

How institutionalized feedback works: Online citizen complaints and local government responsiveness in China

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Abstract

The prevailing view that authoritarian regimes primarily respond to threats of instability is challenged by our research, which posits that such regimes also take citizen complaints seriously, even when they do not pose a direct threat. Based on 238,835 citizen claims from China's largest national online petition platform from 2020 to 2021 and 793,119 citizen claims from Wuhan's local petition website, this study reveals that online complaints result in greater governmental responsiveness, compared to non-complaints. This institutionalized feedback mechanism is driven by a mix of factors: the upper-level officials' expectation for negative feedback, combined with bureaucrats' efforts to preserve themselves and avoid punitive consequences. Our findings thus enhance the understanding of what drives authoritarian responsiveness and signal a caution that an overreliance on managing complaints may deepen a stability-maintenance mechanism, potentially impeding substantial reform.

KEYWORDS

authoritarian responsiveness, complaint, governance, local bureaucracy, online petition

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship across political science (Chen et al., 2016; Distelhorst & Hou, 2017; Meng & Su, 2021), public administration (Kornreich, 2019; Newland & Liu, 2021), area studies (Cai & Zhou, 2019; Qiaoan & Teets, 2020; Wang & Han, 2023), and economics (Buntaine et al., 2024) has been increasingly focused on understanding government responsiveness and recognizing its vital role in the performance of good governance (Dahl, 1971; Dipoppa & Grossman, 2020).

A conventional assumption holds that authoritarian regimes, characterized by centralized political power and a lack of electoral accountability (Miller, 2015), are synonymous with poor government responsiveness (Cain et al., 1987). Challenging this assumption, recent studies suggest that the absence of electoral mechanisms does not necessarily equate to unresponsive authoritarian officials (Distelhorst & Hou, 2014; Qiaoan & Teets, 2020). In authoritarian contexts, motivations for responsiveness extend beyond electoral incentives such as constituency service (Distelhorst & Hou, 2017) and political contestation (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008) to a broader array of factors (Meng & Su, 2021; Wang & Han, 2023).

Instead, the growing scholarly consensus posits that responsiveness is primarily driven by the imperative to mitigate threats to regime stability (Chen, 2009, 2012; Pan, 2020). In particular, Chen et al.'s (2016) experimental study identified collective action threats and higher-level reporting as key factors enhancing government responsiveness to online posts in China. Such views align with a long-standing assumption: Ordinary people do not have low-cost access to political power; consequently, they must resort to extra-institutional channels to defend their interests (McAdam, 1982; Tilly, 1978). This assumption holds particularly true in authoritarian contexts, as influential studies have shown that citizen complaints lodged through the petition system were unlikely to elicit substantive responsiveness (Chen, 2012; Hou, 2020) due to the inherent institutional deficiencies in authoritarian regimes (Tang, 2016).

However, increasing studies have unveiled the efficacy of institutionalized participation in non-democratic contexts (Jiang et al., 2019; Meng et al., 2017). It is puzzling that authoritarian governments respond to citizen claim-making that does not threaten social stability directly. This study aims to tackle this puzzle by examining how an authoritarian regime provides a higher quality of responsiveness to citizen complaints than non-complaints in the digital era, where technological advancements have lowered the communication costs between government and citizens. Although scholars have explored various forms of online engagement, such as “online activism,” defined as “Internet-related struggles” (Yang, 2009, p. 1) and “online mundane complaints” in non-government websites (Wang & Han, 2023, p. 188), there is a dearth of understanding about the differences in responsiveness to complaints versus non-complaints within institutionalized channels. Pan and Chen (2018) examined “online citizen complaints” reported to higher authorities but did not differentiate between complaint and non-complaint communications.

To illustrate how we fill this gap, we introduce a two-by-two matrix that assesses whether online civic activities are expressed in an *institutionalized channel* and offer a *dissatisfied signal* toward local officials (see Figure 1). The matrix helps situate our study within the broad literature of online civic engagement. The existing literature on netizen behavior has primarily concentrated on Quadrant I (e.g., the highly confrontational social mobilization through online forums and social media) and Quadrant IV (e.g., the troll army that supports the regime). However, our understanding of the distinctions between Quadrant II and Quadrant III remains limited.

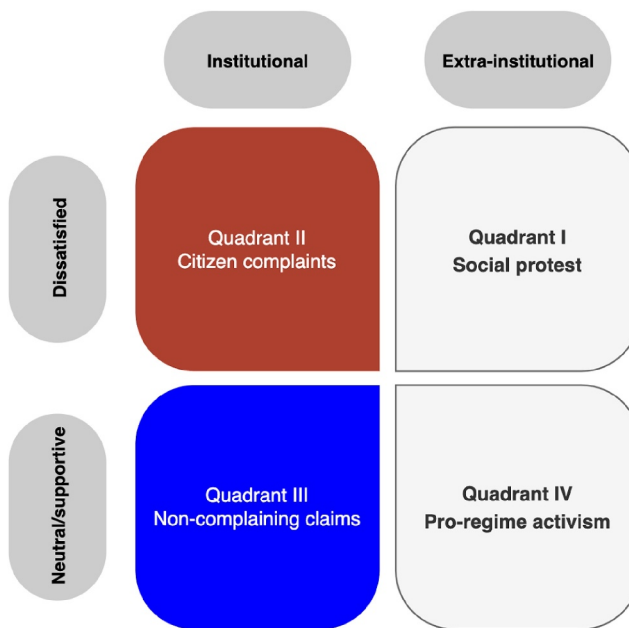


FIGURE 1 Conceptualizing online civic activities in authoritarian regimes.

This study represents a pioneering effort to differentiate government responsiveness between petitions that are complaints and those that are not. Our outcome variable is government responsiveness (defined as the government's response to claimants' demands). Instead of focusing on whether there exist responses, the timeliness of responses, or the publicity of responses, we use new methods to measure various degrees of responsiveness quality, including referral, direct information, solid action, concreteness, and problem resolved. Treating a non-perfunctory response as the minimum level of meaningful responsiveness, we focus on concrete replies in the main analyses. In line with the matrix, we define citizen complaints as individuals' explicit expressions of dissatisfaction addressed to the government. The scope of complaints in this study is limited to institutionalized channels of government-citizen interaction, ranging from dissatisfaction with public services, such as failure to obtain real estate certificates, to various types of private matters, such as purchase disputes.

Delving into the power of online petitions, we address the question: *Does the Chinese government demonstrate greater responsiveness to online citizen complaints than to non-complaints through institutionalized input channels, and why?* We analyzed 238,835 citizen claims from China's Local Leader Message Board (LLMB) from 2020 to 2021, revealing that compared to non-complaints, complaints significantly increased government responsiveness. To answer the why question, we measured each citizen claim's negative sentiment, performing citizenship, and the risk of instability. We found that gathering negative feedback and taking proactive measures to forestall potential unrest are reasons for the government's prioritization of complaints. To enhance the external validity of our findings, we broadened our dataset to include 793,119 messages from Wuhan's online petition forum.

