

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

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March 26, 2025

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, highlighting provocative complaints by hostile states while reducing those by others that may lead to suspicions about government behavior. I find support for my arguments through analysis of an original dataset of Chinese newspaper articles by 117 newspapers on all WTO disputes involving China. I further conduct a survey experiment on Chinese adults, finding that exposure to information about China being sued in a WTO dispute significantly reduces support for international institutions and free trade, especially for those disputes against the United States.

Word count: 10,151

Competing interests: The author(s) declare none.

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1 Introduction

The ongoing trade dispute 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 at 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 dispute has garnered much media, political, and public attention in both the United States and China. Yet what has been distinctive of 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 dispute, 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? 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 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 individual preferences for compliance and state behavior?

I address these questions by examining media coverage of international trade disputes in an authoritarian setting in which the media is strictly controlled by the government. Based on observational analysis, I demonstrate how an authoritarian government can strategically use state media to selectively report on certain types of events befitting its interests. From the perspective of the authoritarian state, passing on information about its legal disputes represents both an opportunity and a risk. Faced with the choice between hiding its alleged transgressions and actively utilizing external criticism to instigate backlash, I argue that the authoritarian government differentiates its information transmission strategy based on

the identity of the dispute counterpart and the likelihood of success in invoking a defensive reaction among the domestic audience. Specifically, for disputes against hostile states, the state may highlight allegations made against itself, since they are likely to lead to heightened threat perceptions and backlash against relevant institutions among the domestic audience, while for disputes not against adversaries, the state may hide allegations made against them in favor of those cases where they are the complainants. Through such strategic censorship, the authoritarian government is able to simultaneously pursue two seemingly contradicting motivations: to present itself as a law-observant global citizen in the eyes of the domestic audience and, at the same time, to instigate backlash against relevant institutions and rally citizens behind government policy.

I find support for my argument through analysis of an original dataset of newspaper articles by 117 Chinese newspapers on all World Trade Organization (WTO) disputes where China has been involved as a complaint 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 significant differences in coverage patterns of WTO disputes based on whether their counterpart is the United States or not. While the Chinese media is generally less likely to report disputes initiated against China than the ones China initiates, this trend is not observed for cases in which the United States is the dispute counterpart. 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. Such 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 on 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 being sued by the United States have significantly more negative attitudes towards international institutions and free trade compared to those exposed to information about China suing the United States. The differences in attitudes depending on whether China is a respondent or complainant were generally 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 study addresses a key gap in the literature on the relationship between IOs, international law, and domestic politics. 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 can also be manipulated. Scholars have shown that how states frame and justify their violations influences public opinion (Brutger and Kertzer, 2018; Chu, 2019; Morse and Pratt, 2022; Strezhnev, Simmons, and Kim, 2019; Zvobgo, 2019). My findings extend this literature by demonstrating that states—particularly authoritarian ones—can move beyond framing and justification to actively suppress information through censorship, shielding themselves from reputational damage when accused of violations (Morse and Pratt, 2022).

The findings of this research provide important implications toward the backlash against

international law and institutions (Voeten, 2020). The results of my media analysis confirm the prevalence of the media’s negativity bias in reporting international legal disputes and further identify that the media highlights disputes filed by hostile states whose intentions may be regarded with apprehension by the domestic public. The results of my survey experiment further highlight the possibility that such negativity bias in the media will lead to negative attitudes toward international law and institutions among the domestic public.

The findings from the survey experiment also make a notable addition to the existing body of literature concerning the public’s response to breaches of international law. In contrast to studies finding that the 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 a legal dispute diminishes support for international institutions, irrespective of the involved parties or the home state’s role in the conflict. Despite the aspirations of the WTO and other international institutions to depoliticize legal disputes on the global stage, my results indicate the presence of constraints that impede their effectiveness in achieving this goal.

The next section discusses the broader literature on the information effects of IOs in international trade law and the role of the media as conduits of IO-provided information. I go on to introduce my theoretical argument on the motivations and means of the authoritarian government in passing on information about trade disputes. Two empirical sections follow: the first presents findings from the analysis of the Chinese media coverage of WTO disputes. The second describes the design and presents the results of 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 International Organizations, Domestic Politics, and the Media

Scholars have long identified information dissemination as a key function of IOs that helps solve various cooperation problems among states. By reducing information asymmetry, it is argued that IOs can reduce states' uncertainty towards other states' intentions (Keohane, 1984). Information effects have also been widely recognized, however, for their influence upon behaviors of subnational actors. In such scholarship, IOs indirectly push states toward compliance with their rules by mobilizing domestic support for compliance. In the absence of direct power to enforce compliance, such mechanisms of domestic enforcement are widely incorporated in explanations of IOs' power in influencing member state behavior (Dai, 2005, 2006; Keck and Sikkink, 1999; Simmons, 2009).

In the context of international trade, IO actions and messages have been argued to inform domestic actors about government policies or practices to help them better demand their preferred policies. The WTO, for example, regularly issues publicly available reports on its members' trade policies, and its dispute settlement mechanism publicizes alleged violations of the agreement. Through such information on international trade provided by IOs, domestic groups are better able to “infer how much of the outcome they experience is due to the government's compliance policy versus some exogenous factors (Dai, 2006, 695).” Mansfield, Milner, and Rosendorff (2002) argue that “publicly exposed cheating on trade agreements can generate domestic ‘audience costs’ for political leaders (p.480),” suggesting that information about a country's noncompliance mobilizes domestic constituencies in favor of compliance.

Numerous experimental studies have tested the link between international legal obligations

and changes in individual preferences toward compliance. In general, studies have found that cues related to international law led to increased support for honoring commitments (Wallace, 2013; Chilton, 2014; Wallace, 2019; Chilton, 2015; Kreps and Wallace, 2016; Tingley and Tomz, 2022). Wallace (2013) finds that respondents told that the use of torture for interrogation would violate the United States' international legal commitment were 6 percent less likely to support torture than respondents not given this information. Kreps and Wallace (2016) find that legal critiques from IOs reduce approval for the use of drone strikes for counterterrorism by around 6 to 8 percent. Yet in cases where international law arguments were highly politicized, studies have also found backlash effects, where reminders of international legal obligations increased support for violations (Chapman and Chaudoin, 2020; Cope and Crabtree, 2020; Lupu and Wallace, 2019).

