Strategic Censorship? Public Opinion, Authoritarian Politics, and the International Trade Regime

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Abstract

International organizations promote cooperation by diffusing information among states and the public. But how does this information reach the public under authoritarian regimes? I examine how an authoritarian government with a censorship apparatus can use government-controlled media to offset international organizations' information effects. The authoritarian government selectively censors IO news based on the likelihood of success in invoking a defensive reaction, suppressing complaints made by neutral counterparts that may lead to concerns for noncompliance while allowing limited attention toward provocative complaints by hostile states. I find support for my arguments through analysis of an original dataset of Chinese newspaper articles by 116 newspapers on all WTO disputes involving China. Survey experiment on Chinese citizens tests the microfoundations of the information strategy, finding that exposure to information about China being sued in a WTO dispute significantly reduces support for international law, especially for those disputes against the United States.

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1 Introduction

The ongoing trade war between the United States and China has been greatly reshaping the global economic and political order since its breakout in 2018. The World Trade Organization (WTO) became one front of the trade war—in 2018 alone, the two states filed seven complaints against each other, accusing the other party of acting against international trade law.

Commensurate with its immense consequences for the world economy, the unfolding of the trade war has garnered much media, political, and public attention in both the United States and China. Yet what has been distinctive about the media coverage in China was the rigorous censorship it was subject to. Indeed, a leaked set of instructions given to Chinese media outlets revealed that Chinese propaganda authorities gave specific guidelines about the volume and content of coverage on the trade war (Wade, 2018). Different media outlets were also granted varying degrees of leeway in covering the conflict, with state media outlets with higher political rankings authorized to publish news and editorials and local and internet-based outlets directed to republish state media reports (Wang and Yu, 2018). On WeChat, China's largest social media platform, the US-China trade war was found to be the most censored term in 2018 (Global Voices, 2019).

What are the consequences of such censorship[1]? Recent scholarship suggests that the media plays a key role in informing the domestic public of the state's violation of international law (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022; Chaudoin, 2023; Creamer and Simmons, 2020), while a separate line of empirical evidence suggests that this type of information shifts individual

[1]In this paper, I focus specifically on legal disputes adjudicated under the WTO, rather than the broader trade conflict involving unilateral tariffs and countermeasures. Throughout the paper, the term "dispute" is used exclusively to refer to formal WTO disputes.

preferences toward compliance (Chilton, 2014, 2015; Kreps and Wallace, 2016; Tingley and Tomz, 2022; Wallace, 2013, 2019). Such mobilization of the domestic public is one of the key mechanisms through which international organizations (IOs) such as the WTO influence state behavior (Dai, 2005, 2006; Keck and Sikkink, 1999; Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff, 2002; Simmons, 2009).

Given that the media has a significant influence on how information is transmitted from international organizations to the domestic public, it should follow that the variation in the media environment affects the information transmission process and individual preferences for compliance. Despite this, the empirical scope of the existing scholarship has been limited to democracies and partial democracies, leaving a theoretical and empirical void regarding how the information effect operates within authoritarian countries. Yet state-media relations are arguably one of the most important factors in determining which messages are transmitted and which are not. Accordingly, we can expect that IOs' effect on media coverage and public opinion will be heterogeneous across political settings with different degrees of press freedom. Does IO-provided information even reach the domestic public under authoritarian rule? How does the pattern of information control affect public preferences for compliance?

I address these questions by examining media coverage of international trade disputes in an authoritarian setting where the media is tightly controlled by the state. Based on observational analysis, I show how an authoritarian government strategically manages information about international legal disputes through selective reporting. From the perspective of the regime, the disclosure of such disputes presents both risks and opportunities: while reports of alleged violations may raise concerns about noncompliance and reputational costs, certain disputes—particularly those initiated by hostile counterparts—can also be framed as politically motivated

or unfair, reinforcing perceptions of external bias. I argue that authoritarian governments differentiate their information strategy according to the identity of the dispute counterpart and the anticipated public response. Specifically, while they suppress disputes initiated by neutral complainants, where allegations may appear more credible, they are more likely to permit limited coverage of provocative complaints initiated by hostile states, where the allegations are more likely to be interpreted as politically motivated. Through this form of strategic censorship, the regime seeks to minimize domestic concerns about noncompliance while shaping how international law is perceived within its borders.

I find support for my argument through analysis of an original dataset of newspaper articles by 116 Chinese newspapers on all WTO disputes in which China has been involved as a complainant or a respondent over the past two decades since its accession to the WTO. My analysis of coverage patterns among Chinese newspapers yields two main findings. First, I find substantial differences in coverage patterns of WTO disputes based on whether China's counterpart is the United States. For disputes not involving the US, Chinese newspapers are far less likely to report disputes in which it is the respondent than those in which it is the complainant. However, this asymmetry vanishes when the United States is the counterpart, where both complainant and respondent cases receive comparatively high levels of coverage. These findings are robust across the outcome of the disputes and the disputed product and industry, as well as year-fixed effects that account for fluctuations in US-China relations. Second, the discrepancies between coverage of cases based on whether the United States is the dispute counterpart or not are significantly larger in the official party-controlled media rather than the non-official commercial media over which the government has less control, suggesting that the trend is driven at least in part by government initiatives rather than

simply responding to public nationalist sentiment. Similar trends are not found among US newspapers' reports, adding support to the existence of government manipulation.

I further test the impact of such disproportionate reporting on public opinion toward the WTO and international legal system with a survey experiment on 1,656 Chinese adults. I find that respondents who are exposed to information about China responding to a WTO dispute initiated by the United States have significantly more negative attitudes towards international institutions and free trade compared to those exposed to information about China complaining against the United States. The differences in attitudes depending on whether China is a respondent or complainant were smaller and less significant when the dispute counterpart was the European Union, suggesting that individuals process information about international legal disputes differently depending on the identity of the dispute counterpart.

This paper proposes a new research agenda for studying IOs in an era of censorship and misinformation, where the messages IOs generate are increasingly filtered, reframed, or suppressed before reaching domestic audiences. While extensive research highlights information dissemination as a crucial function of IOs in facilitating cooperation (Dai, 2005, 2006; Keck and Sikkink, 1999; Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff, 2002; Simmons, 2009), information is not simply transmitted—it can be strategically manipulated. Crucially, this challenge is not unique to authoritarian regimes, as the issue of misinformation plagues many advanced democracies as well. A growing set of studies examines how IO messages travel through domestic media (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022; Chaudoin, 2023; Mikulaschek and Parizek, 2025), but far less attention has been paid to intentional intervention by governments or other political actors. This paper argues for greater attention to the intersection between IOs and domestic information control in order to better understand how IO information

reaches domestic audiences.

The paper also contributes to research on how states manage allegations of noncompliance. Prior work shows that governments often justify or reframe allegations of noncompliance to preserve domestic support (Brutger and Kertzer, 2018; Chu, 2019; Morse and Pratt, 2022, 2025; Strezhnev, Simmons, and Kim, 2019; Zvobgo, 2019). My findings extend this literature by demonstrating that states—especially authoritarian ones—can go further by suppressing the allegations altogether, avoiding reputational costs at their source.

My experimental findings make a notable addition to the body of literature on public responses to violations of international law. In contrast to findings that exposure to home-state violations heightens support for commitment (Wallace, 2013; Chilton, 2014; Wallace, 2019; Chilton, 2015; Kreps and Wallace, 2016; Tingley and Tomz, 2022), this study diverges by finding that any reference to filing a legal claim diminishes support for international law, irrespective of the involved parties or the home state's role in the dispute. Despite the aspirations of the WTO and other IOs to depoliticize legal disputes on the global stage, my results highlight the inherently political nature of these disputes.

The next section develops the theoretical framework, beginning with a discussion of how individuals form attitudes toward international law and how information influences them, then turning to the information strategy of the authoritarian government. Two empirical sections follow: the first analyzes Chinese media coverage of WTO disputes, and the second reports a survey experiment on Chinese citizens. I conclude by discussing the implications of my findings regarding the importance of information environments in IOs' ability to facilitate international cooperation.

2 Authoritarian Censorship and Support for International Law

International organizations play a central informational role in global governance. By publicizing members' policies and alleged violations, they reduce uncertainty and generate domestic audience pressures that can encourage compliance with international commitments (Keohane, 1984; Dai, 2005, 2006; Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff, 2002; Simmons, 2009). Yet information released by IOs rarely reaches citizens directly. Instead, it passes through domestic intermediaries—especially the media—which determine how such information is framed, emphasized, or suppressed (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022; Chaudoin, 2023).

How, then, does information pass from IOs to the domestic public in authoritarian media environments? How do authoritarian regimes deal with information about their own alleged violations of international law? I argue that authoritarian governments engage in strategic censorship, balancing the risks of exposing potential noncompliance with the political advantages of shaping how such disputes are perceived. Specifically, they suppress complaints filed by non-hostile states while allowing limited coverage of those filed by hostile states. This is because complaints made by hostile counterparts are more likely to provoke defensive reactions and foster perceptions of the institution as politicized and disadvantageous for the government, rather than cause concerns about the possible costs of noncompliance.

I present my argument in two steps. First, I discuss how individuals form attitudes toward international law and how information about alleged violations shapes those attitudes. Then, I examine the authoritarian government's strategy of managing information about such disputes, based on its anticipation of these audience reactions.

2.1 Legal Disputes, Media, and Public Opinion toward International Law

Public opinion toward international law and legal institutions can be shaped by several factors. Most broadly, individuals' general orientation toward international cooperation influences their views. Those with cooperative internationalist (CI) foreign policy attitudes, for instance, tend to view international institutions and multilateralism more favorably, seeing them as a means of facilitating cooperation (Holsti and Rosenau, 1988; Wittkopf, 1990). Attitudes may also depend on individuals' preferences regarding an institution's core mandate. For example, attitudes toward the WTO and support for compliance with international trade law are likely shaped by individuals' views on free trade, which lies at the core of the organization's mission (WTO, 2025). Consistent with this logic, Chaudoin (2014) finds that individuals with strong priors about free trade are less responsive to information about potential WTO disputes.

Because most people hold weak priors about international affairs, however, they are especially responsive to salient events that make international law more visible, as well as to the elite and media cues that accompany these events (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023). Legal disputes, in particular, serve as salient cues that activate and reshape public attitudes toward international law by drawing attention to its authority, procedures, and distributive implications (Chaudoin, 2014; Pelc, 2013). Pelc (2013) demonstrates through analysis of web query data that individuals actively seek information about the WTO when their country becomes the target of a WTO dispute, indicating that legal disputes heighten public awareness and engagement.

Because few citizens observe international adjudication directly, media coverage serves

as the principal channel through which information about international law reaches the public. Decisions about whether and how to report on a dispute, including its salience, framing, and tone, therefore shape how audiences interpret international law. Consequently, media coverage plays a critical role in determining whether international legal institutions are understood as legitimate enforcement mechanisms, sources of domestic contestation, or threats to national interests (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022; Chaudoin, 2023).

In authoritarian contexts, this mediating role of the media is especially consequential. Because the state exercises extensive control over information, it can shape how international law is presented to the public—whether as a cooperative framework that advances national interests or as a source of external constraint. Censorship narrows the range of available interpretations, restricting opportunities for independent evaluation. At the same time, in the absence of partisan polarization, reactions to information about international law are more likely to be filtered through national identity rather than partisan identity (Gruffydd-Jones, 2018). Citizens' support or opposition for international institutions therefore often hinges on how international law is portrayed in relation to the nation's interests and external rivals.

While media can shape public opinion in many ways—through selective coverage, framing, or tone—*selective coverage* represents the most fundamental form of control. If a dispute is not reported, citizens receive no cues at all. I therefore focus on how the characteristics of disputes determine which information is passed on to the public, and, consequently, how individuals perceive international law.

In the context of WTO disputes, two features are particularly important [2]. The first concerns the role of the country in the dispute: whether it is a complainant or a respondent. The

[2]Although I focus on the WTO in this paper, this basic dynamic may also be expected for any international legal institutions that adjudicate disputes between countries.

directionality of the dispute shapes how individuals interpret the application of international law. Research in public responses to international economic phenomena has consistently found that individuals support policies that they believe advances their country's welfare (Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Mutz and Kim, 2017). Similarly, in the domain of international law, individuals rely on cues indicating whether their country is advantaged or disadvantaged by legal processes (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022).

The directionality of a dispute provides precisely such a cue. When the country is the complainant, international law is likely to be perceived as a mechanism that protects national interests, enforcing trade rules to ensure fair treatment or remove foreign barriers to domestic exports. Conversely, when the country is the respondent, individuals are more likely to interpret international law as imposing external constraints or as a tool through which other states seek to penalize or extract concessions from their country. Exposure to disputes in which one's own country is accused of noncompliance therefore tends to lower support for international law, as citizens perceive it as operating against, rather than on behalf of, their national interests (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022).

A second dimension concerns the identity of the counterpart: whether the counterpart is regarded as hostile or not. In particular, I argue that hostility *amplifies* the negative effect of being the respondent in a dispute, for two reasons. First, individuals may be especially sensitive about the gains from international law when the benefiting party is a hostile country. Scholars have long recognized the importance of identity in considerations of relative gains; Jervis (1978), for example, has argued that when a state has sufficient common interests with another, it will not view the other country's increase in power as a threat but rather welcome it. The familiar logic of security externalities in international trade also illustrates

the point that even mutually benefiting institutions such as free trade can be forgone if they benefit the adversary (Gowa and Mansfield, 1993; Gowa, 1995). Recent evidence also shows that individuals judge trade outcomes and international organizations by whether they advance their country's relative position in international politics (Brutger and Rathbun, 2021; Brutger and Clark, 2023). In this sense, it is also important *who* is benefiting from the dispute and/or the international legal system instead of the home country, in addition to whether the country is winning or losing from the institution. Hostility intensifies the perception that international law benefits the adversary, making the negative effect of being the respondent larger than when the counterpart is non-hostile.

Second, a legal complaint may also be understood by the public as a shaming gesture. The initiation of a WTO dispute is accompanied by an explicit accusation that the respondent's policies are inconsistent with international trade law. Such allegations are frequently covered in the press, making them highly visible to domestic audiences. When the complainant is a hostile state, these accusations are less likely to be viewed as neutral legal claims and more likely to be interpreted as politically motivated attacks. Evidence from the naming and shaming literature supports this expectation: studies have consistently found that backlash effects are strongest when criticism originates from outgroups or adversaries (Hornsey and Imani, 2004; Hornsey, 2005; Terman and Voeten, 2018; Terman, 2019)[3].

In this sense, when the complaint comes from an adversary, citizens may perceive international law not as an impartial set of rules, but as a tool that adversaries can exploit to constrain or delegitimize their country. If the WTO is seen as providing a platform for hostile states to criticize the government, support for the institution itself is likely to erode. This

[3]However, Tingley and Tomz (2022) finds no difference between shaming by allies and non-allies.

dynamic again amplifies the difference between complainant and respondent cases.

