Does Negative Propaganda against Foreign Rivals Cultivate Regime-Stabilizing Attitudes? Evidence from China

Abstract

Authoritarian regimes massively engage in "negative propaganda" that spreads disproportionately derogatory information defaming foreign rivals. Can such propaganda shape public opinion that stabilizes the regime? I argue that negative propaganda can arouse opposition to the democratic regime and democratic reform because it incites fear of the liberal regime, but it does not necessarily improve regime support. By analyzing over 800,000 Weibo posts from Chinese state-affiliated media, I show that negative propaganda has been consistently prevalent and potentially fear-inducing. With a survey experiment in China, I find that exposure to negative propaganda significantly lowers evaluations of the democratic regime and preference for democratic reform. It also induces fear, which substantially mediates the treatment effects. However, negative propaganda does not significantly improve evaluations of the domestic regime. These results contribute to the understanding of how emotions embedded in propaganda shape public opinion and how authoritarian regimes survive in a changing information environment.

Keywords: propaganda; public opinion; fear; emotions; authoritarian regime; China

(Word count: 9960)

Autocrats use propaganda to consolidate favorable public opinion and maintain regime stability (Brady 2008). To that end, they have launched massive *positive propaganda* campaigns that glorify the regime, justify their policy decisions, inject nationalism into their citizens, and signal their power (Han 2018; Huang 2015*b*; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011). Existing research provides mixed evidence on whether such campaigns have the desired effects. Some research shows that propaganda generates positive attitudes towards the regime (Adena et al. 2015; Pan, Shao and Xu 2021; Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014), whereas others reveal that propaganda fails to promote regime support (Bleck and Michelitch 2017; Mattingly and Yao 2022) and can even backfire because citizens are well aware of such propaganda and resent it (Bush et al. 2016; Chen and Shi 2001; Huang 2015*b*, 2018).

While existing research devotes considerable attention to the effectiveness of positive propaganda, autocrats also use *negative propaganda* to indoctrinate their citizens. Unlike positive propaganda that extends hyperbolic praise of the regime, negative propaganda disproportionately spreads disparaging news, commentary, and misinformation about foreign rivals, exaggerating the level of disorder, insecurity, and incompetence in those countries. Negative propaganda has been a popular strategy across authoritarian regimes, especially in periods of intense interstate rivalry, including the Soviet Union (Barghoorn 1966), Iran (Christia 2019), Azerbaijan (ECRI 2011), Syria (Alrababa'h and Blaydes 2021), and China (Chester 2021). Despite the prevalence of negative propaganda in many authoritarian regimes, its effect on domestic political attitudes is not well understood. Can negative propaganda cultivate public opinion that stabilizes the regime, including increasing antipathy towards the democratic regime, reducing the desire to reform the domestic regime, and promoting regime support?

In this paper, I draw on theories of psychology to argue that negative propaganda can shape regime-stabilizing attitudes because of an important emotional mechanism: fear. Specifically, negative propaganda portrays foreign adversaries in an exceedingly negative light with frightening texts and visuals that contain massive "threatening stimuli." Theories of emotions posit that, as these stimuli are associated with chaos, uncertainty, and other uncontrollable situations, individ-

ual appraisals of such stimuli can incite fear (Frijda 1986; Lazarus 1991; Roseman 1996; Scherer 1999). In turn, individuals who experience fear as a consequence of negative propaganda become more risk-averse (Johnson and Tversky 1983; Lerner and Keltner 2001; Lerner et al. 2003). When negative propaganda frequently associates chaos and corruption with democratic institutions (Chester 2021), risk-averse citizens affected by negative propaganda are, therefore, more likely to resist democracies and democratic reform. However, being risk-averse to institutions that may give rise to dangers and chaos is not equivalent to embracing the domestic regime, so individuals exposed to negative propaganda are not necessarily more likely to support the domestic regime.

Empirical analyses of my argument rely on both observational and experimental data from China. For observational evidence, I turn to the accounts of Chinese state-affiliated media on Sina Weibo, one of China's largest social media platforms that resembles Twitter. By analyzing an original corpus of over 800,000 Weibo posts from state-affiliated media, I show that negative propaganda has been increasingly prevalent and consistently threatening on Chinese social media. I then run an original experimental study to causally examine the effect of exposure to negative propaganda on regime-stabilizing attitudes. In the experiment, I randomly exposed respondents to a Weibo post shared by the state-affiliated media, which describes the social and political chaos in the United States. The results show that exposure to negative propaganda has a significantly negative effect on the evaluation of western democracies and preference for democratic reform. However, the treatment effect on domestic regime support is positive but insignificant. Meanwhile, the treatment groups also report significantly stronger feelings of fear. The causal mediation analysis shows that fear, instead of other emotions, mediates the relationship between exposure to negative propaganda and regime-stabilizing attitudes. This relationship is largely consistent across respondents, including those already knowledgeable about western politics, suggesting fear influences political attitudes above and beyond the informational effects of negative propaganda.

This paper makes several important contributions. First, it expands the understanding of whether and how state propaganda shapes public opinion. While previous studies provide mixed evidence of the impact of positive propaganda on domestic political attitudes, I show that *negative* propa-

ganda can stabilize the regime by reducing preferences for the alternative regime and democratic reform. These results speak to theories of authoritarian survival (e.g., Magaloni 2006) and illuminate how authoritarian states manage to survive by framing alternatives as uncertain and unwelcoming in periods of strong interstate hostility and increasing global support for democratic institutions (Wike et al. 2017). However, these results also speak to the limits of negative propaganda for authoritarian regimes, as it is less effective at generating enthusiastic support for the domestic authoritarian regime. Second, the results contribute to our understanding of how propaganda works. The current literature on propaganda has mainly focused on demonstrating how propaganda persuades citizens by providing information about their own regime's capabilities (e.g., Gehlbach, Sonin and Svolik 2016; Guriev and Treisman 2015; Huang 2018; Jowett and O'Donnell 2018). Instead, this study shows how propaganda affects attitudes by appealing to emotions (see also Bleck and Michelitch 2017; Carter and Carter 2021; Greene and Robertson 2022; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Williamson and Malik 2020). In addition, as negative propaganda against foreign rivals is also prevalent in democracies, this study also has implications on how such propaganda may affect voting behaviors and foreign policy attitudes in democratic countries. I elaborate on these contributions in the conclusion section.

Negative Propaganda and Regime-Stabilizing Attitudes: A Theory

Propaganda is a strategy of exposing individuals to selective or fabricated information in the hope of transmitting social and political values (Huang 2018; Huang and Cruz 2022). Negative propaganda primarily involves providing an excessive proportion of derogatory materials on foreign enemies with a similar goal of cultivating regime support among domestic citizens (Barghoorn 1966). In authoritarian regimes, negative propaganda is usually targeted against western democracies, especially the United States (Barghoorn 1966; Brady 2008; Chester 2021; Mousavian and Shahidsaless 2014; Rawnsley 2016; Vogel 2011), but can also be observed in situations where two

authoritarian countries are in conflicts, such as China and the Soviet Union during the 1960s (Lüthi 2008). Negative propaganda can primarily involve the crude portrayal of "bad guys" (Barghoorn 1966), but can also take a subtler form that strategically associates malfeasance and chaos with the rival regime (Chester 2021). Regardless of the formats, negative propaganda has been used to make the alternative regime look chaotic and uncertain so that autocrats can stabilize domestic public opinion. Do these efforts pay off?