2.1 Media Coverage of International Legal Affairs

Because international affairs lie at a distance from most individuals' lives, messages of IOs are almost always mediated through domestic institutions such as the national government and especially the national media (Chaudoin, 2023). Recognition of this role of the media as the conduit of information has led scholars to examine how the media reports international legal affairs. In the context of human rights, Creamer and Simmons (2020) find that Latin American news outlets report more frequently on torture in the year of the Committee Against Torture (CmAT) review. Chaudoin (2014) finds that WTO disputes increase media coverage of the contested issues.

Studies have also examined whether international legal affairs lead to changes in the substantial patterns of reporting. Chaudoin (2023) finds that the preliminary examination

of the International Criminal Court (ICC) on the War on Drugs in the Philippines led to increased human-rights-themed coverage in the Philippine media, suggesting that IO actions increase the salience of domestic contestation about the issue in hand. Brutger and Strezhnev (2022) find that both the United States and Canadian media significantly cover more ISDS cases where the home state is being sued by a foreign firm, compared to vice versa. Brutger and Strezhnev (2022) associate this negativity bias with the backlash against international institutions, a phenomenon receiving much scholarly attention in recent years (Cooley and Nexon, 2020; Morse and Keohane, 2014; Voeten, 2020), as a disproportionately large coverage of cases in which their country is being sued can lead to beliefs that their country is losing from international law, causing backlash among the audience.

Such recent developments focusing on the mediated nature of IO information effects suggest that in some cases, information from international organizations and institutions may not serve as a warning sign for citizens to hear and demand compliance towards international law to their governments, as the optimistic may expect.

3 Authoritarian Censorship, Trade Disputes, and Public Support for International Organizations

How does information pass from IOs to the domestic public in authoritarian media environments? In an authoritarian media environment, the media often serves to further a political objective, rather than to facilitate government accountability (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014). Studies have also widely suggested that autocracies engage in strategic censorship by selectively targeting specific types of content (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013; Qin, Strömberg,

and Wu, 2017) or adjusting the level of control (Han and Shao, 2022), according to external political events (Lorentzen, 2014).

How do authoritarian regimes deal with information about international legal disputes and especially, about their own alleged violations of international trade law? I argue that authoritarian governments, facing a choice between completely blocking out criticism and invoking rally-around-the-flag effects, choose to control coverage in a way that minimizes risks while maximizing the likelihood that the public will react in defensive ways and maintain support for the regime. News of a country's violation of international law can lead to two consequences among its public: it can either render citizens concerned about the personal and national (reputational and economic) costs of noncompliance and decrease support for the government, or instead boost support for the regime if it is successfully framed as an attack on national integrity. In a sense, passing information about the country being alleged of violating international law is a double-edged sword.

From the perspective of the international law-violating nation, these consequences can be translated into two motivations when it comes to passing on information about the legal disputes in which they are involved to their citizens. On one hand, it may want to present itself as a law-observant global citizen and pass on less information regarding its own violations and more of its accusations of other countries. On the other hand, it may also have motivations to instigate backlash and augment support for the government by positioning itself as an victim of unfair applications of international law. Indeed, Gruffydd-Jones (2018) suggests that the authoritarian government may actually have incentives to pass on foreign criticism to its citizens, since it can instigate defensive reactions among the domestic public especially in a political environment characterized by little political opposition.

The optimal way of navigating these diverging motivations would be to differentiate strategies based on the likelihood of success of bringing about rally-around-the-flag effects, highlighting those cases where it can be expected that the public will react in a defensive manner and reducing those that may lead to suspicion. Such a strategy would allow the government to maximize political benefits from information transmission, while minimizing risks of passing on criticism about itself. What events, then, would be most likely to lead to defensive reactions, and thus most beneficial for the authoritarian government to pass on? First, distinction can be made between disputes filed against the home state and disputes that it files. Findings from Brutger and Strezhnev (2022) suggest that disputes filed against the home state lead to backlash against international institutions. In the context of trade disputes, we may also expect that WTO disputes filed against the home state lead to backlash, compared to those that the home state filed.

Some complaints may also lead to more significant backlash than others, however. Complaints made by hostile states or geopolitical rivals, for one, may induce stronger negative reactions against international institutions. There are two reasons why this may be so. First, individuals may be more sensitive about “the benefits and gains from the international institution” (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022) when the benefiting party is a hostile country. Scholars have long recognized such importance of identity in 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). In this sense, it may also be important

who is benefiting from the dispute and/or the international legal system in general instead of the home state, in addition to whether the state is winning or losing from the institution.

Second, a legal complaint may also be understood by the public as a shaming gesture. While the effects of naming and shaming have primarily been discussed in the human rights literature, recent studies have attempted to consider similar dynamics in other issue areas such as climate change commitments (Tingley and Tomz, 2022). Indeed, the initiation of a WTO dispute is almost always accompanied by an accusation about the inconsistency of a certain measure with the international trade law by the relevant official in the complaining state. For example, in the ongoing trade disputes between Australia and China, both sides have accused each other of not adhering to “the letter and spirit of its ChAFTA and WTO obligations” and “abusing trade-remedy measures.” Such criticisms are also widely covered by the press, leading to its widespread distribution among the domestic audience. In this sense, a legal complaint may not only serve as an informational cue on who wins or loses from international law for the domestic audience (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022), but also be regarded as a criticism of the state itself.

If legal complaints are understood by individuals as a shaming gesture, findings from the naming and shaming literature would lead to expectations that individuals would react more strongly against accusations made by hostile states than those made by non-hostile states. Numerous psychological accounts of backlash against shaming have argued that backfire effects—wherein the criticism is followed by an even larger support for the criticized target—are more likely when the target views the critic as an “outgroup” (Hornsey and Imani, 2004; Hornsey, 2005). Research in international relations has also shown that countries respond more favorably to human rights shaming by allies than adversaries (Terman and Voeten, 2018;

Terman, 2019), and to less threatening states than more threatening ones (Gruffydd-Jones, 2018).¹ In sum, one would expect citizens to react more negatively against trade disputes initiated by hostile countries, whether due to heightened concerns over the benefits or losses from international law, or due to backfire effects towards criticism of the state.