My theoretical expectations regarding individual attitudes can be summarized as follows:

Hypothesis 1.1 *Being the respondent in a dispute decreases public support for international law, compared to being a complainant.*

Hypothesis 1.2 *The negative effect of being the respondent is amplified when the dispute is initiated by a hostile state compared to a non-hostile state.*

2.2 Authoritarian censorship

The authoritarian government's information strategy follows directly from these patterns of public opinion. When citizens learn that their country is the respondent in a WTO dispute, they grow more skeptical toward international law (H1.1), and this effect is stronger when the complaint is brought by a hostile state (H1.2). At the same time, disclosure of such disputes also entails political risks: citizens may interpret allegations of violation as evidence of government wrongdoing and worry about potential economic or reputational costs of noncompliance. Indeed, this concern forms the central expectation of much of the experimental literature on compliance with international law (Wallace, 2013; Chilton, 2014; Wallace, 2019; Chilton, 2015; Kreps and Wallace, 2016; Tingley and Tomz, 2022), as well as the assumptions of canonical treaty-making models such as in Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff (2002).

To manage these competing reactions, authoritarian governments engage in *strategic censorship*. Censorship—or the taxing of information that raises the costs of accessing or spreading information (Roberts, 2018)—serves not merely to suppress dissent but to channel

information toward politically useful ends (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014; Han and Shao, 2022; Lorentzen, 2014; King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu, 2017). Beyond domestic control, governments also use censorship to pursue economic and foreign policy goals. For instance, Kim (2018) finds systematic bias against foreign firms among Chinese newspapers, which serves the government's protectionist aims. Weiss (2014) shows that censorship of nationalist protest can be used to manage diplomatic signaling. Gruffydd-Jones (2018) demonstrates that authoritarian media selectively report foreign criticism to counteract international human rights diplomacy.

I extend these studies to suggest that censorship may also be utilized by the authoritarian government to indirectly contest allegations of its violation of international trade law (Morse and Pratt, 2022, 2025). The government's motivations in censoring WTO disputes are twofold: to minimize domestic concern about potential noncompliance and to manage public reactions that might arise from such allegations. Suppressing all respondent disputes would prevent citizens from perceiving the government as violating international rules, but it would also remove the possibility that some disputes are interpreted as unfair or politically motivated. Indeed, recent research on censorship suggests that authoritarian state media can preemptively address criticisms to maintain credibility and narrative control (Chen and Xu, 2017; Gruffydd-Jones, 2018). Conversely, extensive coverage of all respondent disputes could heighten suspicions about the government's actions and undermine confidence in its adherence to international law.

In short, the government faces a recurring trade-off between the benefits of disclosure—transparency and narrative control—and the costs of disclosure—public concern about noncompliance. The balance of these incentives varies systematically across two dimensions:

the government's role in the dispute and the hostility of the dispute counterpart.

In general, respondent cases entail higher disclosure costs and lower benefits than complainant cases. Disclosure of these cases can sustain the appearance of transparency and enhance the credibility of official state media, but risks heightened citizen concerns about potential noncompliance. In contrast, complainant cases impose minimal disclosure costs, since they do not imply government violation, but rather provide benefits in that they portray the state as defending national interests on the international stage. For these reasons, respondent disputes are generally less likely to be covered in authoritarian media.

The identity of the counterpart conditions these incentives. As per the logic in the previous section, when a dispute is initiated by a hostile country, domestic audiences are less likely to view the allegations as legitimate and more likely to interpret them as politicized attacks. In such cases, the disclosure costs associated with respondent cases are mitigated, since individuals no longer believe that the government has actually violated international law, but rather that it has been the target of a politically motivated attack. At the same time, the benefits of disclosure increase: the government can project transparency—since it is passing on criticism about itself—and simultaneously frame the dispute to highlight external bias. Conversely, when the complainant is a non-hostile country, citizens are more inclined to regard the accusations as credible and worry about possible noncompliance, increasing the expected costs of disclosure. As a result, coverage of respondent disputes should be more frequent when the complainant is hostile and less frequent when it is non-hostile[4].

[4]It could be argued that continuously highlighting disputes initiated by hostile states risks encouraging public opposition to the WTO, which could be counterproductive given the benefits of membership. However, this risk is mitigated for two reasons. First, the government can calibrate both the volume and framing of coverage to prevent public hostility from exceeding politically manageable levels. Second, because the Chinese leadership faces no electoral pressure to respond to public sentiment by altering institutional commitments, temporary expressions of anti-WTO sentiment do not translate into meaningful political costs.

Therefore, the reduction in coverage associated with being the respondent in a WTO dispute should be attenuated when the dispute is initiated by a hostile state, as the government expects lower domestic noncompliance costs and greater opportunities for strategic narrative control. By calibrating which disputes receive coverage, the government can maintain narrative control over international law—reducing exposure to cases that might raise doubts about compliance while allowing limited attention to those that can be framed as politically charged or unfair.

This logic leads to the following expectation about authoritarian media coverage:

Hypothesis 2.1 *Being the respondent in a dispute decreases the likelihood of media coverage, compared to being a complainant.*

Hypothesis 2.2 *The reduction in coverage associated with being the respondent is attenuated when the dispute is initiated by a hostile state compared to a non-hostile state.*

While my theory highlights a specific logic of strategic censorship centered on the government's role in the dispute and the identity of the counterpart, other factors may also shape media coverage. Economic salience is one such consideration: disputes involving strategically important sectors or widely used products may draw greater attention. Similarly, large or high-profile disputes that encompass multiple complainants or result in landmark rulings may receive broader coverage due to their international prominence. The timing of the dispute may also matter; when a case coincides with sensitive diplomatic negotiations or major political events, the government may either suppress coverage to avoid tension or amplify it to strengthen its bargaining position. While my theory focuses on censorship as a function of anticipated domestic audience reactions, these additional sources of variation are incorporated into the empirical analysis.

Several points about the theory also warrant discussion. First, one might question the significance of analyzing information effects in authoritarian settings, for the domestic public in such countries lack meaningful electoral leverage over the policymaking process. Yet understanding the impact of IO-provided information on the domestic public is still important in authoritarian countries, not least because these countries are often precisely the targets of IOs' efforts to raise compliance. Moreover, evidence indicating that authoritarian states, such as China, employ media control to advance protectionist interests and often succeed in doing so (Kim, 2018) underscores the genuine potential for information control and its substantial influence on individual behavior. The fact that China exerts effort toward censoring news about the US-China trade war is also indicative in this regard. Despite this, our understanding of whether and how information regarding noncompliance reaches and influences the domestic public under authoritarian rule remains limited.

Furthermore, authoritarian states are not completely free of restraints; in China, for example, Shirk (2011) claims that the commercialization of the media and the emergence of the internet has led to increased media attention towards foreign policy issues, which meaningfully influence the way leaders and diplomats conduct foreign policy. Regarding the reception of international pressure, in the context of human rights, Hendrix and Wong (2013) argue that foreign naming and shaming has a larger proportional effect in autocracies compared to democracies since international reporting has a larger influence in the absence of alternative information sources. Studies of authoritarian audience costs have also suggested that autocratic leaders face significant domestic audience costs comparable to their democratic counterparts (Li and Chen, 2021; Weeks, 2008, 2012; Weiss, 2013, 2014). Thus, a full account of what actually happens to IO-provided information in authoritarian countries is still

necessary and important.

Second, it should be noted that my theory describes a model of the politics of allegations of violations, rather than a legal ruling. The impact of a legal claim and a legal ruling may work through different mechanisms: claims, being political acts between states, are likely to influence attitudes primarily through perceptions of fairness and politicization, with stronger sensitivity to the identity and motives of the counterpart making the claim. Rulings, while also affecting perceptions of fairness, may additionally engage perceptions of the credibility and legitimacy of the adjudicating international court. My theoretical focus is on how governments and domestic audiences interpret and respond to such allegations—particularly when they originate from hostile states—rather than on how they react to the outcomes of formal adjudication.

3 Chinese Media Coverage of WTO Disputes

3.1 Empirical Scope: Chinese Newspapers

In examining the coverage of international legal disputes in the authoritarian media environment and its effect on attitudes of the domestic public, my empirical scope focuses on Chinese newspapers and the Chinese public. I focus on the case of China for several reasons. First, China is an intrinsically important case due to its major effects on the international economic and political system. Also, among the universe of authoritarian states with varying levels of ability to control information, China represents a "model" case of media control. While other authoritarian states may not have as elaborate and effective control over the media as China, they often share similar motivations. China has been known, for example, to

export software and hardware to help other authoritarian states create a controlled internet environment (Deibert, 2015; Rød and Weidmann, 2015). Analyzing the strategic motivations of the Chinese government in passing on information to the domestic public can therefore help illuminate the motivations of other authoritarian states as well. Also, methodologically, the degree of government control varies substantially between official and commercial newspapers in China (Kim, 2018; Stockmann, 2012), allowing the distinction between state-enforced bias and bias stemming from nationalist public sentiments.

3.2 Data

I construct an original dataset of newspaper articles from 116 Chinese newspapers on the entire set of WTO disputes involving China. To date, China has been a respondent in 45 WTO disputes and a complainant in 21. Since the first of these was initiated in 2002 and the last of them is still ongoing, I collected data on Chinese newspaper articles written between 2002 and 2020, the longest period for which data was available. I utilize the *WiseNews* database of Chinese newspaper articles, the most comprehensive database available to examine coverage of all daily general-interest and financial newspapers in China. Data collection was carried out in three steps: 1) collecting and filtering relevant articles, 2) matching articles with specific WTO disputes, and 3) creating a dispute-newspaper coverage count dataset and combining with newspaper ownership data.

I began with all newspaper articles in the database written between 2002 and 2020 that contained the term "World Trade Organization" ("世界贸易组织") or "WTO" ("世贸组织") either in their headline or the article text, obtaining 264,765 articles. Of these articles, I filtered only those that include phrases that are related to legal disputes such as "sue" or

"dispute"[5] and contain the name of any country that has been involved in a WTO dispute with China, obtaining 57,432 articles. This filtering in the first step was set intentionally coarsely so as to prevent false negatives.

I then matched each of these articles to specific disputes using three conditions, all of which had to be met in order for an article to be classified as being about a certain WTO dispute. First, the article had to be written within seven days following important announcements made by the WTO about a certain dispute, in accordance with each step in the dispute settlement process.[6] This allows me to gauge immediate reactions by the Chinese media. Second, the article had to include the product keyword of the particular dispute, of which I selected the exact phrasing based on a manual inspection of the articles.[7] Many times, articles about a certain dispute were very similar and included the exact same wording that they received from the same sources (such as state media agencies), making it fairly easy to detect keywords. Lastly, the article had to include the name of the specific dispute counterpart country. With these three conditions, 3,657 articles were matched with specific WTO disputes. Overall, while not perfect, the classification system operated satisfactorily

[5]Because I wanted to be as broad as I can in filtering relevant articles so as to not lose data, I included all articles that either contain the character "告" (to tell, sue, request, announce), or "诉" (to tell, complain, accuse), both characters that are used in almost all words related to legal accusations, or the words "指控"(to sue), "争端" (conflict).

[6]Important announcements and their dates were selected as documented by the WTO: consultations requested, panel requested, panel established, panel composed, panel report circulated, appellate body report circulated/adopted, and mutually agreed solution notified.

[7]I selected the keyword initially based on the official title of the dispute; for example, for the dispute DS339 'China – Measures Affecting Imports of Automobile Parts,' the keyword 'automobile'('汽车') was selected and was manually inspected to check whether they were included in all related articles. However, there were also dispute titles that did not include specific products or were ambiguous, such as the dispute DS543 with the title 'United States – Tariff Measures on Certain Goods from China.' For such disputes, I referred to the description of the dispute provided by the WTO and also went through manual inspection to identify phrases that are repeatedly used in related articles. For example, articles referring to the dispute DS543 almost always included the phrase "tariffs under 301 investigations" ("301调查项下征税"), and thus I used this keyword as a filtering condition.

and without systematic errors.

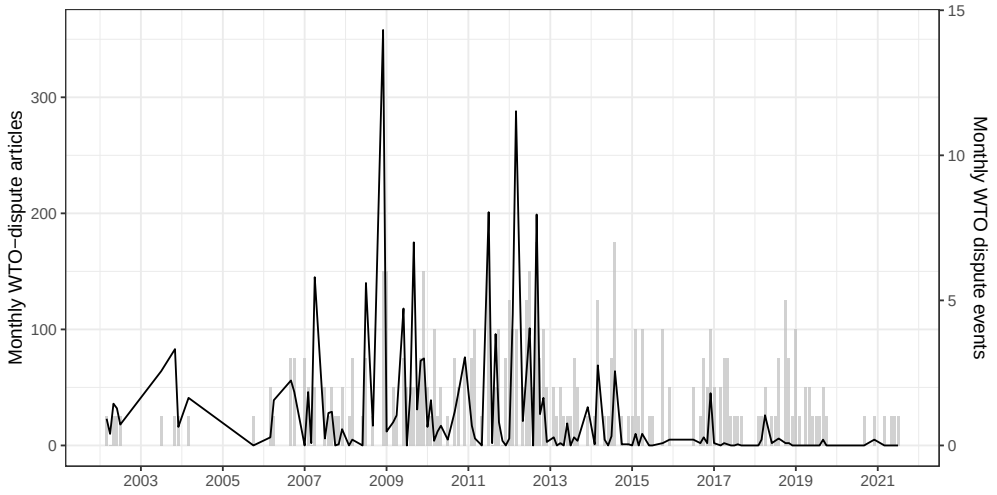

Figure 1: *Monthly number of WTO dispute-related articles (line, left axis) and WTO dispute events (bars, right axis).* Dispute events include key procedural milestones as documented by the WTO (see note 6).

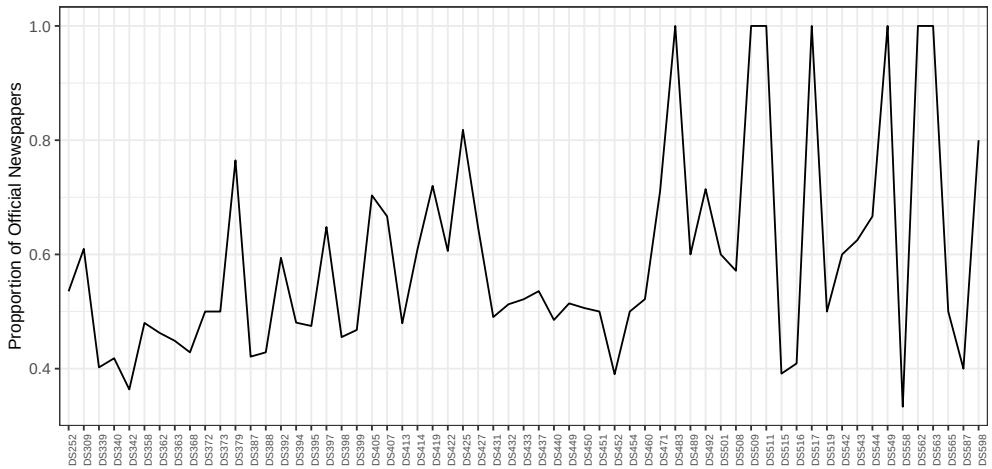

Figure 2: *Proportion of official newspapers covering each WTO dispute.* The line shows the share of official (party-controlled) newspapers among all newspapers covering each WTO dispute.