Insights from theories in psychology suggest that negative propaganda has the potential to shape political attitudes through an important emotional mechanism: fear. Early social psychologists argue that emotions, especially fear, play an important role in the efficacy of propaganda (Doob and Robinson 1935; Strong 1922; Young 1930). For example, Young (1930, 655) asserts that propagandists strategically "arouse our fear and anxiety and to make us avoid some things and to accept and enjoy the new legends and by projection to participate in them." In a more recent overview of the relationship between propaganda and persuasion, Pratkanis and Aronson (2001, 11) claims that "[p]ropaganda involves the dextrous use of images, slogans, and symbols that play on our prejudices and emotions;" Empirical studies have similarly argued emotions as an important outcome of propaganda or a mechanism that propaganda takes effect in various authoritarian contexts, including the Soviet Union, China, and Egypt (Barghoorn 1966; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Williamson and Malik 2020).

These insights are particularly relevant in the case of negative propaganda. After all, this type of propaganda shows the most horrific incidents taking place in rival countries. By associating these foreign regimes with threatening texts and visuals, negative propaganda has the power to incite fear of liberal regimes. This argument is in line with the expectations of research in neuroscience and different strands of emotional theories, which posit that fear stems from the processing of threatening events and unfavorable circumstances (Frijda 1986; Lazarus 1991; LeDoux 1996; Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000; Roseman 1996).[1] In political science, this argument has

[1]While sharing similar conclusions on how fear can be aroused by threatening stimuli, different strands of emotional theories such as the Cognitive Appraisal Theories (CAT) and the Affective Intelligence Theories (AIT) propose different micro-level mechanisms on how such arousal exactly happens. This discussion is out of the scope of this paper but well documented in the cited literature. For example, see Mintz, Valentino and Wayne (2022) for a summary.

been applied to understanding different phenomena such as negative campaigning (Bakir and McStay 2018; Brader 2006; Marcus 2010), public opinion on immigration (Valentino et al. 2008), terrorism (Huddy et al. 2005; Merolla and Zechmeister 2009), and public dissent (Young 2019).

In the context of negative propaganda, frightening information about foreign rivals – such as reports of gun violence and chaos in electoral politics – signals casualties, disorder, and uncontrollable circumstances. Exposure to such threatening stimuli can arouse fear, particularly when these messages are visualized as images and videos (Brader 2006; Newhagen and Reeves 1992; Pratkanis and Aronson 2001). In authoritarian regimes, the state's strict control over the domestic media further ensures that individuals' exposure to negative propaganda is consistent and extensive. While the events covered in negative propaganda may be geographically distant, they can still elicit fear of the liberal regime because people can imagine living in those situations. For example, individuals can experience fear after watching scenes in a movie that signal danger and threat to survival even though they may have no such personal experience (Fredrickson and Branigan 2005; Renshon, Lee and Tingley 2015). Analogously, news reports about how school shootings or the pandemic have affected citizens in another country can induce fear because these incidents in nature can severely threaten survival and social stability.

When the state-run media strategically attributes such chaos and instability to the democratic regime (Chester 2021), it is likely that fear can spread to those political and social institutions, much like individuals who fear terrorist attacks also fear the terrorists who perpetrate such violence. When portraying the democratic regime as excessively dangerous, negative propaganda can induce opposition to democracy and democratic reform because prior research shows that fear is associated with a more pessimistic assessment of risk and risk aversion (Druckman and McDermott 2008; Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales 2015; Johnson and Tversky 1983; Lerner and Keltner 2001; Lerner et al. 2003; Loewenstein, Weber and Hsee 2001). In an authoritarian context, Young (2019) demonstrates that individuals who sense more fear indeed express less dissent against the regime, a risk-averse response to looming repression from the state. Taken together, I expect that *negative propaganda, which provides threatening information about foreign regimes, incites fear of those*

regimes. This, in turn, generates aversion to the democratic regime and democratic reform.

The impact of negative propaganda on support for domestic authoritarian regimes remains equivocal. Because negative propaganda highlights the democratic regime as a costly and risky alternative, individuals' risk-averse tendencies aroused by fear are likely to be directed specifically toward the democratic regime. A further implication is that individuals affected by negative propaganda prefer a more stable and less risky option distant from the "dangerous democratic regime." While the existing authoritarian regime may be perceived as such an option, there can be other possibilities, and it is not necessary that increased opposition to the democratic regime is equivalent to increased support for the status quo. For example, if political and social inefficiencies are also prevalent in the current authoritarian regime, individuals may still disapprove of the current regime, even if negative propaganda simultaneously fears and increases their opposition to democracy. Alternatively, individuals may evaluate the authoritarian regime already very positively, leaving little room for negative propaganda to further improve these evaluations, even if such propaganda simultaneously undermines support for western-style democracy. To sum up, *negative propaganda incites fear of democratic regimes inclining individuals to avoid such regimes, but that does not necessarily mean that they increase their support for the domestic regime.*

Negative Propaganda on Chinese Social Media: A Descriptive Analysis

The increasing antagonism between China and western democracies creates a strong incentive for the Chinese regime to intensify its negative propaganda, which provides a good opportunity to examine the effectiveness of such propaganda on attitudes towards the regime. Given the strict control over information flow on mass media and social media (Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Han 2018), the Chinese government can easily flood the information environment with negative news against foreign rivals. In this section, I describe the observational patterns of negative propaganda on Weibo, one of the largest Chinese social media platforms that resemble Twitter. The goal

of this exercise is to establish that (a) negative propaganda is prevalent and the Chinese population is exposed to it on a regular basis, and (b) the content of such propaganda is indeed threatening and therefore has the potential to induce fear of the liberal regime. In order to demonstrate this, I analysed an original corpus of over 800,000 Weibo posts from major state-run media and a privately-owned outlet that aligns with the state ideology. I focused on news reports about western democracies and leveraged various machine-learning models to identify, predict, and classify Weibo posts related to negative propaganda.

Data Collection, Filtering, and Coding

The Weibo posts are from five accounts that enjoy high popularity and cover a considerable proportion of international news but with different degrees of dependence on the Chinese state, as classified by (Stockmann 2013). Three of them are flagship state-run media: *the People's Daily* (人民日报), *the Xinhua News Agency* (新华社), and *the CCTV News* (央视新闻). Another outlet is *the Global Times* (环球时报), which represents "semiofficial" media that are commericialized but still tightly controlled by the Chinese state. The last Weibo account, *Guancha.cn* (观察者网), serves as an example of privately-owned media that closely aligns with the state ideology. Appendix A.1 describes these media outlets in more detail.

I collected all public Weibo posts shared by these accounts before July 30, 2022. The posts were preprocessed by tokenization and removal of stopwords, hyperlinks, punctuations, white space, and new lines. To identify posts relevant to foreign countries and especially western democracies, I applied generic keywords including "west (西方)," "United States (美国)," "United Kingdom (英国)," "Japan (日本)," "Korea (韩国)," "democracy (民主)," and "freedom (自由)" to the word2vec model, a neural network model to identify other most relevant words in the tokenized texts. Then, I filtered the original corpus containing at least one keyword, which rendered a dataset with 153,672 Weibo posts. The complete list of keywords is included in the Appendix A.2.