Under such expectations, one way the authoritarian government would benefit from controlling coverage would be by choosing a counterpart that is generally regarded by its citizens as a threat to the country's status and identity and highlighting accusations made by (rather than about) the hostile counterpart, since they are more likely to lead to backlash. In contrast, for cases in which the dispute counterpart is not one particularly regarded as a threat, there is less reason to highlight its accusations towards the country, since such a strategy is less likely to provoke a defensive reaction and may even backfire so as to actually lead to suspicions regarding the government's observance of the international law. The authoritarian state with a strong censorship apparatus has the motivations and means to deliberately provoke backfire effects among the public, driving public opinion in the direction of their preferred protectionist policies. My theoretical expectations regarding the media coverage of trade disputes can be summarized as follows:

Hypothesis 1 *When the authoritarian state is the respondent, there is more coverage of hostile state-initiated disputes than those initiated by non-hostile states.*

I also draw the following hypothesis on individual attitudes:

Hypothesis 2 *Public opinion within a state targeted in a WTO dispute will be more negative when the complainant state is perceived as hostile to the target state than when the complainant is seen as non-hostile.*

¹However, Tingley and Tomz (2022) finds no difference between shaming by allies and non-allies.

An important point warrants a brief discussion. 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 international institutions' 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. 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 influences 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 lack 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.

4 Chinese Media Coverage of WTO Disputes

4.1 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). Thus, analyzing the strategic motivations of the Chinese government in passing on information to the domestic public can help illuminate the motivations of other authoritarian states as well. Also, methodologically, the degree of government control varies substantially among official and commercial newspapers in China (Kim, 2018; Stockmann, 2012), allowing the distinction between state-enforced bias and bias stemming from nationalist sentiments among the public.

4.2 Data

I construct an original dataset of newspaper articles from 117 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”² 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 coarse 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 to be 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.³ This allows me to gauge immediate reactions by the Chinese media.

²Because 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).

³Important 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

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.⁴ Many times, articles about a certain dispute were very similar and included the exact same wordings 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 and without systematic errors.

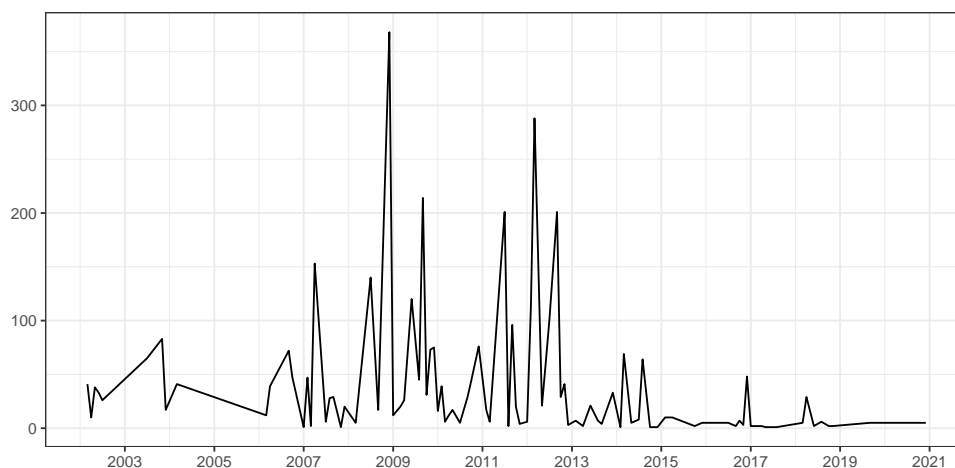


Figure 1: Number of articles over time

circulated.

⁴I 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.

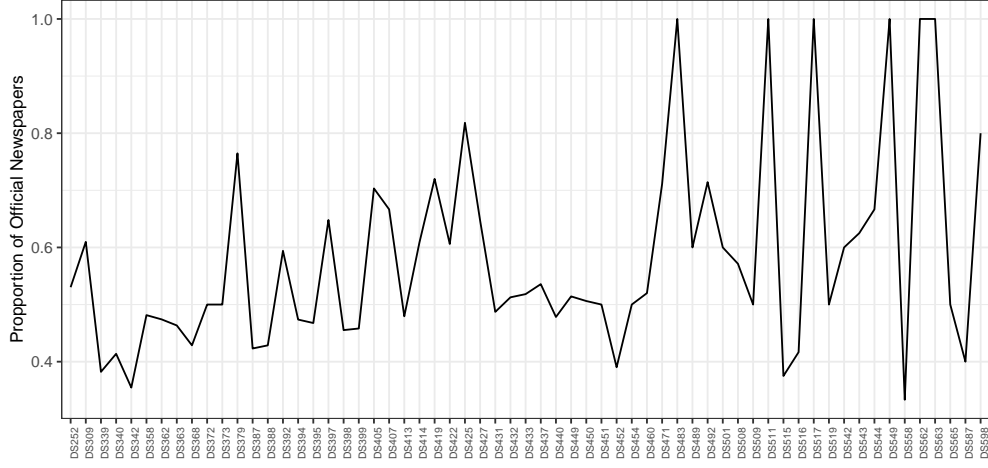


Figure 2: Proportion of official newspapers in coverage of disputes

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 United States and Mexico, which also increased the volume of reports. Another surge in coverage is seen on March 2012, in response to the disputes with the United States, Japan, and the European Union surrounding 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 wealth of WTO activities during this period. The proportion of official newspapers within the total coverage (Figure 2) suggests that this may be attributed to heightened

censorship surrounding these specific disputes. Notably, disputes associated with the trade war have predominantly been covered by official newspapers, aligning with anecdotal evidence suggesting that non-official newspapers faced restrictions in reporting on the trade war.

Using the matched articles, I created a dataset with each dispute-newspaper as a single unit, counting how many times a specific newspaper has reported a specific dispute. I excluded those units in which the whole period (initiation to latest update) of 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. Finally, I matched this 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 | 0.429 |
| | China is respondent | 0.394 | 0.284 |

Table 1 reports the proportion of newspapers among 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 highlights allegations against itself when the United States is involved and

reduces them 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 United States 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.

4.3 Empirical Strategy

To investigate which WTO disputes are more likely to be covered in the Chinese media, I first estimate a binary probit model, testing the probability of a specific dispute case being reported by 1) whether China is the respondent and 2) whether the dispute is against the United States, each as a binary variable. An interaction term is added to find out 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. I repeat the analysis with the subset of official and non-official newspapers in order to gauge whether the observed trend is reflects the authoritarian state's intentions or just a typical form of negativity bias in reporting. Within a given subset, the basic binary probit models are specified as follows:

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

where Y is a binary indicator *Report* that is coded 1 if newspaper i covers a WTO dispute j and 0 otherwise⁵; *ChinaRespondent* and *UnitedStates* are dispute-level binary indicators; vector Z denotes dispute-level control variables; and τ is a vector of year-fixed effects.