While our research is concentrated on examining two popular online petition channels within the Chinese context, our findings offer significant contributions to a broader comprehension of the dynamics of authoritarianism. In contrast to the traditional confrontational

perspective typically adopted in the prevailing literature on authoritarian state-society relations (Chen, 2012; Chen et al., 2016; Cheng et al., 2022; King et al., 2013; Pan, 2020), our analysis extends to the more nuanced and cooperative aspects of governance. In doing so, we scrutinize not the actions of “boundary-pushing activists” (Distelhorst & Fu, 2019, p. 117) but the power of online petitioning that shapes the lived experiences of ordinary citizens. Our results indicate that the motivations driving the careers of officials within the “nomenklatura” system have implications not only for disastrous mismanagement, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (Kung & Chen, 2011; Wang, 2021; Xu & Tian, 2020), but also for generating a higher quality of government responsiveness toward citizen complaints.

Moreover, our research contributes to the discussion on how authoritarian regimes sustain their hold on power and ensure internal stability. In efforts to “minimize political resistance” (Hassan et al., 2022, p. 157), such regimes employ a spectrum of strategies encompassing repression, persuasion, procrastination, attrition, toleration, concession, and facilitation (Chen, 2012; Tilly, 1978; Yuen & Cheng, 2017) in an attempt to “address citizen grievances in a more flexible and coordinated manner” (Wang & Minzner, 2015, pp. 340–341). This explanation adds nuance to a top-down system driven by the power to promote and discipline officials (Landry, 2008; Xu, 2011). Our study suggests that the online petition system serves as a strategic tool for authoritarian regimes, offering local leaders and bureaucrats a means to manage citizen grievances proactively and thereby avoid potential sanctions stemming from social unrest. A responsive governance system emerges and develops when leaders shift the pressures of ensuing social stability onto lower-level bureaucrats. This system facilitates the regime’s information collection and legitimacy reinforcement, potentially improving the provision of services to citizens and giving them a platform where their concerns are heard and acted upon.

2 | SOURCES OF AUTHORITARIAN RESPONSIVENESS

Government responsiveness can be viewed from both macro and micro perspectives. At the macro level, it is defined as the alignment between government actions and public preferences (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008; Jiang et al., 2019; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Roberts & Kim, 2011). At the micro level, government responsiveness pertains to the government’s reaction to specific demands from individuals within society, which involves the flow of information (Chen et al., 2016; Distelhorst & Hou, 2014, 2017; Putnam, 1993; Su & Meng, 2016). These two perspectives are not contradictory: The former represents the objectives and fundamental principles of good governance, whereas the latter signifies the practical implementation of achieving those objectives. This paper adopts the micro perspective, defining responsiveness as the government’s response to individual citizens’ demands, emphasizing the information flow between senders and responders.

2.1 | Stability maintenance and beyond in authoritarian regimes

Contentious politics theories provide a framework for understanding authoritarian responsiveness through the lens of stability maintenance. Resource mobilization theory, for example, asserts that the resources available to activists facilitate collective resistance (McAdam, 1982; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). It is widely recognized that the Internet, as a resource utilized by citizens, streamlines information dissemination, reduces the costs of making claims, and

mitigates the risks associated with contentious claims due to the anonymity it provides (Lei, 2011; Xenos & Moy, 2007). The Internet thus plays a crucial role in empowering individuals to organize contentious activities, especially in non-democratic contexts like China (Yang, 2009).

Conversely, the political opportunity structure theory suggests that the progress and expansion of collective contentions hinge on existing political opportunities (Eisinger, 1973). The high stakes involved in participating in contentious actions such as social movements are well-documented (Lorentzen, 2013). Chen (2012) argues that the divergent interests within the formal institutions of an authoritarian regime create political opportunities for collective petitioners or agitators, leading to varying interpretations of public demands within fragmented authoritarian systems (Mertha, 2009).

Beyond stability maintenance, other factors contribute to understanding authoritarian responsiveness. The proliferation of the Internet is acknowledged as one such factor, leading to increased governmental responsiveness (Heilmann & Perry, 2011; Jiang et al., 2019; Su & Meng, 2016). Additional factors influencing responsiveness have been identified, including the complexity and cost of responding (Cai & Zhou, 2019; Su & Meng, 2016), the authority and professionalism of responding institutions (Meng & Yang, 2020), adherence to social norms and relationships (Tsai, 2007; Xu & Yao, 2015), and local officials' political ties with higher-level leaders (Jiang & Zeng, 2020).

2.2 | Online petition and citizen participation in China

Many historical and current authoritarian regimes have set up institutions to respond to citizen demands, and studies have shown that citizen participation contributes to the longevity of authoritarian rule (Dimitrov, 2013; Nathan, 2003; Truex, 2017). For example, Singapore's "Meet the People" sessions for legislators (Ong, 2015) and the Russian Commissioner for Human Rights of the Russian Federation for addressing complaint letters by citizens (Henry, 2012) both serve as illustrations of this phenomenon. In China, citizens can engage with state agencies through various formal institutions: They can submit offline petitions (Chen, 2012; Li et al., 2012), take legal action against local officials (O'Brien & Li, 2004), and lodge online grievances (Hartford, 2005).

Nevertheless, Chinese citizens, especially in less developed areas, have limited channels to hold the government accountable. Over the past decade, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has introduced an increasing number of online petition channels, which have greatly facilitated institutionalized citizen participation. Online petitions, defined as messages from netizens within these official channels, do not pose a direct threat. Consistent with our insights, literature shows that most grievances focus on livelihood issues and local policy enforcement without challenging the CCP's legitimacy (Lorentzen, 2013; O'Brien & Li, 2006) or the boundaries of the communist regime (Dimitrov, 2014).

As a sub-type of online petitions, complaints that directly threaten social stability are unlikely to appear in institutionalized channels due to censorship. Additionally, citizens posing direct threats often utilize non-government channels, such as Weibo, for exposure (Chen & Li, 2024). Although complaints are not inherently threatening, they are still likely to draw government priority. First, due to preference falsification (Jiang & Yang, 2016), the government often lacks genuine negative information, making complaints a focal point for their attention. Second, addressing individual complaints helps central and local officials cultivate stronger

public support through institutionalized procedures (Dimitrov, 2014). Finally, frontline civil servants may see mishandling complaints as a potential accountability issue, as complaints can sometimes be viewed as covert forms of contentious action. Thus, we expect that online complaints, as opposed to online non-complaints, will elicit a higher quality of government responsiveness (*H1 baseline*).

2.3 | Information, legitimacy, and accountability

Why do authoritarian powerholders allocate significantly more attention to online complaints? According to extensive literature, the reasons are information, legitimacy, and accountability. We assume that within the spectrum of political actors—including central authorities, state media outlets, local leaders, and bureaucrats—each group has distinct incentives related to these three elements that drive their responsiveness in China.

