of PSAs in which a state or corporate logo is displayed after the ad provides an opportunity for us to observe affect transfer. The logo is only displayed for a short time (a maximum of five seconds) and without textual or verbal cues that explain the role of a source in creating the message. As such, the logo is intended to indicate the sponsoring institution as the source of the ad, but fails to achieve this goal in practice. Focus groups and survey results show that sponsorship of television PSAs and the involvement of the state in their production is unclear for the vast majority of viewers; only 11 percent of 6,577 survey respondents in 30 cities believed that party or state units initiated PSAs, while the remainder believed PSAs were initiated by social organizations, TV stations, corporations, advertising companies, or a combination of these actors (Esarey et al., 2017). Most Chinese are not consciously aware of involvement of the state in the production of PSAs; because of the format of PSAs viewers may consciously perceive the logo when watching the ad, but most do not consciously associate the ad with the state as the source after watching the ad, as we show below. State logos displayed after PSAs constitute a supraliminal prime that we can use to observe affect transfer.

Hypotheses

We theorize that exposure to the name of a central-level party institution will activate the affective component associated with the state. If people experience fear, the negative affective component of the state will spread immediately to associatively related objects, in this case the ad watched before seeing the name of the state. When people are subsequently asked to evaluate the ad, they are being asked a non-sensitive question and do not have an incentive to lie. Therefore, they will evaluate the ad more negatively (Disliking hypothesis). However, if

people experience a positive emotion, such as, for example, trust or pride, the prime associated with positive affect will promote more positive evaluations of the ad (Liking hypothesis).

In a second step we turn to political trust as the sensitive survey question. When people read the survey question, they are also exposed to the concept of the state. For people who have not seen the state logo beforehand, this is the first time they receive a cue that is potentially threatening. As a result, greater liking of the ad should be unrelated with their responses regarding political trust. Among people who have seen the state logo, however, we should detect a strong relationship between self-reported evaluations of the ad and the state, depending on the positive or negative affect that has been triggered by the prime: If people experience fear, they will express greater dislike for the ad and report higher levels of political trust (Political fear hypothesis). This is so, because when asked a non-sensitive question to evaluate the ad, they have no incentive to lie, while they have incentives to overreport when being asked a sensitive question about political trust. If people feel calm, however, their responses to the two questions will correspond to each other: the greater dislike they express regarding the ad, the less trust they will report; the more they report to like the ad, the greater their political trust (Serenity hypothesis). Because people have no incentive to lie when being asked to evaluate the ad, we can use people's responses to this question after exposure to the state logo as a baseline for comparison to people's reactions when being asked the sensitive question regarding political trust.

Experimental Design and Data

In our research design we made a decision not to rely on techniques that require people to perform tasks on a computer such as the implicit association test (IAT) (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Though Internet use has been proliferating rapidly in China, we could not assume that ordinary citizens (including migrant workers), whom we recruited for our

experiment, were familiar enough with computers to find the tasks easy to perform. Finally, since laboratory experiments have been rarely conducted in China,[2] we intended to create a setting that would seem as natural to the participants as possible, and the format in which PSAs are shown on Chinese television provided an excellent opportunity to provide a cover story emphasizing television rather than politics.

To our knowledge, ours are the first laboratory experiments using ordinary citizens in the People's Republic to study public opinion.[3] Our study was conducted in late June 2010 at Peking University's Research Center for Contemporary China (RCCC), with a total of 180 adult participants—30 per experimental group. Details regarding the question-wording (in English and Chinese), experimental procedure, cover story, manipulation and selection of treatments are included in the Online Appendix (Section OA-A).

Participants: Subjects were recruited based on quota sampling according to age, education, and gender distributions similar to the most recent census data for Beijing. The resulting sample roughly reflects the adult population of Beijing in terms of gender, age, and education. On average, participants were 37 years old and had a high-school degree. Due to the large number of migrants in China, our sample includes 43.2 percent of people who live in Beijing without a local residency permit (*hukou*). All participants had lived in Beijing for at least two years and had not previously participated in similar studies conducted by RCCC.

