

Chinese State Media Persuades a Global Audience That the “China Model” Is Superior: Evidence from a 19-Country Experiment*

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January 25, 2024

Forthcoming, *American Journal of Political Science*

Key words: Authoritarianism, democracy promotion, media, propaganda, influence operations, public opinion, China

*We are grateful to Frances Rosenbluth for her tireless mentorship, support, and friendship. This paper is dedicated to her memory. We thank Sarah Bush, Yusaku Horiuchi, and Jennifer Pan, for comments on the manuscript, as well as audiences at APSA, Chicago, Michigan, and the U.S. Department of State. We are especially grateful to Ashrakat Elshehawy, Sofia Elverdin, Rand Al Hussaini, Salma Mousa, Islam Ragab, and Jenniffer Vargas Reina for valuable suggestions and for help validating the Arabic and Spanish translations. All errors remain our own. Finally, we are grateful for funding from The Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies and the Council on East Asian Studies at Yale. This study was pre-registered with the Center for Open Science Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/3h2bu/> and was determined to be exempt from review by the Yale Institutional Review Board (Protocol #2000031919).

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Abstract

Many are skeptical of the appeal of authoritarian political systems. We argue that global audiences will embrace authoritarian models when they believe that autocracies can meet governance challenges better than democracies. We collect comprehensive data on the external messaging of the Chinese and American governments. We then conduct a randomized experiment in 19 countries across 6 continents exposing global citizens to real messages from the Chinese and American governments' external media arms. We find that exposure to a representative set of Chinese messages strengthens perceptions that the Chinese Communist Party delivers growth, stability, and competent leadership. It also moves the average respondent from slightly preferring the American model to slightly preferring the Chinese model. In head-to-head matchups, messages from the U.S. government are less persuasive. Our findings show how autocracies build global support by selling growth and competence, with important implications for democratic resilience.

The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures and analyses in this article are available on the American Journal of Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CQ4FZR>.

Word Count: 9,809

In recent years, authoritarian regimes — most prominently Russia and China — have attempted to strengthen global support for non-democratic political systems (Hyde 2020). A core goal of the foreign messaging of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is to “help foreign people realize that the Chinese Communist Party is capable... and that socialism with Chinese characteristics is good.”¹ Similarly, the world’s other superpower, the United States, has long attempted to promote the value of its democratic system (Beaulieu and Hyde 2009; Bush 2015). Growing global competition between China and the United States has set up a potential clash of political systems — yet there is relatively little cross-national empirical evidence about whether China’s efforts to build global support for its political system work as intended.

In this article, we use observational and experimental evidence to characterize how China and the United States promote their political systems to foreign audiences, and to assess whether these messages change attitudes and beliefs. First, we analyze content from tens of thousands of videos from the Chinese and American governments’ foreign media operations. We show that Chinese media actively promote the benefits of China’s governance system for domestic economic growth, whereas the American government’s messaging highlights the merits of democracy for protecting civil liberties. In other words, we find a surprising divergence in the messaging strategies of the two states — the Chinese Communist Party attempts to directly sell the performance of its political system, while the United States’ messaging is not tailored to generate support for the American model.

Next, we use pre-registered experiments replicated across 19 countries on 6 continents to examine how this external media influences public opinion. We survey citizens of countries that represent a diverse range of contexts, including both low-income and high-income countries and autocracies and democracies. In the experiment, we randomly assign participants to one of four arms: a placebo group; a group where participants watch real

¹ See [People’s Daily Staff \(2021\)](#).

messages from the U.S. Department of State; a group where participants watch real messages from the China Global Television Network (CGTN), a state-sponsored news channel that broadcasts in seven languages across six continents (DiResta et al. 2020, 9); and a group where participants watch videos from both countries. In each case, we prominently label the source of each message as being the Chinese or American government. We test many videos in each arm, and use observational data from over 20,000 videos from the Chinese and American governments to demonstrate that the specific treatments we use draw on common messaging strategies for each regime.

The conventional wisdom is that the Chinese Communist Party “has promoted ... a parochial vision of national rejuvenation that has little international appeal” (Weiss 2019, 93) — yet we show that Chinese messages promoting its system to a global audience are strikingly successful. We find that viewing real Chinese state media messages strongly increases support for China’s political and economic models. Viewing Chinese media moves the average respondent from “slightly preferring” the American model to “slightly preferring” the Chinese model.² In other words, viewing Chinese media causes a majority of citizens to prefer China’s authoritarian model to the American democratic model. In head- to-head matchups with American state messages, global audiences move toward China, albeit less dramatically, suggesting that American messaging attenuates, but does not fully counter, the success of Chinese messaging. We also find that Chinese media makes especially striking gains among citizens in Africa and Latin America, two regions that, perhaps not coincidentally, have been a central focus of China’s global media outreach and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of Chinese investment, and where Sino-American competition is particularly pronounced (Blair, Marty and Roessler 2022; Hong and Horiuchi 2022).

We argue that China’s global propaganda is likely effective in part because of starkly

² This corresponds to a treatment effect of 1.04 on a 6-point scale where 1 indicates a strong preference for the United States and 6 indicates a strong preference for China

different messaging strategies, as our observational evidence reveals. The CCP's foreign-facing media portrays the Chinese system as effective at promoting growth and responding to the needs of its citizens. By contrast, American government propaganda is less aggressive in selling the domestic economic benefits of the American system (see also Section 3.2) and more concerned with promoting civil liberties and foreign investment in the United States. There is broad support among global audiences for democratic values such as voting for national leaders and the right to free speech. At the same time, when assessing the merits of political systems, citizens also put considerable weight on competent government performance, including promoting growth. As a result, Chinese messages can move audiences towards preferring China's authoritarian model over the American democratic model. However, China still faces substantial hurdles for shifting global opinion, since viewership of Chinese media remains low, and domestic political elites play an important role in shaping public opinion (Blaydes and Linzer 2012).

This article contributes to our understanding of influence operations by authoritarian regimes; specifically, we show how China's messaging about domestic economic success persuades a global audience of the merits of its political system. We build upon prior studies in international relations on the role of public opinion in foreign policy (e.g., Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017; Tomz and Weeks 2020a, 2021; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo 2020; Incerti et al. 2021); influence operations by authoritarian regimes (e.g., Corstange and Marinov 2012; Tomz and Weeks 2020a; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo 2020; Golovchenko et al. 2020; Bush and Prather 2020; Carter and Carter 2021; Elshehawy et al. 2021; Goodman 2022); and the effectiveness of public diplomacy (e.g., Brazys and Dukalskis 2019; Goldsmith, Horiuchi and Matush 2021; Mattingly and Sundquist 2022; Green-Riley 2022; Rhee, Crabtree and Horiuchi 2023). We show how foreign audiences evaluate political systems on their perceived domestic performance, with important implications for growing Sino-

American political competition.³ As George Kennan wrote in his “X Article” on great power conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States, competition between political systems depends on perceptions of domestic success — the United States, [Kennan \(1946\)](#) wrote, “need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation.” Our findings suggest that today, as in the prior era of great power competition, domestic performance shapes international perceptions of the validity of different political models.

1 How Does External State Media Shape Global Attitudes Towards Autocracy and Democracy?

Recent years have seen a wave of interest in understanding foreign influence operations by authoritarian regimes. Research shows that authoritarian regimes often attempt to manipulate or interfere in elections ([Hyde 2020](#)). One common tactic used by authoritarian regimes, especially Russia, is to prop up populist candidates and stoke domestic political divisions ([Bubeck and Marinov 2017](#); [Golovchenko et al. 2020](#); [Elshehawy et al. 2021](#)). When electoral interference harms the preferred party of citizens and benefits their opponents, citizens become more willing to condemn interference ([Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo 2020](#)), less optimistic about democracy ([Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo 2020](#)), less trusting of the quality of elections ([Bush and Prather 2022](#)), more politically active ([Goodman 2022](#)), and less supportive of close relations and economic engagement with the external actor ([Corstange and Marinov 2012](#); [Bush and Prather 2020](#)).

This line of research has largely left unanswered the question of whether and how China has attempted to sell the merits of its political system. This gap is important in part because,

³ Our work builds on [Goldfien, Joseph and McManus \(2023\)](#) who argue that domestic political choices have implications for perceptions of resolve in international conflicts.

as we illustrate later in this paper, foreign-facing state media from China both explicitly and implicitly promotes the benefits of the Chinese model. Although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not generally attempt to engage in explicit “autocracy promotion” in the same way that the United States engages in democracy promotion ([Bush 2015](#); [Weiss 2019](#)), we demonstrate that the Chinese foreign-facing media does attempt to sell the merits of the Chinese political system without necessarily calling attention to its autocratic features.

Existing scholarship provides conflicting evidence about the effectiveness of Chinese efforts to shape foreign public opinion. [Blair, Marty and Roessler \(2022\)](#) show that proximity to Chinese-funded infrastructure projects is correlated with dimmer views of China. Similarly, [Hong and Horiuchi \(2022\)](#) show that after episodes of domestic repression in China, citizens in countries that receive BRI investment loans become especially critical of the PRC. [Green-Riley \(2022\)](#) shows how in the United States, exposure to Confucius Institute language training led to a significant backlash against China among high school students. These findings would lead us to expect weak or even backlash effects from Chinese attempts to sell its political system abroad. On the other hand, [Brazys and Dukalskis \(2019\)](#) show that spread of Confucius Institutes is correlated with more positive media coverage of China and more positive individual attitudes towards China. [Repnikova \(2022b\)](#) also shows how the language and cultural training offered by Confucius Institutes are “enticing” to an East African audience, although she cautions that maintaining the appeal of these programs may be challenging in the long run.