First, information is critical for the survival of the regime. All authoritarian rulers face ongoing threats from the masses and their subordinate elites (Svolik, 2012), but the quality of information available to them is often poor (Manion, 2015; Truex, 2017), leading them to have an extreme thirst for timely information (Dickson, 2016). Chinese governments use a variety of strategies to gather information, including cultivating civil society (Mattingly, 2020; Teets, 2013), facilitating representative political institutions (Gandhi, 2008), employing local informants (Guo, 2014), and outsourcing to businesses or state-owned news agencies (Stockmann, 2013). Moreover, among the information collected by online petitions, negative information often attracts more attention from the regime, as it can reveal discontented social groups and officials involved in misconduct (Dimitrov, 2014). A failure to respond could decrease citizens' motivation to participate in the consultation process, depriving the authorities of a vital information-gathering channel (Dimitrov, 2014; Distelhorst & Hou, 2017). Considering that discontented citizens are more likely to engage in social unrest events (Cheng et al., 2023), we hypothesize that negative information collection is one of the sources of authoritarian responsiveness and a factor that draws the regime's attention to complaints (*H2a—negative information collection*).

Second, responsiveness improves citizen satisfaction (Nie & Wang, 2023) and enhances regime legitimacy (Balla, 2017; Truex, 2017). Nathan (2003, p. 7) highlighted that “the establishment of institutions for political participation and appeal that strengthen the CCP's legitimacy among the public at large.” Delving into different sources of regime legitimacy, Distelhorst and Fu (2019) identified three types of performing citizenship: subjecthood, legal, and socialist. In asserting their subjecthood citizenship, claimants often present themselves as disadvantaged and distressed, casting officials in a role of authority and integrity. Through legal citizenship, netizens highlight legal discrepancies, asserting that it is the government's duty to uphold and enforce the law. Socialist citizenship involves claimants exchanging their loyalty for the state's capacity to ensure their welfare and livelihood. The government's varied responsiveness to these three types of citizenship demonstrates its level of regard for particular legitimacies. Research has shown that “self-inflicted suffering” is an effective strategy to elicit government responsiveness (Chen, 2012, p. 47), whereas expressing loyalty or engaging in antagonistic rhetoric is not (Chen et al., 2016; Meng et al., 2017). Thus, we hypothesize that subjecthood citizenship is a source of authoritarian responsiveness and a factor that signifies the regime's attention to complaints (*H2b—subjecthood citizenship*).

Third, accountability motivates local leaders and bureaucrats to be responsive to citizens. Accountability refers to the mechanisms a society can implement to sanction powerholders who do not align with public preferences (Grant & Keohane, 2005), which “requires sanctioning ability” (Malesky & Schuler, 2010, p. 486). There is a consensus that the accountability system shapes officials’ behaviors (Anderson et al., 2019). Specifically, Grant and Keohane (2005) argued that the mechanisms of accountability can effectively make governments responsive to their citizens. This theory is well-suited to the context of China, where the central authorities greatly depend on citizen complaints to oversee local leaders (Chen, 2012; Pan & Chen, 2018). Additionally, public exposure can increase the responsiveness of local officials as it may lead officials to be sanctioned (Chen et al., 2016; Buntaine et al., 2024). Given that not being responsive to online complaints might result in sanctions, we hypothesize that the avoidance of sanction risks is a source of authoritarian responsiveness and a reason of the regime’s attention to complaints (*H2c—risk aversion*).

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

We compiled an original dataset from the largest government responsiveness platform in China, the Local Leader Message Board (LLMB). By scraping data, we gathered citizen claims addressed to all prefectural party secretaries from January 2020 to December 2021. Unlike the central government, which has significant control, local governments exercise limited influence over the LLMB (Jiang et al., 2019). Our dataset includes 238,835 online threads initiated by 187,723 netizens directed to their respective party secretaries. To address the confounding effect of local leaders on citizen complaints and government responsiveness, we collected a novel dataset of resume information for 615 party secretaries across 333 prefectural-level cities during the same period. Figure 2 illustrates the total number of daily online claims that received a response from the prefectural party chiefs.

3.1 | The dependent variable: Responsiveness quality

As previously mentioned, we define government responsiveness as the government’s response to citizens’ demands. According to the LLMB’s official regulation,¹ all the government replies were public, so the publicity is a constant. 97.56% (233,007 out of 238,835) of citizen claims received a response during the period of this study, leading us to lose interest in whether the government replied. We do not consider response speed as a dependent variable because we found that it is controlled by the bureaucrats in the name of response quality.²

Instead, we are interested in explaining responsiveness quality, defined as *whether the government’s response meets a claimant’s demand*. As a marginal methodological contribution, we measure various degrees of responsiveness quality, including referral, direct information, action as a reply, concreteness, and problem resolution on institutionalized online platforms. We use concrete reply as the main outcome variable, given that a non-perfunctory response is the minimum standard for a government response and that the distinction between concrete and perfunctory responses is clearly identifiable. Here we provide a few examples (see details on measurement and examples in Appendix B):

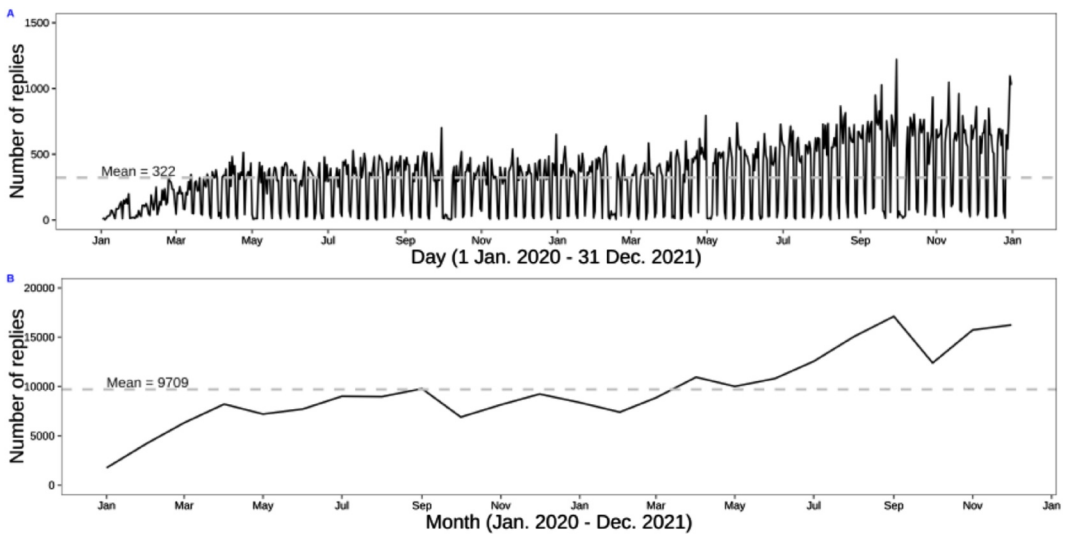


FIGURE 2 The temporal trends of number of government replies by day and by month.

- Direct information (*direct_info*): 重阳大道东段与S206交叉口12月30日前通车。(The intersection of the eastern section of Chongyang Avenue and S206 will be open by December 30th.)
- Action as reply (*action*): 您好! 我局基教处负责人已沟通联系, 您表示理解。祝你学习进步! (Hello! The head of the Elementary Education Bureau has communicated with you, and you said you understood it. We wish you success in your studies!)
- Concrete reply or not is calculated based on direct information (*direct_info*) or solid action as a reply (*action*), so no examples are presented here.