I control for dispute-level variables that could affect the magnitude of reporting. Taking into account that certain products, industries, or dispute types such as rare earths or tariffs disputes may be more sensitive than others, I add binary controls reflecting the industry to which the disputed products belong if the dispute is pertaining to a specific product, and whether the dispute is pertaining to tariffs or subsidies otherwise. In addition, I control for the total number of countries involved in related disputes (as indicated by having the same official title), accounting for the additional coverage stemming from the wider range of affected parties⁶. I also add year-fixed effects in order to account for the general foreign relationship between China and disputing countries across years.

4.4 Results

Table 2 shows the main results from the binary probit models estimating the likelihood of a particular newspaper covering a particular dispute. Models 1 to 3 are results from the subset of articles that are classified as official media, with Models 1 and 2 estimating the effect of a specific dispute being against the United States and China being a respondent in dispute on the probability of coverage, respectively. Model 3 includes an interaction term to determine whether the effect of China being a respondent differs from those cases where the United States is the dispute counterpart and where it is not. Models 4 to 6 estimate the same effects

⁵I use the binary indicator because most WTO disputes are only covered once by each newspaper, if any reports.

⁶For 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

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | News Coverage | | | | | |
| | Official Media | | | Non-official Media | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| United States | 0.444*** (0.102) | | −0.333* (0.197) | 0.459*** (0.090) | | −0.041 (0.165) |
| China sued | | −0.363** (0.143) | −1.282*** (0.201) | | −0.341*** (0.123) | −1.037*** (0.169) |
| United States * China sued | | | 1.274*** (0.235) | | | 0.877*** (0.196) |
| Number of Parties | 0.455*** (0.101) | 0.458*** (0.108) | 0.565*** (0.123) | 0.665*** (0.095) | 0.665*** (0.101) | 0.808*** (0.113) |
| Constant | 0.915** (0.381) | 1.316*** (0.366) | 1.334*** (0.406) | 0.934** (0.370) | 1.367*** (0.357) | 1.181*** (0.388) |
| Year-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Industry-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 1,333 | 1,333 | 1,333 | 2,033 | 2,033 | 2,033 |
| Log Likelihood | −643.475 | −649.757 | −621.052 | −861.085 | −870.538 | −841.575 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 1,342.951 | 1,355.514 | 1,302.105 | 1,778.171 | 1,797.076 | 1,743.151 |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

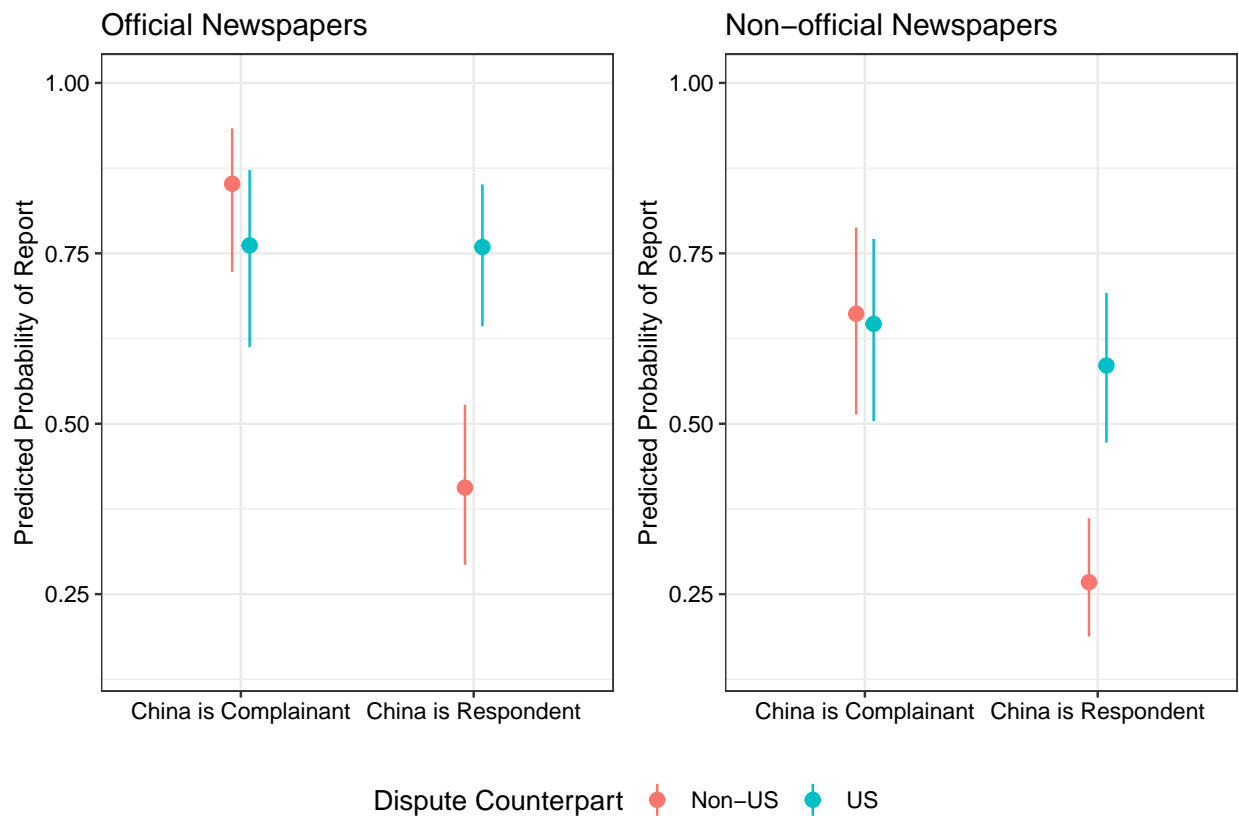


Figure 3: Predicted probability of report among Chinese newspapers by dispute counterpart and the role of China in dispute (95% confidence interval)

with the subset of articles that are classified as non-official media.

Overall, the results support my argument. As can be seen from Models 1 and 4, generally, disputes against the United States are significantly more likely to be covered in the media, regardless of the media type. This is not too surprising, considering that the United States is regarded as a major rival of China and disputes against the US are thus likely to attract much more attention. Results from Models 2 and 4 are more interesting; contrary to related findings in other national contexts (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022), the Chinese media is not more likely to report a WTO dispute when it is being accused of violating the international

trade law. On the contrary, they are significantly more likely to report when China is on the complaining side of the dispute, as seen by the negative coefficient in Models 2 and 5.

