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Constituency Service Under Nondemocratic Rule:
Evidence from China

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Constituency Service Under Nondemocratic Rule: Evidence from China

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Abstract

Why do nondemocratic regimes provide constituency service? This study develops theory based on a national field audit of China's "Mayor's Mailbox," an institution that allows citizens to contact local political officials. Analyzing government responses to over twelve hundred realistic appeals from putative citizens, we find local service institutions in China are comparably responsive to similar institutions in democracies. Two key predictors of institutional quality are economic modernization and the intensity of local social conflict. We explain these findings by proposing a demand-driven theory of nondemocratic constituency service; in order to sustain the informational benefits of citizen participation, service institutions must increase responsiveness according to citizen demand. We then offer supplementary evidence for this theory by analyzing the content of real letters from citizens to local officials in China.

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Constituency service—officials’ efforts to solve problems raised by citizens—is an important component of political representation. Classic studies of constituency service demonstrate how the incentives of electoral politics motivate and shape officials’ responsiveness to the public (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987; Fenno 1978). Yet these studies offer little help in explaining the quality and political logic of constituency service in *nondemocracies*. This study develops theory about the drivers of constituency service in a nondemocratic regime, thereby shedding light on the logic of political representation in the absence of electoral politics.

The rapidly growing literature on nondemocratic institutions (Lust-Okar 2005; Magaloni 2006; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008; Blaydes 2010; Levitsky and Way 2010; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Jensen, Malesky and Weymouth 2013; Truex 2014) has yet to address constituency service institutions, but it is clear that the nondemocratic logic must diverge from the democratic one. Democratic responsiveness to constituent requests turns upon electoral reciprocity; representatives believe that delivering constituency service yields electoral payoffs (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987), elected representatives offer more assistance to citizens eligible to vote in their own districts (Broockman 2013),¹ and expansion of constituency service is even credited with driving the long-term increase in incumbency advantage in the United States (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987; King 1991). If nondemocracies provide similar forms of constituency service, a different theoretical framework is required to explain this behavior in the absence of an electoral link between officials and the public.

This study develops theory on nondemocratic constituency service based on a national field audit constituency service institutions in contemporary China. We analyze the behavior

¹Of course, politicians also report intrinsic motivations as playing an important role in offering help in response to citizen inquiries (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987), and the same study that finds district-based discrimination in constituency service also finds a role for the intrinsic motivation of helping coethnics (Broockman 2013). These potentially non-rational motives of individual political agents to help citizens are not the focus of our study; we are instead interested in whether authoritarian regimes can establish effective institutions of responsiveness in the absence of electoral incentives. We temporarily ignore the blend of rational and nonrational motivations of the agents who execute this function.

of local institutions in response to 1,225 realistic service requests from putative citizens, avoiding the potential biases of self-reported data from government agencies or citizens. Field studies of constituency service have a rich history in democracies, spanning both advanced industrialized countries (Putnam 1994; Butler and Broockman 2011; Butler, Karpowitz and Pope 2012; Broockman 2013; Faller, Nathan and White 2013; Loewen and MacKenzie 2013; Carnes and Holbein 2012) and emerging economies (McClendon 2013*b*; Spada et al. 2012; Spada and Guimarães 2013). Our study contributes, to our knowledge, the first national field study of constituency service in a nondemocracy. It yields an original measure of government responsiveness for 336 subnational political jurisdictions in contemporary China.

The audit reveals that this institution provides a surprisingly high level of service. China’s mayors’ offices offered helpful responses to 43% of appeals in the audit, making these agencies more responsive than the offices of elected representatives in several previous studies of democracies. Examining variation across localities, we find that higher levels of economic modernization and social conflict predict increased quality of service. Using both traditional regression techniques and machine learning estimation procedures, we find that both factors have greater explanatory power than local variation in government resources.

Based on these results, we propose a theory of constituency service under nondemocratic rule. Building on insights from the political economy of nondemocratic regimes, we argue that constituency service institutions deliver valuable information about society to nondemocratic states. These institutions are especially well-suited to generate information about policy implementation and social conflict. However, these informational benefits depend upon sustaining voluntary public participation. If citizens lose faith in the institution and become politically disengaged, the state loses access to this information. This logic drives nondemocratic governments to provide constituency service of reasonable quality and to increase the supply of service in response to public demand. To illustrate these informational benefits, we analyze the content of a sample of publicly-available letters from citizens

to officials in China.

This study introduces a new institution to the growing body of scholarship on quasi-democratic practices in nondemocratic regimes, which to date has largely focused on elections, parties, and legislatures.² In keeping with this literature, we find that authoritarian constituency service goes beyond “window dressing” to deliver meaningful public service. However, whereas previous research on nondemocratic institutions finds that “parties do not compete, elections do not elect, and legislatures do not legislate” (Gandhi and Przeworski 2001), the institution we study apparently delivers similar benefits to those in democratic regimes. Although motivated by the collection of information rather than electoral reciprocity, constituency service in China appears to improve the quality of local governance. This theory sheds light on the sources of political representation under nondemocratic rule. The concluding section discusses the implications of these findings for theories of authoritarian political development.

1 Constituency service in nondemocratic regimes

In the last decade, a consensus has emerged that nondemocratic institutions matter. Legislatures, political parties, and elections are more than democratic facades in the political economy of nondemocratic rule. Across a variety of regions and nondemocratic regimes, these institutions serve to manage conflict and competition among political elites (Lust-Okar 2005; Magaloni 2006; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008; Blaydes 2010), generate information for the regime (Magaloni 2006; Truex 2014), elicit cooperation from society (Gandhi 2008; Magaloni 2006), and coopt political opposition (Lust-Okar 2005; Magaloni 2006). These institutions matter not only for the durability of nondemocratic regimes, but also for their policy and

²A notable exception to the focus on elections, parties, and legislatures in nondemocracies has been the study of petitioning (*xinfang*) institutions in China (O’Brien and Li 1995; Shi 1997; Luehrmann 2003; Chen 2008; 2012; Hurst et al. 2014). We contribute to this literature by studying citizen contacting on a national scale.

provision of public goods (Gandhi 2008; Luo et al. 2007; Wang and Yao 2007).