The left side of Figure 3 presents a wide variation in our dependent variable across prefecture-level cities nationwide, ranging from 0.25 to 1, with darker colors indicating higher quality. The figure suggests that many cities, particularly in the southeast region, have response qualities approaching 1.

3.2 | The independent variable: Complaint or not

According to the LLMB regulation document, netizens must classify their thread as one of five types: (1) inquiring about something, (2) expressing gratitude, (3) suggesting public affairs, (4) seeking help from leaders, or (5) lodging a complaint (see Appendix B1). This variable has no missing data because claimants are required to select an option from the five types before submitting their posts. A citizen claim was intuitively coded as 1 when its type belongs to "lodging a complaint;" otherwise, the other four types are 0. Of 238,835 threads, 37.49% (89,529) are complaints. The right side of Figure 3 shows the distribution of complaint ratios across the 333 prefectural cities, which varies from 0.1 to 0.5. Notably, the figure indicates that complaints constitute half of the citizen messages in many cities within the northeast region. To minimize measurement error, we used five terms closely related to complaints as a more rigorous proxy (see measurement details and examples in Appendix B).

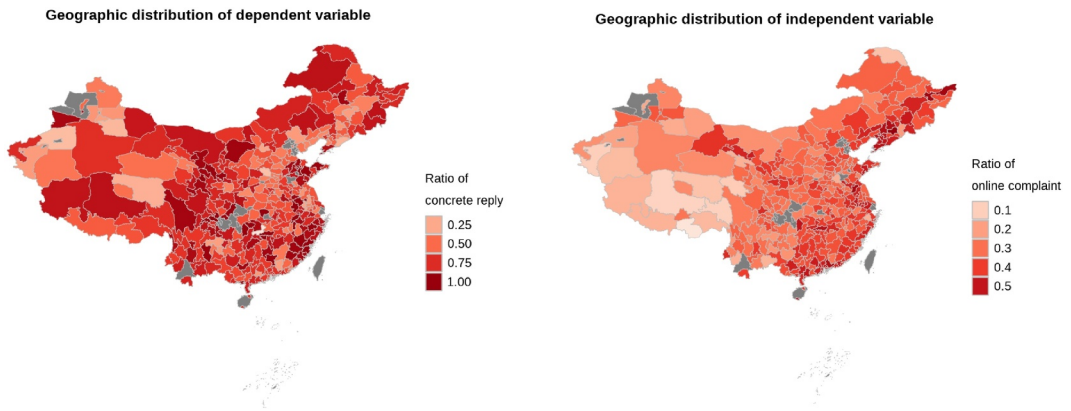


FIGURE 3 Geographic distribution of the dependent variable and independent variable. Gray color refers to missing data.

3.3 | Model specification and control variables

Upon merging the message-level dataset with city-level datasets, a multilevel dataset was created. To analyze this composite data, we employed mixed-effects models using the *lme4* package in R, which allows for the inclusion of both fixed and random effects. We utilized the *glmer* function with binomial family to predict the quality of government responsiveness.³ The baseline model is presented below.

$$Y_i^{\text{responsiveness}}(t) = \beta \text{Complaint}_{i,t} + \delta \text{Post Controls}_{i,t} + \phi \text{Leader Controls}_{i,t} + \gamma \text{City Controls} + \varphi \text{Reply Controls} \\ \text{Random Effect}_{\text{city}} + \text{Random Effect}_{\text{complaint}} + \varepsilon$$

$Y_i^{\text{responsiveness}}(t)$ is the indicator for the responsiveness of thread i at time t . $\text{Complaint}_{i,t}$ is a binary variable representing whether a thread i (the online post) is a complaint or not at time t . We introduced four groups of control variables. First, $\text{Post Controls}_{i,t}$ includes the length of citizen posts (logged), a dummy variable of whether a claim was made via a mobile phone, and the topic domain (e.g., medicine, education, public security, and so on).⁴ Second, $\text{Leader Controls}_{i,t}$ comprises the party secretary's age, gender, ethnicity (Han), graduation from a Double First-Class University, Ph.D. holder, and current tenure length (in months) in a prefectural city. Third, City Controls contains cities' GDP per capita, population, and revenue, which are in logged format. These data are collected from the China City Statistics Yearbook. Fourth, $\text{Reply Controls}_{i,t}$ consists of response speed and response length. Additionally, measurements of negative sentiment, the three types of citizenship, and potential risks in each citizen claim are presented in Appendix B. The summary of variables is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Summary of variables.

Statistic	Description	N	Mean	Median	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Dependent variables							
concrete	Whether the government reply is concrete (1 = yes, 0 = no)	233,004	0.708	1	0.455	0	1
action	Whether the government reply contains solid action (1 = yes, 0 = no)	233,004	0.461	0	0.499	0	1
resolved	Whether the problem is resolved (1 = yes, 0 = no)	233,004	0.150	0	0.357	0	1
Key independent variable							
complaint	Whether the citizen claim is a complaint (1 = yes, 0 = no)	233,004	0.375	0	0.484	0	1
Post controls							
post_length	Word length of a citizen claim	233,004	184.231	151	139.110	9	1795
phone	Whether the citizen claim is made via smartphone	233,004	0.392	0	0.488	0	1
Leader controls							
male	Whether the party secretary who received citizen claims is a male	228,518	0.936	1	0.244	0	1
age	The party secretary's age	228,381	55.475	56	2.952	44	62
han_race	Whether the party secretary belongs to Han ethnicity	228,028	0.956	1	0.205	0	1
edu_shuangyiliu_bin	Whether the party secretary graduated from a Shuangyiliu University (top university)	228,518	0.197	0	0.398	0	1
edu_Ph.D.	Whether the party secretary holds a Ph.D. degree	228,518	0.274	0	0.446	0	1
tenure_length_m	The current tenure length of the party secretary by month	233,004	25.162	19	22.463	0	120

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Statistic	Description	N	Mean	Median	St. Dev.	Min	Max
City controls							
pop_log	City's population (log)	222,604	6.180	6.250	0.671	3.045	7.536
gdp_pc_log	City's GDP per capita (log)	222,726	11.075	11.019	0.467	9.766	12.293
revenue_log	City's revenue (log)	224,200	14.668	14.512	1.105	11.229	17.567
Reply controls							
replied_days	Days taken to get a response	233,004	34.606	22	45.791	0	681
reply_length	The word length of the replied content	233,004	302.190	244	245.577	20	15,729
Negative score							
normalized_negative_score	Negative score of a citizen claim (normalized)	233,004	0.066	0.054	0.065	0.000	1.000
Three types of citizenship							
subject_citizenship	Whether the citizen claim shows subjecthood citizenship	233,004	0.223	0	0.416	0	1
legal_citizenship	Whether the citizen claim shows legal citizenship	233,004	0.187	0	0.390	0	1
socialist_citizenship	Whether the citizen claim shows socialist citizenship	233,004	0.320	0	0.467	0	1
Risk perception							
protest_risk	Whether the citizen claim contains one of the 51 protest keywords	233,004	0.413	0	0.492	0	1
from_hotline12345	Whether the citizen claim comes from the 12345 hotline	233,004	0.031	0	0.173	0	1