Importantly, existing studies do not directly examine the question of whether China’s attempts to promote the merits of its political system to an international audience are likely to succeed. This study examines Chinese efforts to sell the merits of its political system abroad. While the present study is focused on China, understanding whether these efforts succeed has potentially broader implications for democratic resilience.

2 How Competent Government Sells Authoritarianism

Some scholars argue that foreign audiences find authoritarian political models unappealing because of widespread support for democratic values like freedom of speech (e.g., [Way 2016](#)). By contrast, we argue that China can shift global attitudes in favor of its authoritarian model, in part by portraying its political system as delivering important governance outcomes like growth and responsiveness. When weighing the merits of different political systems, global audiences consider not just democratic values but also government performance.

We do not dispute that a global audience is likely to care about the democratic character of political systems. Prior research has shown how international audiences value freedom of speech and expression and other democratic values ([Kertzer et al. 2014](#); [Tomz and Weeks 2020b](#); [Green-Riley, Kruszewska-Eduardo and Fu 2022](#)). In response, the CCP does not explicitly portray its system as “authoritarian,” even if it highlights differences between its one-party system and the American political system. Given that global audiences are likely value freedom of speech, meaningful multi-party political competition, and the ability to vote for their national leadership, as a baseline hypothesis, we first posit that messages from the U.S. government will increase foreign citizens’ preference for the U.S. political and economic model (H1).⁴

At the same time, when assessing the merits of national systems, we hypothesize that global audiences also weigh government *performance*. Importantly, we expect that audiences care about whether governments can successfully shepherd economic growth, provide social stability, respond to citizen demands, and select competent political leaders. This builds on prior theories that show how experiencing economic growth can

⁴ Our hypotheses H1 and H2 differ slightly in wording and numbering from our pre-registration. However, the hypotheses are substantively identical with changes made for clarity of prose only.

build support for authoritarian political systems (Zhao 2009; Krishnarajan, Doucette and Andersen 2022), as well as research showing that authoritarian regimes selectively highlight good news about economic growth (Wallace 2016; Rozenas and Stukal 2019). Chinese messaging that portrays its one party system as an advantage for economic growth, responsiveness, and other domestic governance outcomes can potentially shape global opinion in their favor, even if audiences do not prefer other elements of authoritarian rule. Our second hypothesis (H2) is thus that messages from the CCP will increase foreign citizens' preference for the Chinese political and economic model. Improved perceptions of CCP responsiveness, competence, and stability may also improve perceptions of the Chinese model.

Do audiences find messages from authoritarian or democratic regimes more persuasive? In the real world, audiences are exposed to messages from multiple sources and must sort out on their own which ones they find the most persuasive. In reality, and beyond the bounds of the present study, domestic political elites also shape how audiences view messages from foreign powers, and audiences have a choice over what media to consume (Blaydes and Linzer 2012; de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2019). (See Section 6 on the study's scope conditions for further discussion.)

Here, we build on theories of persuasion, which suggests that the strength of prior beliefs influences the degree to which audiences will update their beliefs (e.g., DellaVigna and Gentzkow 2010; Broockman and Kalla 2022). The United States has been a global superpower for close to a century, and foreign audiences have been exposed to information about the American political system, and are likely to have strong priors (negative or positive) about it. In contrast, new information about China, which has only recently emerged as a global superpower and about which audiences may have weak priors, may cause audiences to update their prior beliefs in China's favor.⁵

⁵ See Figure A14, p A24, and Figure A15, p A25, which show that respondents demonstrate more accurate

Our third hypothesis (H3) is therefore that when exposed to competing messages from both the Chinese and U.S. governments, foreign citizens’ preferences will move toward the Chinese political and economic model. However, it should be noted that this hypothesis differs from our pre-registered hypothesis of no effect.⁶

Where will efforts to sell authoritarian models be most likely to succeed? One possibility is that China’s economic performance, stability, and responsiveness are most likely to be appealing in the developing world, where as [Repnikova \(2022a\)](#) notes, citizens may hope that their country will share the same “trajectory” of economic success as China. Hence, our fourth hypothesis (H4) is that external messaging from China will be most successful in developing regions. We pre-registered this regional subgroup analysis, but did not preregister a specific hypothesis specifying that effects would be strongest in the developing world.⁷

To examine regional differences, we survey developing countries in Africa and Latin America, a mix of high and low-income countries in Asia, and wealthier nations in North America, Europe, and the Middle East, as we elaborate further below. It is possible Chinese messaging will be most successful in Africa and Latin America, where the promise of a “shared developmental trajectory” with China is most appealing. At the same time, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — which promotes Chinese investment in developing countries — has sparked an anti-China backlash in some recipient countries ([Hong and Horiuchi 2022](#); [Blair, Marty and Roessler 2022](#)). It is also possible that Chinese media will be less effective in countries participating in BRI. However, this comparison of heterogeneous treatment effects will be observational in our empirical analyses, so we cannot make strong

beliefs about the

U.S. political system than the Chinese political system, on average.

⁶ We initially supposed that competing messages would cause audiences not to update in either direction. Our analysis here is exploratory in nature and requires further confirmatory testing.

⁷ This analysis should be considered exploratory and the underlying logic again requires further testing.

causal claims.

Why do these efforts succeed? Our fifth hypothesis (H5) is that Chinese messaging will be especially effective at improving perceptions of the Chinese government's *performance* and less effective at improving perceptions of the Chinese government's *democratic* character. (As we noted in our preregistration plan, the analysis of the mechanisms, while preregistered, should be considered exploratory.) One possibility is that global audiences exposed to China's external state media may find the Chinese system to be better at providing social stability, at responding to citizen demands, at selecting competent leadership, and at delivering economic growth, all of which are emphasized in China's external state media messaging. China's state media may be less effective at persuading audiences that the Chinese system is in some sense democratic, as Chinese media focuses on meritocracy and performance. By contrast, American messaging may be more likely to persuade audiences of the democratic character of the American political system, as this is a core focus of U.S. state media.

3 Chinese and American Efforts to Promote Their Systems

Before examining the results of our experiment, we first document *how* China and the United States each promote their respective political and economic systems. As we will demonstrate, American and Chinese governments use different messaging strategies, with Chinese messaging focusing more on strong domestic economic performance and American messaging less targeted at mass audiences and less focused on selling the benefits of the American model. The two governments also devote different levels of resources to the messages, with Chinese messaging having more resources and higher production values. An important contribution of our study is to show how the Chinese and American governments use different messaging strategies, with Chinese messaging being more targeted towards building support for the Chinese system than American messaging.

We begin with a qualitative overview of each country’s strategy. Then, we analyze content from tens of thousands of videos from each country’s external media arms to reach conclusions about popular messaging strategies. Our experimental design draws on some of the most popular messaging tropes from the Chinese and American governments, using real state media videos.

The use of real, representative media from each country is a noteworthy feature of our study that comes with trade-offs for its broader implications. On the one hand, this allows us to focus on the consequences of actual messaging each government uses, increasing the study’s internal validity. On the other hand, it makes generalizing beyond American and Chinese messaging more difficult. Indeed, the contrast between the two countries’ media is an apples-to-oranges comparison, given the very different nature of the messaging strategies, even if it is nonetheless the most relevant comparison for understanding Sino-American political competition.

3.1 Highlighting Performance to Promote the “China Model”

A primary goal of the external messaging of the CCP is to “tell the China story well” (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*). Chinese leaders see increasing its national soft power as “a state-driven, centrally organized endeavor” (Dukalskis 2021, 115).

China’s messaging strategy is in direct contrast to Russia’s. Where Russian messaging attempts to “destabiliz[e] adversaries by covertly fomenting chaos within their borders,” Chinese messaging aims to “project ... to the world a confident, inspirational image of the country and its leader” (DiResta et al. 2020, 3). Compared to Russia, Chinese media focuses more on positive stories about China than misinformation intended to sow discord.

Chinese foreign messaging mixes traditional broadcast media with the use of social media to amplify messages (Repnikova 2022b). On the broadcast side, CGTN maintains dozens of field offices and transmits in seven languages across six continents (DiResta

et al. 2020). On the social media side, CGTN maintains YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter accounts, as do other Chinese state-run media outlets including Xinhua News, China Daily, the People's Daily, and the Global Times. These five outlets have 3.7 billion views on YouTube alone. Madrid-Morales and Wasserman (2022) find that in 2020, 6.3% of Kenyan, 11% of Nigerian, and 7.1% of South African (all countries in our sample) survey respondents self-reported consumed media from CGTN in the past 7 days. Viewership of CGTN is not large, but is also non-negligible.

3.1.1 Observational Evidence on Chinese Messaging

What are typical messaging strategies for China's external media? To systematically examine this question, we created a corpus of 19,791 CGTN segments posted on the broadcaster's YouTube channel. We focus on the text descriptions of the video content, which are generally one to four sentences long. The segments often come directly from live television broadcasts, although some appear to be specifically created for online audiences. The videos on YouTube generally also appear on the company's other social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Line, and WeChat.