To understand whether the post contained negative information and threatening elements against western democracies, I randomly selected 3% of posts from each Weibo account to create a vari-

able to classify the posts. First, I determined whether a post was negative against foreign rivals. Then, if a post was deemed negative, I further determined whether the post contained threatening information that might induce fear of liberal regimes. As a result, a post could fall into one of three possible categories: (1) *non-negative*, (2) *threatening*, and (3) *other negative posts*.

Here, a post was defined as negative if it at least met one of three criteria: (a) it reported the dark sides, suffering, chaos, or instability of foreign democratic countries, (b) it reported "groundless" attacks from the west against China or other allies or China's counterattack against the west, or (c) it included other forms of criticisms, derogation, or negative comparisons. Posts that did not fit these categories were coded as *non-negative*. If a post fell into category (a), it was coded as *threatening* because the reporting of suffering and chaos could signal risk and uncertainty, thereby potentially inducing fear of the democratic regime. If a post fell into category (b) or (c), the post was coded as *other negative*. Two coders independently coded the data based on this coding scheme. Cohen's κ is 0.82, suggesting a strong level of intercoder reliability. Appendix A.3 provides more details of the coding rules and examples for each category. With this coded subset, I used a Naive Bayes Classifier to classify the remaining posts.[2]

Prevalence and the Threatening Nature of Negative Propaganda

Figure 1 visualizes the monthly proportions of state-affiliated media's Weibo posts that are negative against western democracies for state-owned media, the Global Times, and Guancha.cn. Figure 1 shows that the state-owned media have been consistently sharing negative information about the democratic rivals but at a relatively low level before 2020 – the monthly proportion of negative posts is generally over 25% but below 50%. During this period, the state-owned media outlets shared a larger proportion of negative posts only when major negative events happened, such as the

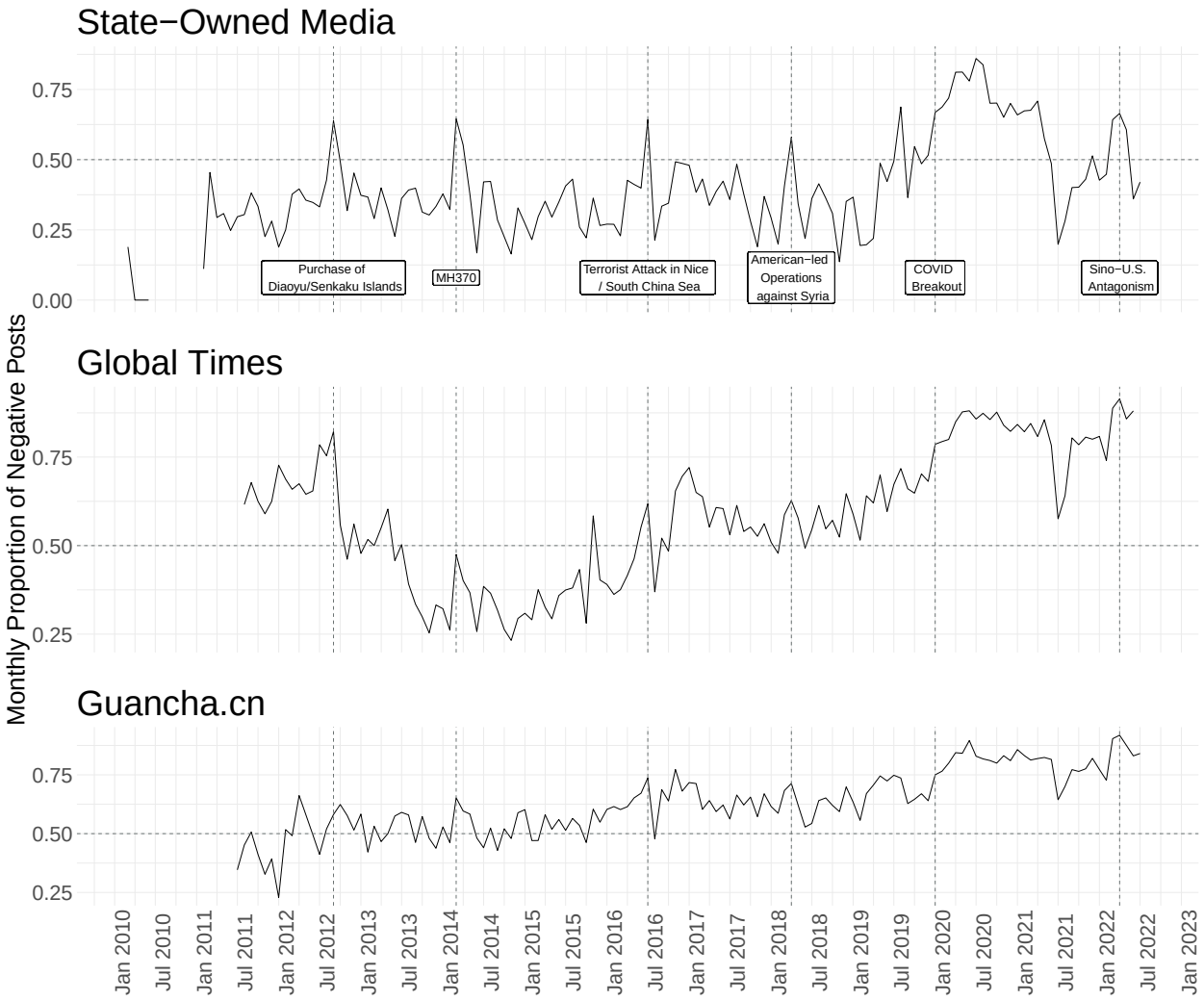
[2]The Naive Bayes Classifier yields accuracy of 82.1%, balanced accuracy of 81.5%, precision of 78.4%, recall of 91.3%, and an F1 score of 84.4%. I deem such model performance as satisfactory to proceed for classification. The Naive Bayes Classifier predicts the probability of which category a post belongs to and assigns the category with a predicted probability higher than 0.5 to that post. This classification is appropriate as the predicted probabilities follow a bipolar distribution, with most predicted probabilities clustered at 0 and 1. See Appendix A.4 for the distribution plot and Appendix A.5 for the descriptive statistics of the corpus.

terrorist attack in Nice in July 2016 or when China was "unfairly" targeted by foreign rivals, such as the purchase of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in 2012. This proportion significantly increased after the breakout of COVID in 2020 and decreased to a much lower level after January 2021, coinciding with a rapid decrease in new COVID cases in the United States. After July 2021, the trend increased again and reached another peak in April 2022, when the rivalry between China and the United States became intense because of the Russia-Ukraine War and the visit of the U.S. congressional delegation to Taiwan. Overall, these data suggest that Chinese citizens are exposed to negative propaganda against foreign rivals from state-owned media on a regular basis.