4 | DOES THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATE GREATER RESPONSIVENESS TO COMPLAINTS

4.1 | Descriptive analyses

Figure 4 illustrates the changing trends of our dependent and the key independent variables over time. First, compared to non-complaints, complaints consistently receive a higher proportion of high-quality government responses each month (including concrete replies, action as

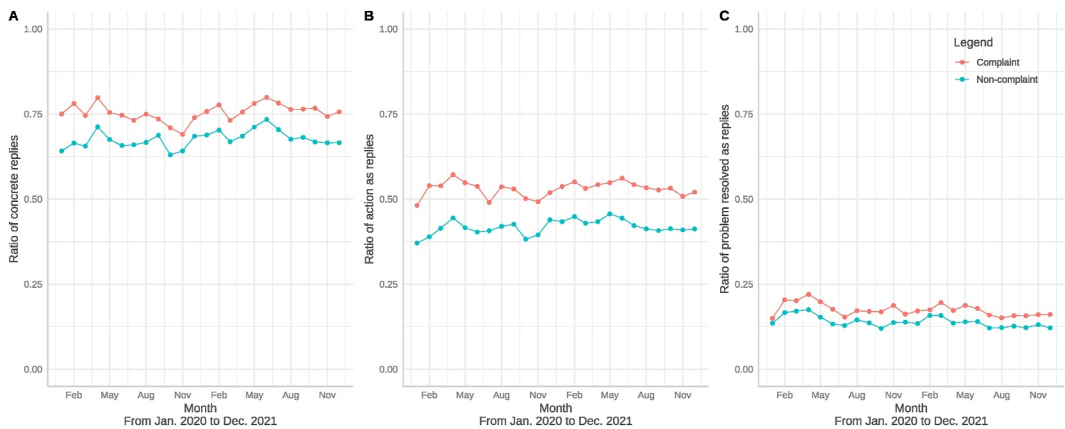


FIGURE 4 Temporal trend of the quality of government responsiveness. Panel (a) concrete replies; Panel (b) action as replies; Panel (c) problem resolved as replies.

replies, and problem resolving as replies). Second, even for non-complaints, the quality of government responses maintains a level that is not very low, showing that online petition channels in authoritarian countries may not merely serve as window-dressing or cheap talk. Third, the fluctuations over the 24 months in Panels a, b, and c are relatively small, indicating a highly institutionalized level of government responsiveness to daily citizen demands.

4.2 | Baseline results

Hypothesis 1 posits that online complaints elicit higher-quality government responses than non-complaints. In testing our baseline hypothesis, we employed multilevel mixed-effect models to predict the quality of government responses, as shown in Table 2. “To avoid any biases introduced by covariates” (Wang, 2021, p. 477), we sequentially added variables to the models from Column 1 to Column 5, including complaint, post controls, leader controls, city controls, and response controls, using the dependent variable of whether the government reply is concrete. Model 5 represents the most important findings in Table 2, and Figure 5 visualizes its regression results. As robustness checks in Columns 6–8, we used three alternative proxies for higher-quality responses: a broader definition of a concrete reply, action as a reply, and problem resolution as a reply. The findings across these models are consistent, lending further credence to the reliability of Hypothesis 1.

4.3 | Robustness checks

To reduce measurement biases, we used three additional binary variables as indicators for broader measurements of concrete replies (Table D1), whether a government response included solid action (Table D2), and whether it resolved the citizen's problem (Table D3); we gradually added covariates to predict these dependent variables. Meanwhile, we used response length as the dependent variable, utilizing the Poisson regression and negative binomial models (Table D4). Finally, considering citizens might wrongly self-defined their claims as complaints

TABLE 2 Online complaint and government responsiveness.

	Concrete reply (1 = yes, 0 = no)					Concrete reply (broad)	Solid action as reply	Problem resolved as reply
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Complaint (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.48 *** (0.02)	0.43 *** (0.02)	0.44 *** (0.02)	0.44 *** (0.02)	0.43 *** (0.02)	0.35 *** (0.02)	0.41 *** (0.02)	0.30 *** (0.02)
Post controls		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Leader controls			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
City controls				Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reply controls					Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Random effects								
σ^2	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29
τ_{00}	2.35 cityid	2.37 cityid	2.44 cityid	2.63 cityid	1.60 cityid	1.99 cityid	1.42 cityid	0.59 cityid
τ_{11}	0.06 cityid. complaint	0.05 cityid. complaint	0.05 cityid. complaint	0.05 cityid. complaint	0.05 cityid. complaint	0.06 cityid.complaint	0.05 cityid. complaint	0.05 cityid.complaint
ICC	0.42	0.42	0.43	0.44	0.33	0.38	0.30	0.15
N	330 cityid	330 cityid	329 cityid	289 cityid	289 cityid	289 cityid	289 cityid	289 cityid
Observations	233,004	233,004	227,973	216,223	216,223	216,223	216,223	216,223
AIC	231,056.321	228,952.367	222,944.318	212,356.857	184,424.618	157,300.993	236,215.327	160,028.241

Note: The unit of analysis is city-thread level. Dependent variables: responsiveness quality (binary). *Post controls* include the length of citizen posts (logged), a dummy variable of whether a claim is lodged via phone, and the topic of domains that are self-selected by claimants (e.g., administration, agriculture, see Appendix Figure B2). *Leader controls* include party secretaries' age, dummy variables for being male, Han ethnicity, graduating from a Shuangyliu University, Ph.D. degree holder, and the leader's current tenure length by month. *City controls* consist of cities' logged GDP per capita, logged population, and logged revenue. *Reply controls* include reply speed (days taken to respond) and response length (the word length of the replied content). The city's cluster effect has been considered in the multilevel mixed-effect model.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

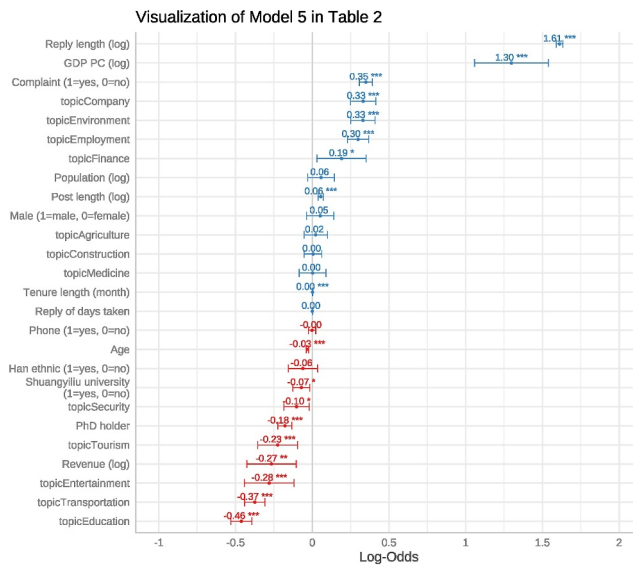


FIGURE 5 Visualization of the main model for the baseline findings.

or not, we employed a strict measure for online complaints (Table D5). To address sample selection biases, we removed outliers based on the volume of citizen posts and the ratio of complaint claims (Table D6). Furthermore, to mitigate risks associated with regional heterogeneity, we divided observations into sub-samples based on two indicators: whether the city is critical (a vice-provincial or a provincial capital city) and whether the city belongs to one of the five autonomous provincial-level units (Table D7). All the above tests for measurement and sample selection biases indicate that our baseline finding is robust.