Conditions and procedure: The experiments tested the effects of exposure to source logos, using the procedure illustrated in Figure 1. Participants in both experiments saw a video with

[2] Psychologists conduct experiments among student samples in China, but due to their young age students are unlikely to have learned to perceive the state as a threat, and therefore represent a poor test for the disliking and distrust hypotheses.
[3] Gries' (2010) lab experiments is based on a convenience sample of students (Gries, 2010).

a series of commercial ads into which one PSA was embedded; after the commercials, participants saw the beginning of a recent evening news program by China Central Television. We conducted the experiments with respect to two issues: in the *anti-corruption experiment* the PSA was aimed at motivating viewers to fight corruption; in the *environmental experiment* the PSA mobilized viewers to conserve water. On each of these issues one-third of participants (n=30) saw the video and the PSA only without any logo (the control group), with a state logo, or with a corporate logo. The state logo displays a central-level party institution involved in propaganda works and commonly displayed after PSAs; the corporate logo displays the logo of a nationally recognized manufacturer of consumer electronics (see also Online Appendix Section OA-A for details). After viewing the eight-minute video, participants filled out a self-administered questionnaire, which was developed based on insights from four focus groups and two pre-tests. The order of the question-wording for key variables in the questionnaire is indicated in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Randomization: using a random number generator on a computer we generated a random ordering of experimental groups (videos) in advance of the study. The first subject that walked through the door saw the first video on the list, the second the second, and so on. Assignments continued each day from the same list, picking up where the previous day's assignments have ended. Balancing tests revealed that randomization resulted in equal distributions across most potential covariates (see Appendix). Because income, education, and CCP membership were unequally distributed across groups we control for these variables in the analysis.

Measurement: During cued recall, we asked which one among four advertisings the respondent had seen and how much they liked the ad, if they had seen it (n=157). Cued recall took place in the beginning of the survey questionnaire *before* any questions with political content were asked. In order to strengthen our confidence that the question was not consciously associated with the state, we used the term "advertising" instead of PSA to refer to the ad. Responses regarding the anti-corruption and environmental PSA were coded as *Liking*. The resulting ordinal variable runs from 1 to 4, whereby higher numbers indicate greater liking. On average, participants in the control group liked the ads (mean = 3.12; s.d. = 0.676). When *Liking* is inserted into the regression model as an independent variable, we recoded it to run from 0 to 1.

Political trust was measured based on questions with the same format asked in the World Value Survey, which constitutes a major source on levels of political trust in China and other authoritarian contexts. We developed the variable for *Trust* in the central government based on people's response to the question: "Generally speaking how much do you trust the following organizations: the central government (other options included: CCTV, local television stations, commercial enterprises, and the local government). The dependent variable runs from 1 to 4, whereby higher numbers represent greater trust. Participants in our control group expressed slightly higher levels of trust than the average Chinese as they professed, on average, to trust the center a bit more (mean=3.621; s.d.=0.494) compared to the national average (mean=3.317; s.d.=0.636).

Awareness of the relationship between the state and the ad was assessed based on responses to an open-ended question. The open-ended format allowed us to hide the purpose of the experiment. People were asked to describe what they had seen: we asked whether they had heard the term "PSA" before and if the video had contained one. If they recalled having seen a PSA, we asked respondents to indicate which organization (*jigou*) sponsored the PSA. A native speaker coded the responses as *Awareness* when the respondent linked the ad to the

state. Responses were coded as *Awareness of the Center* or *Awareness of the State* as source when respondents mentioned a central-level political institution or a party or government unit, respectively.

State Logo, Corporate Logo, and *Anti-Corruption Experiment* are dummy variables for treatment conditions. The precise English and Chinese question-wording of the above variables is included in the Online Appendix (Section OA-B).

Manipulation Check

In order for us to observe the true affective component during affect transfer viewers have to perceive the survey question regarding the evaluation of the ad as non-sensitive. As explained above, we were careful to use a non-sensitive cover story and phrase the question without containing cues that could trigger a threatening response. However, it is still possible that some people associate PSAs so strongly with the Chinese state that any question about a PSA could be perceived as sensitive: in this case an evaluation of the ad would be equivalent to asking about the state.

In order to check how strongly people linked the ad to the state we asked about their awareness of the relationship between the state and the ad in the end of the survey questionnaire. While *Liking* may be sensitive to those people who interpret the survey question as equivalent to an evaluation of the state, asking about whether people perceive such a link is not. There is no incentive to lie about the source of the ad.

As expected, very few participants linked the ad and the state so strongly to each other that they were consciously aware of a relationship when filling in the survey questionnaire. Among the 60 people who had seen the state logo only three were able to recall the exact name of the sponsoring political institution; ten named a central-level institutions and 21 a state institution

as the source of the PSA. Most participants were consciously unaware of the link between the ad and the state when they filled in the questionnaire.

This strengthens our confidence that the state logo constitutes a supraliminal prime for the vast majority of participants, and that the survey question regarding Liking constitutes a non-sensitive survey question. However, to make sure that a perceived link between the ad and the state does not distort the results, we control for it in the empirical analysis.