Figure 1 shows the number of articles matched with WTO disputes over time, and Figure 2 shows the proportion of official newspapers among all newspapers that covered a certain dispute. The volume of coverage generally follows the temporal distribution of important announcements made by WTO panels and appellate bodies. The noticeable spike near the end of 2008 corresponds to China's first loss in the WTO in which China lost to Canada, European Communities, and the United States (DS339, DS340, DS342) on a dispute case surrounding automobile parts. DS387 and DS388 were also initiated in the same month by the US and Mexico, which also increased coverage volume. Another surge in coverage is seen in March 2012, in response to the disputes with the US, Japan, and the EU over rare earths exports, often referred to as the "Rare Earths War" in the Chinese media.

The coverage in the years of the recent trade war is noticeably scant, especially compared to the volume of WTO activities during this period. This pattern likely reflects a broader tightening of China's media environment under Xi Jinping; recent work shows that propaganda and media control have intensified substantially over the past decade (Waight et al., 2025). The rising proportion of official newspapers among those covering WTO disputes (Figure 2) also suggests that trade-war related WTO cases were overwhelmingly covered by official outlets, consistent with anecdotal reports that non-official newspapers faced restrictions when reporting on the trade war. Although this overall decline is not inconsistent with the theory—which focuses on relative patterns of selective reporting across dispute types—it highlights an important scope condition: when censorship becomes extremely stringent, the total amount of permissible reporting may fall so low that fewer empirically observable differences appear across dispute types[8].

[8]I thank the anonymous reviewer for raising this valuable point.

Using the matched articles, I created a dataset with each dispute-newspaper dyad as a single unit (e.g., "Beijing Daily–DS252"), counting how many times a specific newspaper has reported a specific dispute. With 116 newspapers and 66 disputes, this yielded 7,656 possible newspaper–dispute combinations. I excluded those units in which the entire period (initiation to latest update) of the dispute did not fit within the *WiseNews* coverage period of that particular newspaper, since the inclusion of such units would lead to a bias in the direction of non-coverage. After this restriction, 3,366 observations remained. Finally, I matched these data with the newspaper ownership data from Kim (2018), featuring the classification of 120 daily newspapers in China into official newspapers ("newspapers owned and strictly controlled by party committees at different administrative levels") and non-official newspapers, demonstrated by scholars to enjoy greater editorial autonomy (Kim, 2018; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu, 2018).

Table 1: Average coverage probability of WTO disputes by Chinese newspapers

		Dispute Counterpart	
		United States	Non-US party
Role of China in Dispute	China is complainant	0.332 (265/797)	0.429 (115/268)
	China is respondent	0.394 (474/1204)	0.284 (311/1097)

Notes: Values are calculated at the dispute-newspaper level and indicate the share of newspaper-dispute pairs with coverage (number of covered pairs / total pairs).

Table 1 reports the proportion of newspapers in the dataset that covered a certain WTO dispute, depending on whether China was the complainant or respondent and whom the dispute was against. An initial look at the data seems to support my theory that the Chinese media allows coverage of allegations against itself when the US is involved and reduces it

when a different country is involved. US complaints about China were covered in 39 percent of the newspapers in the sample, whereas complaints made by non-US countries were covered in 28 percent. Comparing within those cases in which the US was involved, cases in which China was the respondent were covered by more newspapers than those cases it initiated. However, a more robust empirical strategy would be required in order to make causal claims about the effect of the identity of the dispute counterpart on coverage patterns.

3.3 Empirical Strategy

To investigate which WTO disputes are more likely to be covered in the Chinese media, I estimate binary probit models testing the probability of a specific dispute case being reported by 1) whether China is the respondent or complainant, and 2) whether the dispute is against the United States, each as a binary variable. An interaction term is added to assess the influence of a certain dispute being against the United States on the relationship between the role of China in the dispute (complainant/respondent) and the likelihood of coverage. In practice, this means the model distinguishes between the four types of cases in Table 1: China suing the United States, the United States suing China, China suing other countries, and other countries suing China. I repeat this analysis with subsets of official and non-official newspapers in order to gauge the extent of government intentions. Within a given subset, the basic binary probit models are specified as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}\Pr(Y_{ijt} = 1) = \phi(&\alpha + \beta_1 US_j + \beta_2 ChinaRespondent_j \\ &+ \beta_3 US_j \times ChinaRespondent_j + \delta \mathbf{Z}_j + \tau_t),\end{aligned}$$

where Y_{ijt} is the binary variable *Report* equal to 1 if newspaper i covers WTO dispute j and 0 otherwise[9]. US_j is a dispute-level indicator equal to 1 if the United States is the counterpart and 0 otherwise. $ChinaRespondent_j$ is a dispute-level indicator equal to 1 if China is the respondent and 0 if China is the complainant.[10] $\mathbf{Z}_j$ is a vector of dispute-level control variables, and τ_t denotes year fixed effects.

I control for dispute-level variables that could affect the magnitude of reporting. Because certain industries and dispute types such as those involving rare earths or tariffs may attract greater attention, I include binary indicators for the industry of the disputed products when applicable, as well as for broader dispute categories such as tariffs, subsidies, or methodological (procedural) issues. Details on these classifications are provided in Appendix A.3. I also control for the total number of countries involved in related disputes (identified by a shared official title), accounting for the additional coverage arising from a wider set of affected parties[11]. Year-fixed effects are included in all models to account for the overall state of China's foreign relations with disputing countries across years. Standard errors are clustered by dispute to account for the within-dispute dependence in coverage decisions across newspapers. For robustness, I also report models clustering by newspaper (Table A9).

3.4 Results

Table 2 presents the marginal effects from the binary probit models estimating the probability of coverage. Models 1 to 3 use the subset of articles written by official newspapers. Models 1

[9] I use the binary indicator because most WTO disputes are only covered once by each newspaper, if any.

[10] Because the sample includes all WTO disputes in which China is a party, this variable captures the full range of China's involvement as both complainant and respondent.

[11] For example, DS515 and DS516 are related disputes, because they are both titled "Measures Related to Price Comparison Methodologies."

Table 2: Binary probit models estimating probability of news coverage by Chinese newspapers

	Dependent variable:					
	News Coverage					
	Official Media			Non-official Media		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
US	0.211**		0.186**	0.229**		0.229**
	(0.061)		(0.051)	(0.065)		(0.062)
China is respondent		−0.119	−0.154**		−0.099	−0.175**
		(0.092)	(0.047)		(0.100)	(0.067)
China is respondent | US=0			−0.440**			−0.399**
			(0.070)			(0.086)
China is respondent | US=1			0.018			−0.023
			(0.068)			(0.086)
US × China is respondent			0.457**			0.376**
			(0.101)			(0.114)
Number of parties	0.150*	0.121*	0.150**	0.180*	0.141†	0.201**
	(0.069)	(0.060)	(0.053)	(0.075)	(0.083)	(0.077)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,333	1,333	1,333	2,033	2,033	2,033
Log Likelihood	−662.071	−675.240	−639.915	−906.483	−928.328	−888.453
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,378.142	1,404.480	1,337.831	1,866.966	1,910.657	1,834.906

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (China is Respondent | US=0 and China is Respondent | US=1) show how this effect differs across values of *US*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial US \partial ChinaRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by dispute.

and 2 estimate, respectively, the effect of a dispute involving the United States and the effect of China being a respondent on the likelihood of coverage. Model 3 includes an interaction term to assess whether the effect of China being a respondent differs between disputes involving the United States and those involving other countries. Models 4 to 6 replicate these specifications using the subset of articles written by non-official newspapers. For models with interaction terms, I report both the conditional marginal effects and second differences.

Overall, the results support my argument. As shown in Models 1 and 4, disputes against the United States are significantly more likely to be covered in Chinese newspapers, regardless of media type. Specifically, US involvement increases the probability of coverage by roughly 21 percentage points. This pattern is unsurprising given the prominence of the US as a major rival of China. More interestingly, Models 2 and 5 show that Chinese newspapers are *not* more likely to report WTO disputes in which China is accused of violating international trade law. If anything, they are more likely to report when China initiates. This contrasts with the negativity bias commonly found in other national contexts (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022), and suggests that coverage decisions may be governed by a different logic in authoritarian settings in a way that prioritizes state narratives compared to news value.

Results in Models 3 and 6 suggest that the marginal effect of China being the respondent on the likelihood of coverage is strongly influenced by whether the United States is the dispute counterpart. When the dispute is not against the United States, official Chinese newspapers are about 44 percentage points less likely ($p < 0.01$) to cover cases in which China is the respondent. In contrast, when the US is the complainant, Chinese newspapers are no less likely to report cases in which China is the respondent. The difference in these marginal effects is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) and supports the theoretical explanation that

perceived hostility in the audience attenuates the domestic disincentive to report allegations against China.

This heterogeneity is visualized in Figure 3, which plots the predicted probabilities of coverage. In both official and non-official newspapers, non-US disputes show a pronounced decline in the predicted probability of coverage when China is the respondent; from 88 to 44 percent in official newspapers and 74 to 34 percent in non-official ones. By contrast, for disputes against the US, the predicted probability of coverage remains consistently high (around 80 percent for official and 70 percent for non-official newspapers).

3.5 Robustness Check

For robustness, I run a series of additional checks. First, I estimate alternative model specifications, including a linear probability model and a logistic regression model (Tables A3 and A4). Next, I swap in semester-fixed effects for year-fixed effects (Table A5). My results remain consistent across these alternative specifications.

To ensure that findings are not driven by particular historical periods, I also conduct sensitivity analyses excluding the early accession period prior to 2004—before the first WTO dispute was initiated against China—and the post-2018 period, when the Appellate Body crisis and US unilateral measures intensified (Tables A6 and A7). The results are stable across these alternative temporal windows.

It is also possible that coverage patterns differ by whether dispute cases are won or lost. For example, Chinese newspapers may be more inclined to report those disputes in which the WTO ruled against China, in line with the negativity bias of the media. Alternatively, they could also report more of those disputes in which the WTO ruled *for* China, catering

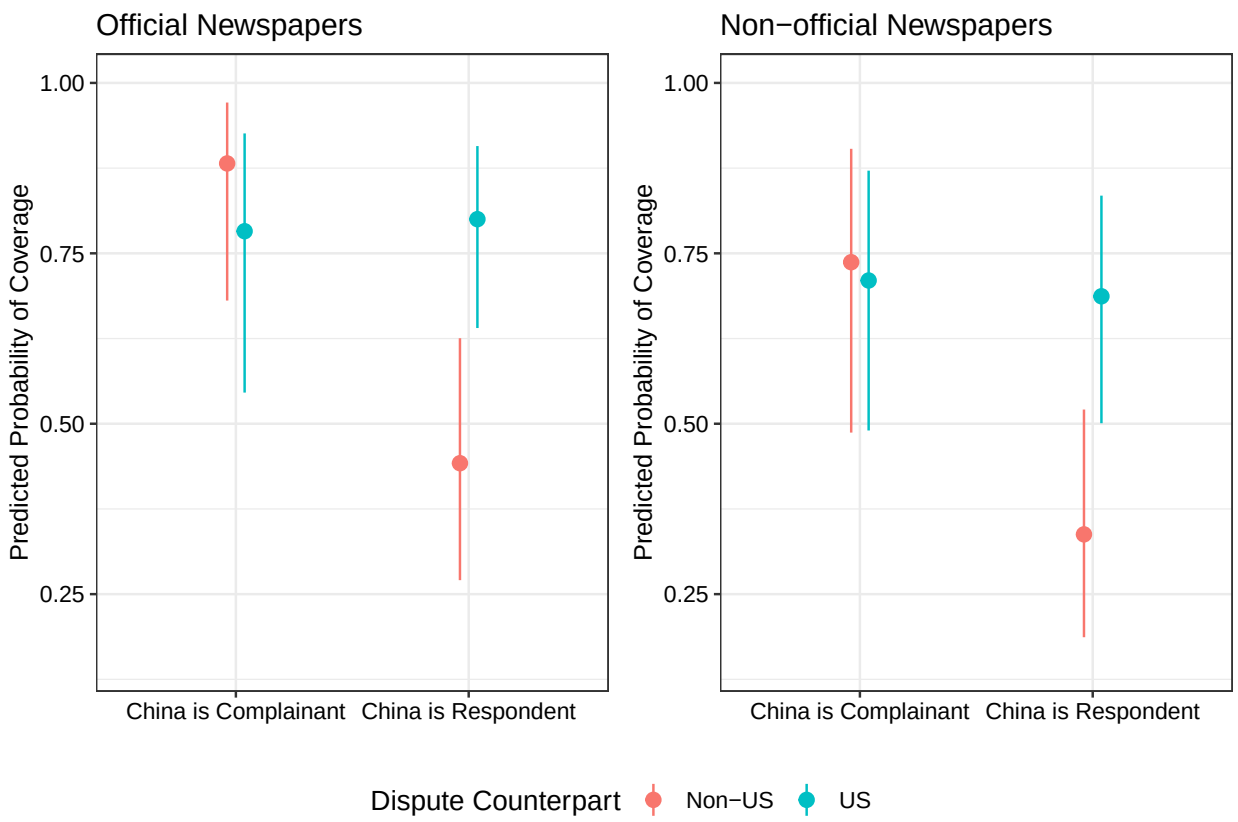

Figure 3: *Predicted probability of coverage among Chinese newspapers by dispute counterpart and the role of China in dispute.* Covariates are held at sample means or modes; error bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

to the nationalistic audiences. To account for this possibility, I repeat the analysis with the subset of articles that are written between the window of time surrounding the initiation of the dispute (at the point of consultation request), before any WTO ruling is made (Table A8). Reporting patterns remain robust even when focusing solely on early-stage articles.

An important distinction theoretically and empirically is whether these differences in the probability of coverage are due to the selective coverage of the media, which can happen in both authoritarian and democratic settings, or government manipulation, which is more likely

to be present in authoritarian settings. I utilize two methods to address this issue. First, I conduct a three-way interaction test with the binary variables *ChinaRespondent* and *US*, and an additional binary variable *Official* that indicates whether the newspaper in question is an official or non-official newspaper (Table A12). The coefficient for the three-way interaction variable is positive and statistically significant, suggesting that reporting bias is significantly greater in official, party-controlled media.

As a further test, I replicate the analysis using US newspapers, examining how they report WTO disputes involving the United States (Appendix A.5). Following the same design, I estimate the probability of coverage by the United States' role in the dispute—respondent or complainant—and whether China is the counterpart. Analyzing US newspapers, which operate in a democratic media environment with greater press freedom, provides a useful benchmark for comparison. If my theory is not authoritarian-specific, empirically, we would find similar results across authoritarian and democratic media environments. A significantly different result in terms of the direction of influence, however, would boost our confidence in the existence of government manipulation. I do not find comparable results among US newspapers, reinforcing the idea that these patterns are specific to authoritarian media environments rather than a broader phenomenon across regime types.