However, the positive and significant coefficient for the interaction term in Models 3 and 6 suggest that the relationship between whether China is a respondent or complainant, and the likelihood of coverage, is influenced by whether the dispute counterpart is the United States. The direction of this influence can be observed in Figure 3, visualizing the marginal effects. From the figure, it can be observed that the Chinese media refrains from reporting disputes in which China is sued by a non-US country, whereas such negative impact is not observed for disputes with the United States. These results suggest that while the Chinese government tries to minimize the reporting of its violations of international law, it does not exert much effort in doing so for disputes against the United States.

4.5 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 A6). My results remain consistent across these alternative specifications.

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 WTO ruled *for* China, catering 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 dispute

(at the point of consultation request), before any WTO ruling is made (Table A5). 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 *UnitedStates*, and an additional binary variable *Official* that indicates whether the newspaper in question is an official or non-official newspaper (Table A7). The coefficient for the three-way interaction variable is positive and statistically significant, suggesting that that reporting bias is significantly greater in official, party-controlled media.

As a further test, I repeat the entire exercise with a set of US newspapers, examining how the probability of coverage differs by whether the United States is the complainant or respondent, and whether the dispute is against China (Appendix A.4). By analyzing US newspapers—a democratic media environment with greater press freedom—the test provides a benchmark against which to compare the findings from Chinese newspapers. 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.

5 Media Effect on Support for International Institutions

5.1 Experiment Design

To further analyze the impact of the demonstrated disproportionate reporting 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, significantly well-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, 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 on 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 have 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 towards 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. This allows 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 for respondents to have strong priors. 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 were asked to answer a series of questions about international institutions and the Chinese government’s policies. My main dependent variable of interest was “attitudes toward international institutions and norms,” as I wished to understand the differentiated impact of media bias towards backlash towards international law. I measured this with four questions asking respondents’ attitudes toward 1) the WTO, 2) free trade, 3) international institutions in general, and 4) international courts.⁷ As denoted in Hypothesis 2, I expected that respondents 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 institutions and norms, 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 |

⁷Specifically, 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 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.

5.2 Results

Table 4: Survey experiment results

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | | | | | | |
|----------------|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | WTO | | Free Trade | | Int'l Institutions | | Int'l Courts | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
| US sues China | −0.095 (0.082) | | −0.167** (0.073) | | −0.182** (0.082) | | −0.198* (0.101) | |
| EU sues China | | −0.020 (0.087) | | −0.088 (0.071) | | −0.098 (0.089) | | −0.153 (0.109) |
| Constant | 5.256*** (0.057) | 5.057*** (0.061) | 4.610*** (0.051) | 4.526*** (0.050) | 5.744*** (0.058) | 5.706*** (0.063) | 4.753*** (0.071) | 4.724*** (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 |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

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 ⁸. Table 4 summarizes the treatment effects. Across all variations in the treatment and dependent variables, Chinese citizens displayed higher support for international institutions and norms when exposed to news coverage on 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 working against their country when exposed to disputes initiated against their home country (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022).

The results provide suggestive evidence that WTO disputes involving the United States generate stronger public reactions than those involving the European Union. In three out of

⁸Respondents who failed a basic attention check were dropped from the analyses.

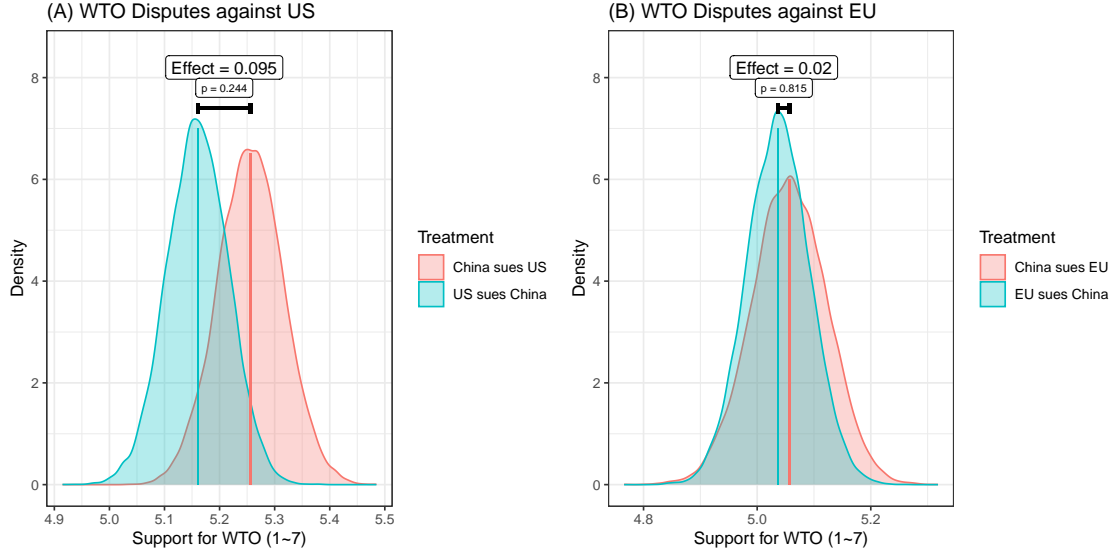


Figure 4: Effect of exposure to news coverage on support for the WTO. Panels show the effect of exposure to news coverage on WTO disputes against the United States and those against the European Union. Density plots denote bootstrapped sampling distribution of responses under each treatment (20,000 iterations).

four dependent variables, the ‘US sues China’ treatment has a significantly negative effect on attitudes toward international institutions and free trade compared to the ‘China sues US’ treatment. In contrast, the 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 WTO as those who were exposed to news about the EU suing China.