The middle and lower panels of Figure 1 provide more prominent evidence that negative propaganda becomes increasingly prevalent among semiofficial and private media outlets, as the monthly proportion of negative posts shared by the Global Times and Guancha.cn has been increasing over time. Almost every month, over 50% of the Weibo posts from Guancha.cn were negative news against foreign rivals. The proportion increased to an even higher level after the COVID breakout, generally over 75%. The Global Times also followed this trend of becoming increasingly cynical against foreign rivals after 2016. As the Global Times and Guancha.cn have a more explicit focus on international news compared with the state-controlled media, these patterns are more illustrative of the prevalence of negative propaganda. These results reflect that, in general, Chinese citizens have been consistently and increasingly exposed to negative propaganda against western democracies.

Figure 2 further discloses the threatening nature of negative propaganda and its potential to induce fear of liberal regimes. Across all selected media outlets, the proportion of potentially fear-inducing posts is over half almost all the time. For the Global Times and Guancha.cn, there is even an increasing proportion of content about chaos and instability in foreign rivals, suggesting that these media outlets have been increasingly engaging in fear-mongering western democracies. Taken together, these descriptive results clearly show that the Chinese state-affiliated media have been increasingly engaging in negative propaganda on social media and disseminating content that may induce fear of the democratic regime.

Figure 1: Monthly Proportion of Negative Posts against Western Democracies on Chinese Social Media

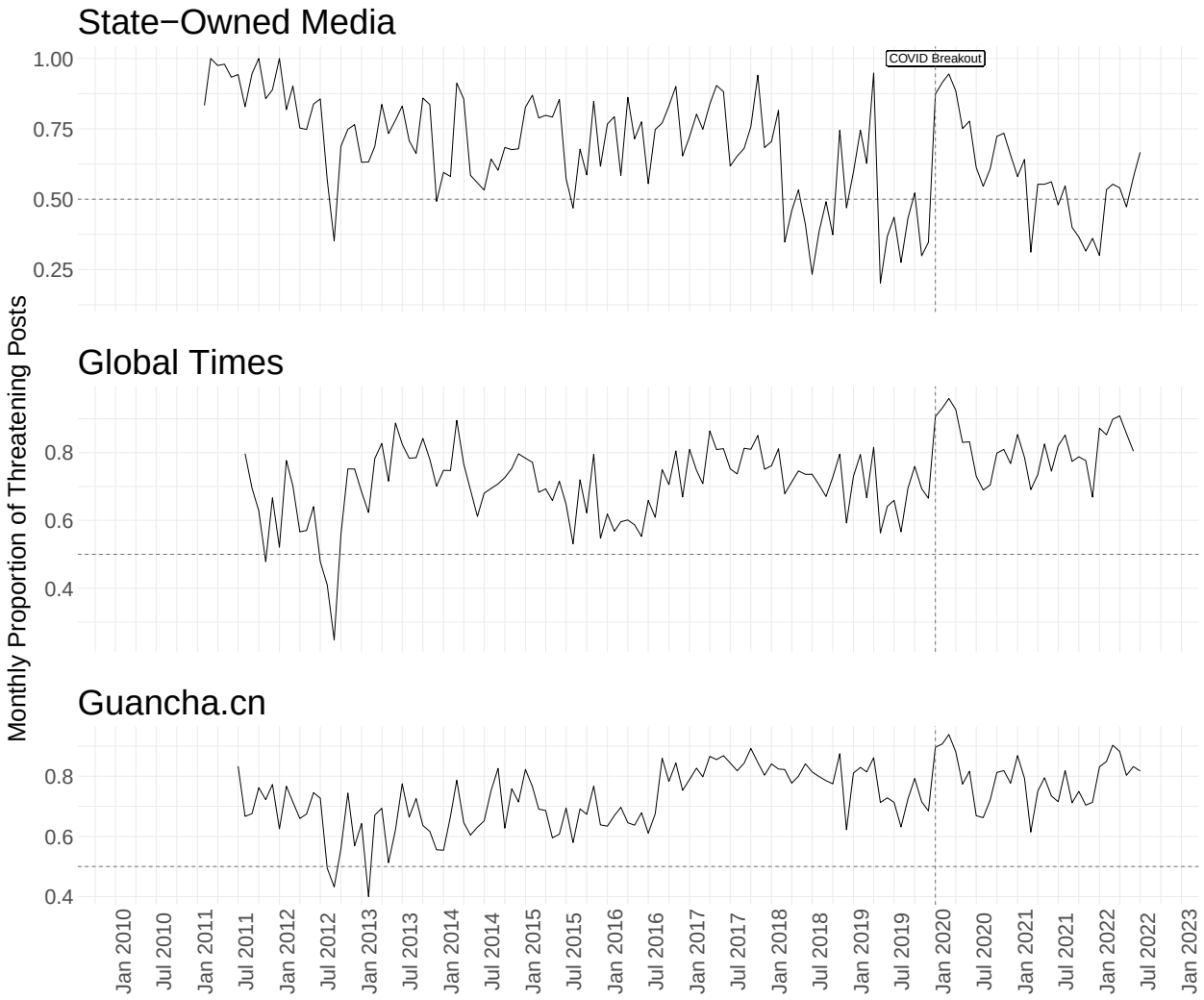


Note: The monthly proportion of negative posts is calculated by dividing the number of negative posts by all posts relevant to western democracies within a month. The three panels present the monthly proportions for different media outlets. "State-Owned Media" include the People's Daily, the Xinhua Agency, and the CCTV News.

Experimental Evidence

How does negative propaganda to which individuals have been consistently exposed affect attitudes towards the domestic and the democratic regime? I will now turn to examine (1) the causal relationship between exposure to negative propaganda and regime-stabilizing attitudes and (2) whether it is the fear mechanism that underlies this relationship. To do so, I conducted a survey experiment in China, where I randomly assigned respondents to read a Weibo post shared by the state media

Figure 2: Monthly Proportion of Threatening Posts against Western Democracies on Chinese Social Media



Note: The monthly proportion of threatening posts is calculated by dividing the number of threatening posts by the number of negative posts within a month. The three panels present the monthly proportions for different media outlets."State-Owned Media" include the People's Daily, the Xinhua Agency, and the CCTV News.

about the political and social chaos in western democracies. Then, I compared attitudinal outcomes and the level of fear between the control and treatment groups to identify the causal effect of exposing respondents to negative propaganda. I also leverage causal mediation analysis to test the plausibility of the fear mechanism (Imai, Keele and Yamamoto 2010; Imai et al. 2011; Imai and Yamamoto 2013).

Procedures

The survey experiment was conducted in November 2022 online in China.[3] The 1,050 participants of the survey experiment were recruited by a licensed survey company. According to the company's information, it maintains a subject pool of over 12 million registered participants and is able to recruit participants across various socioeconomic backgrounds and all regions in Mainland China. The respondents recruited by the company were later directed to Qualtrics to complete the survey anonymously. Respondents from each unique IP address were only allowed to answer the survey once to prevent duplication. Appendix B provides further details on the sample, including the benefits of an online sample, its representativeness of the Chinese Internet population, and potential caveats.

All respondents needed to pass a screener question that served as an attention check before receiving their treatments.[4] Respondents who passed the attention check read a Weibo post shared by a Chinese state-affiliated media, while the content of the post differed between treatment conditions. Specifically, I randomized respondents to read either a Weibo post about seasons (the control group) or a Weibo post about political and social turmoil in the United States (the treatment groups). All posts contained text and an image, similar to most Weibo posts shared by state-affiliated media. Compared with pure text, images are more powerful in evoking emotions (Brader 2006; Gadarian 2010).