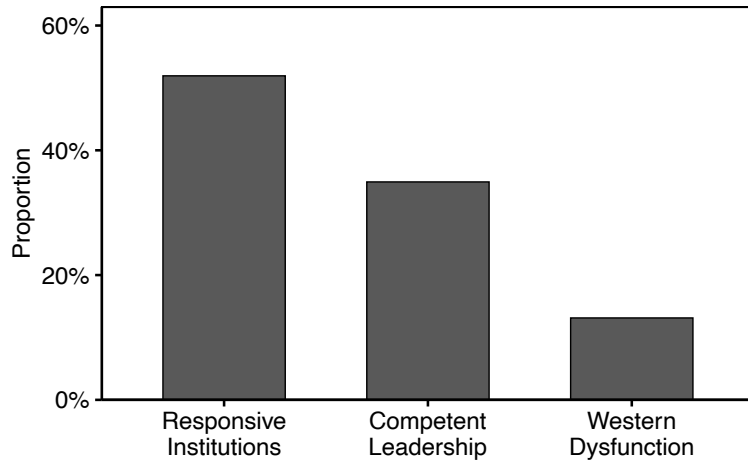
To study the content of China's media, we use a topic modeling approach (Roberts et al. 2014). We fit a Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model using 20 topics.⁸ Based on a qualitative reading of the top words for each topic, we combined topics into several clusters, including China's political model, China's economic model, international news, Chinese domestic news, Chinese culture, and pandemic news.

The data show that Chinese foreign-facing media, particularly CGTN, include a significant amount of content touting the Chinese government's domestic performance. Stories touting the achievements of China's political model account for an estimated 26 percent of stories, while the achievement of China's economic model accounts for 18

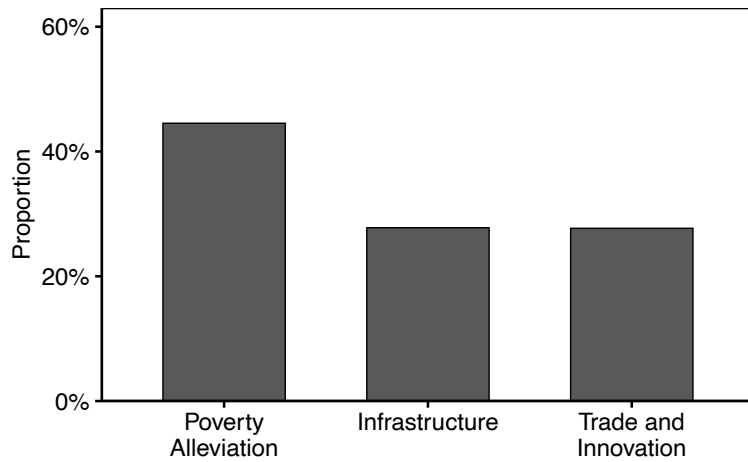
⁸ We cross-validate and tune the model using standard metrics. Please see the replication files.

percent of stories.

Figure 1: How Chinese State Media Sell the Chinese System



(a) Messaging themes: China's Political Model



(b) Messaging themes: China's Economic Model

Notes: Frequency of topics in videos about China's political and economic models. Topics are inferred using Latent Dirichlet allocation analysis and a dataset of over 19,000 segments from CGTN, 2020–2021. We subset to the six topics within the two main categories of interest, China's political model (around 26 percent) and economic model (around 18 percent).

Our data in Figure 1 show that stories in the political category contain three strands: responsive institutions, competent leadership, and Western political dysfunction. Stories

on responsive institutions highlight the alleged responsiveness of domestic institutions such as the National People's Congress to popular demands (and during the first year of the pandemic, the country's success in containing the coronavirus relative to other countries was often highlighted). Stories on competent leadership argue that the CCP selects competent leaders who govern the country well and that this is a key ingredient in the country's success. Finally, stories on Western dysfunction focus on protests, racism, and political violence in the United States, and draw contrasts with political stability and responsiveness in China.

Stories in the economic category contain three strands: poverty alleviation, infrastructure, and trade and innovation. Stories on poverty alleviation focus on how China has lifted some 800 million people out of poverty over the last four decades. Stories on infrastructure highlight China's infrastructure-building efforts at home and abroad and how these projects benefit ordinary citizens. Finally, stories on trade and innovation focus on how China's economic miracle has driven global trade and economic gains around the world and highlight China's domestic technological achievements. Overall, messages promoting the Chinese model account for an estimated 44 percent of the content on CGTN (around 26 percent of the political model plus around 18 percent of the economic model).

In a study of Chinese state media's Twitter accounts, [Fan, Pan and Sheng \(2023\)](#) show that CGTN is more negative and spends less time repeating official talking points and more time on soft news than other state-media outlets, such as the English-language newspaper *China Daily*. We build on these findings, showing how CGTN nevertheless promotes themes important to CCP leaders, while differentiating itself from other outlets.

Our experimental design, described in more detail below, examines whether these common messages are effective at moving global attitudes toward the China model.

3.2 Promoting the American Model

The United States government's external communication strategy is starkly different from the Chinese model. Starting early in the Cold War, the American State Department established funding and infrastructure for external media arms which were intended to sell the American political system (Nye Jr 2004, 98). Since the Cold War ended, funding for American public diplomacy initiatives has fluctuated between 1.5 billion and 2.5 billion dollars annually (2020 dollar-adjusted), or about four percent of American spending on international affairs (Walker et al. 2022, 17). The U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM) now receives about 800 million dollars from that budget each year to be spent on foreign-facing content, with little change between presidential administrations (Walker et al. 2022, 293).

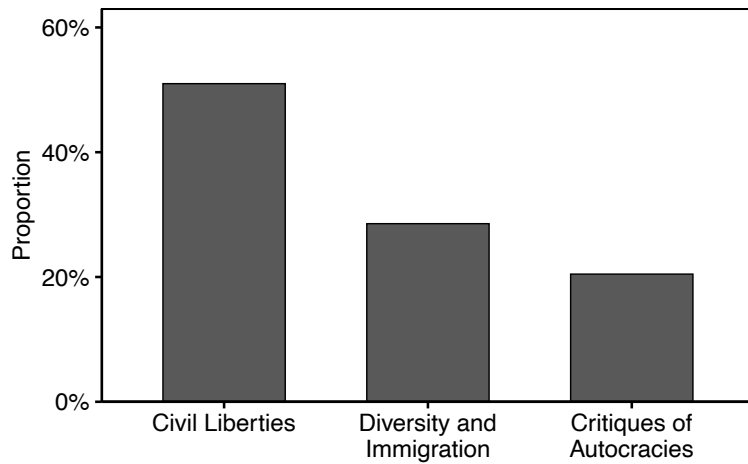
Under the USAGM, a network of broadcasters, technology providers, and social media content creators distribute media designed to inform foreign nationals on topics related to freedom and democracy. USAGM outlets also provide coverage of local and world news to countries with censorship policies, repressive regimes, or limited press freedom. The mandate of American public messaging abroad is divided between the explicit promotion of American democratic values and the implicit support of those values through open discourse and press freedom. Much of the content produced by the American government for foreign viewers presents an American perspective on local or global news, rather than sharing news about the United States itself.

3.2.1 Observational Evidence on U.S. Messaging

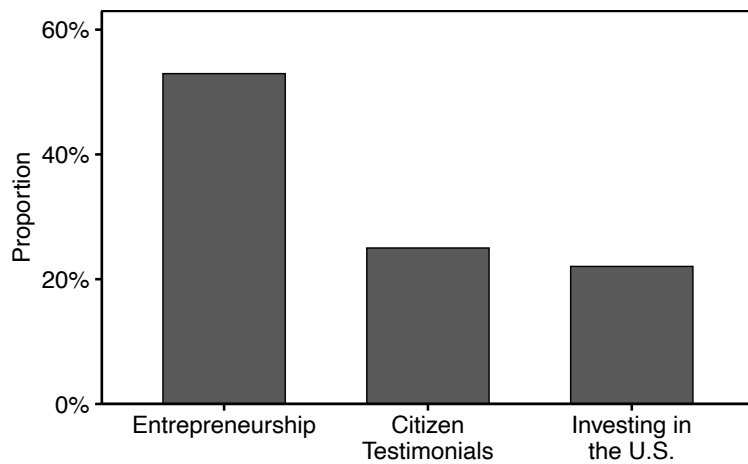
What messages are commonly promoted by the U.S. State Department about the U.S. political system? We created a corpus of 1,117 videos produced and disseminated via ShareAmerica, which is the "U.S. Department of State's platform for sharing compelling stories and images about American society, culture, and life, and about the principles that

underlie our nation’s foreign policy and engagement with the world.” Videos on this platform are translated into ten languages and cross-posted on social media sites like YouTube. As with the Chinese messaging corpus, we analyze this dataset using LDA topic modeling.

Figure 2: How American State Media Sell the American System



(a) Messaging themes: America’s Political Model



(b) Messaging themes: America’s Economic Model

Notes: Frequency of topics in videos about America’s political and economic models. . Topics are inferred using Latent Dirichlet allocation analysis and a dataset of 1,117 segments from Share America, 2008–2022. We subset to the six topics focusing on promoting America’s political model (around 38 percent of topics) and economic model (around 19 percent of topics).

The content promoted through ShareAmerica, as rendered in Figure 2, is quite different than Chinese media. First, in the politics category, where the Chinese videos focus on the government's domestic responsiveness to popular needs, American videos focus on civil liberties and other freedoms. In the politics category, the two most common strands are videos promoting strong civil liberties, such as freedom of speech and expression, and videos promoting American diversity and immigration. The channel also devotes resources to critiquing autocratic governments for human rights violations.

Second, and perhaps most striking, whereas Chinese videos focus on China's economic success — sometimes linking it to domestic politics in other developing countries — American videos on the economy are narrowly tailored towards attracting entrepreneurs and investors. In the economic category, the most common videos promote entrepreneurship. A second set of videos uses a citizen testimonials style to promote the economy more generally. Finally, some videos directly promote investment in the United States, with the American education system as an important selling point. Overall, messages promoting

the American model account for an estimated 57 percent of the content on these channels (around 38 percent focus on the political model and 19 percent on the economic model).