Empirical Results

Liking

To test whether the state logo triggers positive affect towards the state, we first estimate the impact of the state logo on the dependent variable *Liking* displayed in the left column of Table 1. As indicated earlier, our measurement of *Liking* is based on a non-sensitive question that was asked in the beginning of the survey questionnaire, before any questions regarding politics were asked to avoid that other political terms may distort the results.

[Insert Table 1 and Figure 2 about here]

The left column represents ordinal probit maximum likelihood regression equations where *Liking* is regressed upon dummy variables for each treatment condition, with the control group who had not seen any logo as the excluded category (reference variable). With this specification, we can directly compare the size of the effects of the state logo with the corporate logo, and

also investigate whether results differed between the anti-corruption and environmental experiment.[4] We control for awareness, income, education, and CCP membership.[5]

The functional form of the Liking model is as follows:

$$Liking = \beta_0 + \beta_1 StateLogo + \beta_2 CorporateLogo + \beta_3 Anti-CorruptionExperiment + \beta_4 Awareness + Controls + u$$

The nature of the affective component associated with the concept of the state hinges on the valence and magnitude of the coefficient for β_1.

We find that the display of the state logo has a strong and significant positive impact on *Liking*. The positive sign on the coefficient for groups that have seen the state logo (0.43) demonstrate that people transferred the positive affective component associated with the concept of the state onto the advertisement (confirming the Liking Hypothesis). People did not have an incentive to lie regarding how much they liked the ad. Having seen the state logo increases the probability to like the ad significantly. As shown in Figure 2, people who have not seen the state logo have a 62 percent change of liking the ad, but only a 31 percent chance of liking the ad very much; in comparison, people who have seen the state logo have a 48 percent chance of liking the ad and a 49 percent chance of liking it very much. Whether participants were involved in the *anti-corruption experiment* or *environmental experiment* did not make a difference.[6] Awareness of the relationship between the state and the ad did not affect the responses.

Political Trust

[4] Data from both experiments could be combined into one data set because they were conducted at the same time: participants were randomly sampled into control and treatment conditions of either one of the two experiments.

[5] Balancing tests revealed that randomization resulted in unequal distributions across groups in terms of income, education, and CCP membership (see Appendix).

[6] Participants also liked PSAs better after having seen a corporate logo, but affect towards the commercial enterprise displayed on the corporate logo did not affect Trust in commercial enterprises.

So far, we have shown evidence that the affective component associated with the concept of the state was positive. But is this positive affective reaction also transferred onto political trust in the central government? To answer this question we estimate the interaction between *Liking* and the impact of the state logo on the dependent variable *Trust*, displayed in Table 1. The functional form of the Trust model is similar to the Liking model except that Liking becomes an independent variable and now interacts with exposure to the state logo. The nature of response bias upon viewing the state logo hinges on the valence and magnitude of the coefficient for the interaction term. To fully appreciate the interactive effect, we compare results of the ordinal probit maximum likelihood regression equations before and after the interaction term is added (middle and right column in Table 1).

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Before adding the interaction term, we find that the display of the state logo has a strong and significant impact on *Trust*. The positive sign on the coefficient for groups that have seen the state logo (0.713) in the left column of Table 2 suggests that viewing the state logo increases self-reported levels of political trust and these results were statistically significant. What explains this positive effect?

After allowing *Liking* and *State Logo* to interact the positive effect is completely absorbed by the coefficient of the interaction term (1.837), as displayed in the right column of Table 1. The positive coefficient confirms the serenity hypothesis: people who dislike the ad also tend to report lower levels of political trust, while people who like the ad also tend to report higher levels of trust. This strong relationship is only present among people who saw the state logo: as expected, liking and political trust is unrelated (0.004) when people have not seen the state logo. As shown in Figure 3, as people liked the ad more they had a higher chance of expressing

high trust in government upon seeing the state logo; however, as they liked the ad less they had a higher chance of expressing lower levels of trust in government in comparison to people who had not see the state logo.

These results hold up when comparing across issue areas and across PSA labels. The coefficient for the display of the corporate logo is indistinguishable from zero compared to the control group, which strengthens our confidence that the effects are caused by the association of the name displayed with a political institution rather than just the display of any logo. As before, whether participants were involved in the *anti-corruption experiment* or *environmental experiment* did not make a significant difference.[7] A more highly politically sensitive issue raised by the PSA (to combat corruption) did not trigger more fearful responses among participants.

Noticeably, none of the coefficients of *Awareness* provide evidence that people report *higher* levels of *Trust* if they link the ad to the state. These coefficients are *negatively* correlated with *Trust* and statistically insignificant. Among the three people who correctly recalled the state logo and may have interpreted the question evaluating the ad (*Liking)* as sensitive, two reported to somewhat trust the central government, and one to trust it very much, which mirrors, on average, responses by the control group.