This inquiry into nondemocratic institutions has yet to explore nonelectoral institutions of constituency service. Service institutions purport to render government officials responsive to the needs of the mass public. Although a defining feature of nondemocracies is the absence of open electoral systems of accountability, these regimes also provide institutions for, “providing help to individuals, groups, and localities in coping with...government” (Fenno 1978, 101).³ Institutions for citizens to contact officials, as well as state encouragement to do so, are described in studies of traditional communist regimes like the USSR (Little 1976) and Bulgaria (Dimitrov 2014), as well as contemporary single-party regimes like Singapore (Li et al. 2004) and pre-revolutionary Egypt (Reddick, Abdelsalam and Elkadi 2011).

In the People’s Republic of China, service institutions comprise part of the “Mass Line” political system, facilitating direct consultation between citizens and officials while maintaining concentration of power in the Communist Party (Chen 2012). Communist institutions of letters and visits were established in the 1950s (Luehrmann 2003), but the historical antecedents of this institution can be found in petitions to imperial officials (Hung 2011). Contemporary scholarship on these institutions has highlighted their crucial role for mobilizing extra-institutional resistance and the inherent contradictions the state faces in dealing with citizen appeals (Luehrmann 2003; Chen 2008; Cai 2010; Chen 2012; Hurst et al. 2014). However, a national evaluation of the quality of these institutions has been hampered by limited availability of data.

What drives constituency service in the absence of electoral incentives? We exploit subnational variation in service quality across China to test three preliminary hypotheses

³Fenno’s (1978) definition originally referred to the “federal government,” as his research subjects were U.S. Congresspeople. We see no need for conceptually limiting constituency service to dealing with national-level governments. The public’s need for help dealing with government is not limited to any particular jurisdiction.

on what explains constituency service in nondemocratic political regimes. One logic of nondemocratic constituency service views it as a practical issue of policy implementation capacity. As part of broader policy mandates, such as the “Mass Line” in China, local governments are tasked with fielding and resolving appeals from citizens. In this logic, the quality of resulting institutions may depend upon the resources that governments can dedicate to properly staffing service offices and establishing the technical systems to properly sort and resolve requests from the public. Nondemocratic regimes exhibit wide variation in coercive and implementation capacities both across countries and subnationally (O’Donnell 1978; Bellin 2004; Levitsky and Way 2010). If constituency service is primarily governed by a practical logic of policy implementation, local variation in state capacity will be a strong predictor of the quality of constituency service.

Economic modernization may also help explain the provision of constituency service in nondemocracies. The claim that economic change exerts a powerful influence on state-society relations goes back to early modernization theorists such as Lerner (1958) and Lipset (1960). They view increased urbanization, wealth, education, and communications media as altering the public’s expectations surrounding the role of government, a relationship that has been theoretically elaborated through subsequent survey research (Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Even when modernization does not lead to political democracy, it transforms authoritarian states by creating, “competing interests, conflicting normative claims, and divergent behavioral expectations” (O’Donnell 1973, 75-6). Modernization involves a broad syndrome of social and political changes, but the most relevant to our study of constituency service are the changes in public expectations surrounding government. The development of the industrial welfare state involves increased government involvement in economic life as both a regulator and a provider of social benefits like healthcare and education. As citizens’ interaction and dependence on government grows deeper, constituency service institutions are in greater demand to resolve citizen problems and addresses sources

of discontent with policy. These demand pressures may incentivize greater investment in nondemocratic constituency services. This logic predicts improved service quality in settings of greater economic modernization.

Thirdly, constituency service institutions may contribute to the management of social conflict. Social unrest related to governance failures like corruption, private conflicts resolved through extra-institutional violence, and other visible breakdowns in public order represent a major political concern for nondemocratic regimes (Wallace 2014; Shirk 2008; Whyte 2010; King, Pan and Roberts 2013). Even protests for ostensibly nationalist causes threaten to turn against the state (Weiss 2014). This makes the management of social stability a major concern for nondemocratic regimes, leading to massive expenditures in terms of official time and resources (Chen 2013). Constituency service may contribute to managing social conflict in two ways. First, citizen service request may seek intervention of political officials into their disputes with other government agencies, employers, business partners, and other economic actors. These appeals offer an opportunity for service institutions to resolve these grievances before they escalate to more disruptive forms of claimsmaking (Cai 2010; Chen 2012). Second, citizen appeals for service can highlight areas of public policy that contribute to citizen grievances more generally. This information on unpopular or poorly implemented policies can be used to make adjustments that reduce discontent. This logic predicts that increased social instability will be associated with improved provision of constituency service, as local governments invest more in service institutions.

2 Data source: field audit

We test these three hypotheses—bureaucratic capacity, economic modernization, and the extent of social conflict—with data collected from a multiple-wave field audit of a local constituency service institution in China. Local governments received letters from putative

citizens requesting assistance with various public policies and services. We evaluate service quality by examining government responses to these requests. This design permits us to compare the quality of service across hundreds of political jurisdictions against the common standard of identical requests for assistance. Ordinarily, constituency service interactions are private exchanges between officials and citizens; they are only publicized at the discretion of one of the parties. The audit design produces a behavioral measure of service quality (i.e. whether the government satisfies our request) that is not subject to biases in self-reporting by government agencies, officials, or citizens.

The constituency service institution we study in China is commonly known as the “Mayor’s Mailbox” (*shizhang xinxiang*), a channel for citizens to contact local political leaders with questions, complaints, or suggestions (Hartford 2005).⁴ Citizens submit their requests for assistance through official government webpages or to email addresses established for this purpose. This institution appeared in the early 2000s as Internet use grew throughout mainland China; by 2014 we found some variant of the Mayor’s Mailbox on the official webpages of 98% of China’s 336 prefecture-level governments.⁵

The Mayor’s Mailbox represents a technologically modern addition to the “Mass Line” institutions like petitioning offices (Luehrmann 2003; Chen 2012). Similar to citizen petitions, Mayor’s Mailbox complaints are typically received by a general-purpose office and then routed to the most relevant bureau, who then provides a response to close the service process. In some cases closing a request may simply involve providing information, whereas in others the agency may rescind a penalty, compensate a victim, or investigate a disturbance. While the agencies it provides access to and services it delivers are highly similar to in-person

⁴Our audit found over fifty variants of online channels for contacting city government, with names such as Government Mailbox, Ask-About-Government Web, Mayor’s Hotline, Write to the Mayor, and Leaders’ Window. The most common name for this institution was Mayor’s Mailbox (65%).

⁵Our main units of analysis in this study are prefectures, which are the Chinese political jurisdiction directly below provinces and directly above counties. In this study, we also include the four province-level cities—Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing. We view them as roughly comparable to populous, urbanized prefectures such as Guangzhou or Shenzhen.

petitioning, the Mayor's Mailbox also differs in important ways. Whereas visiting petition offices creates opportunities for disruptive protest tactics (Chen 2009), online contacting keeps citizens at physical remove from government buildings and officials.