3.3 Discussion: Differing American and Chinese External Messaging Strategies

The observational data show that the Chinese and American governments have markedly different strategies for external messaging. Chinese government messaging tends to promote the Chinese system by selling its domestic economic performance. By contrast, United States government messaging tends to sell the American system by claiming that it protects civil liberties.

This difference in messaging strategies creates an asymmetry when assessing the success of each messaging strategy. We focus here on investigating the effectiveness of current strategies employed by China and the U.S. in shaping global audiences' attitudes about China's authoritarian model and the American democratic model. This is an important topic in an era when democratic values are being challenged. However, our approach leaves open the question of whether or not American messaging that focused more explicitly on selling the merits of the American system, and especially its economic performance, would more effectively counter messaging from China.

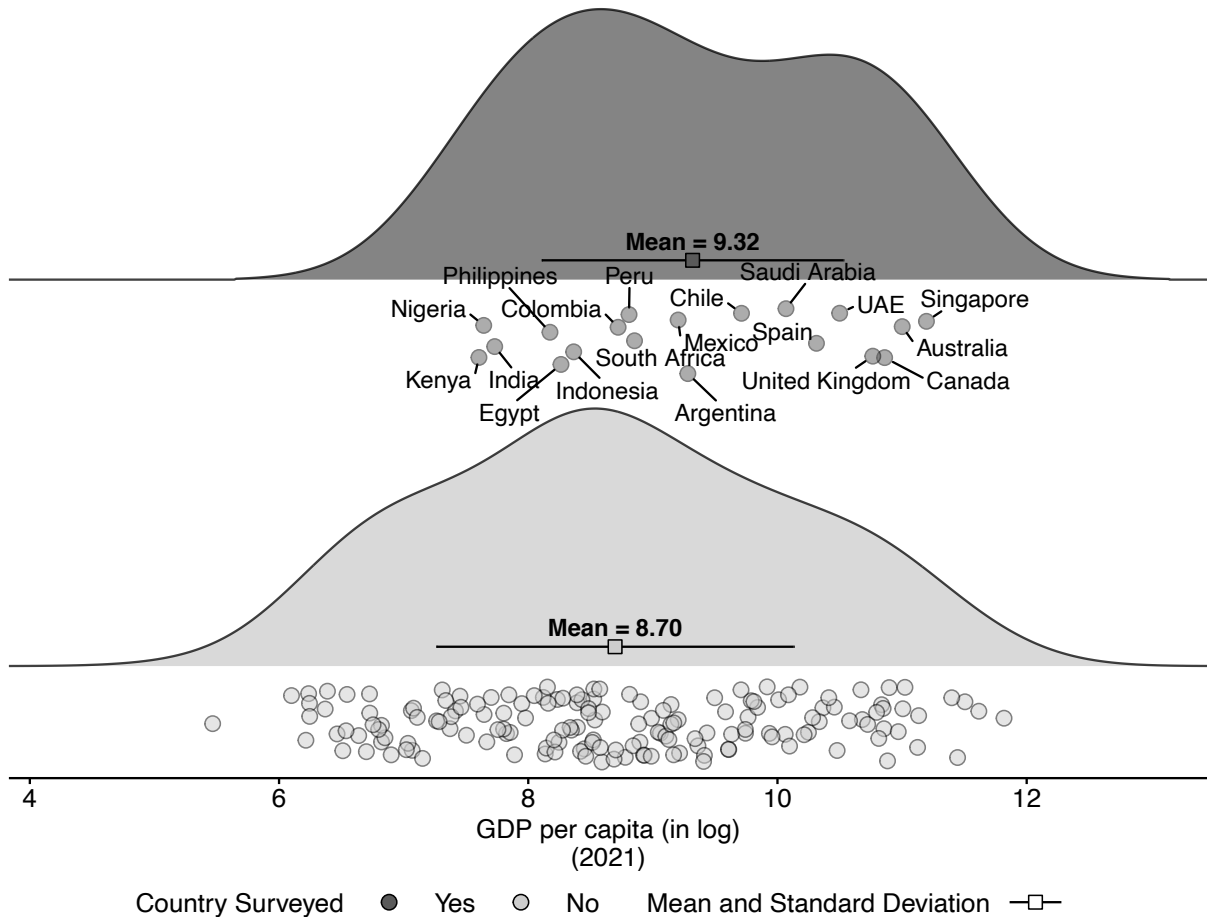
4 Research Design

To understand the effects of Chinese and American real-world efforts to promote their political and economic systems, we fielded a global survey with an embedded experiment between June 10 and 19, 2022. In this section, we explain how we designed our experiment and discuss important ethical considerations.

4.1 Country Selection

To sample a global audience, we recruited respondents through the survey firm Lucid in the following 19 countries across all 6 inhabited continents: Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United Kingdom. The total number of our respondents was 6,276, an average of 330 respondents per country (see Table A1, p. A2, for more details).

Figure 3: Surveyed and Non-Surveyed Countries



Note: Log gross domestic product per capita in 2021 for surveyed and non-surveyed countries. Datapoints are “jittered” to avoid overlaps. Gross domestic product per capita for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is for 2020.

Figure 3 illustrates that the countries in our survey cover a wide range of levels of development, as measured by log per capita GDP. Given our H4, we sought to survey countries across the spectrum of economic development levels. In Section C.5, pp. A19-A22, in the online appendix, we further leverage descriptive statistics from recent public opinion polls and observational data to alleviate concerns over potential selection bias and show that the 19 countries allowed us to cover a diverse set of cases in terms of their exposure to Chinese aids, regime types, their approval rates for Chinese and US leadership.

Our surveys were conducted in Arabic, English, and Spanish. This goes beyond prior studies in our global coverage. At the same time, a limit of the study is that we do not conduct it in some important contexts, such as many Asian countries where English is not a primary language. While not a random population draw, our surveys were evenly balanced on gender and had an average age of 34, slightly higher than the median age of 31 in our sampled countries.

4.2 Media Treatment Selection

Our experimental design exposed audiences to real state media messages from the Chinese and United States governments touting their respective systems. We chose 4 treatment videos from each country. Drawing on the same corpus of Chinese CGTN videos analyzed in Section 3.1.1 and U.S. State Department videos analyzed in Section 3.2.1, we selected videos that captured the key messages advanced by each country.

One set of messaging focused on each country's *political* model. In the case of China, these focused on leadership (especially the meritocratic nature of leader selection), the responsiveness of CCP institutions, and the country's political stability. In the case of the United States, these videos focused on civil rights and the diversity of American society. We selected 2 videos from each country that focused on these themes by watching a large number of videos and selecting treatments that had high engagement and reflected well on

the underlying themes. We also used quantitative metrics (described below) to assess whether the messages were representative.

A second set of messaging focused on each country's *economic* model. In the case of China, these messages focused on growth and innovation, poverty alleviation, and infrastructure development. In the case of the United States, these messages focused on how the United States has a dynamic economy and remains an attractive place to start a business and invest money. We again selected 2 videos from each country by watching a large number of videos and selecting videos based on viewer metrics and consistency with underlying themes, as illustrated in Section 3.1.1 and Section 3.2.1.

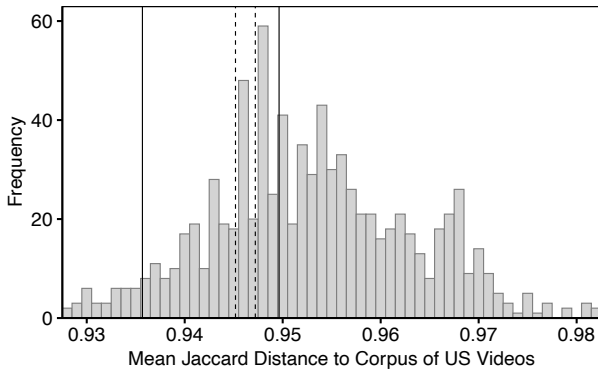
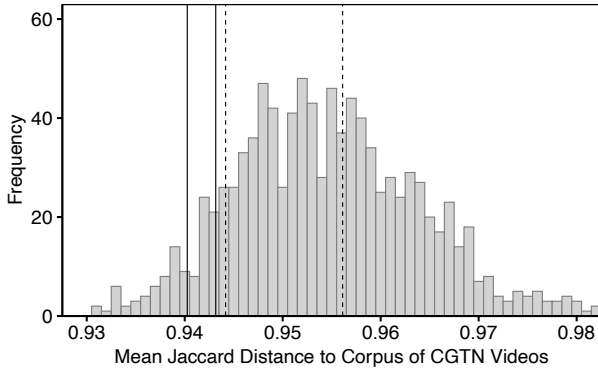
4.2.1 Selected Treatments are Typical

An important feature of our study's design was that the treatments we used are typical of the population of Chinese and American messaging. This allows us to assess how American and Chinese messaging is likely to influence public opinion, at least for the period of the study and the outlets we study, and with the caveat that the eight treatments cannot capture every dimension of Chinese and American messaging.

To systematically assess the suitability of our treatments, we analyzed the similarity of the selected treatments to the larger body of media from the Chinese and United States governments. We present here a commonly used distance metric, Jaccard distance, which captures the overlap between sets. In Appendix Figure A13, p. A23, we present results for alternative metrics.⁹

⁹ Because of the large number of videos, we randomly sampled a subset of 1,000 videos from each country to make the analysis computationally tractable. We then take the mean distance between each document and each other document in the larger corpus. To calculate the three metrics, we transform each corpus into a document term matrix, which captures the frequency of words in different documents. Each row in the matrix is a document and each column is a term (or word). Jaccard distance computes the overlap between sets.