4 Media Effect on Support for International Law

4.1 Experiment Design

To further analyze the impact of the demonstrated reporting patterns on attitudes toward international law, I conducted a survey experiment on 1,656 Chinese adults recruited by

SoJump, a survey research company based in China. Respondents were recruited under a demographics-based quota on age and gender to be relatively well-distributed in terms of these variables; they were, however, considerably more educated compared to the population, with around 60% of the respondents having earned a college degree (compared to 18% in the entire population, as of 2020 (OECD, 2021)). Generally, my sample can be said to better represent the Chinese online population, the educated urbanites, who are often understood to be more politically engaged and whose opinions are more likely to be noticed by the Chinese government (Li and Zeng, 2017).

In the experiment, individuals were divided into five groups, one control and four treatment groups: respondents in the control group read a short passage on the WTO dispute settlement process, while respondents in each of the four treatment groups, in addition to the same passage, also read a fictional news article that mentioned WTO disputes that varied by 1) whether China is the complaining or responding party and 2) whether the dispute counterpart is the United States or the European Union. This allowed me to test the influence of the Chinese media's bias in favor of reporting on disputes against itself, as well as the differentiated effects based on the dispute counterpart. Table 3 summarizes the treatment groups.

The US and EU were chosen as the hypothetical dispute counterparts based on the results of the media coverage analysis, where I found significant coverage differences between WTO dispute cases against the US and those not against the US (which were predominantly against the EU). Also, Chinese public opinion on the United States and European countries has been reported to be markedly different. In a survey conducted from October to November 2020, Liu, Li, and Fang (2020) found that 77% of the Chinese respondents had unfavorable views toward the United States, whereas the figure was less than 50% for all European countries

asked. This finding is also echoed in my survey results, with around 60% of the respondents reporting negative attitudes toward the United States, compared to only 30% toward the European Union (Figure B7). The choice of these two countries therefore allowed me to test the influence of differences in explicit geopolitical rivalry in the public eye.

The newspaper article that respondents in the treatment groups were exposed to mentioned a WTO dispute initiated over "anti-dumping measures." The issue of anti-dumping was chosen because not only is it one of the most frequent types of disputes among WTO disputes involving China, but it is also less politicized (compared to, for example, disputes concerning tariffs, which may prompt respondents to think about the recent trade war between US and China) and thus less likely to trigger strong priors among respondents. Addressing the possibility of bias regarding a specific product or industry, I chose to set the fictional dispute as one concerning "anti-dumping measures on products from" China, the US, or the European Union, rather than mentioning the specific product in question. The phrasing of the newspaper article was based on actual media reports, with a sentence stating the occurrence of the dispute and a quotation from the relevant official addressing the inconsistency of the measure with WTO rules and hopes of remedies. Respondents were debriefed about the falsity of the news article once the experiment was over.

After treatment, respondents answered a series of questions about international law. My primary outcomes are four measures of support for international law: support for the WTO, support for free trade, the perceived importance of international institutions, and support for creating more international courts[12]. As denoted in Hypothesis 2, I expected that respondents

[12] Specifically, the questions asked were as follows. 1) What is your attitude towards the WTO? (extremely negative - extremely positive) 2) How much do you agree with the following statements? (a) In order to protect the domestic economy, China needs to limit foreign imports, (b) In the globalization era, China needs to sign more free trade agreements (strongly disagree - strongly agree), 3) How important do you think are

who were exposed to articles in which China is responding to a dispute initiated by the United States would display more negative attitudes toward international law, compared to those exposed to articles in which China is complaining against the US. Such differences may not be as pronounced for respondents exposed to information about WTO dispute cases against the European Union, as the EU is not as strongly regarded as a geopolitical rival.

Table 3: Summary of treatment groups

		China as Complainant/Respondent	
		China as Complainant	China as Respondent
Dispute Counterpart	US	Group 1: China sues US	Group 2: US sues China
	EU	Group 3: China sues EU	Group 4: EU sues China

4.2 Results

Figures 4 through 7 plot the effect of exposure to news coverage on WTO disputes on support for the WTO, free trade, international institutions, and international courts[13]. Table 4 summarizes the treatment effects. Across all variations in the treatment and dependent variables, Chinese citizens displayed higher support for international law when exposed to news reporting WTO disputes in which China was suing a foreign country as opposed to those in which China was sued, albeit with varying statistical significance. These results are consistent with the view that individuals generally see the international legal system as

international institutions, including international organizations and laws, toward facilitating international cooperation? (not important at all - extremely important), 4) Some people argue that in order to settle disputes between countries, there should be more international courts that make decisions on these matters. How much do you agree with this argument? (strongly disagree - strongly agree). All questions were measured on a 7-point scale.

[13]Respondents who failed a basic attention check were dropped from the analyses (261 respondents).

Table 4: Effect of China as Respondent conditions ("US sues China" and "EU sues China") on support for international law.

	Dependent variable:							
	WTO		Free Trade		Int'l Institutions		Int'l Courts	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
US sues China	−0.095		−0.167*		−0.182*		−0.198†	
	(0.082)		(0.073)		(0.082)		(0.101)	
EU sues China		−0.020		−0.088		−0.098		−0.153
		(0.087)		(0.071)		(0.089)		(0.109)
Constant	5.256**	5.057**	4.610**	4.526**	5.744**	5.706**	4.753**	4.724**
	(0.057)	(0.061)	(0.051)	(0.050)	(0.058)	(0.063)	(0.071)	(0.077)
Observations	645	659	645	659	645	659	645	659
R^2	0.002	0.0001	0.008	0.002	0.008	0.002	0.006	0.003

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Effects are relative to the baseline of "China sues US" and "China sues EU" conditions. See note 12 for full questions.

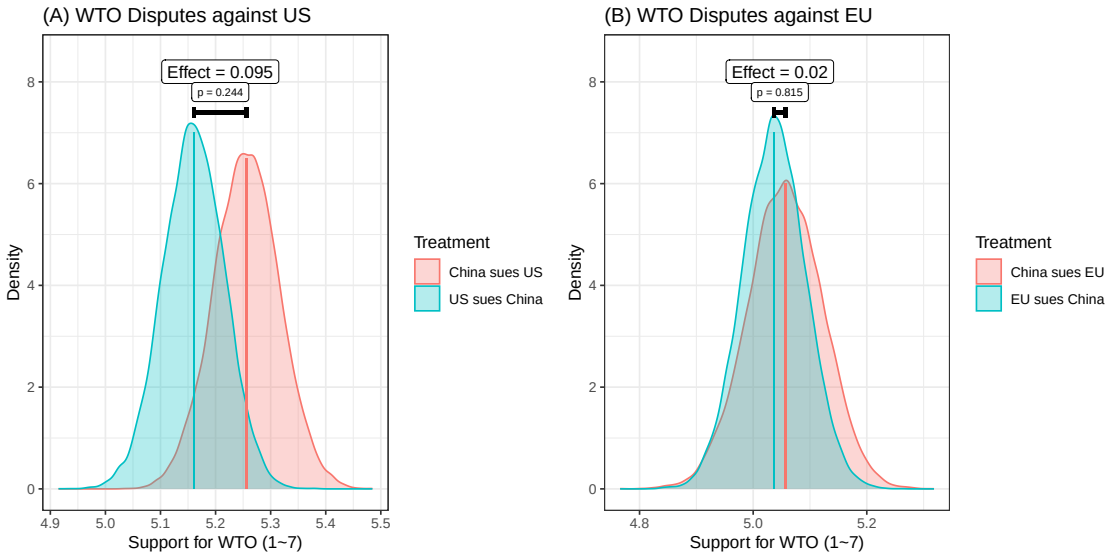

Figure 4: *Effect of exposure to news coverage on support for the WTO.* Panels show the effect of exposure to news coverage on WTO disputes against the United States and those against the European Union. Density plots denote bootstrapped sampling distribution of responses under each treatment (20,000 iterations).

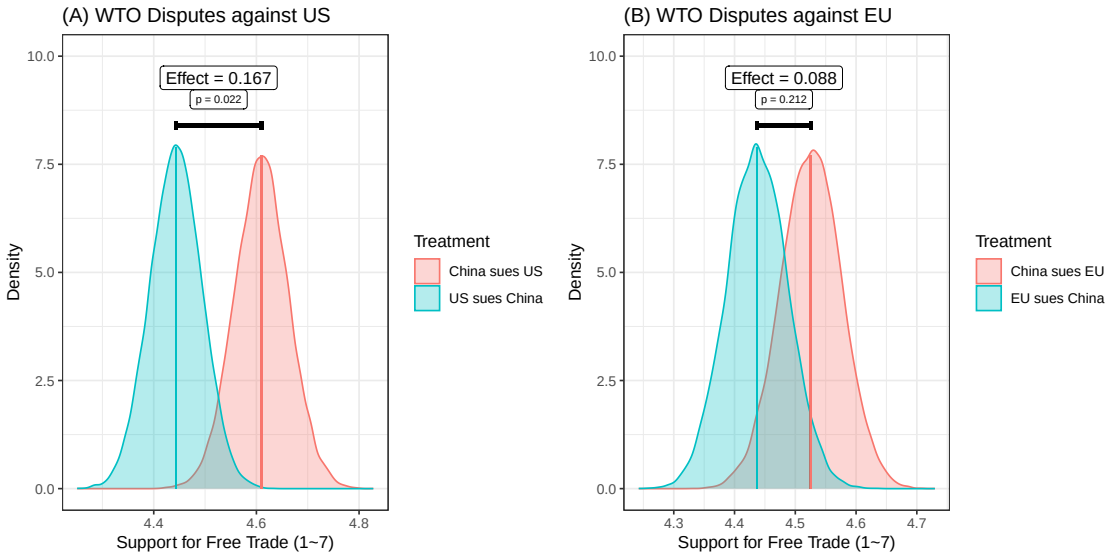

Figure 5: *Effect of exposure to news coverage on support for free trade.* Panels show the effect of exposure to news coverage on WTO disputes against the United States and those against the European Union. Density plots denote bootstrapped sampling distribution of responses under each treatment (20,000 iterations).

working against their country when exposed to disputes initiated against their home country (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022).

The results indicate a clearer and more consistent respondent–complainant contrast in disputes involving the United States than in those involving the European Union. In three out of four dependent variables, the "US sues China" treatment has a significantly negative effect on attitudes toward international law compared to the "China sues US" treatment. In contrast, the corresponding difference between the "EU sues China" and "China sues EU" treatments is much smaller and does not reach statistical significance for any of the dependent variables. In fact, respondents who were exposed to news about China suing the EU were just as likely to display negative attitudes toward the WTO as those who were exposed to news about the EU suing China.

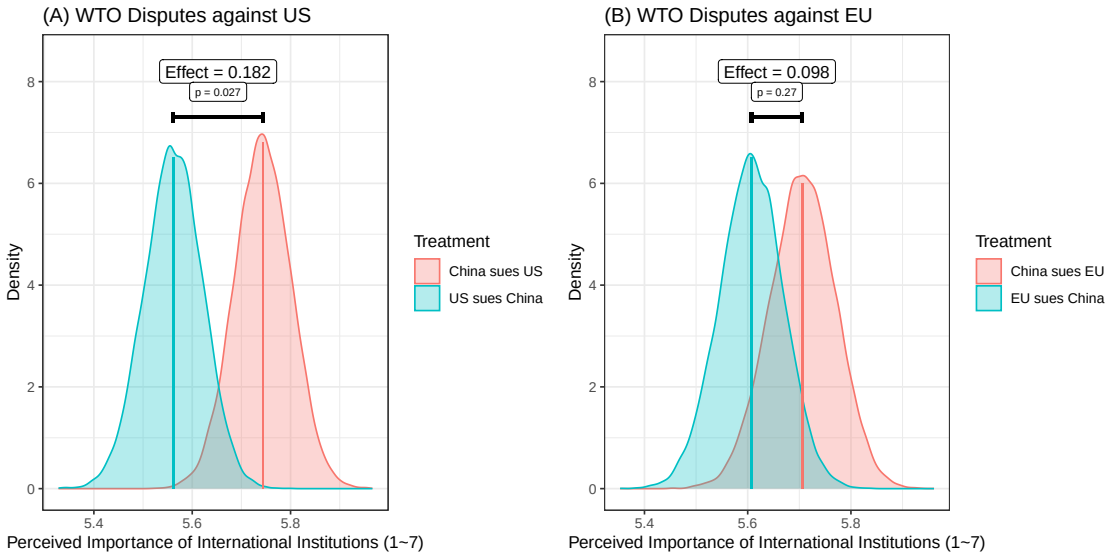

Figure 6: *Effect of exposure to news coverage on the perceived importance of international institutions.* Panels show the effect of exposure to news coverage on WTO disputes against the United States and those against the European Union. Density plots denote bootstrapped sampling distribution of responses under each treatment (20,000 iterations).

While the direction of effects aligns with theoretical expectations, a formal difference-in-differences test comparing the respondent–complainant gap across US and EU cases does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance (Appendix B.3). In other words, although China being the respondent reduces support for international law primarily in US-related disputes, the magnitude of the difference between US- and EU-related effects remains statistically inconclusive. However, this may reflect limitations in statistical power rather than the absence of a true difference, as detecting smaller interaction effects requires a larger sample (Appendix B.4). Nonetheless, the substantive and statistical significance of US-related effects across multiple measures, compared to the lack of significance for EU-related effects, points to a meaningful asymmetry.