China's prefectural mayors are the chief executives of prefectural governments. Their appointments and promotions decided by provincial political authorities, not elections. Mayors generally serve short terms of two to three years, in part to combat the development of entrenched local interests and corruption. Their professional incentives reward exceptional economic performance but impose few sanctions for poor performance, short of corruption (Landry 2008). Although mayors are not directly involved in answering the vast majority of letters received through the Mayor's Mailbox, they are prominently featured in the branding of this service institution. Aside from its name, these webpages often feature Mayors' photographs and exhortations to "Write me a letter" (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Mayor's Mailbox webpage, Nanjing, China



Source: <http://szxx.nj.gov.cn/page/index.jsp>

Between 2012 and 2013, we conducted a multi-wave audit of national field experiments involving Mayor's Mailboxes at the prefecture level, utilizing a design first reported in Distelhorst and Hou (2014). In each wave, prefectural governments received letters from

putative citizens asking for information about various policies. The letters were designed to resemble letters from real constituents while also ensuring that answering these artificial questions would not greatly distract officials from responding to the concerns of ordinary citizens.⁶ One potential downside to the field audit design is that the requests for assistance are artificial. We attempted to design queries with a high degree of verisimilitude, based on requests we observed actual citizens making in publicly-available letters to government. The following letter was submitted in the first wave of the audit (letters from the remaining waves reported in Appendix B).

Respected Leader,

I have been unable to find stable work for a long time, and my economic situation is not good. Do I have the opportunity to apply for the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee? What conditions would I need to satisfy to receive the Minimum Livelihood Guarantee?

With gratitude for leaders' care,
Name

The full audit included letters from a range of citizen identities: unemployed individuals, employed migrant workers, entrepreneurs, and recent college graduates (Table 1). They represent a range of socioeconomic strata in contemporary China, with entrepreneurs and university graduates at the upper end and unemployed individuals and migrant workers at the lower end. Each letter requested some type of policy information: access to poverty relief funds, rules about the minimum wage, business taxation policies, and the process for starting a new business.

⁶There are a host of ethical considerations in the design of field experiments that interact with officials, including the proper use of deception and distortions to the allocation of official effort. The range of considerations are summarized nicely by McClendon (2013a) and Malesky (2013). Our research design was guided by these principles and was reviewed and approved by our university's Institutional Review Board.

We measure the quality of constituency service by examining how government agencies responded to these requests. When governments responded to these letters, we coded whether the response was informative or not. Uninformative responses included statement that the request was “accepted,” and claims that the service request was too vague. When governments did respond, the vast majority provided useful information about the policy in question, an example of which is provided below.

In each experiment, we attempted to submit requests to 336 political jurisdictions. In some jurisdictions we were unable to find an online channel for contacting officials. In others, the channel appeared to exist, but was unusable (e.g. email address bounced back). In still others, the channel existed, but it placed requirements on requesters that we were unable to satisfy, such as providing identification card numbers corresponding to the individual. As these requirements changed over time, the sample size for each study varies from 230 to 260 prefectures, a potential source of bias we examine in the results section.

Table 1: Constituency service requests in the audit

Wave	Fielded	Citizen identity	Service requested	N
1	2012 July	Unemployed	Accessing poverty relief	258
2	2013 May	Unemployed	Accessing poverty relief	235
3	2013 June	Migrant worker	Minimum wage regulations	260
4	2013 July	Recent graduate	Starting new business	230
5	2013 August	Entrepreneur	Business tax information	242

Notes. Key features of the five waves of the field audit. In total, local agencies received 1,225 letters. Translations of each letter are presented in Appendix B.

3 China’s constituency service in comparative perspective

China’s prefectural governments provided a relatively high level of responsiveness to citizen requests for information. The Mayor’s Mailbox offered useful information in response

to 43% (528 of 1,225) appeals for assistance in the policy queries described above. Clustering errors by prefecture, this yields a 95% confidence interval of 39% to 47% for the response rate. A typical informative response to the query about accessing income assistance (above) is given below.

Dear Comrade,

Whether you qualify for Minimum Livelihood Guarantee (*dibao*) depends on your household income, and you should apply on behalf of your household. According to the new standard implemented this year, if your household income is lower than 350 yuan per month (urban) or 2000 yuan per year (rural), you are eligible to apply for *dibao*.

The application process is as follows: an applicant submits an application, and the street committee or work unit processes the application. Then the district or township government approves or rejects the application. If approved, *dibao* certificates will be distributed and you will be informed on how to collect the *dibao* cash transfer.

Prefectural Bureau of Civil Affairs

The responsiveness of China's mayors' offices falls squarely in the middle of the findings in previous field audits of service in democracies (Table 2). The majority of studies have taken place in the United States, where the highest responsiveness (78%) came from local election commissions contacted in Faller, Nathan and White (2013). When it comes to state legislators and congresspeople, response rates were much closer to what we observe in contemporary China, ranging from 19% to 52%. Several of these studies inquired about politicians' policy positions, an inquiry that generally produces lower response rates than service requests (Butler, Karpowitz and Pope 2012). This may explain the very low responsiveness of Brazilian candidates in Spada et al. (2012). China's mayors' offices also exhibit

greater responsiveness than the Italian bureaucrats contacted in Putnam (1994).

Table 2: Field audits of constituency service

Country	Subjects	Issue	Service rate	Study
U.S.	Election officials	Voter identification	78%	Faller, Nathan and White (2013)
U.S.	State legislators	Voter registration	57%	Butler and Broockman (2011)
U.S.	Congresspeople	Immigration	52%	Butler, Karpowitz and Pope (2012)
U.S.	State legislators	Immigration	51%	Butler, Karpowitz and Pope (2012)
China	Mayors	Benefits and regulations	43%	-
U.S.	State legislators	Unemployment	42%	Broockman (2013)
U.S.	Congresspeople	Positions: immigration	38%	Butler, Karpowitz and Pope (2012)
Italy	Local bureaucrats	Policy implementation	33%	Putnam (1994)
Brazil	Mayoral candidates	Position: tax policy	29%	Spada and Guimarães (2013)
S. Africa	Local councillors	Infrastructure	22%	McClendon (2013 <i>b</i>)
U.S.	State legislators	Positions: immigration	19%	Butler, Karpowitz and Pope (2012)
Brazil	Local/federal candidates	Positions: unemployment	14%	Spada et al. (2012)

China’s mayors offices are comparably responsive to those of many politicians in established democracies, at least when responding to requests for information. However, local context must be kept in mind when interpreting these comparisons. Prefectural governments in China are large bureaucracies with expenditures in the hundreds of millions of dollars. They have massive financial and human resources at their disposal, should they choose to dedicate them to providing high-quality constituency service. In contrast, local legislators generally have relatively limited staff and resources to provide service to their constituents. Chinese prefectural jurisdictions are also relatively large, averaging nearly four million residents, compared to 711 thousand residents in the average U.S. congressional district in 2010.⁷ Service provided through the Mayor’s Mailbox in China’s prefectures takes place at a larger scale in terms of both government resources and the population served.