Figure 4: Distribution of Jaccard Distance Values for US and China Treatments



(a) China: Jaccard Distance

(b) US: Jaccard Distance

Notes: Distribution of Jaccard distance values for US and China treatments from the larger corpus of videos. The results show the selected treatments are among the media with smallest distance to the larger corpus. Scores for the political model treatment marked with solid lines, economic model treatment with dotted lines. Larger scores indicate that the words in the video description are more dissimilar to the words in the descriptions in other videos in the corpus. Low scores indicate that the videos are more similar.

In Figure 4, the results for Jaccard distance show that the videos used are typical of the larger corpus of media. The histograms plot the distribution of distance scores in the corpus of documents. The solid lines indicate the distance scores of the two political videos, and the dotted lines indicate the distance scores of the economic videos. High values indicate that the documents are dissimilar from the larger corpus. Low values indicate that the documents are similar.

The results are consistent with the notion that the treatments are typical of the larger body of American and Chinese messaging. Most videos are to the left of the distribution, indicating that they are closer in distance to the larger corpus of videos than most other media. In a sense, the videos are exceptional in their averageness.

While we cannot necessarily infer from our study the effect of watching at random any of the tens of thousands of news segments produced by each government for international consumption, the analysis shows that the messages we use in our treatments utilize language typically employed by each government.

4.3 Experimental Design

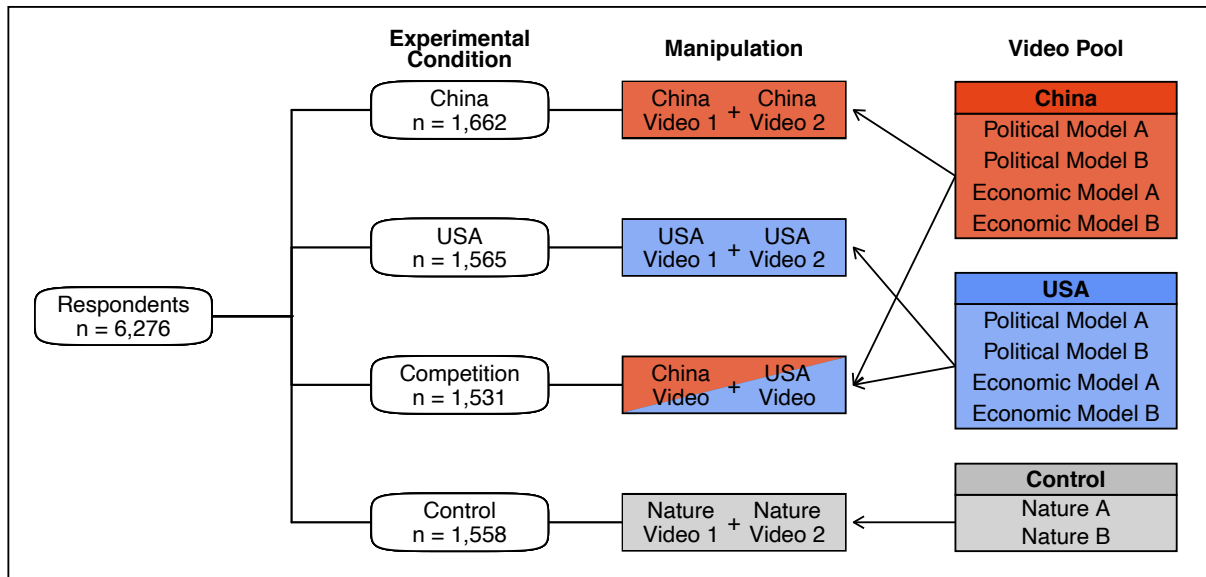
Figure 5 illustrates our experimental design. Individuals were block randomly assigned by country to one of four conditions with equal probability: a treatment condition where they viewed two Chinese government produced videos (*China*), a treatment condition where they viewed two U.S. government produced videos (*USA*), a treatment condition where they viewed one Chinese government produced video and one U.S. government produced video (*Competition*), or a placebo condition with two nature videos unrelated to China, the U.S., or political economy (*Control*). Within the *China* and *USA* treatment conditions, two videos focus on each country's political system and two videos focus on each country's domestic economy. In the *China* treatment condition, two of four Chinese videos were randomly assigned. In the *USA* treatment condition, two of the four U.S. videos were randomly assigned.¹⁰ In the *Competition* condition, one of the four Chinese videos and one of the four U.S. videos were randomly assigned with equal probability, with the order of the countries

¹⁰ In each condition, respondents were randomly assigned at least one video from the pool of videos about the country's political model, and then randomly assigned a second video about either the political or economic model.

in which the videos randomized with equal probability.¹¹

After watching the videos, individuals were asked to complete a short survey. We focus on the following two main outcome variables, which were pre-registered: (1) respondents' preference for a Chinese vs. U.S.-style political model in their own country and (2) respondents' preference for a Chinese vs. U.S.-style economic model in their own country. Our survey and pre-analysis plan also included a third main outcome: respondents' preference for China or the U.S. as world leader. The results for the world leader outcome are substantively similar to the political model and economic model outcome variables in

Figure 5: Experimental Design



Notes: A sketch of the experimental design. Respondents are randomly sorted into one of four experimental conditions, and then within each condition are shown two videos from the relevant pool of clips.

that treatment effects for all outcomes are similar in sign, magnitude, and statistical significance. However, for the sake of brevity and clarity, we deviate from our pre-analysis

¹¹ We note that our experiment can also be thought of as having six treatment groups (i.e., placebo, China politics, China economy, U.S. politics, U.S. economy, China + U.S.), or nine treatment groups (placebo plus one for each treatment video)

plan and place the world leader results in the online appendix.¹²

As we discussed above, China sells its China model, although Chinese political and economic systems are diverse in reality. By using the disaggregated outcome variables, we empirically examine whether respondents can differentiate the political and economic models. But it may as well be that respondents perceive the aggregated China model and evaluate political and economic dimensions similarly, as they are intertwined with each other. Respondents were asked to indicate their preference on a 6-point scale, where 1 indicates a strong preference for the United States and 6 indicates a strong preference for China.

In order to understand what aspects of the Chinese or American political and economic models respondents find attractive, we also collected data from eight outcome variable designed to better understand the mechanisms behind our main effects. We therefore survey respondents on: (a) four outcomes designed to assess perceptions of government and economic performance and (b) four outcomes designed to assess perceptions of democratic values.¹³

The experiment was administered to those who passed two pre-treatment attention checks.¹⁴ A breakdown of subjects by region, country, and treatment condition can be found in [Table A1, p. A2](#). Survey completion did not differ significantly by treatment condition (see [Figure A1, p. A10](#)), with approximately 6,000 respondents completing each

¹² See [Figure A6, p. A11](#), [Table A3, p. A11](#), and [Table A6, p. A12](#). Importantly, multiple comparisons corrections conducted in the Appendix include the world leader outcome.

¹³ These outcome variables were pre-registered. Exact wording of all outcome questions can be found in [Appendix D, p. A27-A28](#). The order of questions was randomized within question blocks. First, respondents were presented with the three main outcome questions, the order of which was randomized. Second, respondents were presented with the eight “mechanism” questions. Here we both randomized the order in which questions appeared and whether the question about the U.S. or China question appeared first. This set-up minimized potential for spillover within each block. However, it does leave open the possibility of spillover across the block of the three main outcomes and the block the eight “mechanism” questions.

¹⁴ Studies have reported low data quality for individuals who fail to pass pre-treatment attention checks, including ignoring audio-visual cues ([Aronow et al. 2020](#)).

of the three primary outcome questions.

4.4 Research Ethics

In the design and execution of the study, we were guided by the principles of the Belmont Report, which include, among other norms, *respect for persons* (especially the notion that “individuals should be treated as autonomous agents”) and *beneficence* (especially the maxim of “do no harm”) ([United States National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1978](#), 4).

Studying the effect of Chinese and American media on global attitudes is, we believe, a question of scientific and policy importance, but one which requires researchers to expose audiences to actual Chinese and American state media. This presents ethical issues that must be handled with care.

Our study began with asking for informed consent for participants. (See Appendix p. [A9](#) for wording.) In the first page of the survey form, we informed respondents that the general purpose of the study was to examine public opinion on international topics. We also informed viewers of the source of the videos *before* they were asked to watch them, and allowed them to opt out without penalty at any point.

Survey and behavioral research should rarely use deception about the purposes of the study or provide research subjects with misinformation. When such deception is used, researchers should always clearly debrief subjects and provide additional opportunities for providing informed consent. Research on this topic must proceed carefully, because researcher fact checks, while often effective, do not always fully correct individual misperceptions ([Nyhan 2020](#); [Badrinathan 2021](#)).

In this study, we do not deceive participants by giving them false information or misleading them about the purpose of the research. We were particularly concerned about the content of the Chinese videos, and therefore verified the extent to which the content of each

of the videos included only factual information. Appendix F, pp. A33-A35, provides a fact check of the Chinese video content. These videos include only factual information, but are slanted in favor of China. However, the clear source labelling of the videos made this editorial slant plain.

Our study thus follows others in the experimental literature that uses selectively presented but factual information to probe the effect of different frames on respondents' attitudes.¹⁵ In particular, our design approach is similar to others that have probed the effect of Russian state media campaigns through selective exposure to Russian media (Carter and Carter, 2021) or studies that have examined the effect of Russian foreign aid through exposure to positively framed news stories about Russia (Rhee, Crabtree and Horiuchi 2023).

We were also guided by the principle of transparency. Each of the government-produced videos was clearly labelled as being “produced by the Chinese government” or “produced by the United States government.” Being provided with information that was factually correct, with clearly labelled sources, but with a plain editorial slant, allowed participants to determine for themselves how to form opinions.