As suggested by Albertson and Gadarian (2016), I selected two posts based on a pretest of 126 participants recruited from the same survey company.[5] In the pretest, the participants read some candidate posts recently shared by Chinese state-affiliated media on their Weibo accounts. Afterwards, they reported their emotional states and familiarity with similar posts. I selected two Weibo posts that (a) induced a relatively high level of fear but not comparable levels of other emotions and (b) were similar to news reports the participants had read previously. Therefore,

[3]The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the researcher's home institution and was preregistered in EGAP.

[4]The screener question was adapted from Berinsky et al. (2021), which asked respondents to indicate their preference for news types but can only choose two designated categories as explicitly specified in the question.

[5]These participants were excluded from the main experiment.

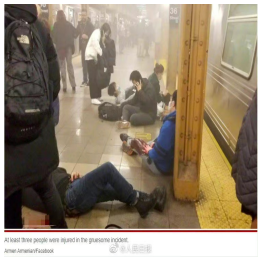
the posts selected for the treatment groups can serve as appropriate threatening stimuli that signal chaos and uncontrollable situations in western democracies while providing little extra information for participants, given their familiarity with similar events. Specifically, the first post reported on gun violence, stating that at least 86 shootings occurred in one day in the United States, which resulted in nine people being shot and one person being killed. The image attached to this post showed that individuals were shot at a metro station in New York. This image was shared by the People's Daily's Weibo account in another post about the shooting in New York on April 12, 2022. The second post reported on the chaos of party politics, stating that a female Trump supporter was shot and killed in a conflict between police and protesters during the Capitol Attack on January 6, 2021. The image attached to this post showed protesters waving a flag and cheering at the Capitol. Respondents were fully informed that the posts they read were real but might be from different accounts, so there was no deception. I randomized respondents in the treatment groups to read one of the two posts. Table 1 summarizes the treatment conditions. Appendix G provides the details of these Weibo posts.

After the treatment, the survey asked respondents to recall some details of the post as treatment reinforcement. Then, participants reported their emotional state using the Positive and Negative Attitude Schedule-M (PANAS-M) (Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre and Utych 2021), a modified version of the PANAS (Watson, Clark and Tellegen 1988). While the original PANAS can lead to measurement error as negative emotions tend to be highly correlated, the PANAS-M lowers these correlations by taking a two-step approach. Participants first indicate whether they feel any emotions on the list, then rate the intensity of the emotions they selected on a 1-5 scale. This strengthens the internal validity of the measured emotions (Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre and Utych 2021). I created two variables that indicated whether the respondents experienced fear (*Fear Dummy*) and if so, the level of fear (*Fear Level*). *Fear Level* was coded as 0 if *Fear Dummy* was 0.[6]

After measuring emotions, I measured respondents' (a) evaluation of the democratic regime,

[6]In addition to fear, I also measured whether and to what extent respondents experienced other emotions, including anger and reassurance. Appendix C.1 presents a table that summarized the options the respondents could choose to indicate their feelings of fear, anger, or reassurance.

Table 1: Summary of Control and Treatment Conditions

Group	Treatment Conditions	Hashtags of the Posts	Image
C1	Control	#Autumn autumn come quietly#	Neutral image: 
T1	Gun violence	#86 shootings occurred in one day in the United States#	Shootings in New York: 
T2	Jan-6 Attack	#Police shot and killed a female Trump supporter#	Screenshot from the video: 

(b) preference for democratic reform, and (c) evaluation of the domestic regime.[7] First, I asked respondents to self-report how well China's political regime functioned in China (*China Regime*), how well the democratic regime functioned in western countries (*Western Regime*), and preference for reform by learning from the democratic regime (*Democratic Reform*). I also asked respondents to evaluate the current domestic situations in China (*Domestic Eval*). These questions were all placed on a 1-5 Likert scale.

In addition, I included the Word Association Test (WAT) as a complementary measure of

[7]There is a trade-off of measuring the mediator or the outcome first. I explain why the survey measures the mediator (fear) first in the Appendix C.

regime-related attitudes (Han, Liu and Truex 2022). The WATs require respondents to provide concepts interconnected with a given keyword. I use WATs because they can reduce potential social desirability bias and provides an alternative measurement of political attitudes (Han, Liu and Truex 2022). Specifically, I asked respondents to indicate relevant terms to "domestic regime (国内体制)" and "western democracy (西方民主)" within 25 seconds. For the keyword "domestic situation," a variable *WAT Domestic* was generated, where the responses were coded as 1 if a majority of terms were positive about the Chinese regime, -1 if a majority of terms were negative about the Chinese regime, and 0 if a majority of terms were neutral or the number of positive terms and negative terms was the same. Similarly, for the keyword "western democracy," a variable *WAT Western* was coded as 1 if a majority of terms were positive about the western democracies, -1 if a majority of terms were negative about the western democracies, and 0 if a majority of terms were neutral or the number of positive terms and negative terms was the same.[8]

Table 2 summarizes the measurement of emotions and regime-related attitudes. Appendix G provides the survey instruments.

Results

I start by discussing the treatment effects on regime-stabilizing attitudes, namely evaluations of the democratic regime, preference for democratic reform, and evaluations of the domestic regime. Following this, I proceed to analyze the treatment effects on fear. To provide additional evidence regarding the validity of the fear mechanism, I present the outcomes of causal mediation analyses utilizing the methodology developed by Imai, Keele and Yamamoto (2010); Imai et al. (2011), as well as Imai and Yamamoto (2013), which examine the average causal mediation effects (ACMEs) of the fear mechanism.

[8]More details about the development and advantages of the WATs, as well as the coding scheme of the two WATs in this survey, are included in the Appendix C.