⁷<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-08.pdf>

4 Empirical strategy

To investigate the determinants of constituency service quality in China and to test the state capacity, economic modernization, and social conflict hypotheses, we estimate regression models of government responsiveness, using the geographic variation across prefectures to explore the correlates of high-quality service. Our model (Equation 1) combines the five studies such that Y_{ik} indicates whether the government in prefecture i provided a helpful response in study k . Our key explanatory variables are prefectural socioeconomic indicators (X_i). We also include study fixed effects (η_k). Each wave of the audit also had experimental manipulations that are peripheral to the research question of the present study; we adjust for them by including each experiment’s binary treatment indicator (D_{ik}) as control. The random assignment of experimental treatments means that D_{ik} is not, in expectation, correlated with unobservable prefectural characteristics that might drive variation in service quality. The effects of interest are estimated by β .

$$(1) \quad Y_{ik} = \beta X_i + \lambda D_{ik} + \eta_k + \varepsilon_{ik}$$

We first present a variety of OLS regression models, including combinations of the explanatory variables and province fixed-effects. To address possible misspecification bias, we then compare the OLS estimates to those obtained from kernel-regularized least squares (KRLS) (Hainmueller and Hazlett 2013). KRLS is a machine-learning estimation procedure that allows for higher-order interactions between predictors, nonlinearity, and heterogeneous marginal effects, while also yielding easy to interpret marginal effects. We employ KRLS to address the possibility that the effects we detect are the result of model misspecification.

We measure economic modernization with the proportion of local economy accounted for by the primary sector as opposed to the secondary and tertiary sectors. Primary sector

economic activity includes farming, forestry, animal husbandry, and fishing. Manufacturing, construction, mining, and utilities comprise the secondary sector, and all remaining activity falls into the tertiary (service) sector. The growth of the secondary and tertiary sectors are standard indicators of modernization and appear in China's official evaluation rubric for municipal modernization (Landry 2008, 83).

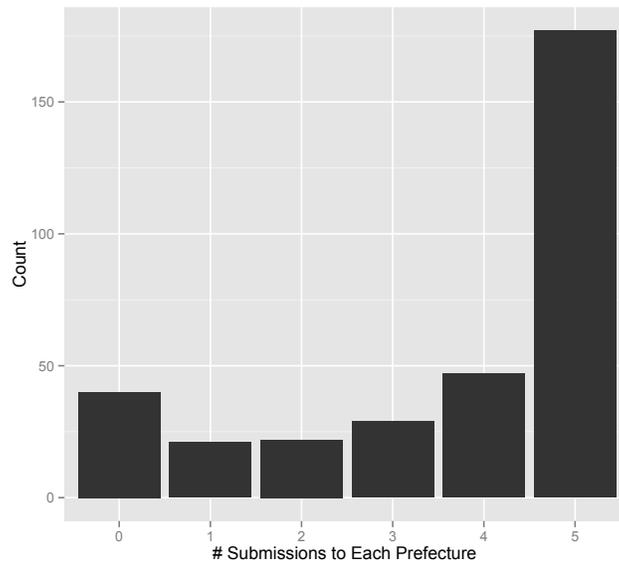
To measure local social unrest, we use data on local labor protests from media reports and labor organizations collected by the China Strikes project (Elfstrom 2012). This is not a geographical census of labor unrest, and its reliance on these civil society organizations likely introduces some urban bias. Nonetheless, it represents one of the richer public sources of data on local social conflict in China. In total, the dataset records 769 labor protests across 177 prefectures the period 2008-2012. Labor unrest is a particularly salient form of social instability due to the symbolic link between Communist authority and labor, the history of workers' movements in overthrowing authoritarian regimes, and the sheer number of migrant wage laborers in contemporary China.

To measure local government capacity we use prefectural government revenue (per capita). Local fiscal revenue offers a more direct measure of government capacity than GDP and is arguably less subject to political manipulation (Lü and Landry N.d.). Finally, as the Mayor's Mailbox is an online channel of communication, we also explore whether service quality may be explained by the level of Internet development across prefectures. We measure the local Internet development by broadband Internet subscribers (per capita). Measures of Internet subscribers, labor protests, and government revenue are all logged to produce near-normal distributions. Summary statistics of these variables are shown in Appendix A.

Our outcome measure is a binary indicator of whether the government agency provided a helpful response to a request for assistance (1) or not (0). In individual studies we developed more detailed measures of the helpfulness of government responses. However, due to variation in the letters, these scales are not intuitively comparable across studies. The

binary indicator of helpful responses offers a relatively straightforward way of aggregating outcome data across studies, at the cost of reducing variation in the dependent variable. When we were unable to submit a request to a prefecture, that prefecture-study observation is excluded from our analysis. We were able to submit all five requests to 177 prefectures in total; 40 prefectures were excluded entirely from the audit (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Number of submitted requests by prefecture



Notes. Histogram of service requests successfully submitted to each prefecture in the field audit. All five service requests were submitted to 177 prefectures, while 40 prefectures received zero requests. Variation in the number of successful submissions reflects variation in the design and connectivity of local government websites over time. $N = 336$.

5 Results

Both local social unrest and economic modernity are correlated with improved constituency service (Table 3). Local government revenue, although a bivariate predictor, has no effect after controlling for the other factors. To examine whether our variables of interest are confounded by regional characteristics, we also estimate models with province fixed-effects. Provincial governments have a great deal of influence over prefectural politics, including the

power to appoint mayors (Landry 2008). The effects are robust to the fixed-effects specification, and the magnitude of the effect of economic modernity increases. Internet development, plausibly correlated with economic modernization, is a bivariate predictor of service quality, but its effects shrink to statistical insignificance in the full model. ⁸

Table 3: Predictors of service quality, OLS models

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Primary sector share	-.673*** (.207)				-.582* (.327)	-1.182*** (.399)
Strikes (log)		.101*** (.021)			.090*** (.028)	.065** (.032)
Broadband per cap. (log)			.063*** (.024)		.018 (.035)	-.053 (.046)
Govt revenue per cap. (log)				.050** (.023)	-.044 (.039)	-.047 (.043)
Study FE/treatments	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Province FE						✓
R-squared	0.026	0.037	0.021	0.019	0.044	0.145
Prefectures	296	296	293	296	293	293
N	1225	1225	1212	1225	1212	1212

Notes. OLS regression estimates with standard errors clustered by prefecture shown in parentheses. The outcome is whether local government responded to a request for constituency service with helpful information (1) or not (0).