Overall, we do not detect evidence for response bias due to political fear, which would require a negative coefficient of the interaction term: participants who evaluate the ad more negatively should report higher levels of *Trust* upon seeing the state logo. None of the results are consistent with this expectation.

Criticism of the State

[7] Coefficient may become statistically significant with larger n, but large standard errors and comments from focus group participants lead us to expect that respondents react similarly on both issues, even when including larger samples.

As auxiliary evidence we also investigated whether we could detect any evidence for fear with respect to other potentially sensitive questions in the questionnaire, specifically whether watching the state logo had a negative effect on respondents to volunteer criticism of the state. Towards the end of the questionnaire, we asked all participants (including those in the environmental experiment) whether they had ideas about how corruption could be fought. If they indicated to have some ideas, we asked which ones in an open-ended format. A native speaker coded replies that implied reform of the political system and criticism of the state as one.

Among 120 people who had not seen the state logo (because they had seen the corporate logo or watched an ad with no logo at all) 22.5 percent (n=27) volunteered an idea about how to fight corruption. By contrast, 35 percent of 60 people (n=21) who had seen the state logo volunteered an idea, and this difference was statistically significant at the 90 percent level (p=0.07).[8] People were more likely to volunteer an idea upon seeing the state logo, even if they had seen the environmental ad instead of the corruption ad. Therefore, viewing the anti-corruption PSA did not mobilize respondents to volunteer ideas.

When reporting an idea, participants were quite explicit when expressing their opinions on anti-corruption measures, whereby the overwhelming majority raised criticism of the state. Suggestions by people who had seen a state logo included, for example: "the power should not be in one hand;" "through opening of the government, media independence, and supervision of the masses;" "by establishing independent departments that have absolute implementation rights, do not need to report to higher levels, and that have the right to directly investigate."[9] Responses were frank and did not indicate that participants were hesitant to criticize the

[8] Detailed frequencies and percentages of volunteering an idea about how to fight corruption within each treatment group are included in the Online Appendix (Section OA-C).
[9] The Online Appendix (Section OA-C) contains further examples of criticism of the state across all treatment groups.

Chinese political system or government upon watching the state logo. Further, there was no evidence that respondents were mobilized by the anti-corruption PSA to be critical since respondents who had watched the environmental PSA were just as likely to voice criticism.

These results are consistent with a list experiment conducted by Birney, Landry, and Yan (In Press) as part of the World Value Survey 2012, which compared the extent to which Chinese respondents misrepresented their responses to a number of sensitive questions. Similarly to our findings there was no evidence that respondents misrepresented their willingness to openly criticize the central government.

Some Caveats

While the preceding results are consistent with arguments that high levels of political trust found in Chinese polls indeed reflect true support for authoritarian rule, we must be cautious about how they are interpreted.

A first caveat concerns generalizability. This research design allowed us to assess emotional responses to sensitive survey questions among a group of average citizens. We do *not* claim that our findings are representative of the Chinese public. However, since the experiments were conducted among a group of adults with socio-demographic characteristics comparable to respondents in public opinion surveys, the absence of strong empirical evidence for political fear that causes bias calls into question whether political fear constitutes the main source of overreporting among Chinese respondents. If political fear was as widely spread as commonly believed, surely we would have detected evidence among participants.

A second qualification concerns an interpretation of the results. We do *not* conclude that survey data regarding political trust can be regarded as accurate representation of public confidence in the Chinese government. While the empirical findings of these experiments are consistent with an explanation that the level of political trust largely reflects "true" affect

towards the regime, we cannot exclude the possibility that other sources of bias than political fear are at work.

What other sources of bias may be at work? During the experiments we had the chance to compare people's descriptions of the content of the video with the actual content they had seen. For example, some people reported to have seen an ad about environmental protection (the environmental PSA) although they had not seen it. Based on these responses we constructed a scale to assess a person's likelihood to guess the "right" answer. About 50 percent of people did not attempt to guess, 38 percent guessed a little bit, 11.1 attempted to guess, and 1.4 were highly likely to guess. When we examined the characteristics of participants who engaged in this bias, we found that having watched the state logo did not prompt such a response. Instead, people were most likely to engage in guessing the "right" response when they were less educated or had higher levels of income. We believe that people who attempted to guess were motivated by a desire to please the researchers, even though the true intention of the experiment was only revealed to participants afterwards. Therefore, high levels of political trust in Chinese surveys could still be inflated by the high percentage of participants who guess the answers to survey questions – but in an attempt to conform to social norms rather than out of political fear.[10] Overall, these findings lead us to conclude that high levels of political trust in China may be exaggerated, but not primarily out of fear of the central government.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our experimental results clearly dispute interpretations of survey results that suggest that high levels of trust in the central government in China are mainly caused by political fear. Using an