While the theorized pattern holds for most dependent variables, a formal difference-in-differences test comparing the treatment effects (‘US sues China’ – ‘China sues US’ vs. ‘EU sues China’ – ‘China sues EU’) does not reach statistical significance, although in the anticipated direction. This suggests that while US-related disputes elicit stronger responses,

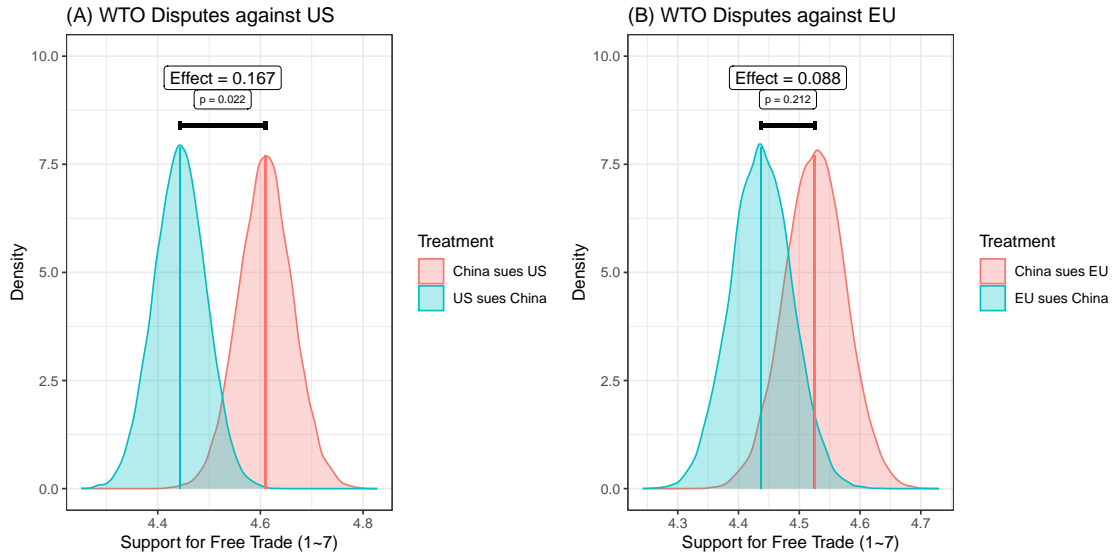


Figure 5: Effect of exposure to news coverage on support for free trade. Panels show the effect of exposure to news coverage on WTO disputes against the United States and those against the European Union. Density plots denote bootstrapped sampling distribution of responses under each treatment (20,000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

the difference between US and EU cases remains statistically inconclusive. However, this may reflect limitations in statistical power rather than the absence of a true difference, as detecting smaller interaction effects likely requires a larger sample. 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.

The results of the survey experiment demonstrate that the censorship strategy deployed by the authoritarian government could indeed induce backlash among the domestic public by highlighting complaints made by hostile states. Unlike trade disputes against non-hostile states, the difference in effects depending on whom the dispute was initiated by is substantial for disputes against hostile states, making them efficient targets for selective censorship. Biased media coverage can negatively affect public attitudes toward international law; authoritarian

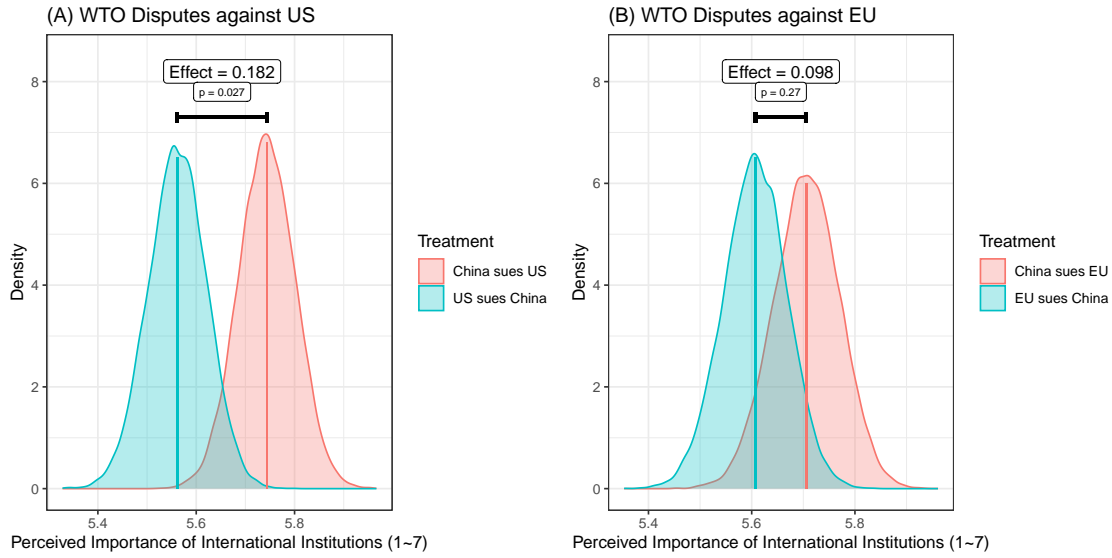


Figure 6: Effect of exposure to news coverage on the perceived importance of international institutions. Panels show the effect of exposure to news coverage on WTO disputes against the United States and those against the European Union. Density plots denote bootstrapped sampling distribution of responses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

governments can make use of these mechanisms in order to foster backlash and distrust for the international legal system and support for the government facing allegations.

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 United States saw larger differences based on whom the dispute was initiated by compared to the dispute against the European Union, the generally larger negative effects of disputes against the European Union on attitudes towards the WTO are puzzling. While I cannot reach a decisive conclusion from these results alone, one thing to consider is the stronger priors regarding WTO trade disputes with the United States. Because the experiment was conducted after years of trade war between the United States and China, which has already involved multiple WTO disputes, respondents would have been more familiar with

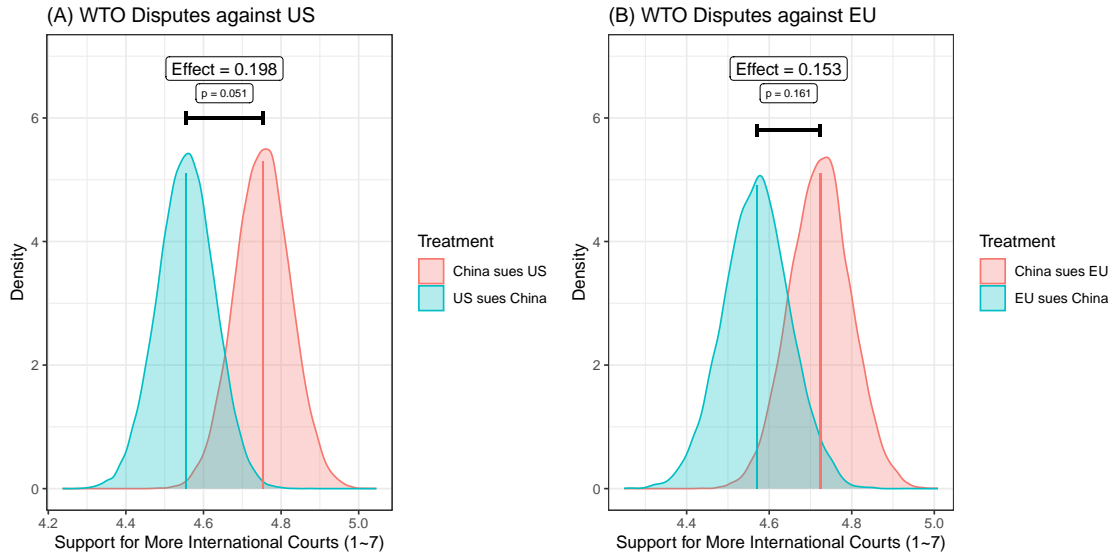


Figure 7: Effect of exposure to news coverage on support for increased number of international courts. Panels show the effect of exposure to news coverage on WTO disputes against the United States and those against the European Union. Density plots denote bootstrapped sampling distribution of responses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