An additional principle we considered was that of respect for the autonomous viewpoints of our participants. As the Belmont report states, researchers should “give weight to autonomous persons' considered opinions and choices” (United States National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1978, 4). An important issue we carefully considered was whether or not we should include a statement of some form at the end of the study that highlighted potentially problematic aspects of the government video treatments. As noted above, any study that includes deception or misinformation *must* debrief participants. In this case, there was no misinformation or

¹⁵ For example, in one analogous study, researchers manipulated whether participants were given a free speech or public order framing in an article discussing a rally by a white supremacist group (Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1997).

deception to correct, and we were concerned that a debrief that weighed in favor of one political system over another would (a) violate the principles of participant autonomy and respect for individuals' views and (b) compromise scholarly impartiality and the credibility of the research. Given this, at the end of the study, we included a neutral concluding statement reminding participants of the purpose of the study and noting our non-partisan stance.¹⁶

More discussion of these issues can be found in Appendix B, pp. A7-A8, in the online appendix. Researchers may reasonably come to different conclusions than we have about how best to address specific issues, but should in any case consider ethical issues well beyond simply obtaining approval from their Institutional Review Board, which is only a starting point for the ethical conduct of research.

4.5 Estimation Procedures

Our primary estimand is the average treatment effect (ATE) of being assigned to each treatment condition on preference for political and economic model. We estimate the ATE using ordinary least squares (OLS) with HC2 robust standard errors and including the following pre-treatment covariates: *gender*, *age*, *education*, *national pride*, *left-right political orientation*, and *country*.¹⁷ Missing covariates are imputed using predictive mean matching (Rubin 1986).

For robustness, we report p values free from distributional assumptions using randomization inference. In addition, as we possess nine total treatment-outcome combinations in our experiment, we also calculate p values adjusted for multiple comparisons using the Benjamini-Hochberg, Holm-Bonferroni, and Bonferroni corrections. All results survive both robustness checks.

¹⁶ See Appendix p. A10. The wording of this debrief was similar to the debrief in a recent study that probed the effect of positively framed stories about Russian aid (Rhee, Crabtree and Horiuchi 2023).

¹⁷ A table of covariate balance across treatment groups can be found in Table A2, p. A3. Unadjusted estimates are also reported in the appendix.

For our eight mechanism outcome variables, we utilize the same procedure to estimate the ATE. However, prior to estimating the ATE, we perform dimension reduction using hierarchical clustering¹⁸ on all eight outcomes, which groups together strongly correlated variables. Next, we use factor analysis on each of the identified clusters to create scores to be used as the final outcomes.

We also examine treatment effect heterogeneity by calculating conditional average treatment effects (CATEs). A CATE is an average treatment effect specific to a subgroup of subjects, where the subgroup is defined by subjects' attributes (e.g., the ATE among African respondents). We estimate heterogeneous treatment effects by regressing the outcome variables on treatments separately for each region and country.

All procedures described in this section were pre-registered.

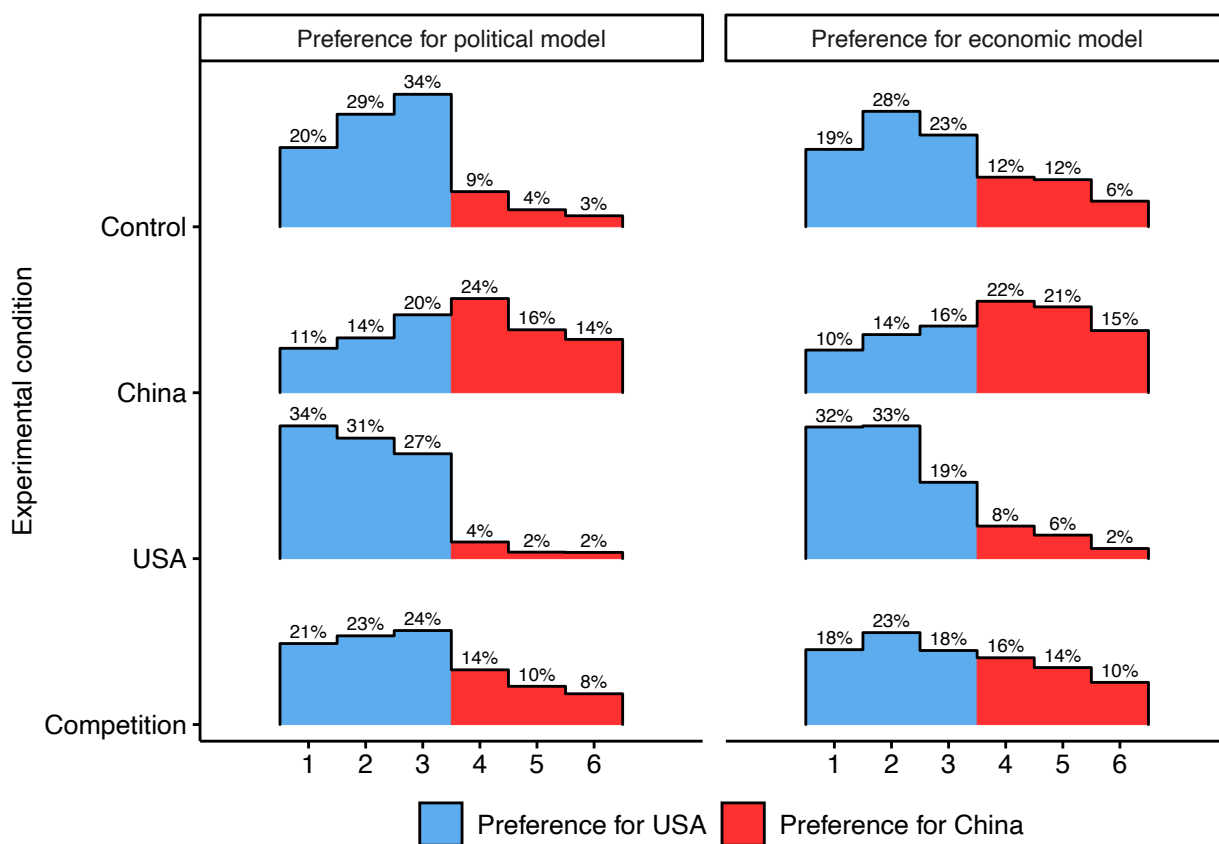
5 Results

5.1 Is the Chinese System Attractive?

[Figure 6](#) depicts the distribution of responses across each treatment condition for our primary outcomes. In control, 70 percent of respondents prefer the American economic model over the Chinese economic model and 83 percent prefer the American political model over the Chinese political model (see also Appendix Tables A3 – A7, pp. A11-A13). At baseline, untreated individuals therefore display a strong preference for the American economic and

Figure 6: Preferences for Political and Economic Models

¹⁸ Conducted with the *hclustvar* command of the ClustOfVar package in R. See [Chavent et al. \(2011\)](#) for computational details of the procedure.



Notes: Distributions of primary outcomes by treatment condition. 1 indicates a strong preference for the United States and 6 indicates a strong preference for China.

political models. This is also consistent with our observational analyses comparing our sample with the global sample; they indicate that our surveyed countries have more negative views towards China than the non-surveyed countries.¹⁹ This in turn suggests that the United States has less room to grow its support due to ceiling effects, while there is ample room for growth in support of the Chinese system. However, unlike our theoretical

¹⁹ A distinctive feature of our survey is to ask questions about which political model respondents prefer. We do not provide definitions of models (e.g., what “China political model” and “Chinese economic model” mean), giving respondents the latitude to interpret this outcome as they choose. Subsequent questions probe why respondents prefer each model. This suggests that the questions capture respondents’ general assessments of each country’s political and economic system.

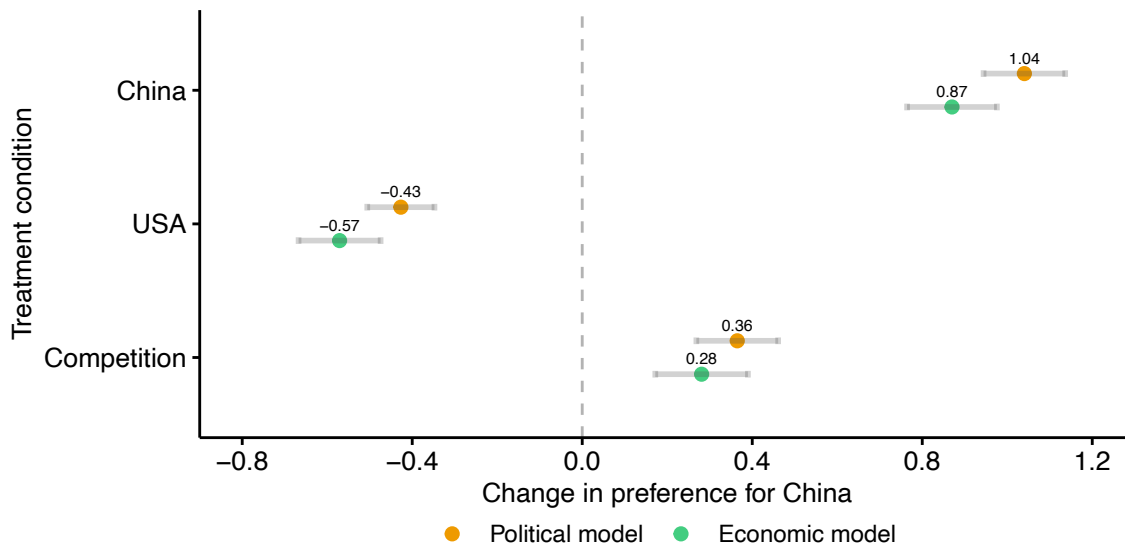
expectation, it is also possible that Chinese efforts to influence the global public can backfire (e.g., [Green-Riley 2022](#)) and watching the Chinese videos may prime the negative images of China, thereby leading to even lower evaluations than the baseline attitudes. Our experiment allows us to examine the expectations.