[10] We did not find a positive relationship between a person's likelihood to guess and levels of political trust. When we added guessing as a control variable, people who engaged in guessing were more likely to report *lower* levels of *Trust* upon watching the state logo and these results were not statistically significant.

unobtrusive measure based on affect transfer, we find that people transfer positive affect toward the state onto evaluations of television advertisements upon mere exposure to the name of a central party institution. Participants did not have incentives to lie because they did not associate the advertisements with the state when filling in the survey questionnaire. Furthermore, people who evaluated the ads more positively upon viewing the name of the state also reported more positive levels of trust. These findings underscore that exaggerated survey responses due to political fear may be significantly smaller in comparison to other sources of response bias. The central implication is that contrary to many portrayals, survey data reporting high levels of political trust in China may be subject to response bias, but political fear is not the main factor driving biased survey response.

These findings have several important implications. First, studies have demonstrated response bias among Chinese survey respondents to politically sensitive questions (King et al., 2004), (Birney et al., In Press), but regarding political trust the degree and nature of response bias is less clear. Regarding political trust, response bias may depend on the degree to which respondents are consciously aware of "politics" when the survey is conducted: Similar to our study, a survey experiment from 2014 detected that people reported lower levels of political trust when the interviewer wore a CCP emblem (Lei and Lu, 2017). Curiously, greater awareness seems to reduce bias rather than magnify it.

Second, future research could also compare the effects of exposure to the name of different kinds of political institutions, varying by level of administration (local vs. national) or policy area (such as, for example, The Ministry of Public Security in charge of making political arrests compared to the Ministry of Culture in charge of promoting the arts and managing cultural centers). Comparison could help to disaggregate the concept of trust in government and generate more fine-grained understandings of response bias in survey questions regarding political trust.

Furthermore, our findings suggest that Chinese respondents may overreport political trust in an effort to conform to norms defining desirable attitudes and behaviors; they are likely concerned about these norms to distort their answers to avoid presenting themselves in an unfavorable light. Research on personality traits suggests that these concerns grow out of needs for social approval or the need to conform to social standards (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000). The reluctance to give offense may reflect the norm of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Pizziconi, 2003) a general unwillingness to convey unpleasant news (Bond & Anderson, 1987; Dibble et al., 2013), or socialization to conform to ideas about good citizenship (Hughes, 2006; Zhao, 1998). Our experiments suggest that we need to also consider alternative explanations for inflated survey responses regarding political trust in China.

Of course, political fear remains important for research on public opinion in China and other authoritarian settings (see, for example Havel, 1978; Kuran, 1991; Wedeen, 1999). In China conditions for social science survey research have greatly improved over time, but survey research remains vulnerable to political censorship by officials involved in the approval process and to self-censorship by researchers themselves (Manion, 2010; Tsai, 2010). Apart from the questionnaire design, our findings suggest that scholars also need to better understand when and how political fear influences survey responses.

The unobtrusive way in which political fear is examined in this study can help to identify which institutions are perceived as threats in China and how mentioning those institutions influences conversation and political expression in China. While we have detected no evidence that the national government triggers political fear, variations of our experiments may paint a more differentiated picture. More research is needed to understand emotional responses to the Chinese state and its political actors. Works on contentious politics in China often raise anger as an emotion triggering political action (see, for example Xi Chen, 2012; O'Brien & Li, 2006), but other emotions are rarely even mentioned in accounts of contemporary Chinese politics.

Only when we start observing the full range of emotional reactions to the Chinese state will scholars understand the true nature of regime support in China.

Appendix: Balance Check Results

[Insert Table 2 about here]