Table 4 investigates whether these effects are the product of model specification decisions using KRLS. The effects of economic modernization and social stability on constituency service are robust to this alternative estimation procedure, both with and without provincial fixed-effects. Neither state capacity nor Internet development are predictors of service quality in these flexible models.⁹

⁸Keeping in mind that estimates might be affected by the incidental parameters problems (Greene 2004), we have also run the above analyses using logistic regressions (See Table A2). Estimates are similar to those in the OLS models.

⁹Note that fixed effects in KRLS require a slightly different interpretation than in linear models; they allow for complex interactions of other predictors with the unit effects.

Table 4: Predictors of service quality, alternative estimation procedures

	OLS	KRLS	OLS	KRLS
Primary sector share	-.582* (.327)	-.248*** (.094)	-1.182*** (.399)	-.511*** (.102)
Strikes (log)	.090*** (.028)	.045*** (.011)	.065** (.032)	.031*** (.012)
Broadband per cap. (log)	.018 (.035)	.006 (.010)	-.053 (.046)	-.012 (.011)
Govt revenue per cap. (log)	-.044 (.039)	-.006 (.009)	-.047 (.043)	.001 (.009)
Study FE/treatments	✓	✓	✓	✓
Province FE			✓	✓
R-squared	0.044	0.059	0.145	0.264
Prefectures	293	293	293	293
N	1212	1212	1212	1212

Alternative hypotheses

One alternative hypothesis holds that urbanized areas receive better service due to the desire to coopt socioeconomic elites. Socioeconomic elites have been implicated in a number of revolutionary democratizing movements (Gandhi 2008), and previous research on authoritarian institutions repeatedly highlights the importance of coopting elites (Lust-Okar 2005; Magaloni 2006). If constituency service is intended primarily for elite cooptation, we would expect service quality to vary based on the socioeconomic status of the citizen making the request. Our audit used citizen aliases from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, from migrant workers to recent university graduates and entrepreneurs. However, we found almost no variation in response rate across these social identities (Table 6). In fact, migrant workers and university graduates enjoyed nearly identical response rates of 45.0% and 45.2%, respectively. We fail to find evidence of status-driven distortions to service.¹⁰

¹⁰In contrast, Distelhorst and Hou (2014) found citizen ethnic identity affected government responsiveness; officials were 33% less likely to reply to letters from an apparently Muslim name. This effect is interpreted as ingroup ethnic bias, rather than bias due to socioeconomic status. The apparent irrelevance of status distinctions in this study is consistent with that interpretation.

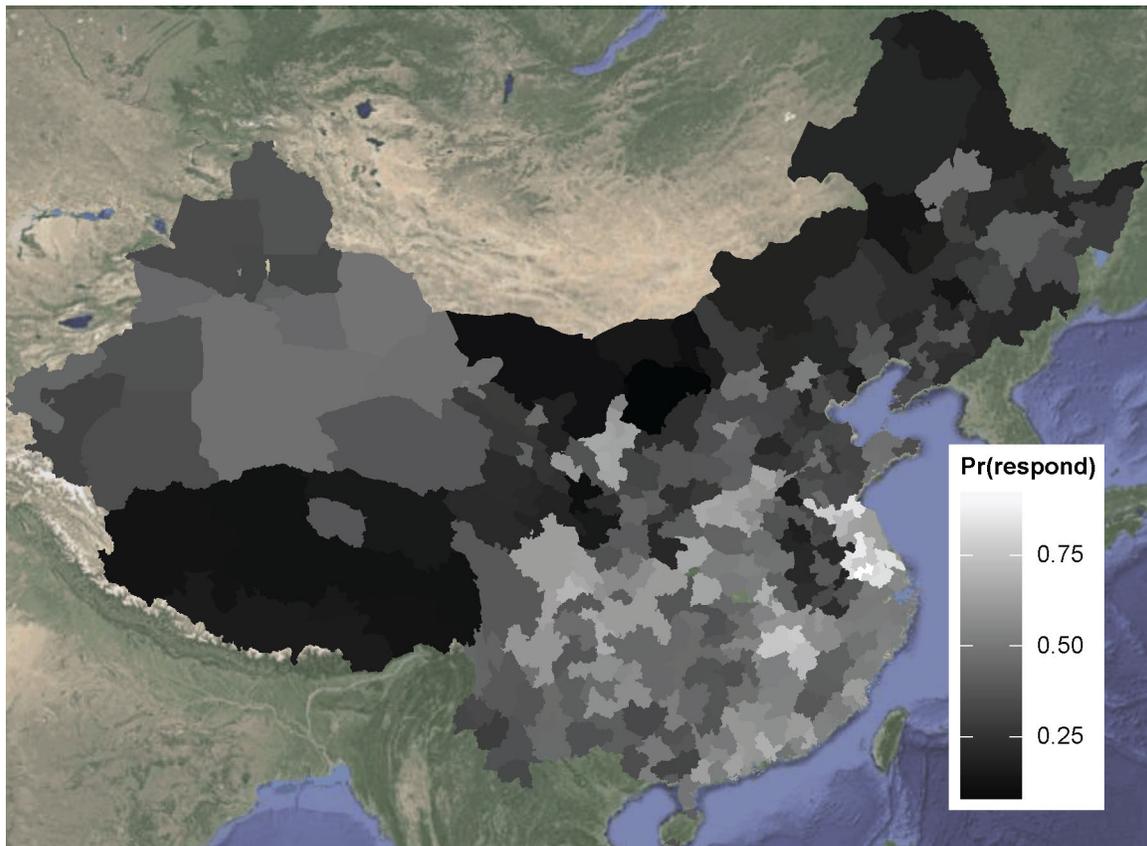
Table 5: Service quality by citizen socioeconomic status

Wave	Citizen identity	Socioeconomic status	N	Service provided
1	Unemployed	Low	258	43.0%
2	Unemployed	Low	235	41.3%
3	Migrant worker	Low	260	45.0%
4	Recent college grad	Medium	230	45.2%
5	Entrepreneur	High	242	40.9%

Another alternative account might hold that China is characterized by distinctive regional variation in governance or political culture (Goodman 1997) that may correlate with our measure of economic modernization. Specifically, China’s eastern coastal provinces are frequently credited with enjoying superior governance in a variety of dimensions, and these provinces also have larger industrial and service sectors. Examining a map of the predicted probability of local responsiveness to the letters in the audit (Figure 3), we do find that southeastern China exhibits higher-quality institutions than northeastern or southwestern regions. At the same time, there are relatively responsive prefectures in central China as well. Moreover, if these distinctive regional features explained the estimated effects of economic modernization, we would expect modernization’s effects to attenuate upon the inclusion of province fixed-effects. Instead, the effect of modernization strengthens after controlling for unobserved province-level confounders.