Table 2: Measurement of Fear and Regime-Related Attitudes

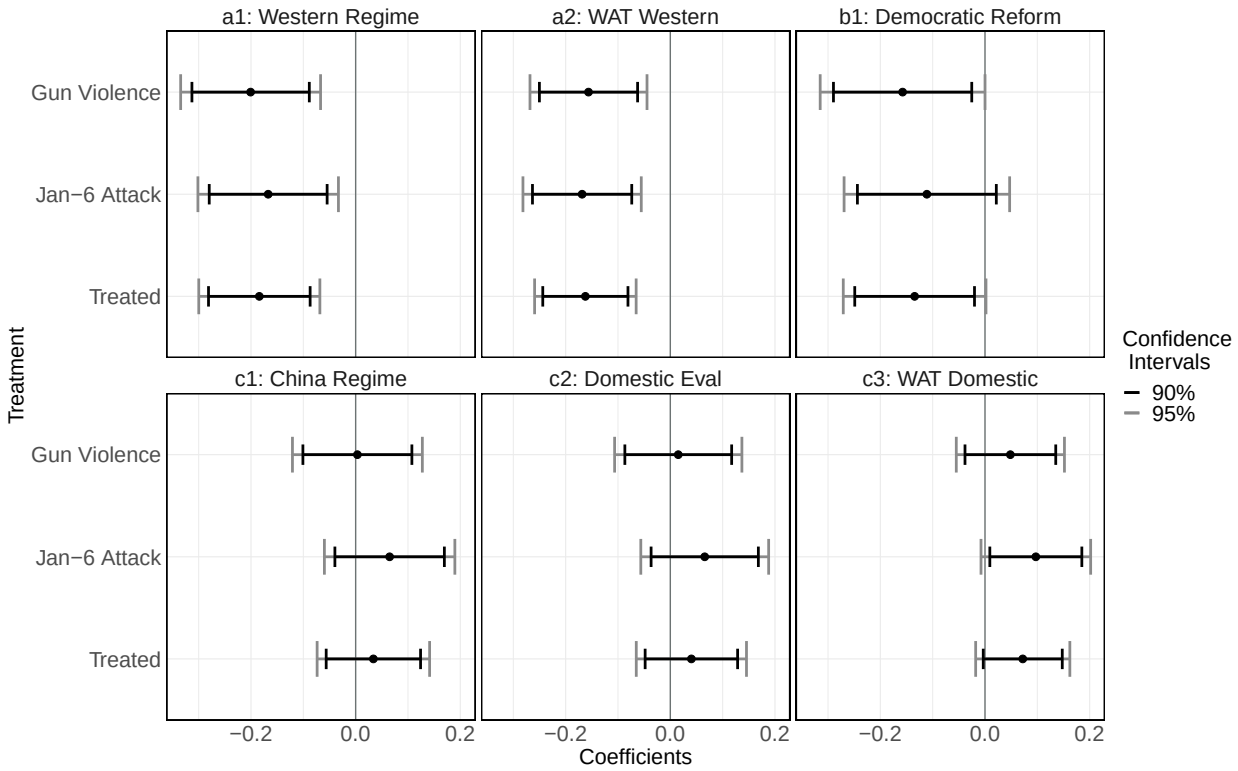
Variables	Description
Fear	
Fear Dummy	Whether an individual experiences fear when reading the post
Fear Level	(If Fear Dummy is 1) the level of fear an individual experiences
Regime-Related Attitudes	
(a) Evaluation of the Democratic Regime	
Western Regime	Evaluation of how well democracies function in the west
WAT Western	The variable generated from the WAT with the keyword "western democracies"
(b) Preference for Democratic Reform	
Democratic Reform	Preference for reform by adopting features of the democratic regime
(c) Evaluation of the Domestic Regime	
China Regime	Evaluation of how well the domestic regime functions in China
Domestic Eval	Evaluation of the overall domestic situation in China
WAT Domestic	The variable generated from the WAT with the keyword "domestic regime"

The Effect of Negative Propaganda on Regime-Stabilizing Attitudes

Figure 3 visualizes the results of the treatment effects on six measures of regime-stabilizing attitudes. The upper-left and upper-middle subplots show that exposure to negative propaganda reduces preference for the democratic regime, and the treatment effects are significant at 0.05 level. Regarding the self-reported measure, exposure to negative propaganda decreases preference for the democratic regime by 6.8 percentage points for the *Gun Violence* treatment group and by 5.6 percentage points for the *Jan-6 Attack* treatment group, respectively. Regarding the WAT measure, respondents are 2.31 times in the *Gun Violence* group and 2.42 times in the *Jan-6 Attack* group as likely as the control group to provide negative answers to the keyword "western democracy." These results are consistent with the theoretical expectation that exposure to negative propaganda increases antipathy towards the democratic regime.

Results in the upper-right subplot also provide affirming evidence that negative propaganda can reduce preference for reforming the regime to be more democratic. The treatment effect is

Figure 3: Treatment Effects on Regime-Stabilizing Attitudes



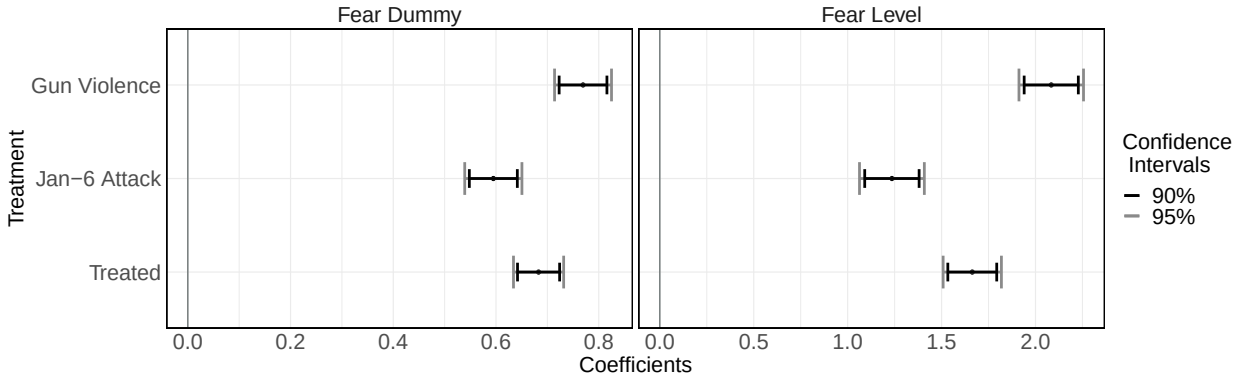
Note: The points represent the difference-in-means estimators, showing the treatment effects on the self-reported evaluation of the western regime (upper-left), the evaluation of the democratic regime measured by the WAT (upper-middle), and the self-reported preference for democratic reform (upper-right). The lower panel presents the effects on domestic regime support, including the self-reported preference for the Chinese regime (lower-left), satisfaction with the domestic situations (lower-middle), and the evaluation of the democratic regime measured by the WAT (lower-right). "Treated" represents a separate model where all treatment groups are pooled as the "treated" group.

negative and statistically significant at 0.1 level in the *Gun Violence* group ($\beta = -0.157$, se = 0.080, equivalent to a decrease of 5.0 percentage points), and insignificant but still negative in the *Jan-6 Attack* group ($\beta = -0.111$, se = 0.081, equivalent to a decrease of 3.5 percentage points). Compared with the treatment effect on the evaluation of the democratic regime, the treatment effect on democratic reform is also significantly negative, but the magnitude becomes smaller.

The subplots in the lower three panels show that respondents exposed to negative propaganda increase their self-reported support for the regime, satisfaction with the domestic situations, and are more likely to provide positive answers in the WAT, but almost all the coefficients are statistically indistinguishable from zero except for the WAT measure in the *Jan-6 Attack* group ($\beta = 0.097$, se = 0.053, meaning that respondents in the *Jan-6 Attack* are 19.5% more likely to give negative responses to the keyword). Further analysis of the self-reported measures (*China Regime* and *Domestic Eval*) suggests these insignificant results may be due to the ceiling effect. For example, 78.7% of the respondents in the control group already evaluated the Chinese regime as functioning well or very well, and this proportion only increased by 2.4% in the treatment groups. While this explanation is plausible, the comparison between the self-reported measures with the *WAT Domestic* measure shows that this ceiling effect may partially originate from respondents' varying understanding of the measurement scale and social desirability bias, as only 50.2% of the respondents in the control group give a positive response in the *WAT Domestic* question. This proportion increases by 2.7% in the treatment group, a magnitude similar to the case of self-reported measures. Therefore, the efforts to reduce social desirability bias and switch to an alternative measurement by using the WAT measure do not change the results in a meaningful way. Altogether, these results show that negative propaganda does not necessarily improve support for the domestic regime.