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Figures

Figure 1. Flowchart of Experimental Procedure

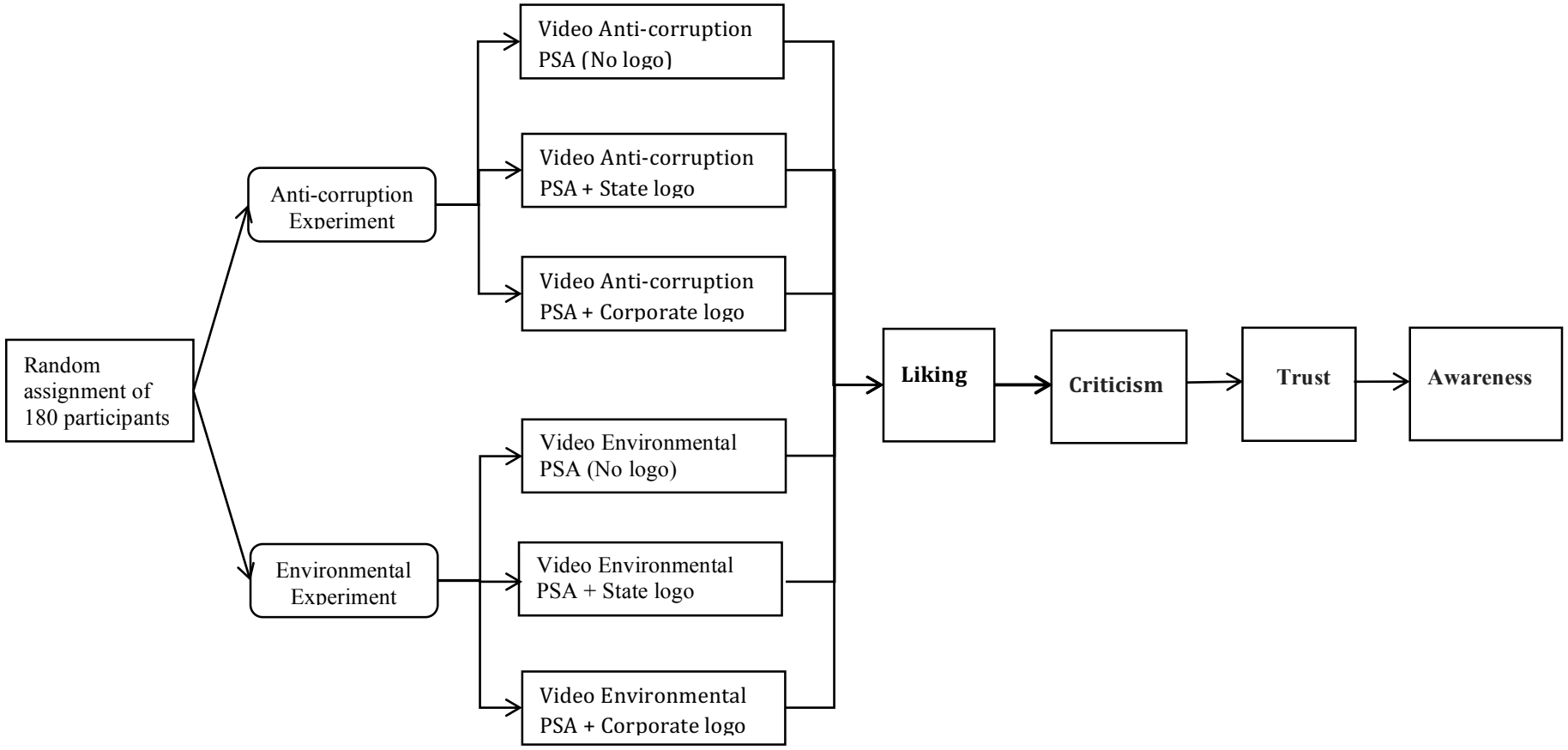
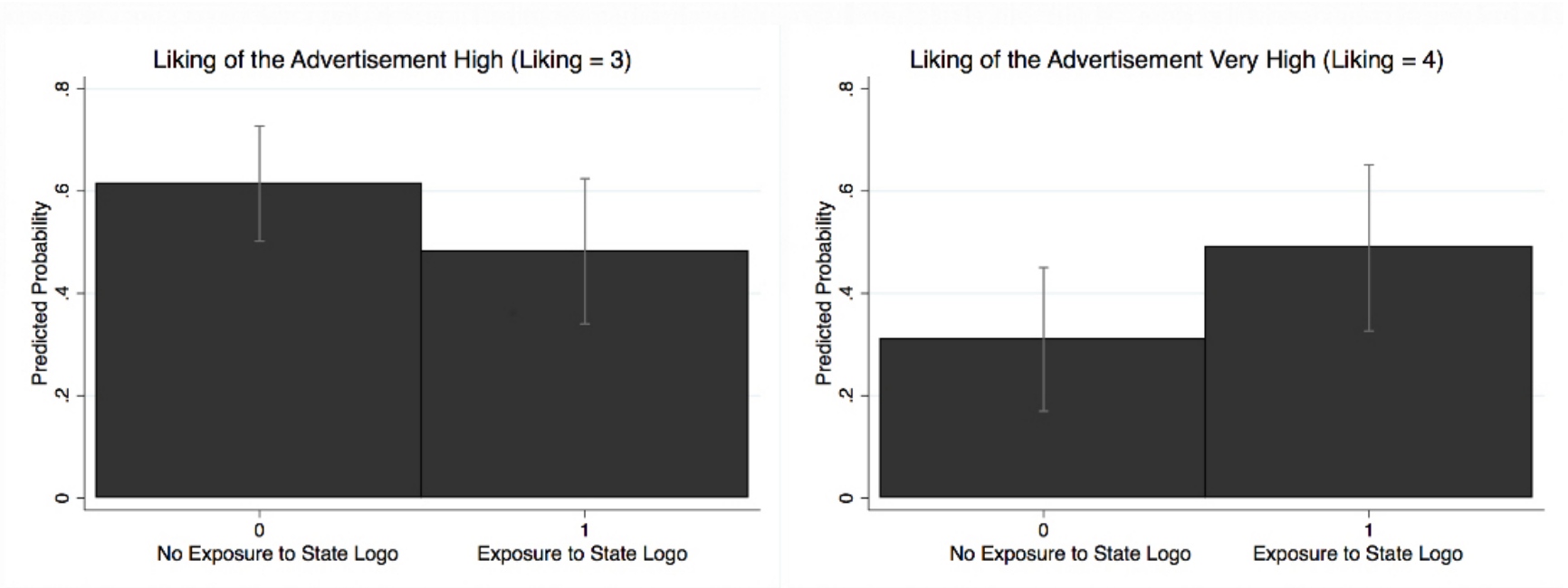
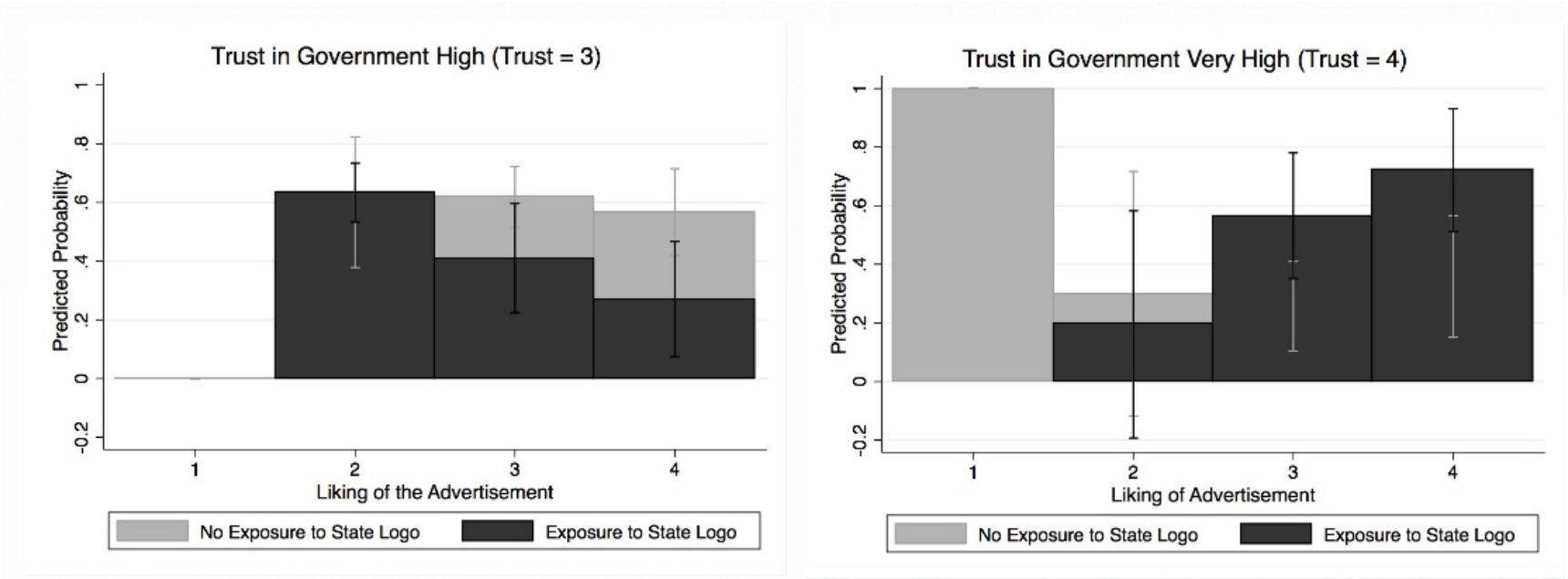


Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities for High and Very High Liking of the Advertisement



Notes: Figure displays predicted probabilities for the ordinal probit maximum likelihood regression model on Liking displayed in Table 1 (left column) when the outcome is high liking and very high liking of the advertisement (Liking = 3; 4). Probabilities are displayed for people who have seen the state logo and people who have not seen the state logo, keeping all other variables constant (Corporate Logo = 0; Anti-Corruption Experiment = 0; Awareness = 0, CCP Member = 0; Education = mean; Income = mean).

Figure 3. Predicted Probabilities for High and Very High Trust in Government



Notes: Figure displays predicted probabilities for the ordinal probit maximum likelihood regression model displayed in Table 1 (right column) when the outcome is high and very high trust in government (Trust = 3; 4). Probabilities are displayed for people who have seen the state logo and people who have not seen the state logo as liking of the advertisement changes, keeping all other variables constant (Corporate Logo = 0; Anti-Corruption Experiment = 0; Awareness = 0, CCP Member = 0; Education = mean; Income = mean)

Tables

Table 1. Ordinal Probit Regression Results of Treatments on Liking and Trust

	Liking	Trust in Central Government	Trust in Central Government
Exposure to State Logo	**0.433*** (0.243)	**0.713***** (0.253)	-0.662 (0.812)
Liking	---	0.541 (0.460)	0.004 (0.553)
State Logo * Liking	---	---	**1.837*** (1.035)
Exposure to Corporate Logo	0.693*** (0.240)	0.275 (0.240)	0.339 (0.243)
Anti-Corruption Experiment	-0.283 (0.195)	0.126 (0.201)	0.109 (0.202)
Awareness of Center	-0.140 (0.284)	-0.097 (0.331)	-0.108 (0.333)
Awareness of State	---	-0.303 (0.251)	-0.302 (0.252)
CCP Member	-0.104 (0.395)	0.103 (0.392)	0.103 (0.393)
Education	0.015 (0.063)	-0.093 (0.066)	-0.105 (0.067)
Income	0.022 (0.089)	0.055 (0.090)	0.074 (0.092)
Cut 1	-1.994*** (0.406)	-1.775*** (0.515)	-2.180*** (0.567)
Cut 2	-1.241*** (0.334)	-1.181** (0.472)	-1.586*** (0.528)
Cut 3	0.582* (0.319)	0.554 (0.454)	0.162 (0.508)

N	152	152	152
Pseudo R2	0.04	0.06	0.07

z-value: *** z<0.01; ** z<0.05; * z<0.1;

Notes: Standard errors are displayed in parentheses. Entries for support variables are ordinal probit maximum-likelihood regression coefficients. Significance tests are two-tailed. Parallel regression assumption holds (likelihood ratio-test left column prob > chi2 = 0.051; middle column: prob > chi2 = 0.437; right column: prob > chi2 = 0.215).

Table 2. Balance Checks Results

Variable	Range	Mean Value for Treatment Group						*p*
		No Logo		State Logo		Corporate Logo		
	Issue	Env	Corr	Env	Corr	Env	Corr	
Demographics								
Female	0-1	.43	.57	.47	.5	.5	.37	.73
Age	18-64	39.6	39.07	35.87	38.1	35.2	35.6	.57
Education	1-8	3.9	4.43	5.2***	4.4	3.9	4.2	.07
Income (family)	1-6	2.24	2.19	3.1***	1.97**	2.27	2.45	.01
Migration (hukou)								
Resident (Beijing)	0-1	.67	.67	.63	.57	.43	.4*	.13
Party Membership								
CCP	0-1	.07	.1	0*	.03	.03	.2***	.05
TV watching habits								
Days watching TV per week	0-7	5.33	5.52	5.3	5.17	5.1	4.79	.88
Attention to advertising when watching TV	0-1	.43	.45	.44	.46	.47	.44	.91
Procedural details								
Date	1-4	1.67	1.63	1.63	1.67	1.63	1.68	1.0
Duration (minutes)	3-189	60.73	59.97	53.2	61.13	56.83	64.07	.79
Start time	850-1914	1271.97	1287.23	1287.93	1240.17	1293.9	1246.29	.95
Waiting time (minutes)	0-67	1.13**	5.4	2.5	6.77*	5.63	4.89	.32
Interviewer	1-10	6.33	6.4	5.87	6.77	6.27	5.87	.52

Notes: Statistically significant comparisons between the no label control and treatment groups are marked as follows: * $p<.10$; ** $p<.05$; *** $p<.01$. T-tests are conducted for continuous variables, Chi-square tests for categorical and dummy variables, and Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests for ordinal variables. Right-hand column reports *p* values for tests of relationships between variables of interest and treatment categories.