In summary, improvements in service quality associated with economic modernization and social conflict are robust to several model specification decisions, and we find little evidence for accounts based on local state capacity, Internet development, cooptation of socioeconomic elites, or the distinctive features of China’s regions.

Figure 3: Predicted probability of response by prefecture



Notes. Estimated probabilities of response for each prefecture in the study. White is 100% probability of responding to a letter, and black is 0%. We obtain predicted values from the KRLS model with province fixed effects estimated in Table 4, column 4.

6 Discussion: citizen demand and service quality

This section proposes a demand-driven logic of constituency service in nondemocratic politics, drawing upon the results above and adding supplementary evidence from actual citizen letters to officials in China. This logic links local economic modernization and social instability to high-quality service institutions.

Nondemocratic states struggle to generate information about the behavior of their local agents, public approval of their policies, and sources of local discontent (Lorentzen 2013), issues which under democracy would be revealed through the electoral process. Under conditions of widespread political disengagement and repression of unpopular speech, preference falsification by the citizenry may lead officials to underestimate levels of public support, producing revolutionary movements that appear seemingly overnight (Kuran 1991; 1997). Nondemocracies respond to these informational challenges with a variety of institutions that gather information about society without providing openings for political challenge. Their information-gathering channels include technological and human surveillance (Morozov 2012), media freedoms (Lorentzen 2014; Egorov, Guriev and Sonin 2009; Distelhorst 2013), limited electoral contests (Magaloni 2006; Blaydes 2010), public opinion polling (Henn 1998), and even the toleration of certain protests (Lorentzen 2013).

Constituency service institutions contribute to resolving information problems in nondemocratic regimes. Citizen appeals to nondemocratic authorities help to transmit information from the “masses” to political elites (Luehrmann 2000; Dimitrov 2014; Chen 2012). We argue that these institutions are particularly well-suited for generating information about two specific issues: problems with policy implementation and social conflict. When dissatisfied with local policy, citizens naturally turn to the government as the party that makes and implements these policies. These complaints provide information that may not be readily available within the state, as the officials responsible for failing policies have significant

incentive to conceal their failures. The costliness of writing and submitting a complaint also makes these signals more credible than views expressed in public opinion polls.

Service institutions also provide useful information on social conflicts that may precede episodes of unrest or disruption of public order. Citizens appeals request the intervention of political officials into their disputes with government agencies, employers, business partners, and other economic actors. These conflicts, if unresolved, may lead parties to seek extra-institutional means to resolve conflict, including the use of private violence and other acts of social disruption.

When service institutions are functioning well, citizens proactively provide information about themselves and society to government agencies. However, unlike covert surveillance or media coverage, the informational value of constituency service depends crucially upon the voluntary actions of citizens. Nondemocratic governments must therefore nurture public engagement with service channels to sustain these voluntary flows of information. While the state can initially promote use of these institutions through the media, sustaining voluntary engagement requires that service institutions offer some probability of resolving the issues these citizens raise.¹¹ If constituency service institutions are ineffective, citizens have little incentive to reveal their problems to officials and disengage with these institutions, robbing the state of valuable information.

The informational benefits of constituency service are sustained only when the institutions satisfy some proportion of the appeals they receive. This logic links state supply of constituency service to citizen demand. When demand for service is relatively low, the government can offer relatively low quality service while only inducing a small sector of the public to become politically disengaged. However, when demand is high, higher qual-

¹¹Dimitrov (2014) contains a thoughtful discussion of citizens' incentive to complain as a function of their trust in central authorities. In our model, citizens' incentive to complain depends upon the perceived probability that complaining will lead to the satisfactory resolution of their grievance, dispute, or question. High trust in either central or local political authorities could contribute to this belief, but citizens' perception of this probability may be influenced by other factors as well.

ity institutions are required to prevent politically disengagement from spreading across the society.¹²

This demand-driven logic of constituency service is especially helpful for understanding the empirical link between economic modernization and improved service. Two factors tie industrialization in China to increased pressure on constituency service. The first involves the bureaucratization of public goods provision in the move from rural to industrial economies. In China, the agricultural sector remains dominated by small household farms organized into villages with populations in the hundreds or low thousands. In this setting, the local community is one important provider of public goods and services. Village projects account for a significant portion of local public goods, including contributions to roads, irrigation, schools, and sanitation projects (Tsai 2007; Luo et al. 2007). The provision of public goods in these small communities is relatively communal and personalized, with few layers of bureaucracy between individuals and public-goods providers. These communal features of rural China permit informal institutions such as lineage groups and clans to play an important role in the provision of public goods (Tsai 2007) and enforcement of property rights (Mattingly 2014).

In urban China the prefectural government and its subordinate agencies are responsible for delivering these same public goods. They serve millions of individuals, with duties distributed across a variety of specialized agencies: transportation, industry and commerce, public works, social security, etc. This inserts bureaucracies and bureaucratic processes between citizens and access to public goods. As in other modern regulatory states, Chinese citizens in industrialized areas find themselves living “in a red tape era in which a lot of

¹²To illustrate the relationship between citizen demand, service quality, and the scale of political disengagement, imagine that a government replies to 50% of all letters it receives and that citizens whose letters are ignored by government become disillusioned and unwilling to use the institution in the future. If 10% of the public makes requests, then only 5% become disengaged. However, if 90% of the public attempts to use the institution, 45% will become disengaged. If we assume that the upper limit on political disengagement is constant across localities, it follows that localities with greater demand must reply to a larger proportion of requests.

people can't get through the bureaucracy" (Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina 1987). Citizens demand constituency service to overcome this confusion and the disconnect between large government organizations and the publics they serve.