In sum, these results are generally consistent with my hypotheses, but the strengths of the causal relationships vary by the attitudinal measures. That is, the effect sizes and statistical significance are the most salient for attitudes towards the democratic regime, weaker but still significant for preference for democratic reform, and the weakest for domestic regime support. These results hold when demographic and other pre-treatment covariates are controlled, as presented by the

Figure 4: Treatment Effects on Fear



Note: The points represent the regression coefficients of the treatment indicator, showing the effects on whether a respondent experiences fear and the level of fear. "Treated" represents a separate model where all treatment groups are pooled as the "treated" group.

regression tables in Appendix D.1.

The Effect of Negative Propaganda on Fear

In this section, I test whether the treatments induce fear, which is the mechanism I propose that underlies the relationship between exposure to negative propaganda and regime-stabilizing attitudes. Here, I use two measures of fear, namely *Fear Dummy* indicating whether a respondent experiences fear and *Fear Level* indicating the level of fear.

Figure 4 presents the results. They clearly show that exposure to negative propaganda significantly induces fear. Regarding the *Fear Dummy* measure, respondents are 16.0 times in the *Gun Violence* treatment group and 12.7 times in the *Jan-6 Attack* treatment group as likely as the control group to report the feelings of fear. Such significant results are similar when using the *Fear Level* measure: both the *Gun Violence* ($\beta = 2.084$, se = 0.088) and the *Jan-6 Attack* treatment groups ($\beta = 1.236$, se = 0.088) report a significantly higher level of fear. These results suggest the plausibility of the fear mechanism, as treatments both reduce preference for democracies and democratic reform, as well as induce fear.

Fear as the Mechanism: Causal Mediation Analysis

To formally test whether the fear mechanism mediates the relationship between exposure to negative propaganda and regime-stabilizing attitudes, I use mediation analysis to estimate the ACME of fear (Imai, Keele and Yamamoto 2010; Imai et al. 2011). In the framework of causal mediation analysis, the Average Treatment Effect (ATE) can be decomposed into the ACME and the Average Direct Effect (ADE). While the former represents an indirect effect that the treatment (T) has on the outcome (O) through a mediator (M), the latter stands for a direct effect that T has on O. In this study, I am interested in the indirect effect exposure to negative propaganda has on regime-stabilizing attitudes, which is the ACME of fear.

An essential assumption that underlies the identification of the ACME is *sequential ignorability*. Specifically, the assumption states that (a) the treatment assignment is independent of the potential outcomes and potential mediators conditional on the observed pre-treatment confounders, and (b) the observed mediator is independent of the outcomes conditional on the actual treatment status and pre-treatment confounders. In this study, Part (a) is easily satisfied as the treatment assignment in randomized.[9] Part (b), however, is harder to satisfy because it essentially states that no unmeasured pre-treatment or post-treatment covariates can confound the relationship between the mediator and the outcomes. To partially satisfy this assumption, I include a series of demographic and pre-treatment covariates that may be theoretically correlated with fear induction and regime-related attitudes.

To account for potential posttreatment confounders, Imai and Yamamoto (2013) relax the sequential ignorability assumption by allowing potential alternative mediators to be not independent of the main mediator. In this extended framework, the sequential ignorability assumption requires the main mediator to be exogenous conditional on pre-treatment covariates, the treatment status, and potential alternative mediators. To identify the ACME, however, this framework requires an extra assumption of *No Interaction* between the treatment and mediator for every observa-

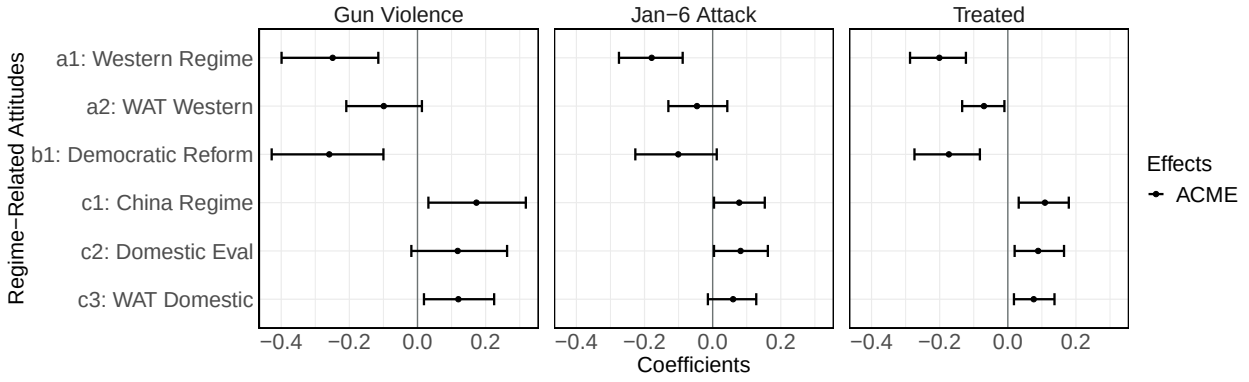
[9] See also Table B.4 in the Appendix for an OLS model that shows pre-treatment covariates do not predict treatment statuses.

tion. While this assumption may be challenging to satisfy, Imai and Yamamoto (2013) suggest presenting results by assuming the standard deviation of the individual-level coefficient for the treatment–mediator interaction, σ, to be zero, and running sensitivity analyses by varying σ and another parameter ρ_t, which stands for the correlation between the mediator of interest and the individual-level treatment–mediator interaction effect.

Conditional on accepting these assumptions, I performed two sets of mediation analyses. The first relies on the original causal mediator analysis framework that assumes independence of multiple mechanisms (Imai, Keele and Yamamoto 2010; Imai et al. 2011). The second one relies on the extended framework suggested by Imai and Yamamoto (2013), which allows controlling alternative causal mechanisms. Figure 5 reports the results of the first set of mediation analyses, where the ACMEs are estimated by using different regime-related attitudes, *Fear Level* as the mediator, and a binary treatment indicator. Appendix E provides the detailed results of the estimates and confidence intervals of the ACMEs and ADEs. These results suggest that fear mediates the relationship between exposure to negative propaganda and regime-stabilizing attitudes, as the directions of the ACMEs are consistent with the hypotheses. In terms of measures of evaluations of the democratic regime and preference for democratic reform, the ACMEs are, in general, statistically significant and negative. In addition, the strength of the fear mechanism is also suggested by the magnitude of the ACMEs, as the ACMEs estimated in all treatment groups are all slightly larger than the total effects: For example, in the pooled treatment group, the fear mechanism explains 102.5% of the variations in *Western Regime* and 114.5% of the variations in *Democratic Reform*. These results suggest that fear strongly mediates the treatment effects on attitudes towards western democracies.

Regarding measures of evaluations of the domestic regime, the ACMEs are generally statistically significant and positive, while most ADEs are negative, which explains why most of the total effects are indistinguishable from zero. These results indicate that absent the fear mechanism, exposure to negative propaganda can unexpectedly arouse backlash on the performance of the domestic regime. One plausible explanation for this finding is that respondents exposed to negative propaganda may be simultaneously primed with similar shortcomings of the domestic regime. By

Figure 5: Fear Mediates the Treatment Effects on Regime-Stabilizing Attitudes



Note: The plot presents a set of mediation analyses by using a binary treatment group (indicated by the column labels), an attitudinal measure (indicated by the row labels), and *Fear Level* as the mediator. The points stand for the ACMEs and the lines represent 95% bootstrapping confidence intervals.