This asymmetry helps explain why an authoritarian government may find it less costly to

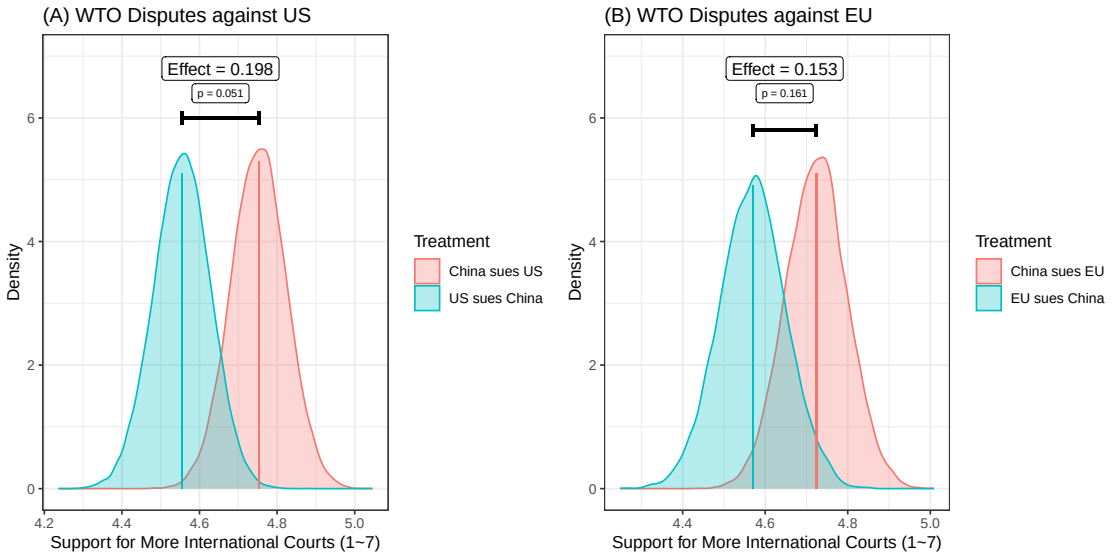

Figure 7: *Effect of exposure to news coverage on support for more international courts.* Panels show the effect of exposure to news coverage on WTO disputes against the United States and those against the European Union. Density plots denote bootstrapped sampling distribution of responses under each treatment (20,000 iterations).

allow coverage of disputes initiated by hostile states. Unlike disputes brought by non-hostile counterparts, complaints from hostile states elicit negative reactions against international law, thereby lowering the domestic costs associated with disclosing allegations of noncompliance. In turn, such selective information exposure can dampen support for international law and enable the government to manage the domestic narrative surrounding its alleged violations.

The treatment effects on support for the WTO warrant a brief discussion. Although the general findings are relatively in line with the theoretical expectations in that the disputes against the US saw larger respondent-complainant gaps comparedexcept for to the disputes against the EU, the generally larger negative effects of the disputes against the EU on attitudes toward the WTO are puzzling. One explanation could be stronger priors regarding WTO disputes with the US among Chinese respondents (see also Appendix B.5). Because

the experiment was conducted after years of sustained trade conflict between the US and China involving multiple WTO disputes, respondents would have been more familiar with such disputes, leading to smaller treatment effects. In contrast, for trade disputes against the EU, respondents would not have had as strong priors, leading to stronger treatment effects toward support for the WTO. For other dependent variables, the prior may not have had a strong effect since they were not explicitly about the WTO itself, but rather more general attitudes toward international institutions and norms. In a sense, my experiment can be described as a hard test for testing the differentiated effect based on the dispute counterpart. Taken as a whole, the results largely support my argument that the dispute counterpart matters in terms of how individuals process information about international legal disputes in which their home country is suing or is being sued by another country.

5 Conclusion

This study theorizes how government censorship in authoritarian countries can hinder the transmission of IO messages by filtering out disputes that pose reputational risks while permitting visibility for disputes initiated by hostile states, whose claims are more easily dismissed as politically motivated. The experimental evidence offers a microfoundation for this information strategy and shows that exposure to this patterned information environment can dampen support for IOs, multilateralism, and the norms they promote.

This study advances research on the information effects of IOs by demonstrating that the domestic impact of IO-provided information is fundamentally shaped by the media environment through which it travels. The findings also extend work on framing and

reputation management in international law (Chu, 2019; Morse and Pratt, 2022, 2025; Strezhnev, Simmons, and Kim, 2019; Zvobgo, 2019) by identifying an overlooked strategy: states may suppress the very existence of allegations rather than justify or reinterpret them after they enter public view.

The survey experiment highlights the central role of identity and political positioning of the information source in shaping public reactions to international legal disputes. International legal information is rarely presented as a neutral legal update; instead, it is embedded in political contestation among the alleged violator, the adjudicating institution, the accusing state, and even third parties. While this paper focuses on interstate disputes and the identity of the complainant, future research should further examine how individuals form perceptions of the credibility, motives, and alignments of these actors, and how such perceptions condition the domestic consequences of IO information.

More broadly, this study calls for a research agenda that places IOs within the information environments in which their messages circulate. IO influence presumes an information pathway from the organization to citizens, yet this pathway is increasingly mediated by actors with incentives to filter or recast these messages. As concerns about misinformation intensify across regime types, integrating research on IOs with work on domestic information control offers a promising avenue for future work that advances our understanding of IO effectiveness.

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APPENDICES

A Newspaper Coverage

A.1 Summary Statistics and List of Newspapers

Table A1: Summary statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Median	Max
Report	0.3	0.5	0.0	0.0	1.0
US	0.6	0.5	0.0	1.0	1.0
Respondent is China	0.7	0.5	0.0	1.0	1.0
Number of Parties	1.6	0.9	1.0	1.0	3.0
Year	2011.4	4.0	2002.0	2011.0	2019.0
Industry	N	%			
Consumer discretionary	451	13.4			
Consumer staples	338	10.0			
Industrials	492	14.6			
Information technology	283	8.4			
Intellectual property	186	5.5			
Materials	735	21.8			
Methodology	194	5.8			
Subsidies	360	10.7			
Tariffs	217	6.4			
Utilities	110	3.3			

Table A2: List of newspapers included in analysis and classification

	Newspaper Type	Newspapers
1	Official	Beijing Daily, Changjiang Daily, Chengdu Daily, China News Service, Dazhong Daily, Economic Daily, Fujian Daily, Gan Su Daily, Guangming Daily, Guangxi Daily, Guangzhou Daily, Hainan Daily, Harbin Daily, Henan Daily, Hubei Daily, Jiang Cheng Ri Bao, Jiangxi Daily, Jiefang Daily, Jinan Daily, Kunming Daily, Nan Fang Daily, People's Daily, Qingdao Daily, Shan Tou Daily, Shanxi Daily, Sichuan Daily, Taiyuan Evening News, Tianjin Daily, Xi An Daily, XinHua Economic News, Xinmin Evening News, Yangtse Evening Post, Yunnan Daily, Zhejiang Daily
2	Semi-official	Beijing Youth Daily, Changsha Evening Newspaper, Shan Tou Te Qu Evening Post, Xi'an Evening News, Yangcheng Evening News, Youth Daily
3	Subsidiary	Bandao Metropolis, Beijing Evening News, Beijing Morning Post, Beijing Times, ChangJiang Times, Chengdu Business Daily, Chengdu Evening News, China Business News, Chongqing Evening News, Chongqing Morning Post, Chu Tian Golden News, Chunchen Evening News, Chutian Metropolis Daily, Dahe Daily, Du Shi Shi Bao, Henan Business Daily, Information Daily, Information Times, Jiang Nan City Daily, Jiang Nan Times, Jinjiao Daily, Lanzhou Morning Post, Metro Express, Modern Evening Times, Modern Life Daily, Morning Express, Morning Post, Nan Guo Jin Bao, Nanguo Morning News, New Express Daily, News Times, Oriental Morning Post, Panyu Daily, Private Economy News, QiLu Evening News, Qianjiang Evening News, San Qin Du Shi Bao, Sanxia Evening News, Securities Times, Shanghai Evening Post, Shanghai Morning Post, Shantou City Daily, Southern Metropolis Daily, Strait News, Tai Zhou Shang Bao, The Beijing News, The First, Tian Tian Business News, Today Evening Post, WENZHOU ECONOMIC DAILY, Wen Hui Daily, Wenzhou Dushibao, Western China Metropolis Daily, Wuhan Evening News, Wuhan Morning Post, Xi Bu Business, Xinjiang Urban News

A.2 Alternative Model Specifications

Table A3: Replication of main results with linear probability models

	Dependent variable:					
	News Coverage					
	Official Media			Non-official Media		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
US	0.157**		0.134**	0.151**		0.139**
	(0.049)		(0.039)	(0.043)		(0.039)
China is respondent		−0.108	−0.133*		−0.056	−0.081
		(0.078)	(0.058)		(0.059)	(0.049)
China is respondent | US=0			−0.372**			−0.218**
			(0.094)			(0.074)
China is respondent | US=1			0.025			0.014
			(0.073)			(0.064)
US × China is respondent			0.397**			0.232*
			(0.117)			(0.096)
Number of parties	0.131*	0.118*	0.138**	0.153**	0.128**	0.157**
	(0.058)	(0.052)	(0.049)	(0.045)	(0.048)	(0.044)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,333	1,333	1,333	2,033	2,033	2,033
R^2	0.327	0.313	0.350	0.301	0.283	0.310

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (China is Respondent | US=0 and China is Respondent | US=1) show how this effect differs across values of *US*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial US \partial ChinaRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by dispute.

Table A4: Replication of main results with logistic regression

	Dependent variable:					
	News Coverage					
	Official Media			Non-official Media		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
US	0.221**		0.189**	0.252**		0.253**
	(0.068)		(0.059)	(0.073)		(0.071)
China is respondent		−0.120	−0.144**		−0.111	−0.184**
		(0.095)	(0.044)		(0.110)	(0.069)
China is respondent | US=0			−0.448**			−0.432**
			(0.074)			(0.086)
China is respondent | US=1			0.027			−0.020
			(0.063)			(0.088)
US × China is respondent			0.475**			0.412**
			(0.103)			(0.118)
Number of parties	0.158*	0.125†	0.145*	0.199*	0.157	0.215*
	(0.074)	(0.064)	(0.057)	(0.091)	(0.109)	(0.099)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,333	1,333	1,333	2,033	2,033	2,033
Log Likelihood	−662.143	−675.030	−638.509	−906.422	−928.412	−888.211
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,378.285	1,404.060	1,335.018	1,866.844	1,910.824	1,834.422

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (China is Respondent | US=0 and China is Respondent | US=1) show how this effect differs across values of *US*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial US \partial ChinaRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by dispute.

Table A5: Semester-fixed effects

	Dependent variable:					
	News Coverage					
	Official Media			Non-official Media		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
US	0.254**		0.245**	0.211**		0.202*
	(0.075)		(0.065)	(0.072)		(0.083)
China is respondent		−0.065	−0.062		0.001	−0.034
		(0.183)	(0.129)		(0.134)	(0.140)
China is respondent | US=0			−0.305*			−0.171
			(0.153)			(0.172)
China is respondent | US=1			0.118			0.094
			(0.141)			(0.136)
US × China is respondent			0.423**			0.265**
			(0.095)			(0.086)
Number of parties	0.266*	0.186	0.244*	0.288**	0.185	0.278*
	(0.107)	(0.157)	(0.105)	(0.091)	(0.165)	(0.138)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,333	1,333	1,333	2,033	2,033	2,033
Log Likelihood	−619.474	−636.256	−609.233	−840.736	−862.707	−832.723
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,310.947	1,344.513	1,294.466	1,753.473	1,797.414	1,741.446

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (China is Respondent | US=0 and China is Respondent | US=1) show how this effect differs across values of *US*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial US \partial ChinaRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by dispute.

Table A6: Replication of main results excluding pre-2004 period

	Dependent variable:					
	News Coverage					
	Official Media			Non-official Media		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
US	0.211**		0.194**	0.229**		0.232**
	(0.061)		(0.051)	(0.065)		(0.062)
China is respondent		−0.119	−0.158**		−0.099	−0.177**
		(0.092)	(0.047)		(0.100)	(0.067)
China is respondent | US=0			−0.440**			−0.399**
			(0.070)			(0.086)
China is respondent | US=1			0.018			−0.023
			(0.068)			(0.086)
US × China is respondent			0.457**			0.376**
			(0.101)			(0.114)
Number of parties	0.151*	0.122*	0.151**	0.180*	0.141†	0.201**
	(0.069)	(0.060)	(0.053)	(0.075)	(0.083)	(0.077)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,306	1,306	1,306	2,008	2,008	2,008
Log Likelihood	−652.652	−665.821	−630.497	−897.310	−919.155	−879.280
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,357.305	1,383.643	1,316.994	1,846.620	1,890.310	1,814.560

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (China is Respondent | US=0 and China is Respondent | US=1) show how this effect differs across values of *US*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial US \partial ChinaRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by dispute.

Table A7: Replication of main results excluding post-2018 period

	Dependent variable:					
	News Coverage					
	Official Media			Non-official Media		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
US	0.208**		0.183**	0.238**		0.252**
	(0.071)		(0.056)	(0.069)		(0.066)
China is respondent		−0.160	−0.176**		−0.144	−0.228**
		(0.098)	(0.049)		(0.115)	(0.075)
China is respondent | US=0			−0.427**			−0.421**
			(0.072)			(0.086)
China is respondent | US=1			−0.021			−0.087
			(0.068)			(0.097)
US × China is respondent			0.407**			0.335**
			(0.099)			(0.115)
Number of parties	0.133†	0.101†	0.118*	0.179*	0.137†	0.204*
	(0.070)	(0.053)	(0.050)	(0.079)	(0.081)	(0.080)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,161	1,161	1,161	1,775	1,775	1,775
Log Likelihood	−592.868	−602.953	−569.232	−845.468	−865.640	−828.182
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,235.735	1,255.905	1,192.465	1,740.937	1,781.279	1,710.364

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (China is Respondent | US=0 and China is Respondent | US=1) show how this effect differs across values of *US*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial US \partial ChinaRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by dispute.

Table A8: Replication of main results with articles written at initiation of dispute

	Dependent variable:					
	News Coverage					
	Official Media			Non-official Media		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
US	0.170**		0.187**	0.188**		0.223**
	(0.059)		(0.050)	(0.054)		(0.054)
China is respondent		−0.188	−0.244**		−0.130	−0.226*
		(0.119)	(0.088)		(0.114)	(0.103)
China is respondent | US=0			−0.486**			−0.375**
			(0.087)			(0.105)
China is respondent | US=1			−0.071			−0.100
			(0.110)			(0.132)
US × China is respondent			0.415**			0.275*
			(0.104)			(0.135)
Number of parties	0.154*	0.161**	0.202**	0.179**	0.168*	0.239**
	(0.066)	(0.055)	(0.052)	(0.065)	(0.079)	(0.078)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,333	1,333	1,333	2,033	2,033	2,033
Log Likelihood	−676.972	−683.590	−656.906	−810.456	−827.334	−795.576
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,407.944	1,421.181	1,371.811	1,674.912	1,708.667	1,649.151

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (China is Respondent | US=0 and China is Respondent | US=1) show how this effect differs across values of *US*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial US \partial ChinaRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by newspaper.

Table A9: Replication of main results with newspaper clustering

	Dependent variable:					
	News Coverage					
	Official Media			Non-official Media		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
US	0.211**		0.186**	0.229**		0.229**
	(0.030)		(0.031)	(0.024)		(0.022)
China is respondent		−0.119†	−0.154**		−0.099*	−0.175**
		(0.064)	(0.055)		(0.049)	(0.044)
China is respondent | US=0			−0.440**			−0.399**
			(0.053)			(0.048)
China is respondent | US=1			0.018			−0.023
			(0.057)			(0.057)
US × China is respondent			0.457**			0.376**
			(0.050)			(0.069)
Number of parties	0.150**	0.121**	0.150**	0.180**	0.141**	0.201**
	(0.036)	(0.036)	(0.033)	(0.027)	(0.032)	(0.033)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,333	1,333	1,333	2,033	2,033	2,033
Log Likelihood	−662.071	−675.240	−639.915	−906.483	−928.328	−888.453
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,378.142	1,404.480	1,337.831	1,866.966	1,910.657	1,834.906

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (China is Respondent | US=0 and China is Respondent | US=1) show how this effect differs across values of *US*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial US \partial ChinaRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by dispute.