In addition to the bureaucratization of public goods provision, a significant share of China's emerging social welfare system is distributed through formal employment relationships characteristic of industrial and service sector economic activity. These benefits are the subject of a significant proportion of actual citizen service requests, including programs such as employer-sponsored housing accounts, maternity leave subsidies, and work injury insurance. Citizens in economically modernized areas are therefore eligible for a wider range of government programs, which deliver benefits but also create confusion and grievances about their administration.

Increased bureaucratization and eligibility for a wide range benefits drive increased demand for constituency service (policy explanations, assistance dealing with recalcitrant bureaucracies, etc.) in the economically modernized regions of China. Governments of modernized jurisdictions must respond to this demand with higher-quality service or risk political disengagement of a growing proportion of the public. In rural areas, where a narrower range of services are delivered through smaller political communities, governments can afford to have relatively weaker service channels without alienating a large segment of the public.

A similar logic holds for the relationship between social conflict and service quality. High levels of social conflict also place increased pressure on these institutions to resolve disputes. Governments respond with improved institutions as they strive to both gather information and minimize politically disengagement among the parties to conflicts. Service institutions provide an opportunity for government actors to intercede in disputes before the parties turn to extra-institutional tactics, and they also offer information about the sources of conflict that may allow for policy adaptation. The state's demand for information is further exacerbated in high-conflict settings by its need to clamp down on the news media,

in order to limit the threat of coordination (Lorentzen 2014). Thus, where the local social conflict is high, governments provide higher-quality constituency service.

Consistent with this information-driven theory of constituency service, our audit showed that localities with higher economic modernization and more intense social conflict were more likely to provide higher quality constituency service. A second observable implication is that citizen requests should deal with the policy problems described and episodes of social conflict. While we cannot present a similarly complete audit of citizen letters to officials, we can examine a sample publicly-posted appeals to local officials. Many local governments post letters received through the Mayor's Mailbox to their websites. This serves as a public demonstration of government responsiveness and also offers helpful information to would-be contacters. We collected and analyzed 100 publicly-posted letters from ten randomly-sampled prefectures across China.

Citizen appeals to the Mayor's Mailbox fell into three broad categories. They predominantly seek help with problems surrounding state-provided public goods, including social benefits, infrastructure, and economic regulation. The second-largest pool of requests asks for officials to intercede in disputes with other social actors or agencies. Finally, a small minority deals directly with political corruption.

First, citizens predominantly requested help or information surrounding public goods provided by government. Service requests on public goods were highly diverse and can be further subdivided into three groups. The most common requests (34%) dealt with access to social services and benefits, including health insurance, housing subsidies, disability benefits, employment training, work-injury insurance, pension payments, maternity benefits, and education. The requests included a mixture of grievances, in which citizens complained about not receiving the benefits they believed themselves entitled to, and policy inquiries that sought to clarify conditions of eligibility and other issues. The Chinese government is deeply involved in the provision of these social benefits, especially in cities, and citizens

therefore have substantial bureaucratic hurdles to overcome in accessing them.

Table 6: Content of citizen service requests

Content	%	Example quotes
Public goods and policy		
Social benefits: education, health insurance, pensions, subsidies, public housing	34%	• <i>How can I access the Delayed Parenthood subsidy?</i> • <i>...my employer did not contribute to my housing fund.</i> • <i>What is the subsidy for returning farmland to forest?</i>
Infrastructure: roads, public transportation, utilities	23%	• <i>The heating...leaves rooms extremely cold</i> • <i>Can you pave a two-kilometer concrete road for us?</i> • <i>It is a “three-without” village: without school, without medical clinic, and without phone service or internet.</i>
Regulation: public order, environmental regulation, certifications	23%	• <i>The Mah-Jongg House is disturbing public order</i> • <i>...the natural gas station often shortchanges customers, and the government makes no inquiries.</i>
Economic disputes	17%	• <i>...but irrigation was obstructed by local villager Du Guang and other illegal miners.</i> • <i>...it is already over one year since the contracted date for handing over the property.</i>
Reporting corruption	4%	• <i>You can come investigate; there are many sham village committees.</i> • <i>They did not allow villagers working outside the village [to vote by proxy]. Is such an election valid?</i>

Notes. Content of 100 letters from citizens to the Mayor’s Mailbox in ten randomly-sampled prefectures (May 2014). Some letters include multiple topics, and percentages do not sum to one.

A second major focus of public goods appeals was public infrastructure (23%). Appeals for service cite problems with roads, public transportation, parks, heating, and water supply. Infrastructure complaints pertain to both provision (“...when will the Jinxing village road be laid?”) and maintenance (“...why aren’t the lights on either side of Qingyun Road installed yet?”). A third focus of letters (23%) is regulatory and legal activities. These appeals deal with policing public order, enforcement of environmental regulations, profes-

sional certifications, family planning policies, and administration of the civil service. Taken together, letters about public goods and services account for 76% of all letters in our sample.

Aside from public goods problems, appeals also request that local governments intercede in a variety of economic disputes (17%). Citizens wrote the mayor's office about disputes with employers, businesses, service providers like hospitals and schools, and even other government bodies. For example, one farmer complained about insufficient compensation for fields reclaimed by the village. "Just before harvest, the village suddenly decided to build a reservoir, and they were only willing to offer 500 yuan in compensation. Where is the justice?" Conflicts over real estate were frequent surrounding fees and maintenance.

Finally, some appeals contained explicit accusations of corrupted officials or political processes. Only a small minority of letters (4%) reported corruption, but they stood out for their detail. Three letters reported an allegedly corrupted village election: "...[the village] stripped nearly 100 people working outside the village of their voting rights. I hope that the busy leaders will take time to come verify this and restore our rights." Another accused village officials of fraud in a program intended to compensate villagers for the conservation of farmland.

Letters on both disputes and corruption provide information on potential threats to social stability. One letter recounted a dispute with an employer that led to the threat of violent confrontation: "...when we arrived we saw that the mine had arranged for over fifty mafia thugs to threaten us! Forget about talking thing over! On seeing that the situation was dangerous we called 110, but over one hour later no police had arrived on the scene." Another letter explicitly threatened officials with going to their bureaucratic superiors: "If there is no result from the related department at the prefectural level, we will proceed to report to higher levels [of government], reporting all the way to Beijing." By providing an opportunity to mediate these disputes, an effectively functioning Mayor's Mailbox helps local officials to reduce the potential for local social conflict and petitioning to higher levels.