The distributions of outcomes depicted in [Figure 6](#) shift markedly when individuals are exposed to state-produced media. Most notably, exposure to Chinese messages triples the proportion of respondents who prefer the Chinese political model to the American model, from 16 to 54 percent. In head-to-head matchups, Chinese messaging outperforms its American counterpart in every aspect; respondents' baseline attitudes shift in favor of China when moving from the control to competition condition.

[Figure 7](#) depicts the corresponding ATEs for the two primary outcome measures: preference for Chinese or U.S.-style political model and preference for Chinese or U.S.-style economic model. Audiences are receptive to Chinese media touting a “China Model” across both outcome measures, with the strongest increase in preference for the Chinese political model. These increases are substantively large, representing 41 percent and 30 percent increases in support for the Chinese political and economic models, respectively. The effects for the political model and economic model are roughly 0.87 and 0.59 of a standard deviation of each respective outcome variable in the control condition. This is consistent with H2.

American media is also effective, which is consistent with H1. But we find that it is always less so than its Chinese equivalent. Finally, when individuals are exposed to both Chinese *and* American media, the effectiveness of Chinese media is dampened, but the overall effect remains an increase in preference for the “China Model.” This is in line with H3.

Figure 7: Average Treatment Effects



Note: Average treatment effect of treatment videos on preference for political model and economic model by treatment condition. Tabular results are presented in Table A3.

5.2 Where Is the Chinese System Attractive?

Figure 8 shows the ATE of each treatment condition on respondent preference for political and economic models by region.²⁰ Importantly, as country and region are not randomly assigned, these conditional treatment effects must be interpreted as the descriptive association between the country or region in question and the magnitude of the treatment effect, *not* as the causal effect of the country or region on outcomes. Moreover, while we preregistered this analysis, we note in our pre-registration plan, and reiterate here, that the analysis is exploratory.

In isolation, the projection of Chinese and American state media appears to be effective in all regions, albeit to different degrees. In addition, the competition arm implies that Chinese media efforts outperform American equivalents in most regions. We find that

²⁰ Figure A8, p. A15, depicts the ATE of each treatment condition on respondent preference for political model, economic model, and world leader by country.

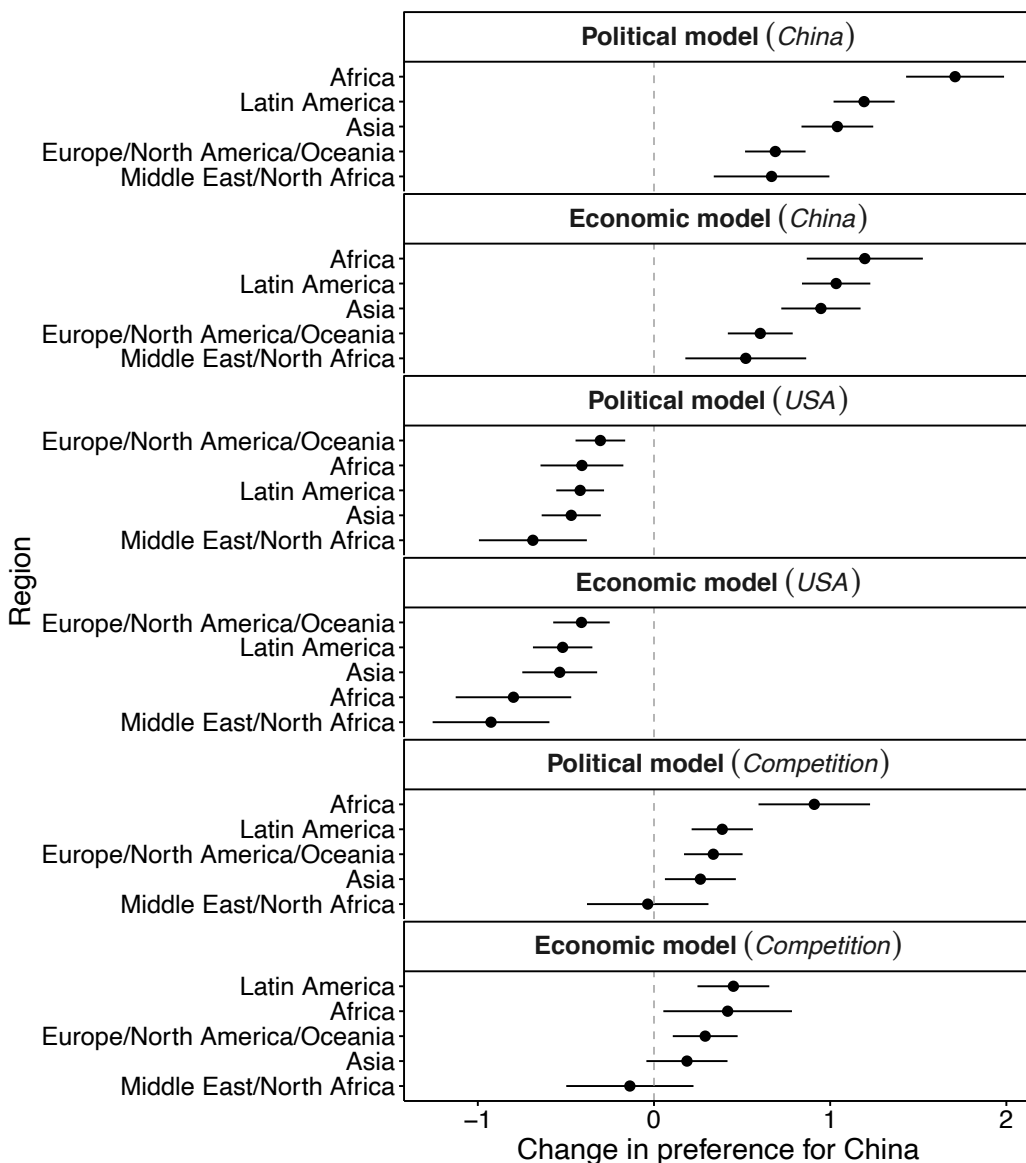
messaging from China is most successful in developing countries, especially in Africa and Latin America. Most notably, the treatment effects of Chinese media on preferences for the Chinese political model are especially strong in the African countries we surveyed (Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa). The appeal of the Chinese political system, not just its economic model, is somewhat surprising, especially when set next to the argument made by [Repnikova \(2022a\)](#), that audiences in Sub-Saharan Africa are likely to find China’s economic growth story inspiring while still finding democratic political values appealing

In addition, we run mixed-effect models to estimate the “fixed” effects of the interactions of a number of country-level variables and the treatment variables on our outcomes while adding country-specific “random” effects. We test for correlations with the following country-level variables: whether the country is a democracy, whether the country is a BRI member, GDP (in log), whether the country is a recipient of Chinese aid, and whether the country is a US ally (see [Table A8, p. A17](#), and [Table A9, p. A18](#)).²¹ We find suggestive evidence that: (1) respondents in democracies have a lower baseline preference for the Chinese model but are more persuaded by Chinese state messaging, (2) respondents in BRI countries have a higher baseline preference for the Chinese model but are less persuaded by Chinese state messaging,²² (3) respondents in wealthier countries may find Chinese state media less persuasive, (4) respondents in states that have received Chinese aid may be more persuaded by Chinese state media, and (5) that respondents in countries allied with the US have lower baseline preference for the Chinese models.

²¹ This analysis was not pre-registered and should therefore be viewed as exploratory.

²² This is in line with recent work highlighting backlash in perceptions of China among BRI countries ([Hong and Horiuchi 2022](#)).

Figure 8: Average Treatment Effect By Region



Notes: Average treatment effect of treatment videos on preference for political model and economic model by region. Y-axis labels (regions) in descending order by treatment effect size. Tabular results are presented in Table A4 and Table A5.

5.3 Why Is the Chinese System Attractive?

Why do Chinese messages sway a global audience towards favoring the Chinese model?

To answer this question, we analyze the results of eight pre-registered outcome questions

designed to measure respondent assessments of Chinese and American government performance and democratic values. These questions ask respondents whether the political systems of China and the United States: (1) select competent leaders; (2) deliver economic growth; (3) deliver political stability; (4) are responsive to the needs of citizens; (5) provide the right to free speech; (6) result in the alternation of power between competing parties; (7) have universal suffrage in national elections; and (8) are democratic in their character. We designed the questions so that (1) to (4) correspond to notions of government *performance*, whereas questions (5) to (8) correspond to notions of *democratic* character.²³