A.3 Dispute-level Controls

All results on newspaper coverage include controls for dispute-level characteristics that may affect likelihood of coverage. For disputes pertaining to a specific product, I identify the corresponding GICS sector and NAICS 3-digit classification; for example, DS309 'China – Value-Added Tax on Integrated Circuits' is coded as 'Information Technology' in GICS and '334 - Computer and Electronic Product Manufacturing' in NAICS. I primarily use GICS sectors across the paper, but also show results utilizing NAICS codes here.

For disputes involving more than one product, I assign the case to the primary industry that covers most of the products, but also allow for multiplicity in robustness checks. For example, DS394 'China – Measures Related to the Exportation of Various Raw Materials' concerns bauxite, coke, fluoirspar, magnesium, manganese, silicon carbide, silicon metal, yellow phosphorus, and zinc. Of these, four fall under '331 - Primary Metal Manufacturing,' which I code as the case's primary industry classification. For robustness, however, I also show results for when disputes are coded as belonging to all relevant industries simultaneously.

Finally, some disputes do not pertain to specific products but to broad policy measures such as general tariffs or subsidies, or to issues such as intellectual property rights or methodological procedures (e.g., price comparison methodologies). I construct separate dummy variables for these categories to account for their distinct nature.

Figure A1 show the distribution of disputes across industry classifications.

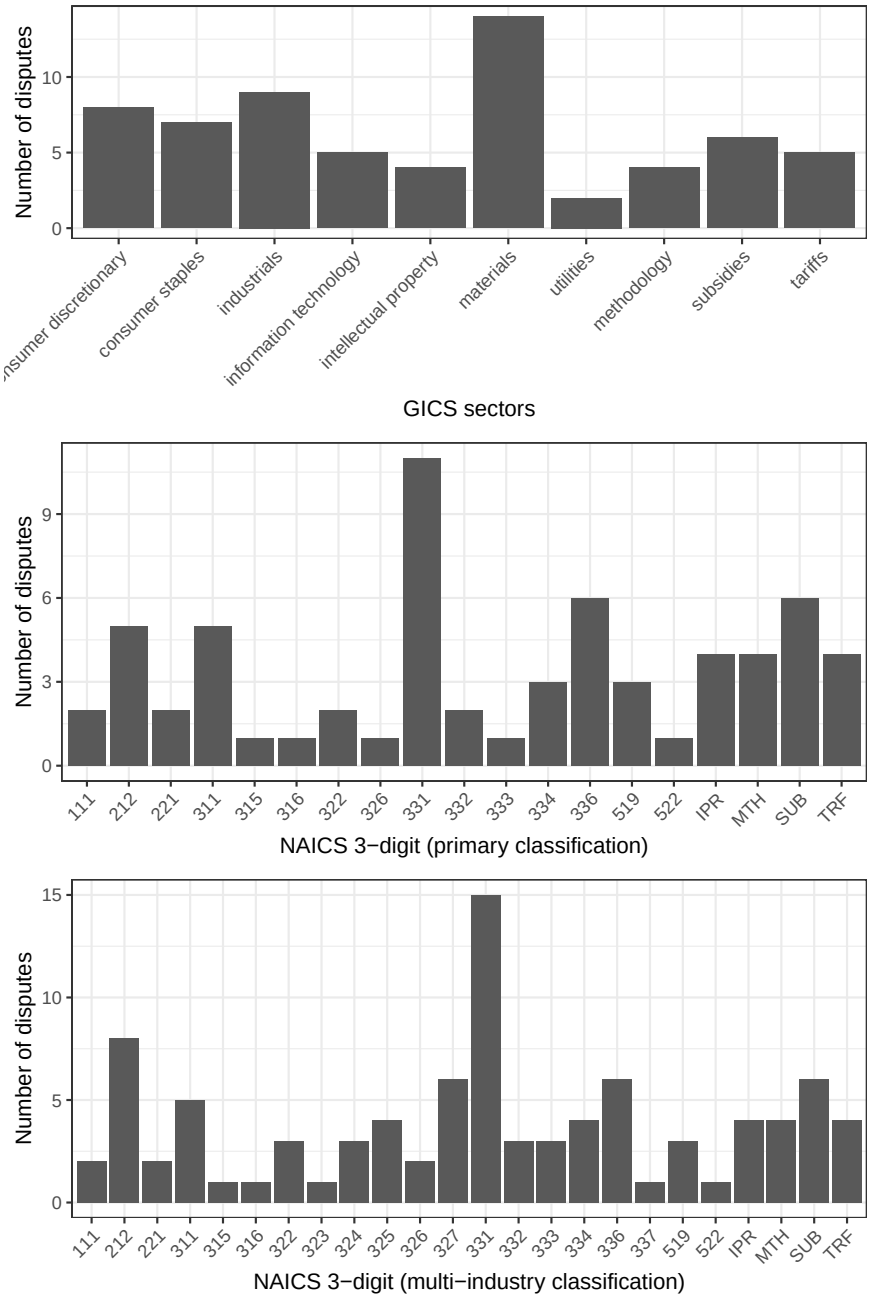


Figure A1: *Industry composition of WTO disputes within sample*

Table A10: Alternative industry classifications (NAICS3)

	Dependent variable:					
	News Coverage					
	Official Media			Non-official Media		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
US	0.277**		0.227**	0.237**		0.193**
	(0.060)		(0.073)	(0.051)		(0.055)
China is respondent		−0.137	−0.122		−0.111	−0.097
		(0.101)	(0.095)		(0.091)	(0.078)
China is respondent | US=0			−0.353**			−0.276**
			(0.119)			(0.104)
China is respondent | US=1			0.026			0.016
			(0.084)			(0.063)
US × China is respondent			0.379**			0.291**
			(0.098)			(0.078)
Number of parties	0.247**	0.186†	0.239**	0.338**	0.308**	0.330**
	(0.059)	(0.095)	(0.061)	(0.056)	(0.075)	(0.053)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,333	1,333	1,333	2,033	2,033	2,033
Log Likelihood	−616.452	−630.955	−610.059	−832.449	−847.367	−827.691
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,304.905	1,333.909	1,296.117	1,736.898	1,766.735	1,731.382

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (China is Respondent | US=0 and China is Respondent | US=1) show how this effect differs across values of *US*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial US \partial ChinaRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by dispute.

Table A11: Alternative industry classifications (NAICS3), allowing multiple industries

	Dependent variable:					
	News Coverage					
	Official Media			Non-official Media		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
US	0.227*		0.184*	0.179		0.178*
	(0.103)		(0.079)	(0.110)		(0.085)
China is respondent		−0.331†	−0.489**		−0.279	−0.452*
		(0.195)	(0.129)		(0.253)	(0.183)
China is respondent | US=0			−0.556**			−0.476**
			(0.118)			(0.161)
China is respondent | US=1			−0.412**			−0.408*
			(0.146)			(0.208)
US × China is respondent			0.144†			0.068
			(0.087)			(0.102)
Number of parties	−0.220**	−0.210**	−0.229**	−0.054	−0.098**	−0.030
	(0.083)	(0.046)	(0.057)	(0.100)	(0.025)	(0.096)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,333	1,333	1,333	2,033	2,033	2,033
Log Likelihood	−603.275	−606.543	−591.387	−832.721	−839.436	−823.259
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,286.549	1,293.086	1,266.774	1,745.442	1,758.873	1,730.518

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (China is Respondent | US=0 and China is Respondent | US=1) show how this effect differs across values of *US*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial US \partial ChinaRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by dispute.

A.4 Three-way interaction

Table A12: Three-way interaction test between *ChinaRespondent*, *US*, *Official*

	Dependent variable:
	News Coverage
US	−0.087
	(0.154)
China is Respondent	−1.009**
	(0.161)
Official	0.713**
	(0.167)
US × China is Respondent	0.949**
	(0.182)
China is Respondent × Official	−0.383*
	(0.195)
US × Official	−0.312
	(0.198)
US × China is Respondent × Official	0.491*
	(0.237)
Number of Parties	0.489**
	(0.071)
Year-fixed effects	Yes
Industry controls	Yes
Observations	3,366
Log Likelihood	−1,540.222
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,146.444

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

A.5 Placebo Test: US Newspapers

To further verify the existence of government manipulation, I collected data on US newspaper reports of WTO disputes from 1997, when the US was first party to a WTO dispute, and

2020, the end of my time frame. I utilized the *Factiva* database and matched articles to dispute cases with the same methodology as described in section 3.2, obtaining 1,675 articles from 9 US newspapers. Reversing the roles of China and the United States from the previous specifications, I estimate binary probit models that estimate the probability of coverage by 1) whether the United States was the respondent and 2) whether the dispute was against China. All other model specifications are kept consistent with the main analysis.

Table A13: Binary probit models estimating probability of news coverage by US newspapers

	Dependent variable:		
	News Coverage		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
China	0.101*		0.102*
	(0.042)		(0.043)
US is respondent		−0.002	0.007
		(0.008)	(0.013)
US is respondent | China=0			0.014
			(0.014)
US is respondent | China=1			−0.111*
			(0.056)
China × US is respondent			−0.125*
			(0.061)
Number of parties	0.013*	0.009†	0.015*
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.007)
Year-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Industry controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,538	2,538	2,538
Log Likelihood	−1,064.402	−1,085.323	−1,058.347
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,214.804	2,256.647	2,206.695

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. Conditional marginal effects (US is Respondent | China=0 and US is Respondent | China=1) show how this effect differs across values of *China*. The interaction term reports the second differences ($\partial^2 P/\partial China \partial USRespondent$), representing how the marginal effect of China being respondent varies when the United States is the counterpart. Standard errors are clustered by dispute.

Table A13 shows the results of the placebo test, and Figure A2 visualizes the conditional coefficients. Again, the central term of interest is the interaction term in Model 3. As was in the case with Chinese newspapers, the interaction term is significant at the 0.05 level, suggesting that whether or not the dispute case is against China influences the relationship between the role of the United States in the dispute and the probability of coverage. However, the direction of influence is the opposite from the trend shown with Chinese newspapers. Notably, whether the United States was a respondent or complainant in a dispute did not influence its probability of coverage for those disputes against non-Chinese states. Yet for disputes against China, US newspapers tended to overreport those cases where the US sued China, compared to those cases where China sued the US.

An in-depth analysis of the coverage trends in US newspapers is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a reasonable takeaway from this exercise is that the trends identified in Chinese newspapers are not common to all newspapers regardless of the regime type. Due to the comparatively liberal and open nature of the US media market in contrast to China, we can expect the coverage trends of US newspapers to more accurately reflect the preferences of the media consumers. Compared to Chinese newspapers which must navigate the government's mandates, US media firms are more profit-driven, leading them to report what is interesting to their readers rather than what is politically most desirable. At the minimum, the fact that the same trends displayed by Chinese newspapers were not repeated in US newspapers suggests that the theorized dynamics are not simply due to the nature of the media and the appetites of their consumers.

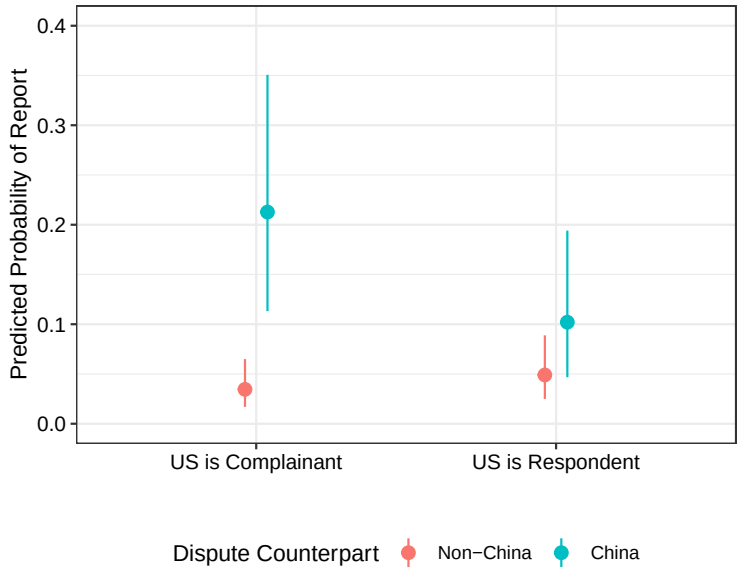


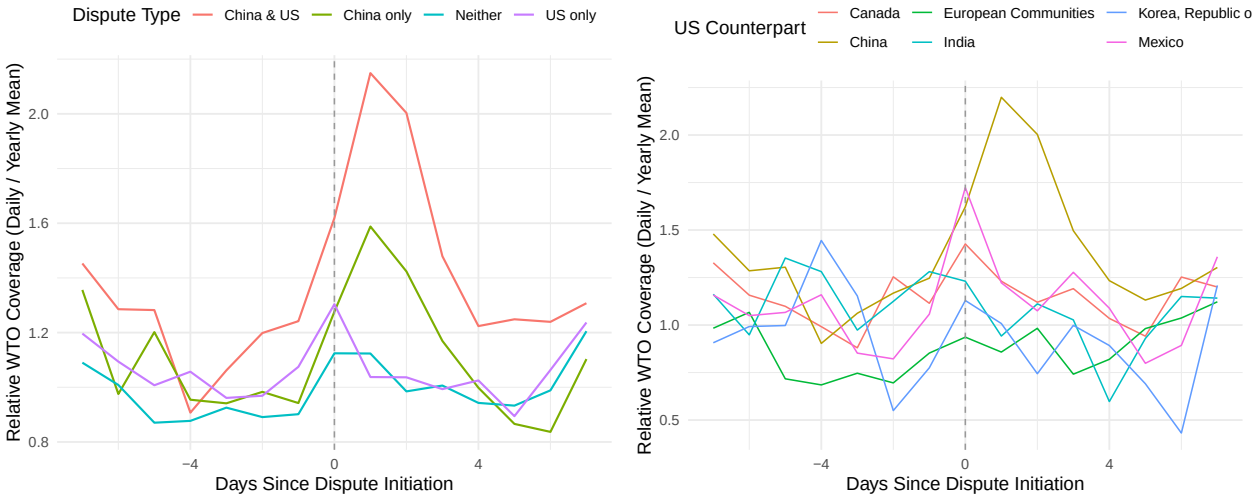
Figure A2: *Predicted probability of coverage by US newspapers, by dispute counterpart and the role of United States in dispute.* Covariates are held at sample means or modes; error bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

A.6 Coverage of Disputes in which China is not Involved

In this section, I examine coverage of WTO disputes that do not involve China in order to explore the scope of China's media control. Broader coverage of third-party disputes could suggest that the media use the WTO as a stage to demonstrate the organization's role in trade regime enforcement or highlight division among other states. By contrast, if coverage is concentrated on disputes involving China, this would indicate a more narrowly targeted information strategy focused on managing domestic perceptions of China's position in global trade governance.