We acknowledged that our analyses are based on data generated during 2020–2021, which was under the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, the increase in confirmed COVID-19 cases in China from May 2020 to December 2021 was relatively low and stable.⁵ To mitigate potential biases, we conducted two tests as shown in Table D8: (1) excluding observations from the initial 4 months of 2020 due to the lockdown in Wuhan from January 23 to April 8, 2020, and (2) including only observations from 2021, given that the COVID-19 pandemic in China was largely under stable control during that year. To further address this unusual year issue, we tested our theories using data from Wuhan in 2019 before the pandemic outbreak.

Additionally, complaints may be more likely than non-complaints to include requests for higher-quality responsiveness. To test this internal validity issue, we randomly sampled 1000 cases from the full dataset. Figures D2 to D4 demonstrate that this sample represents the full dataset well. We asked two researchers to manually code whether a post included requests for a concrete government response. We found that 81.5%–82.3% of claims contained requests for direct information or solid action, with an 82% consistency level between the two coding results. The analysis indicates that complaints do not inherently request concrete replies (Figure D5 and Table D9), and our baseline finding remains valid (Table D10).

5 | WHY THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT DEMONSTRATES GREATER RESPONSIVENESS TO COMPLAINTS

In the first half of our Hypotheses H2a, H2b, and H2c, we proposed that negative sentiment, subjecthood citizenship, and potential instability risk are sources of authoritarian responsiveness. In the latter half of these hypotheses, we expected that these three characteristics of online petitions drive governments to prioritize complaints.

Before testing them respectively, measurements of these three characteristics of online petitions are introduced. First, we collected 11,670 unique Chinese terms representing negative sentiment from two online dictionaries.⁶ We then calculated the negative sentiment score for each citizen's claims using the formula $(\text{negative score} - \text{min}) / (\text{max} - \text{min})$ to normalize the score within a range of 0–1. Second, by operationalizing Distelhorst and Fu (2019)'s work on citizenship, we identified that 22.31% of citizen claims belong to subject citizenship, 18.72% under legal citizenship, and 32.04% under socialist citizenship in our LLMB dataset. Third, we generated a binary variable indicating whether a citizen's claim contains the risk of street protests, based on a list of high-frequency protest-related keywords identified by Zhang and Pan (2019). Meanwhile, we measured whether a claim mentioned a previous unhappy experience through the 12345 hotline, another localized petition channel across China.

Table 3 confirms the first part of our hypotheses H2a, H2b, and H2c. Specifically, Columns 1–3 indicate that these three characteristics indeed are associated with higher quality responses, irrespective of whether the petition is a complaint or a non-complaint; Column 4, where putting these factors together, consistently confirms this finding. These findings validate the existing literature's argument that negative information, subjecthood citizenship, and potential instability risk are sources of authoritarian responsiveness.⁷ Additionally, from a complaint-centered perspective, Table 3 shows that even when controlling for the three aspects, complaints still elicit higher-quality responsiveness.

Results for the latter half of Hypotheses H2a to H2c are presented in Figure 6. We treated the three aspects of online petitions as mediators to investigate the mechanism. Utilizing the *mediation* package for multilevel models from Tingley et al. (2014), we tested whether and to what extent the effect of complaints on responsiveness is mediated by each of these three aspects. The results show that H2a and H2c are supported, while H2b is not. Specifically, 6.70% of the effect is mediated through the negative information mechanism, while approximately 1.36%–3.29% is mediated through the bureaucrats' risk aversion mechanism. Using Zeng et al. (2023)'s method, Figure E1 echoes this finding, showing that complaints are positively correlated with negative sentiment and potential instability risk but negatively correlated with subjecthood citizenship.

6 | EXTENSION

Establishing external validity requires testing the generalizability of our findings in different contexts, especially in a context without COVID-19. Therefore, we analyzed online petition data from Wuhan, a prefecture-level city in central China. By decoding the API of the Wuhan Urban Message Board (<https://liuyan.cjn.cn/fivelist?fup=1>), we retrieved all posts and government responses from April 28, 2017, to July 13, 2022. The temporal distribution of government replies is illustrated in Figure 7.

TABLE 3 Multiple sources of authoritarian responsiveness.

	DV: Concrete reply (1 = yes, 0 = no)			
	H2a (1)	H2b (2)	H2c (3)	H2 (4)
Complaint (1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.34 *** (0.02)	0.36 *** (0.02)	0.34 *** (0.02)	0.35 *** (0.02)
Normalized negative score	0.61 *** (0.13)			0.61 *** (0.13)
Subjecthood citizenship		0.13 *** (0.01)		0.13 *** (0.01)
Legal citizenship		0.02 (0.02)		0.01 (0.02)
Socialist citizenship		−0.05 *** (0.01)		−0.06 *** (0.01)
Claim containing protest risk			0.08 *** (0.01)	0.06 *** (0.01)
Claim from 12345 hotline			0.22 *** (0.04)	0.21 *** (0.04)
Post controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Leader controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
City controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reply controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Random Effects				
σ^2	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29
τ_{00}	1.61 cityid	1.60 cityid	1.60 cityid	1.61 cityid
τ_{11}	0.04 cityid.complaint	0.05 cityid.complaint	0.04 cityid.complaint	0.04 cityid.complaint
ICC	0.33	0.33	0.33	0.33
N	289 cityid	289 cityid	289 cityid	289 cityid
Observations	216,223	216,223	216,223	216,223
AIC	184,405.013	184,327.562	184,351.924	184,246.394

Note: The unit of analysis is city-thread level. Dependent variable: the quality of government responsiveness (binary). Post controls, leader controls, city controls, and reply controls are the same as Model 5 of Table 2. City clustering effects are accounted for in the multilevel mixed-effect models.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

To exclude the effects of COVID-19 and ensure better comparability with the LLMB data from 2020 to 2021, we only used observations from 2019 in Wuhan, highlighted in yellow in Figure 7. The Wuhan online petition platform, being local, lacks the standardized labeling of complaint types and topic domains seen in the LLMB. Therefore, we used text-processing techniques to measure these variables. First, we applied the same method to identify strictly defined complaints, as shown in Appendix B, which constituted 9.0% of the data (compared to 7.8% in the main LLMB analysis). Next, we used the structural topic model method to detect 20 topics and measured the proportion of each topic, as shown in Figure 8. These topic proportions were included as variables in regression models, excluding three topics labeled as “unknown.” The summary of relevant variables can be found in Table F1 in the appendix.