such disputes, leading to smaller treatment effects. In contrast, for trade disputes against the European Union, respondents would not have had as strong priors, and thus the 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 disputes in which their home country is suing against or sued by another country.

6 Conclusion

This study theorizes how government censorship in authoritarian countries may hinder the transmission of IO messages by selectively reporting on certain types of disputes that are more likely to engender backlash—namely, those disputes filed *against* the state, by a *hostile country*. I have also shown through a survey experiment that such media bias may lead to significant responses among the domestic public in reduced support for IOs, multilateralism, and the norms they promote.

This study contributes to the emerging literature on the backlash against international courts and international law (Voeten, 2020) by adding support to the argument that biased media coverage, as a filter for the domestic audiences of international legal disputes, can negatively affect public attitudes toward international law (Brutger and Strezhnev, 2022). Additionally, the media can serve not only to highlight international legal disputes filed against the home state but also *those filed by hostile states*—this is likely to aggravate backlash, as individuals are ultimately most likely to be exposed to information about hostile states suing against their home country.

The results of my survey experiment on Chinese citizens challenge the existing literature on the effects of violating international law on public opinion and question the scope to which their results can be applied. While the literature has generally found violation to be associated with decreased support for the policy in question and increased support for commitment, not only did exposure to China’s alleged violation of WTO rules decrease support for WTO and free trade but in fact *any* mention of dispute settlement was found to be counterproductive in their ability to raise support for compliance. This is in line with a

few other studies that have found negative effects outside of the US, including Chapman and Chaudoin (2020), Cope and Crabtree (2020), and Lupu and Wallace (2019), and presents a concern for those who wish to raise compliance through information.

This study’s theorization of authoritarian governments’ motivations in selectively transmitting IO-provided information, along with its empirical demonstration, advances the broader literature on the informational effects of IOs. It highlights that the impact of IO-provided information varies across media environments. In states with significant media control, information reaching the public may backfire, undermining rather than mobilizing domestic pro-compliance constituencies. By identifying a strategy that states use to protect their reputations when facing allegations of international law violations, my findings contribute to the literature on framing and reputation management in the context of international law (Brutger and Kertzer, 2018; Chu, 2019; Morse and Pratt, 2022; Strezhnev, Simmons, and Kim, 2019; Zvobgo, 2019).

The scope of my study also suggests numerous avenues for future research. An important premise of my theory of the authoritarian state’s calculus in passing on information is that they have the means to effectively control media coverage; yet this ability varies among authoritarian countries. Future research could analyze patterns of media coverage among the official and non-official media under regimes with different information control capabilities. Also, while my theory focused on the authoritarian motivation in *inducing* such bias, the bias based on the dispute counterpart may be found in democratic media environments as well, due to the media’s appetite for provocative news. This conjecture would also have to be systematically examined.

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APPENDICES

A Newspaper Coverage

A.1 List of Newspapers and Descriptive Statistics

Table A1: Probability of newspaper coverage by dispute counterpart

| | Dispute Counterpart | Min. | 1st Qu. | Median | Mean | 3rd Qu. | Max. |
|---|--------------------------------|------|---------|--------|-------|---------|------|
| 1 | All | 0 | 0.141 | 0.353 | 0.366 | 0.500 | 1 |
| 2 | Disputes with US | 0 | 0.167 | 0.368 | 0.393 | 0.526 | 1 |
| 3 | Disputes with Non-US Countries | 0 | 0.103 | 0.283 | 0.277 | 0.400 | 1 |

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, WENZHOUECONOMIC 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

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| | News Coverage | | | | | |
| | Official Media | | | Non-official Media | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| United States | 0.122*** (0.028) | | -0.132** (0.055) | 0.121*** (0.021) | | -0.013 (0.042) |
| China sued | | -0.110*** (0.041) | -0.351*** (0.055) | | -0.059* (0.031) | -0.201*** (0.041) |
| United States * China sued | | | 0.361*** (0.064) | | | 0.194*** (0.048) |
| Number of Parties | 0.141*** (0.028) | 0.148*** (0.031) | 0.158*** (0.032) | 0.176*** (0.020) | 0.165*** (0.023) | 0.190*** (0.024) |
| Constant | 0.814*** (0.098) | 0.922*** (0.094) | 0.981*** (0.104) | 0.780*** (0.087) | 0.897*** (0.085) | 0.865*** (0.091) |
| Year-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Industry-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 1,333 | 1,333 | 1,333 | 2,033 | 2,033 | 2,033 |
| R ² | 0.349 | 0.343 | 0.370 | 0.333 | 0.323 | 0.341 |
| Adjusted R ² | 0.335 | 0.329 | 0.356 | 0.324 | 0.314 | 0.331 |
| <i>Note:</i> | | | | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 | | |

Table A4: Replication of main results with logistic regression

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | News Coverage | | | | | |
| | Official Media | | | Non-official Media | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| United States | 0.722*** (0.176) | | −0.560* (0.337) | 0.790*** (0.161) | | −0.052 (0.289) |
| China sued | | −0.606** (0.244) | −2.216*** (0.349) | | −0.669*** (0.220) | −1.847*** (0.299) |
| United States * China sued | | | 2.237*** (0.408) | | | 1.520*** (0.345) |
| Number of Parties | 0.816*** (0.181) | 0.827*** (0.191) | 1.029*** (0.220) | 1.294*** (0.194) | 1.338*** (0.205) | 1.560*** (0.222) |
| Constant | 1.616** (0.708) | 2.278*** (0.685) | 2.236*** (0.748) | 1.725** (0.696) | 2.521*** (0.672) | 2.106*** (0.724) |
| Year-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Industry-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 1,333 | 1,333 | 1,333 | 2,033 | 2,033 | 2,033 |
| Log Likelihood | −642.632 | −648.108 | −619.078 | −858.826 | −866.758 | −838.689 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 1,341.264 | 1,352.216 | 1,298.156 | 1,773.653 | 1,789.516 | 1,737.377 |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A5: Replication of main results with articles written at initiation of dispute