To explore this, I categorize all WTO disputes into four groups based on the countries involved: (1) disputes involving both China and the United States, (2) disputes involving China but not the United States, (3) disputes involving the United States but not China, and (4) disputes involving neither country. For each category, I calculate the relative volume of WTO-related newspaper articles within a seven-day window surrounding the initiation of a dispute, normalized by the yearly mean of WTO coverage (Figure A3a).

The results show that coverage in Chinese newspapers is overwhelmingly concentrated on disputes involving China, particularly those between China and the United States. Both "China & US" and "China only" disputes produce visible surges in WTO coverage. "US



(a) China-US involvement

(b) US disputes by counterpart

Figure A3: *Relative volume of WTO-related news articles within a seven-day window surrounding dispute initiation, normalized by yearly mean coverage.* The left panel compares disputes by China–US involvement, while the right panel compares US-involved disputes by counterpart state.

only" disputes show modest increase in coverage, amounting to around 1.3 times the yearly mean. Disputes that do not involve either generate little discernible change. This pattern indicates that Chinese media coverage of WTO disputes serves primarily domestic purposes—reinforcing narratives about China's role in international trade—rather than reflecting a general interest in WTO enforcement or in the disputes of other states.

To assess whether any third-party disputes attract greater attention, I further examine WTO disputes in which the United States is a party and compare coverage by the counterpart state (Figure A3b). The results again show that disputes involving China are uniquely salient. While cases involving Mexico receive modest attention, other US disputes—such as those with the EU or South Korea—receive little coverage. Together, these findings suggest that Chinese media reporting on WTO disputes is highly selective and self-referential, oriented toward disputes that directly implicate China rather than those that highlight the broader functioning of the WTO dispute settlement system.

B Survey Experiment

B.1 Tables and Figures

Table B1: Sample characteristics

Characteristics	Classification	Sample
Gender	Female	50.3% (831)
	Male	49.7% (820)
Age	Less than 29	28.1% (462)
	29 to 39	23.9% (393)
	39 to 49	26% (427)
	49 to 59	17.4% (286)
	59 to 69	2.9% (47)
	More than 69	1.7% (28)
Education	Primary or less	1.6% (27)
	Some secondary	3.3% (55)
	Secondary	9.8% (163)
	Some college or university	24.4% (404)
	College degree	60.8% (1007)

Table B2: Summary statistics by treatment condition

DV (Group)	Mean	SD	Min	Median	Max
WTO (Overall)	5.19	1.08	1	5	7
China sues EU	5.06	1.21	1	5	7
China sues US	5.26	1.08	1	5	7
Control	5.40	1.04	1	5	7
EU sues China	5.04	1.01	1	5	7
US sues China	5.16	0.99	1	5	7
Free Trade (Overall)	4.54	0.92	1	4.50	7
China sues EU	4.53	0.92	2	4.50	7
China sues US	4.61	0.95	2	4.50	7
Control	4.69	0.93	1	4.50	7
EU sues China	4.44	0.90	2	4.50	7
US sues China	4.44	0.89	1.50	4.50	7
Int'l Institutions (Overall)	5.65	1.11	1	6	7
China sues EU	5.71	1.18	1	6	7
China sues US	5.74	1.04	3	6	7
Control	5.64	1.14	1	6	7
EU sues China	5.61	1.10	1	6	7
US sues China	5.56	1.05	1	6	7
Int'l Courts (Overall)	4.65	1.35	1	5	7
China sues EU	4.72	1.36	1	5	7
China sues US	4.75	1.28	1	5	7
Control	4.66	1.36	1	5	7
EU sues China	4.57	1.44	1	5	7
US sues China	4.56	1.29	1	4	7

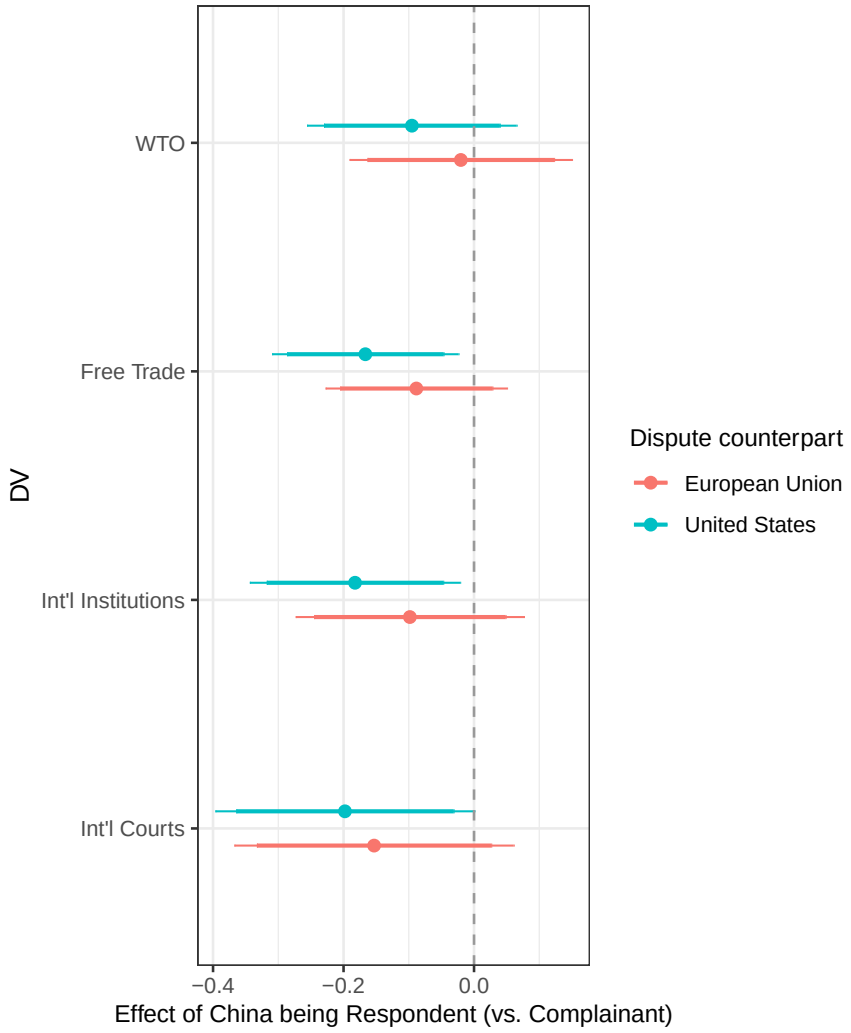
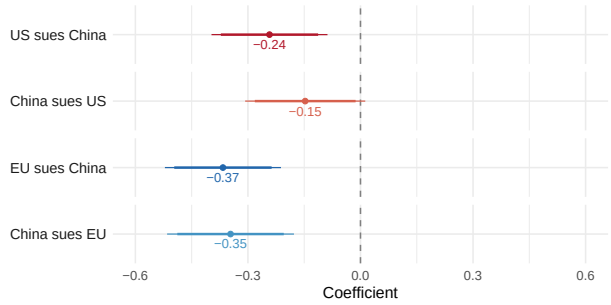
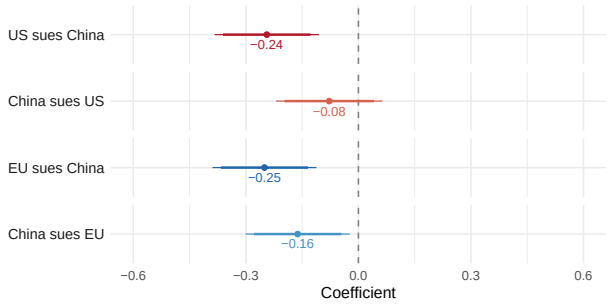


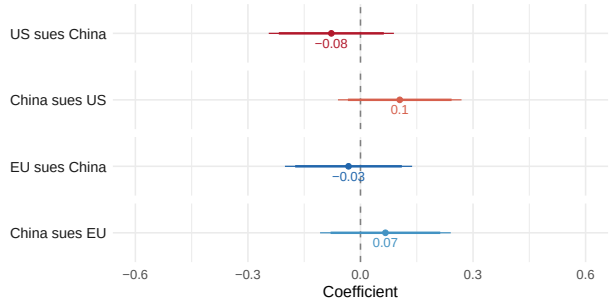
Figure B1: *Effect of China being respondent by dispute counterpart.* Effects are estimated relative to the corresponding baseline condition in which China is the complainant. Error bars represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals.



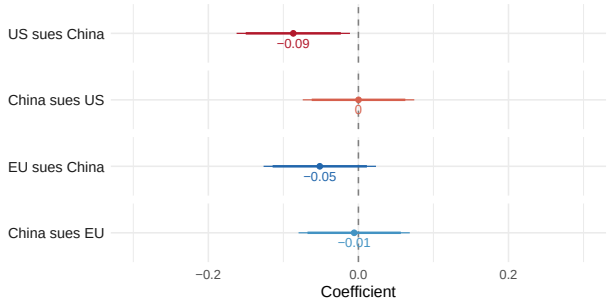
(a) Support for WTO



(b) Support for free trade



(c) Perceived importance of int'l institutions



(d) Support for more int'l courts

Figure B2: *Treatment effect by treatment condition, relative to the control condition (no dispute information).* Error bars represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

B.2 Treatments

Table B3: Treatments

US Sues China Treatment	English Translation
美国向世界贸易组织（WTO）状告中国 2021-09-14 9月13日, 美国在世界贸易组织（WTO）起诉中国对从美国进口的产品采取的“双反”措施。美国贸易代表凯瑟琳·戴表示，中国的措施不符合WTO规则的相关规定，希望中方采取切实行动，纠正错误做法。	United States Sues China in the WTO 2021-09-14 On September 13th, the United States sued China in the WTO for China's “anti-dumping” measures against US imports. US trade representative Katherine Tai expressed that China's measures did not meet related WTO rules, and hoped that China would take appropriate action and fix its wrong behavior.
China Sues US Treatment	English Translation
中国向世界贸易组织（WTO）状告美国 2021-09-14 9月13日, 中国在世界贸易组织（WTO）起诉美国对从中国进口的产品采取的“双反”措施。商务部新闻发言人高峰表示，美国措施不符合WTO规则的相关规定，希望美方采取切实行动，纠正错误做法。	China sues US in the WTO 2021-09-14 On September 13th, China sued the United States in the WTO for the US' “anti-dumping” measures against Chinese imports. The Spokesperson for the Ministry of Commerce expressed that United States' measures did not meet related WTO rules, and hoped that US would take appropriate action and fix its wrong behavior.
EU Sues China Treatment	English Translation
欧洲联盟向世界贸易组织（WTO）状告中国 2021-09-14 9月13日, 欧盟在世界贸易组织（WTO）起诉中国对从欧盟进口的产品采取的“双反”措施。欧盟贸易专员瓦尔季斯·东布罗夫斯基斯表示，中国的措施不符合WTO规则的相关规定，希望中方采取切实行动，纠正错误做法。	European Union Sues China in the WTO 2021-09-14 On September 13th, the European Union sued China in the WTO for China's “anti-dumping” measures against EU imports. EU Commissioner for Trade Vladis Dombrovskis expressed that China's measures did not meet related WTO rules, and hoped that China would take appropriate action and fix its wrong behavior.
China Sues EU Treatment	English Translation
中国向世界贸易组织（WTO）状告欧洲联盟 2021-09-14 9月13日, 中国在世界贸易组织（WTO）起诉美国对从中国进口的产品采取的“双反”措施。商务部新闻发言人高峰表示，美国措施不符合WTO规则的相关规定，希望美方采取切实行动，纠正错误做法。	China sues EU in the WTO 2021-09-14 On September 13th, China sued the European Union in the WTO for the EU's “anti-dumping” measures against Chinese imports. The Spokesperson for the Ministry of Commerce expressed that the European Union's measures did not meet related WTO rules, and hoped that US would take appropriate action and fix its wrong behavior.

B.3 Cross-group Analysis

Table B4 reports the results of a difference-in-differences test designed to assess whether the respondent–complainant gap differs systematically between disputes involving the United States and those involving the European Union. The model includes binary indicators for whether the dispute involves the United States, whether China is the respondent, and their interaction term. The coefficient on the interaction term therefore captures the difference in the respondent effect between US- and EU-related disputes—that is, whether the effect of China being the respondent varies by the identity of the counterpart.

While the direction of coefficients is consistent with theoretical expectations, the interaction term does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance for any of the four dependent variables. These results suggest that although disputes involving the United States tend to elicit stronger negative reactions relative to those involving the European Union, the difference between the two effects is not statistically distinguishable given the sample size (see also Appendix B.4).

Table B4: Difference-in-differences test: respondent effects by dispute counterpart

	Dependent variable:			
	WTO	Free Trade	Int'l Institutions	Int'l Courts
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
US	0.199*	0.084	0.038	0.029
	(0.084)	(0.071)	(0.085)	(0.104)
Respondent is China	−0.020	−0.088	−0.098	−0.153
	(0.084)	(0.071)	(0.085)	(0.105)
US × China is respondent	−0.075	−0.078	−0.084	−0.045
	(0.119)	(0.101)	(0.121)	(0.149)
Constant	5.057**	4.526**	5.706**	4.724**
	(0.059)	(0.050)	(0.060)	(0.074)
Observations	1,304	1,304	1,304	1,304
R^2	0.007	0.006	0.004	0.004

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

B.4 Power Analysis

In this section, I present the results of a post hoc power analysis based on the observed cell means and standard deviations for each dependent variable in the survey experiment. The analysis estimates the statistical power to detect an interaction effect of the observed magnitude between the two treatment factors—China's role as complainant versus respondent and the identity of the counterpart (United States versus European Union). The results indicate that, to achieve conventional levels of statistical power (0.8) for detecting an interaction effect of the observed size, sample sizes of approximately 50,000, 40,000, 42,000, and over 100,000 observations would be required for the four dependent variables, respectively. This suggests that the null result for the interaction test in the main analysis likely reflects limitations in statistical power rather than the absence of a meaningful effect.