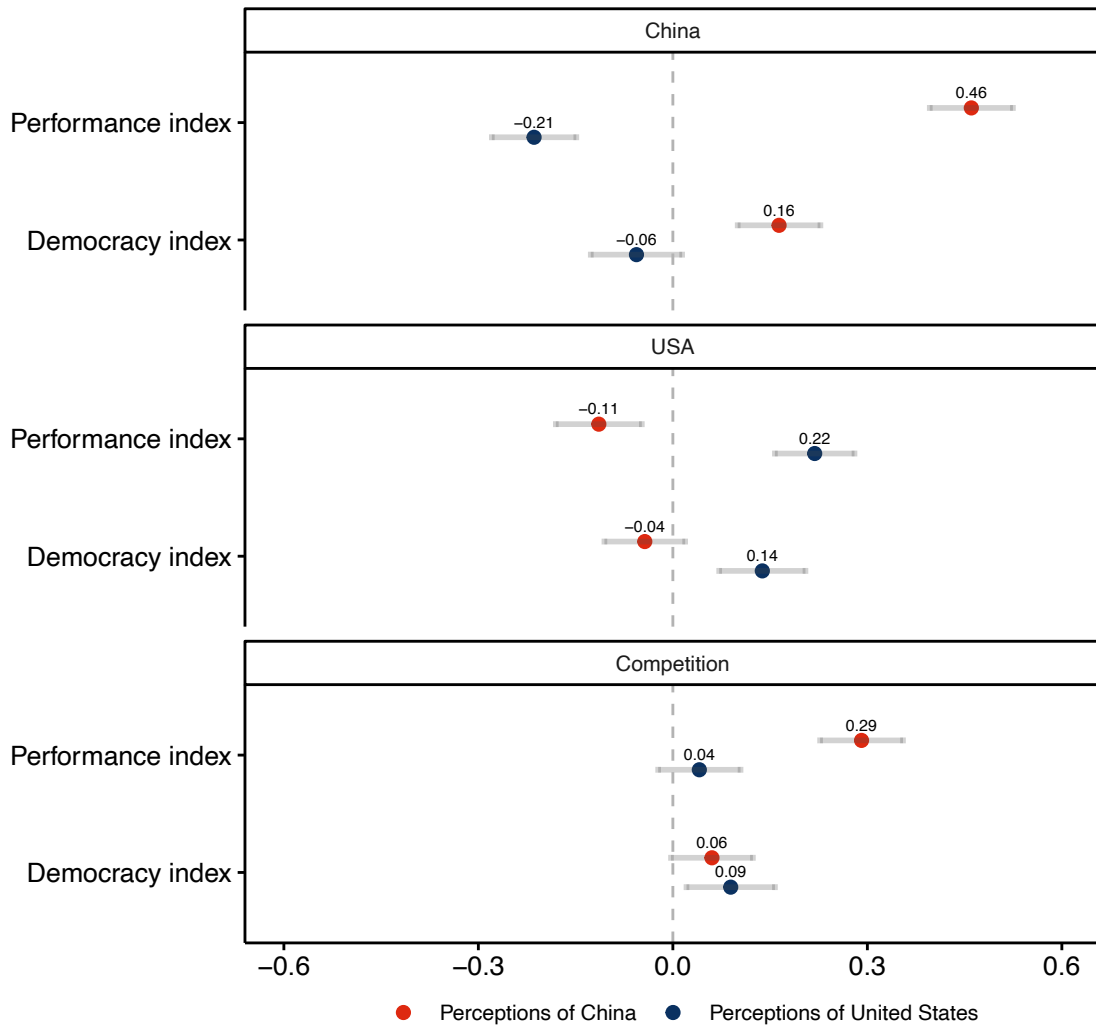
Prior to calculating treatment effects, we run a hierarchical clustering model on the eight outcomes discussed above, which identifies two distinct clusters centered on perceptions of government performance and democratic values.²⁴ The two clusters that organically emerged from this exercise were the same two clusters of questions we intentionally created in our survey design. Namely, answers to questions (1) through (4) are one cluster, and these questions all relate to government performance. Questions (5) through (8) are a second cluster, and these questions all relate to notions of a government’s democratic character. As outlined in our preregistration plan, we then combine the outcomes in these clusters into two indices using factor analysis: a performance index and a democracy index.²⁵

²³ For exact wording, see Appendix D.2, p. A28.

²⁴ The number of clusters is chosen based on the location of the “elbow” in a scree plot, as well as examination of a cluster dendrogram.

²⁵ The advantage of this approach over separately taking the mean of questions 1–4 and questions 5–8 is that we do not assert that these two groups of questions are correlated. Rather, we take an agnostic approach and show algorithmically that these variables are strongly related to each other and thus provide similar information. See also Appendix Figures A15-A16, pp. A24-A26.

Figure 9: Average Treatment Effect on Perceptions of Government Performance and Democracy



Note: Average treatment effect of treatment videos on indices of perceptions of government performance and democracy by treatment condition. Tabular results are presented in Table A7.

Figure 9 depicts the ATE of each treatment condition on the performance and democracy indices.²⁶ While Chinese media does increase the perception that China is democratic, the effect on perceptions of performance is roughly three times as large. Further, Chinese media decreases perceptions of the performance of the American system. However, when paired with American media, the effectiveness of Chinese media in convincing respondents

²⁶ ATEs for each individual mechanism outcome variable can be found in Figure A16, p. A26.

that China is democratic is more than halved and is no longer significant at conventional levels, and perceptions of American performance no longer decrease. By contrast, perceptions of Chinese performance remain strong when Chinese and American media are paired. This analysis suggests, in line with exploratory H5, that it is the performance of the “China model” that is most attractive, not its values.

6 Limits and Scope Conditions

This study has important limitations and scope conditions. First, while we show China’s messaging strategy to be effective, in practice, several factors may dilute its influence. One important factor is that domestic political elites play a large role in shaping public opinion (Blaydes and Linzer 2012). Domestic elites in many countries have signaled their dissatisfaction with the CCP, moving global public opinion against China. Moreover, viewership of CGTN and Chinese media remains small, which lessens the reach of these messages.

Second, a study on global attitudes toward the legitimacy of the Chinese system is silent on the question of whether it is practically possible to export China’s authoritarian model. As we show, however, China does seek to increase the legitimacy of its system in the eyes of a global audience.

Third, we do not propose that there is, in reality, a conceptually coherent “China model.” Scholarship rightly points to the fact that China’s economic system is diverse and varies from locale to locale.

Fourth, the effectiveness of messaging strategies may be limited to authoritarian regimes that can credibly point to governance successes. China’s economic success from the late 1970s until recent years may make it a somewhat unique case compared to other major autocracies. It is less clear whether countries like Russia or Saudi Arabia could successfully adopt the same approach. Moreover, if China’s economic model falters, its messaging may

not be as effective in the future.

Notably, our experiment was fielded in the summer of 2022, *after* widespread negative coverage in the international press of the troubled COVID-19 lockdown in Shanghai. While this was before the fall 2022 protests against the COVID-19 lockdowns, it suggests that international attitudes toward China remained malleable even after adverse information shocks about Chinese government performance.

Fifth, although we examine competition between China and the United States, audiences may find American democracy less appealing than other democratic models. In recent years, America's domestic politics has been marked by policy gridlock and events such as the January 6th insurrection. Moreover, American-produced messaging has lower production values which may make it less persuasive.

Sixth, because of the divergent messaging strategies of the U.S. and China, our study may thus represent an upper bound for the effectiveness of authoritarian messaging and a lower bound for the effectiveness of democratic messaging. Chinese messaging about the China model is directed at growing global support for its model by touting its strong domestic performance. American messaging, by contrast, is less targeted on shaping attitudes towards the American model or touting the performance of the American system on growth and governance. That said, comparing findings about the effectiveness of political messaging from China and the United States is substantively valuable, given these two countries' outsized roles in the emerging landscape of great-power competition.

More broadly, there are limits to generalizing from the United States and China as the standard bearers for democracy and autocracy, respectively. We have focused on these countries because of both their substantive importance for great power competition. Though the United States and China are the most prominent and perhaps most vocal advocates for their respective models, they are not necessarily the most effective.

7 Conclusion

Heightened competition between the United States and China is likely to shape international politics for years to come. Yet we know relatively little about whether global audiences are swayed by the competing efforts of China and the United States to sell the merits of authoritarian and democratic regimes. We used an experiment replicated across 19 countries on 6 continents to gauge how global audiences respond to these efforts. We exposed audiences in these countries to real messages from state-sponsored media from China and the United States. Observational data on over 20,000 media segments showed these messages to be typical of the media strategies used by their respective governments. Whereas there is widespread skepticism about the ability of authoritarian regimes to successfully advocate for the benefits of their systems, our surveys revealed that exposure to real Chinese media led to a substantial increase in support for China's authoritarian political and economic model. The results were striking: we found that state-sponsored media increased the proportion of respondents who prefer China's political model from 16 percent to 54 percent. While this finding may be disconcerting to Americans and many governments and citizens of democratic polities, it represents arguably a more realistic and informative baseline for contemplating the US–China rivalry in the 21st century.

We hope that this article will stimulate further research on state media and international politics. We suggest three such avenues of future research. First, while the sample of our study includes global respondents from Arabic, English, and Spanish speaking countries, assessing the effectiveness of Chinese and American messaging in Asian states and economies such as Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan can help complement our study. In addition, future scholarship should examine other democracies and autocracies that promote the merits of their systems.

Second, future research can build on our findings by further “unbundling” the treatments and theorizing about which specific messages are the most persuasive. It also remains unclear to what degree respondents “believe” in the content of the messages, and whether this is a function of the source of the message or its content. In future research, it may be worthwhile to examine if persuasiveness is attenuated if respondents are provided with direct counterarguments. We leave these questions as interesting topics for further scrutiny.

Third, future research could also examine the asymmetric messaging strategies used by China and the United States. One possibility is that if the United States adopted a messaging strategy similar to China’s — by touting American economic success and dynamism and explicitly promoting an “American model” — American messaging would be more successful.

Overall, our findings have important implications for scholars and policymakers interested in democratic resilience. Despite skepticism about the ability of autocracies to sell their political systems, we demonstrate that real messaging from China is strikingly effective at persuading a global audience to embrace the Chinese model. Although global views towards China are negative in many countries, these negative views may be reversed through persistent Chinese efforts to promote the benefits of the country’s economic and political model. At the same time, American counter-messaging can blunt the effectiveness of Chinese messaging. From an American perspective, it is thus important for the United States to advocate for the merits of democratic systems — absent such countervailing messages, one possible result could be a rapid growth in global support for authoritarian political systems.

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