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | News Coverage | | | | | |
| | Official Media | | | Non-official Media | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| United States | 0.354*** (0.098) | | −0.292 (0.194) | 0.458*** (0.091) | | 0.035 (0.170) |
| China sued | | −0.485*** (0.146) | −1.250*** (0.196) | | −0.384*** (0.129) | −1.035*** (0.176) |
| United States * China sued | | | 1.068*** (0.227) | | | 0.769*** (0.201) |
| Number of Parties | 0.387*** (0.100) | 0.460*** (0.108) | 0.534*** (0.121) | 0.596*** (0.098) | 0.618*** (0.106) | 0.769*** (0.117) |
| Constant | −0.370 (0.319) | −0.089 (0.303) | −0.038 (0.351) | −0.949*** (0.338) | −0.507 (0.323) | −0.739** (0.359) |
| Year-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Industry-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 1,333 | 1,333 | 1,333 | 2,033 | 2,033 | 2,033 |
| Log Likelihood | −671.448 | −672.304 | −650.105 | −793.868 | −802.198 | −776.353 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 1,398.897 | 1,400.608 | 1,360.209 | 1,643.736 | 1,660.396 | 1,612.705 |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A6: Replication of main results with semester-fixed effects

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | | | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| | News Coverage | | | | | |
| | Official Media | | | Non-official Media | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| United States | 0.630*** (0.126) | | −0.253 (0.260) | 0.622*** (0.110) | | −0.042 (0.226) |
| China sued | | −0.301 (0.252) | −0.900*** (0.271) | | −0.275 (0.261) | −0.770*** (0.277) |
| United States * China sued | | | 1.178*** (0.278) | | | 0.865*** (0.236) |
| Number of Parties | 0.355*** (0.120) | 0.243 (0.151) | 0.274 (0.190) | 0.581*** (0.107) | 0.478*** (0.150) | 0.562*** (0.178) |
| Constant | 0.934** (0.451) | 1.506*** (0.459) | 1.601*** (0.583) | 0.883** (0.419) | 1.533*** (0.427) | 1.359** (0.533) |
| Semester-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Industry-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 1,333 | 1,333 | 1,333 | 2,033 | 2,033 | 2,033 |
| Log Likelihood | −612.485 | −625.007 | −600.570 | −831.803 | −848.070 | −822.379 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 1,296.969 | 1,322.013 | 1,277.141 | 1,735.606 | 1,768.140 | 1,720.759 |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

A.3 Three-way interaction

Table A7: Three-way interaction test between *ChinaRespondent*, *UnitedStates*, *Official*

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | News Coverage |
| United States | −0.037 (0.148) |
| China sued | −0.997*** (0.151) |
| Official | 0.686*** (0.164) |
| United States * China sued | 0.831*** (0.178) |
| China sued * Official | −0.326* (0.194) |
| United States * Official | −0.293 (0.195) |
| United States * China sued * Official | 0.496** (0.238) |
| Number of Parties | 0.694*** (0.082) |
| Constant | 0.908*** (0.287) |
| Year-fixed effects | Yes |
| Industry-fixed effects | Yes |
| Observations | 3,366 |
| Log Likelihood | −1,475.815 |
| Akaike Inf. Crit. | 3,019.631 |
| <i>Note:</i> | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 |

A.4 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 A8: Binary probit models estimating probability of news coverage by US newspapers

| | <i>Dependent variable:</i> | | |
|--|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| | News Coverage | | |
| | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| China | 0.679*** (0.105) | | 1.021*** (0.145) |
| US sued | | −0.021 (0.075) | 0.163* (0.084) |
| China * US sued | | | −0.637*** (0.187) |
| Number of Parties | 0.130*** (0.039) | 0.125*** (0.039) | 0.143*** (0.039) |
| Constant | −0.593** (0.275) | −0.574** (0.275) | −0.655** (0.275) |
| Year-fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Industry-fixed effects | 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 |
| <i>Note:</i> *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 | | | |

Table A8 shows the results of the placebo test, and Figure A1 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.

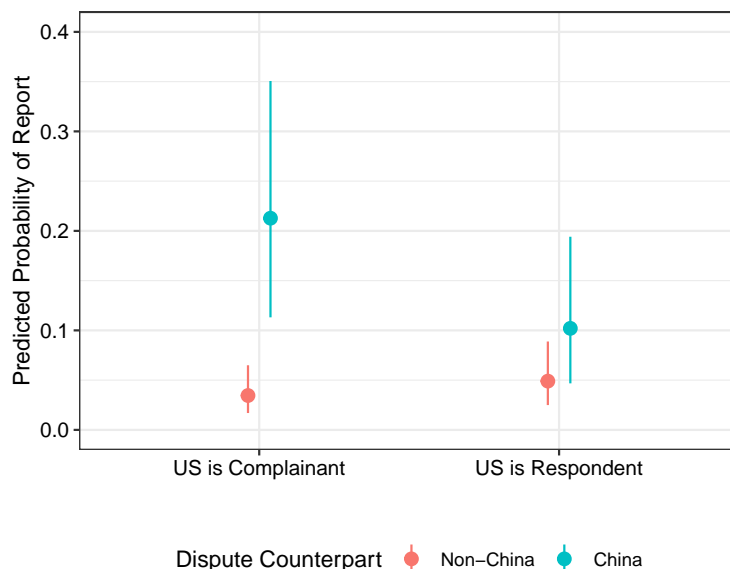


Figure A1: Predicted probability of report among US newspapers by dispute counterpart and the role of United States in dispute (95% confidence interval)

B Survey Experiment

B.1 Sample Characteristics

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) |

B.2 Treatments

Table B2: Treatments

| US Sues China Treatment | English Translation |
|--|--|
| <p>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。</p> | <p>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.</p> |
| China Sues US Treatment | English Translation |
| <p>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。</p> | <p>China sues WTO 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.</p> |
| EU Sues China Treatment | English Translation |
| <p>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。</p> | <p>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.</p> |
| China Sues EU Treatment | English Translation |
| <p>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。</p> | <p>China sues WTO 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.</p> |