Models 1–3 in Table 4 greatly increase our confidence regarding the effect of complaints on the quality of government responsiveness. In Model 4, no evidence shows that in Wuhan, complaints are resolved better than ordinary online posts; this may be due to grassroots

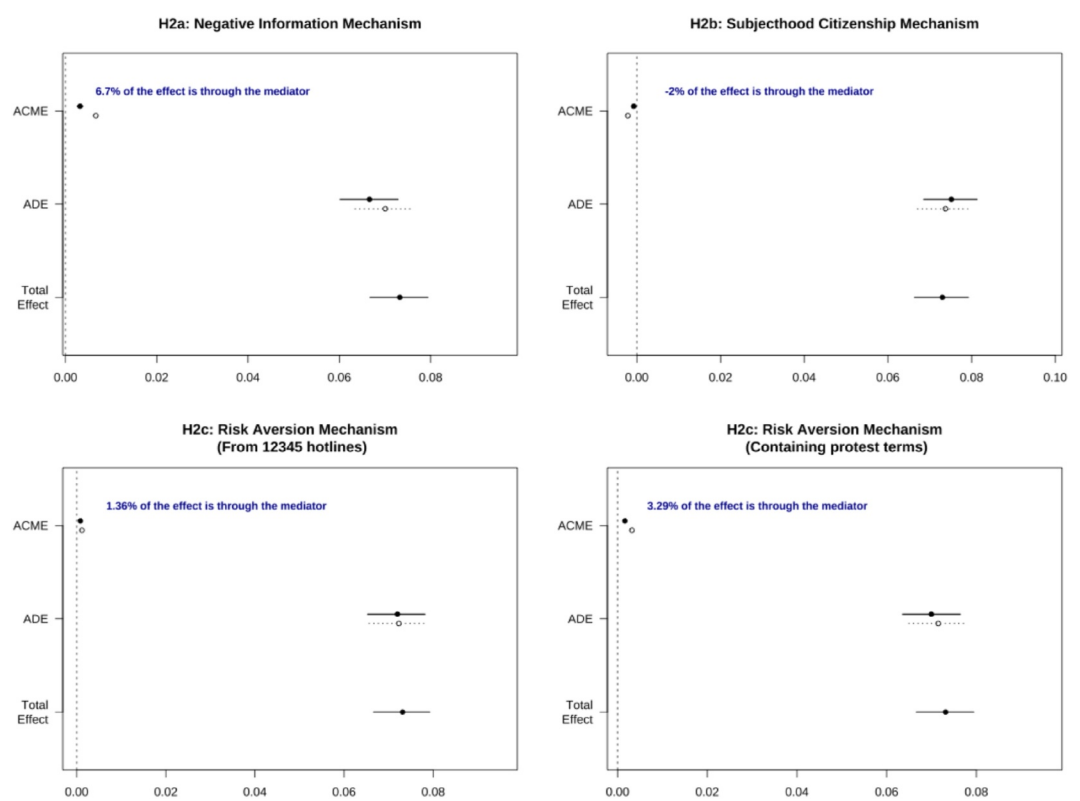


FIGURE 6 Testing mechanisms through mediation models.

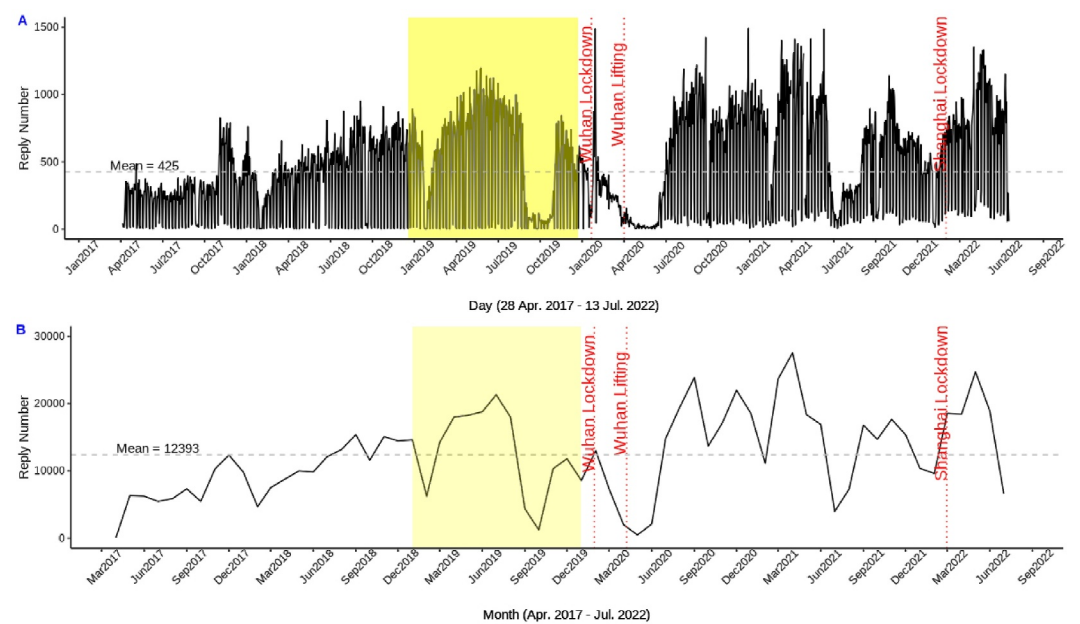


FIGURE 7 Number of governments' replies in Wuhan, 2017–2022. The yellow area refers to observations in 2019.

The Plot of Structural Topic Modeling with Labels

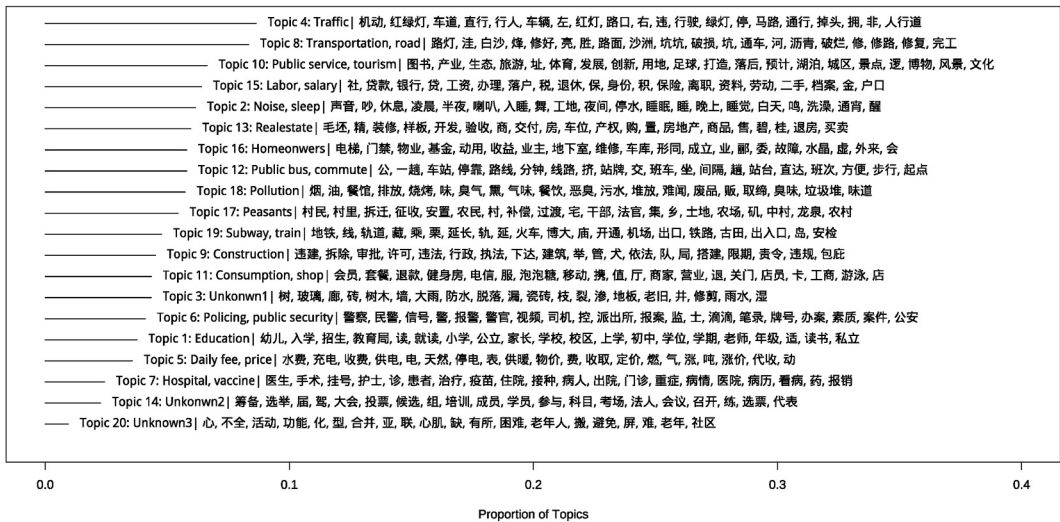


FIGURE 8 Topics detected in Wuhan by the structural topic model.

governments lacking sufficient resources and authority to address some complex issues. This spark difference implies that LLMB, operated by the central authority, is more influential in holding local bureaucrats to be responsive to citizens than the Wuhan online petition platform.