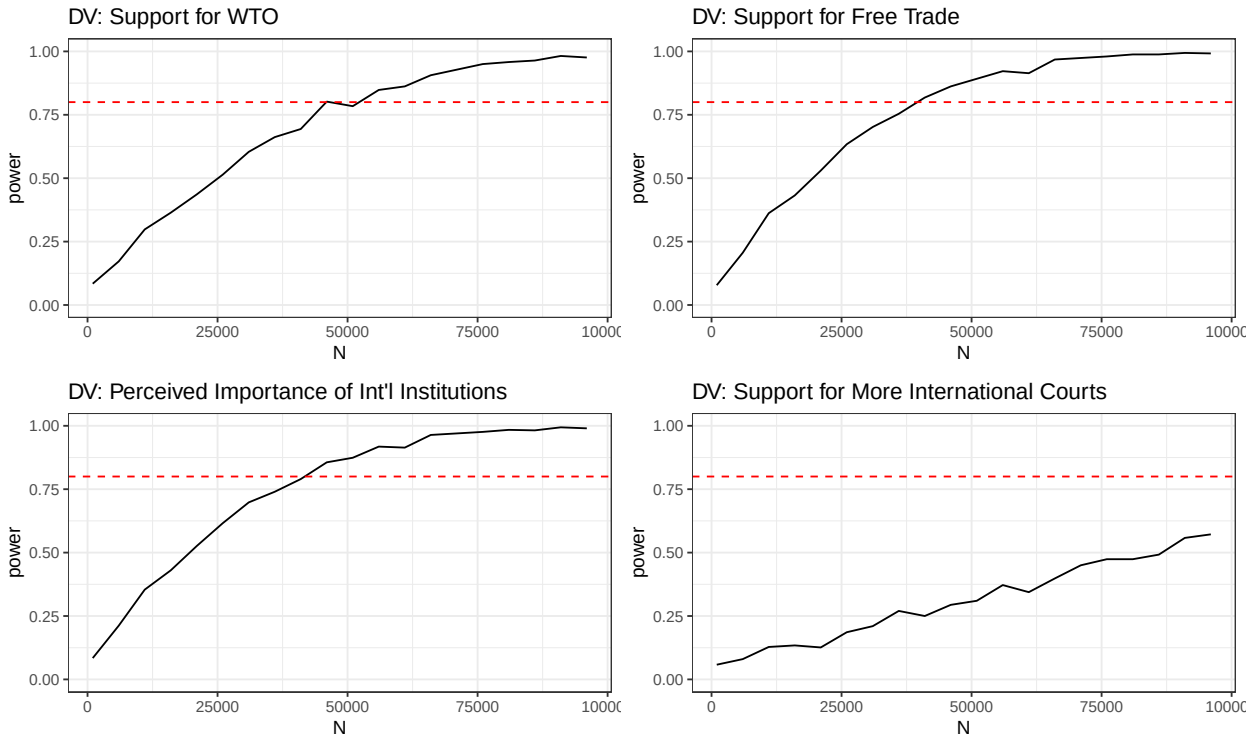


Figure B3: *Power curves for detecting the interaction effect between China's role (complainant vs. respondent) and the counterpart (United States vs. European Union) across four dependent variables.* Power simulations were conducted using the `DeclareDesign` package, based on observed cell means and standard deviations from the survey experiment. The curves indicate the estimated statistical power as a function of sample size for each outcome variable.

B.5 Prior Effect

In the main text, I discuss prior effects as a possible reason for the muted reactions of Chinese respondents toward WTO disputes between China and the US. In this section, I present two pieces of indirect evidence to support this conjecture, examining the information supply and information-seeking behavior among the Chinese audience.

B.5.1 Evidence from Newspaper Data

First, I assess whether the supply of information for Chinese audiences has been disproportionately focused on disputes against the US, compared to the EU. The main results in Table 2 show that WTO disputes involving the United States receive substantially greater coverage than those that do not. Here, I zero in on the comparison between US and EU cases. Specifically, I subset to those disputes that are against the US or the EU, and estimate the following model:

$$\Pr(Y_{ijt} = 1) = \phi(\alpha + \beta_1 US_j + \delta \mathbf{Z}_j + \tau_t),$$

where Y_{ijt} is a binary variable equal to 1 if newspaper i covers WTO dispute j and 0 otherwise. US_j is a binary variable that is equal to 1 if the dispute is against the US, and 0 if against the EU. $\mathbf{Z}_j$ is a vector of dispute-level control variables, and τ_t denotes year fixed effects.

Table B5 displays the marginal effects from the probit model, and Figure B4 visualizes the predicted probabilities. The results indicate that disputes involving the United States are about 11 percentage points more likely to be covered than those involving the EU, a difference that is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. This suggests that Chinese audiences are more frequently exposed to news about WTO disputes against the US.

B.5.2 Evidence from Web Query Data

Next, I analyze patterns of online search behavior surrounding the initiation of WTO disputes involving China. I draw on data from Baidu Index, an analytics platform similar to Google Trends operated by China's largest search engine, Baidu, which tracks the frequency of user search queries over time. Using Baidu Index data for the keyword "WTO", I measure changes in weekly search volume in the weeks surrounding the announcement of consultation requests that mark the formal initiation of disputes.

For each dispute, I construct an event-centered window of ± 4 weeks around the week of initiation (t = 0) and normalize the Baidu search index by the yearly mean to account for overall changes in search volume. I then calculate the average normalized search volume across all dispute events, separately for those involving the United States and those involving the European Union.

Table B5: Binary probit model estimating probability of news coverage, US vs. EU

	Dependent variable:
	News Coverage
US(=1,EU=0)	0.108*
	(0.055)
Number of Parties	0.151**
	(0.042)
or EU (US) Observations	2,690
Log Likelihood	−1,292.913
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2,637.827

Notes: † $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Reported coefficients are marginal effects ($\partial P/\partial x$); that is, the marginal effect on Pr(Y=1) given a unit increase in the value of the regressor x, holding all other regressors at their respective sample means or modes. *US* is a binary variable that takes 1 if the dispute is against the US, and 0 if against the EU. Therefore, the marginal effect represents the change in the predicted probability of coverage when the dispute involves the United States rather than the European Union.

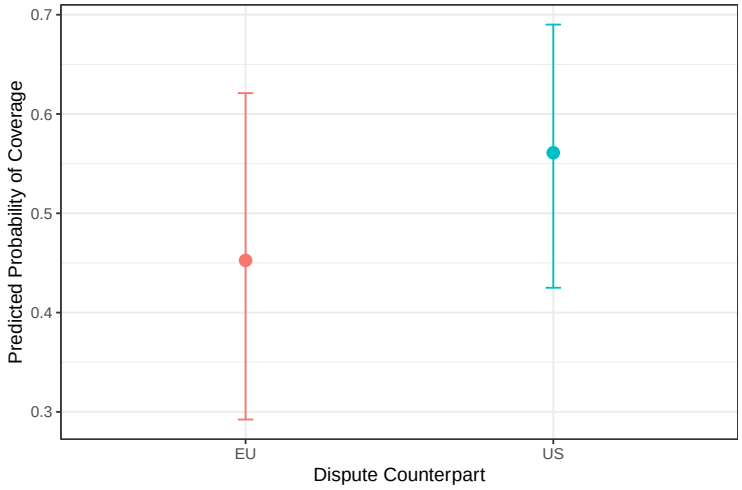


Figure B4: *Predicted probability of WTO dispute coverage for disputes involving the US and EU.* Covariates are held at sample means or modes; error bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

Figure B5 plots the results. Disputes initiated by or against the United States are associated with a marked increase in search interest at the time of initiation, suggesting

that these cases attract greater public attention in China. In contrast, disputes involving the European Union do not appear to generate comparable increases in search activity. These results indicate that US-related WTO disputes are more salient to Chinese audiences, providing indirect evidence that differences in prior exposure could contribute to the observed variation in treatment effects across counterparts.

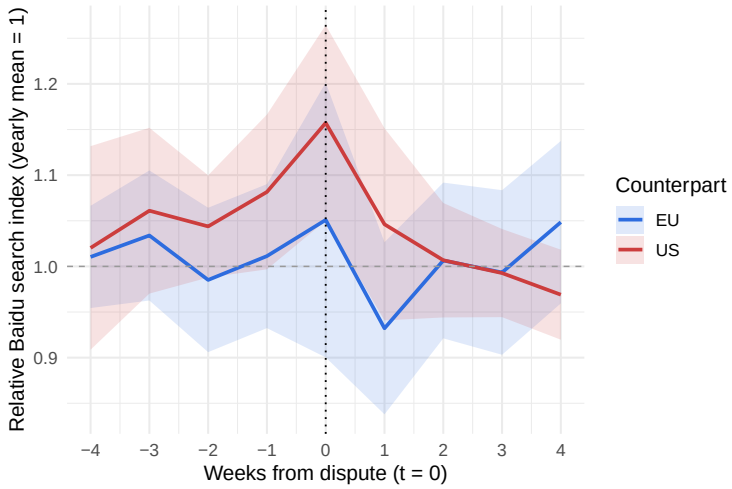


Figure B5: *Event-centered change in WTO search interest, by dispute counterpart.* This figure plots the average weekly Baidu search index for the keyword "WTO" in the weeks surrounding the initiation of WTO disputes involving China, with t = 0 marking the week of dispute initiation. Values are normalized by each year's mean to account for changes in overall search volume. Separate lines indicate averages for disputes involving the United States (red) and the European Union (blue). Shaded bands denote 95% confidence intervals across disputs. The vertical dashed line marks the week of dispute initiation.

In addition, I present Baidu search trends for composite keywords "WTO + United States" and "WTO + European Union." Because composite keyword data (for multiple-term queries) are unavailable for download through Baidu's API, I rely on figures reported directly by the platform. Figure B6 displays the weekly Baidu search index for both terms between 2011 and 2025. Weekly indexes for the composite keyword "WTO + United States" are displayed in blue, while those for the keyword "WTO + European Union" are displayed in green. Search interest in "WTO + United States" is consistently and substantially higher than that for "WTO + European Union," with around two weekly exceptions over the span of 14 years.

These results reinforce the interpretation that WTO disputes involving the United States are more salient and familiar to Chinese audiences. This asymmetry in prior exposure helps contextualize the experimental results, suggesting that stronger familiarity with US-related

disputes may have attenuated the observed treatment effects.

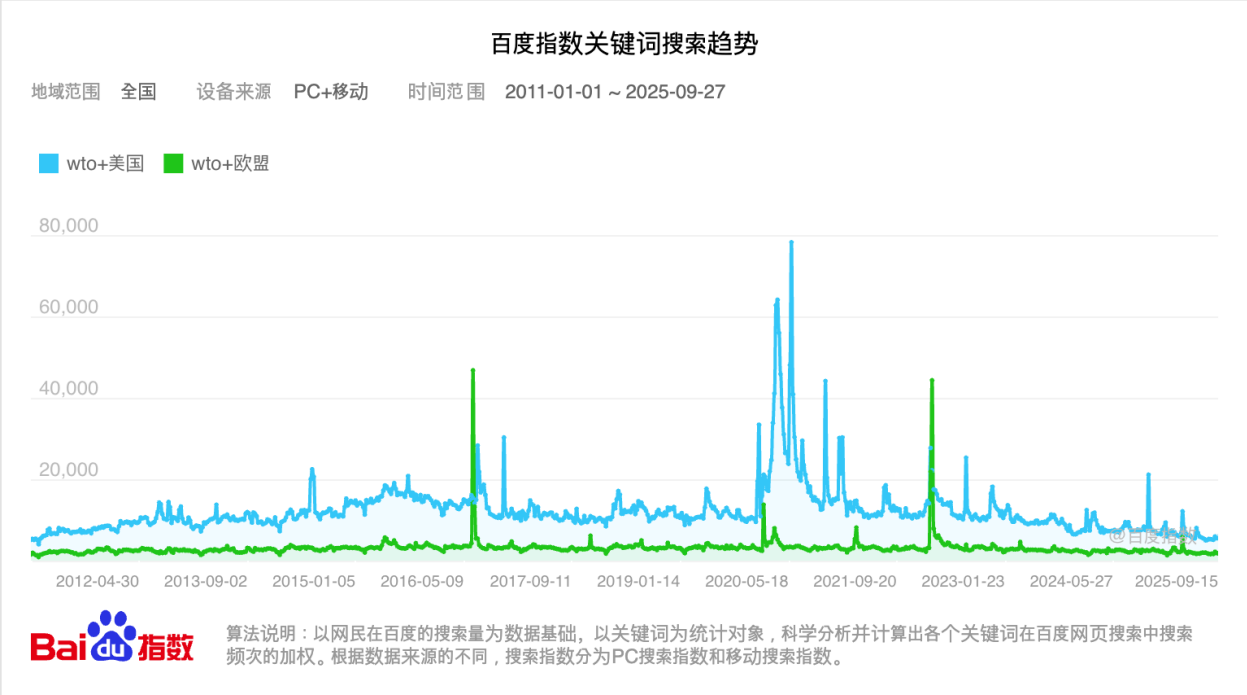


Figure B6: *Baidu search index over time for composite keywords "WTO + United States" (in blue) and "WTO + European Union" (in green).*

B.6 US and EU Favorability in China

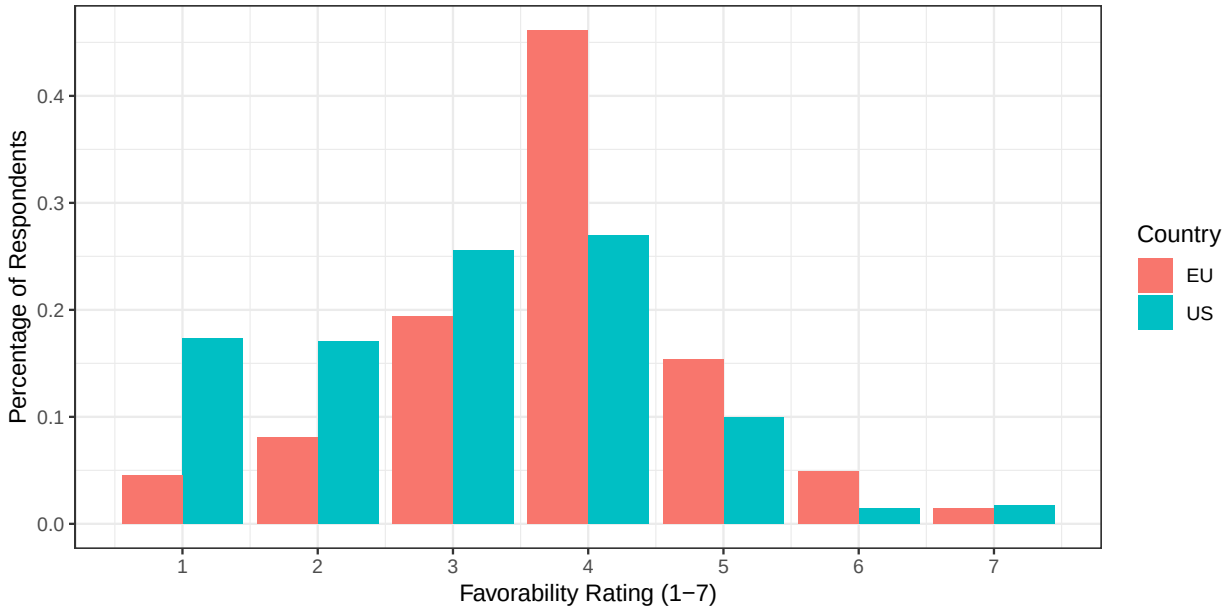


Figure B7: *US and EU favorability among control group respondents (1–7).* Respondents were asked: "What is your impression of the United States [European Union]?" (1 = extremely negative, 7 = extremely positive).