We find that citizens use the Mayor’s Mailbox to seek help with unsatisfactory public policies and various disputes. This helps to explain why local economic modernization predicts increased service quality. In economically modern areas, citizens have greater demand for assistance overcoming bureaucratic hurdles to receive high-quality public goods and social benefits. We also show citizens do transmit information about their disputes to the government via this institution, consistent with the idea that constituency service plays a role in the management of social stability.

7 Conclusion

In the absence of an electoral connection between citizens and officials, constituency service in nondemocracies demands its own theoretical framework. Our field audit demonstrated nondemocratic constituency service is surprisingly responsive to citizen queries, with comparable performance to institutions in both rich and developing democracies (Table 2). We found that service quality is correlated with both economic modernization and social conflict. To help interpret these results, we proposed that service institutions in nondemocracies are important information-gathering tools for the political regime. However, in order to sustain these flows of information from the public, service institutions must be minimally responsive to their appeals.

While these empirical results are consistent with an information-driven theory of constituency service, there are important limitations to drawing causal inferences from cross-sectional studies utilizing observational data. Flexible estimation procedures like KRLS help to address the issue of misspecification bias, but they cannot overcome concerns about omitted variable bias, as neither economic modernization nor local social conflict are randomly assigned to localities. It remains possible that unobserved confounders are responsible for the observed correlations between constituency service and China’s more economically modern

and socially fractious prefectures. While we believe we have controlled for the prime suspects in this study—variation in total government capacity, diffusion of Internet access, and provincial confounders—future work may investigate each claim using designs that deliver more compelling causal inference.

This study also yields an original measure of subnational government responsiveness in contemporary China. These data may be profitably combined with other streams of research on China’s subnational political institutions, including recent work on fiscal extraction (Lü and Landry N.d.), legislative bodies (Truex 2014; Manion 2013), and career incentives for cadres (Landry 2008; Shih, Adolph and Liu 2012).

Emphasizing the role of economic modernization in authoritarian state-society relations revises a recent emphasis in political science on social stability as the core issue in nondemocratic political economy. While our results acknowledge the importance of social conflict, they also highlight how broader changes state-society relations associated with urbanization and modernization alter the relationship between officials and the public. The informational incentives described in our theory link economic modernization to improved constituency service. The gathering of information and resulting improvements in local governance may reduce the incidence of anti-regime collective action in the long-run, but in the short term the information these institutions provide has little direct linkage to the logic of preventing collective action. None of the service requests in our field audit appeared likely to generate episodes of social instability, yet local governments still responded to nearly half of them.

Our theory departs from the traditional modernization hypothesis, which directly links economic development to political democracy; “...all the various aspects of economic development-industrialization, urbanization, wealth, and education-are so closely interrelated as to form one major factor which has the political correlate of democracy” (Lipset 1960, 41). This observation ignited a long-running debate on the effects of economic growth on

political transitions to democratic rule (Przeworski 2000; Epstein et al. 2006; Acemoglu et al. 2009). In contrast, our theory suggests that modernization promotes political development—improved responsiveness to citizen appeals—*within* nondemocratic institutions. We see this finding as part of a growing literature that treats the delivery of normative political goods under nondemocracy, including government accountability (Tsai 2007) and political representation (Truex 2014; Manion 2013), as open empirical questions that merit comparative study.

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Appendix A: Additional tables

Table A1: Summary statistics of covariates

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Primary sector share	1225	.154	.093	.001	.621
Strikes	1225	2.411	7.852	0	86
Strikes (log)	1225	.681	.818	0	4.466
Broadband per cap.	1212	.095	.119	.003	1.337
Broadband per cap. (log)	1212	-2.736	.845	-5.879	.290
Govt revenue per cap.	1225	.203	.312	.014	3.581
Govt revenue per cap. (log)	1225	-2.098	.935	-4.273	1.276

Notes. Summary statistics of prefectural characteristics. Primary sector share denotes the proportion primary sector contributes to the local economic output. Strikes (log) takes the logarithm of the total number of local episodes of labor unrest (plus one) documented in the China Strikes project (Elfstrom 2012). Broadband per capita (log) takes the logarithm of the local proportion of broadband Internet subscribers. Government revenue per capita (log) takes the logarithm of prefectural government revenue, measured in 10,000 Yuan per capita. Socioeconomic data from *China Statistical Yearbook for Regional Economy* (2010, China Statistics Press).

Table A2: Robustness Check: Logistic Regressions

	OLS	Logit	OLS	Logit
Primary sector share	-.582* (.327)	-2.607* (1.513)	-1.182*** (.399)	-6.284*** (2.104)
Strikes (log)	.090*** (.028)	.376*** (.120)	.065** (.032)	.285** (.145)
Broadband per cap.(log)	.018 (.035)	.077 (.152)	-.053 (.046)	-.235 (.209)
Govt revenue per cap.(log)	-.044 (.039)	-.196 (.172)	-.047 (.043)	-.267 (.213)
Study FE/treatments	✓	✓	✓	✓
Province FE			✓	✓
Prefectures	293	293	293	293
N	1212	1212	1212	1203

Notes. Columns 1 and 3 are OLS estimates reported in Table 3. Columns 2 and 4 show estimates using logistic models.

Appendix B: Letters submitted in the audit

The letter for the first wave of the audit is reported in the body text. The following letters were submitted in the remaining four waves.

B1 Minimum livelihood guarantee

Respected Mayor:

Hello! I am from a disadvantaged household. No matter how hard I look I cannot find stable work. I want to inquire: what conditions do you need to satisfy in this city to collect Minimum Livelihood Guarantee? Can I apply?

I await the Mayor's reply. Thank you!

Name

B2 Business taxation policies

Respected Leader:

I am a local private entrepreneur in the industry of IT service. I heard that the business-tax to value-added tax reform is going to roll out in selected cities nationwide. My firm will be directly affected by this policy.

When will my firm be affected by this policy?

Thank you,

Name

B3 Starting a new business

Dear Leader:

I am a college graduate who graduated last year. Now I am thinking about starting my own business. I am wondering whether our local government has any policies that support new business started by university graduates?

Thank you,
Name

B4 Minimum wage regulations

Greetings Respected Leader:

As a non-local, I do not understand the local minimum wage regulations. If I sign a one-year contract with a one-month trial period, what is the local minimum wage during the trial period? The friends around me also do not understand the relevant regulations; it seems that many labor policies have not been publicized to migrant workers. A friend recommended that I write to you.

I hope you will set aside time to pay attention to the situation of migrant workers. Waiting for your reply!

Name