In summary, the evidence from Wuhan highlights two key points. First, it demonstrates that the Chinese government's responsiveness to complaints is not merely a reaction to crises like COVID-19 but likely reflects a consistent governance pattern. Second, it shows that even at the local level, complaints can effectively prompt improved government responsiveness. Together, these points bolster our confidence in applying this theory to broader contexts.

7 | CONCLUSION

This study separates how government responsiveness through institutionalized online petition channels prioritizes citizen complaints compared to non-complaints. Drawing on two government-provided online petition channels in China, we demonstrated that complaints receive higher-quality responsiveness than ordinary citizen claims. Our analyses also reveal that the authoritarian regime's prioritization of citizen complaints is predominantly influenced by gathering negative information and proactive measures to forestall potential unrest.

Our findings have several theoretical implications. First, this study indicates that authoritarian responsiveness has a proactive facet. Conventional wisdom believes authoritarian responsiveness is passive and is primarily driven by direct threats to social stability (Chen, 2009, 2012; Chen et al., 2016; Pan, 2020). However, we demonstrated that authoritarian regimes take citizen complaints seriously, although these complaints, submitted through institutionalized channels, do not pose a direct threat. Different input channels in authoritarian regimes like China handle various types of citizen claims, with messages directly threatening social stability being highly unlikely to appear in institutionalized channels. Moreover, while online petition

TABLE 4 Complaint and responsiveness in the Wuhan online petition channel.

Predictors	Concrete reply (1 = yes, 0 = no) (1)	Concrete reply (broad, 1 = yes, 0 = no) (2)	Action as reply (1 = yes, 0 = no) (3)	Problem resolved as reply (1 = yes, 0 = no) (4)
Complaint (re, 1 = yes, 0 = no)	0.12 ** (0.04)	0.12 ** (0.04)	0.13 *** (0.02)	−0.02 (0.05)
Post controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Reply controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Random effects				
σ^2	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.29
τ_{00}	0.02 reply_month	0.00 reply_month	0.00 reply_month	0.00 reply_month
	0.00 reply_month.1	0.02 reply_month.1	0.00 reply_month.1	0.00 reply_month.1
τ_{11}	0.01 reply_month.1. complaint_re	0.01 reply_month.1. complaint_re	0.00 reply_month.1. complaint_re	0.01 reply_month.1. complaint_re
ρ_{01}	−0.76 reply_month.1	−0.06 reply_month.1	1.00 reply_month.1	0.41 reply_month.1
ICC	0.01	0.00		0.00
N	12 reply_month	12 reply_month	12 reply_month	12 reply_month
Observations	157,221	157,221	157,221	157,221
AIC	156,871.197	154,187.538	189,934.253	88,020.048

Note: The unit of analysis is individual post. Dependent variables: responsiveness quality. Complaints are measured in the same way as LLMB's approach to strict complaints. *Post controls* consist of logged post length and topics detected by the structural topic model. *Reply controls* include response speed and response length. The month's cluster effect was considered in the mixed effect models.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

platforms facilitate “vertical communication” between officials and citizens, they rarely foster horizontal communication among citizens (Dimitrov, 2023, p. 334).

Second, our research sheds light on the relationship between repression and responsiveness. The rising digital surveillance has made street protests increasingly difficult (Fu & Distelhorst, 2018; Xu, 2021), leading to more decentralized and disguised forms of mobilization (Cheng et al., 2022; Fu, 2018; Liang & Lee, 2021). While repression increases the risk of contentious activities, online petition platforms offer safer avenues for citizens to complain, explaining why repression can coexist with responsiveness (Elfstrom, 2020). However, our study suggests that the increasing capability of digital surveillance enhances the regime's ability to collect information, which may reduce the government's motivation and necessity to provide responsiveness to attract voluntarily provided information.

Third, our findings speak to the broader literature on online citizen participation. While the scholarship has primarily concentrated on online activism and protests (Liang & Lee, 2021; Yang, 2009; Zhu et al., 2022) and the troll army on non-institutionalized forums (Han, 2018), very few studies have delved into institutionalized input channels. Although a few recent studies have contributed to analyzing online citizen complaints (Cai & Zhou, 2019; Pan & Chen, 2018; Wang & Han, 2023), almost no literature has highlighted the differences between

online complaints and non-complaints. Our study may encourage further research into the differences between complaints and non-complaints in institutionalized online channels.

Finally, although governments' attention to online complaints and consultation leads to the macro-level government responsiveness characterized by the congruence of public preferences and government policy (Jiang et al., 2019; Jiang & Zeng, 2020; Kornreich, 2019; Zeng et al., 2023), we should caution that overreliance on prioritizing complaints may impede substantial reform. An ideal responsive government should address all citizen demands equally rather than selectively respond to citizens.

This research has several limitations that suggest avenues for future study. First, textual promises do not necessarily lead to solid action but increase the likelihood of better government responsiveness (Liu, 2023). While our measurement of concrete responsiveness captures the actions that governments claim to have taken or plan to take, potential biases remain. Given that citizens can repeatedly complain and that lying to central authorities with text records carries high risks, we expect these biases to be minimal. Still, more advanced methods are needed to improve measurement accuracy. Second, biases can stem from self-censorship and platform censorship. Before resorting to LLMB, many citizens may adapt to behavioral habits using the 12345 hotline or local petition websites. However, despite censorship on social media, institutionalized channels such as the LLMB experience relatively less censorship (Jiang et al., 2019). Finally, while we have provided preliminary evidence to explain why authoritarian regimes prioritize online complaints, we recognized the need for further causal or qualitative analyses of the mechanisms, particularly regarding the role of legitimacy.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We claim that the article contains no potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data and code supporting this study's results are available at Harvard Dataverse: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/5DNE8Q>.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The official LLMB regulations are available at <http://liuyan.people.com.cn/help?cat=1> (accessed May 15, 2022).

- ² One of our authors had worked as a civil servant in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, between August 2016 and July 2017, when he responded to hundreds of citizen petitions.
- ³ In robustness checks, we use glmer with Poisson family for predicting response length.
- ⁴ The detailed distribution of topic domains can be found in Figure B2 in the appendix.
- ⁵ See time series of confirmed cases at <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/china>.
- ⁶ See <https://github.com/iamxiatian/xsimilarity/tree/master/dict/sentiment> and https://github.com/hellonlp/sentiment_analysis_dict.
- ⁷ Results in Table E1 are also supportive.

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