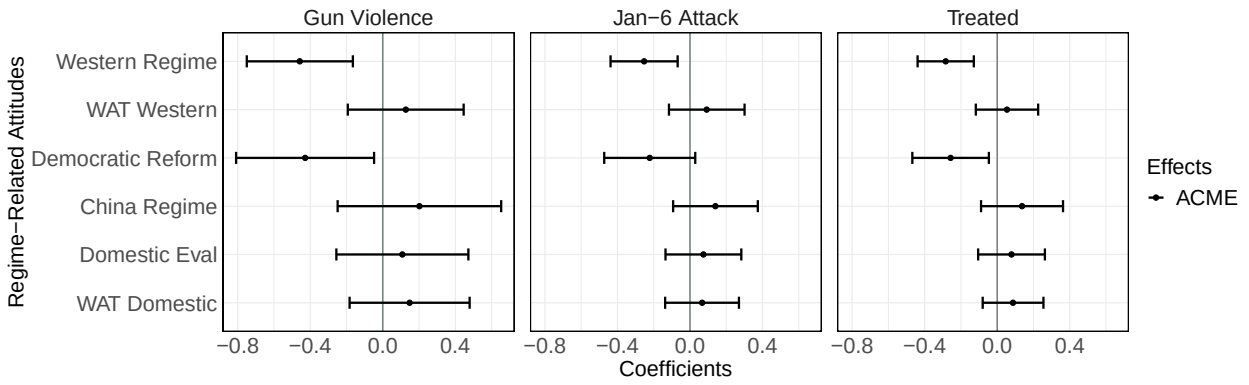
delving into the responses to the WAT that uses the keyword of *domestic regime*, I find that respondents who report a lower level of fear tend to provide answers more related to the negative side of the democratic regime, such as corruption and poor quality of the bureaucratic system.

The second set of mediation analyses that employ the multiple causal mechanisms framework (Imai and Yamamoto 2013) additionally controls other emotional mechanisms as potential alternative mediators, including anger and reassurance. Previous studies suggest emotions, especially fear and anger, tend to be correlated and co-occur (Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2017). In this study, while the pairwise correlations among fear, anger, and reassurance are moderate and comparable to the studies leveraging the PANAS-M to measure emotions (Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre and Utych 2021), exposure to negative propaganda also induces anger and reduces reassurance, albeit to a lesser extent compared with fear.[10] Therefore, controlling anger and reassurance as potential alternative mechanisms provides a more robust test of the fear mechanism.

Figure 6 presents the results of the second set of mediation analyses. These results are consistent with the previous findings presented in Figure 5, providing further evidence for the validity of the fear mechanism in mediating the treatment effects on regime-stabilizing attitudes. Specifically, the ACMEs associated with *Western Regime* and *Democratic Reform* are negative and statistically

[10]Appendix F.1 provides the correlation table and the regression tables showing the treatment effects on anger and reassurance.

Figure 6: Fear Mediates the Treatment Effects on Anti-Democratic Attitudes after Controlling Anger and Reassurance



Note: The plot presents a set of mediation analyses by using a binary treatment group (indicated by the column labels), an attitudinal measure (indicated by the row labels), and *Fear Level* as the mediator. In each subplot, the points stand for the ACMEs and the lines represent 95% bootstrapping confidence intervals.

significant, indicating that fear mediates the treatment effects on these outcomes. Moreover, the magnitude of the ACMEs is also larger than the total effects, suggesting that fear plays a significant role in mediating the treatment effects on attitudes towards western democracies. The sensitivity analyses presented in Appendix E show that the ACMEs are robust to the violation of the no interaction assumption. In the pooled treatment group, the ACME associated with *Western Regime* reaches zero when σ reaches 0.383, or 81% of its largest possible value. The ACME associated with *Democratic Reform* reaches zero when σ reaches 0.346, or 61% of its largest possible value. These results further support the validity of the fear mechanism, as σ needs to reach a high level, compared to studies reanalyzed by Imai and Yamamoto (2013), to neutralize the ACMEs. In contrast, the ACME of fear associated with *WAT Western* becomes positive but indistinguishable from zero. However, the interpretation of this ACME needs to be treated with caution since the sensitivity analyses show that the ACME is sensitive to the violation of the no interaction assumption: It becomes negative as soon as σ reaches 0.08, or only 20% of its largest possible values (0.391).

The ACMEs associated with attitudes towards the domestic regimes become insignificant after controlling potential alternative mechanisms. Therefore, the evidence generally suggests that exposure to negative propaganda does not significantly improve the evaluation of the domestic regime, and neither is the fear mechanism substantially involved.

Robustness Check

In this section, I discuss two potential alternative explanations to the fear mechanism: Other emotions and the informational mechanism. I provide evidence to assuage the concerns that these alternative explanations will hamper the validity of the fear mechanism.

Other Emotions as the Main Mediator?

As a placebo test for the fear mechanism, I conducted another two sets of mediation analyses by using anger or reassurance as the main mediator and controlling the other two emotions as alternative mediators. The results in Appendix F.1 show that the ACMEs are insignificant across all measures of attitudes towards western democracies or democratic reform. While two ACMEs associated with measures of attitudes towards the domestic regime are significant when using reassurance as the main mediator, the inconsistency of the magnitude of the results across the treatment group makes it difficult to interpret its mediating role. In summary, these results suggest that there is little evidence to argue that anger or reassurance mediates the treatment effects, especially on evaluations of the democratic regime and preference for a democratic reform, which further supports the fear mechanism.

The Informational Mechanism?

Besides fear, another alternative mechanism that may explain the relationship between exposure to negative propaganda and regime-stabilizing attitudes is *belief updating*. That is, the negative propaganda messages shift the beliefs of domestic citizens about the quality of democracies and the domestic regime. Indeed, the current literature has an extensive discussion on how propaganda works through the informational mechanism (e.g., Gehlbach, Sonin and Svolik 2016; Guriev and Treisman 2015; Huang 2015*b*; Jowett and O'Donnell 2018; Rozenas and Stukal 2019). While the experiment does not have an ideal design-based way to control the informational mechanism, I argue that the presence of the informational mechanism is not likely to affect the validity of the fear mechanism in the current context. First, the consistent exposure to negative propaganda means that

Chinese citizens have become less likely to leverage new information from many topics of negative propaganda to update their beliefs. Second, the Weibo posts selected as treatments were pretested for their relatively high familiarity to Chinese citizens, suggesting that such posts were less likely to provide new information about western democracies. Third, I tested the heterogeneous treatment effects by different pre-treatment covariates indicating respondents' informativeness about western democracies. The results failed to support the notion that less informed respondents are more susceptible to the treatment. Appendix F.2 details the explanations and statistical evidence.

Conclusion

Does negative propaganda shape public opinion favored by the authoritarian state? This paper argues that negative propaganda can increase opposition to the democratic regime and reduce preference for reform in the direction of being more democratic through an emotional mechanism: fear. The threatening stimuli contained in negative propaganda, which signal disorder, uncertainty, and uncontrollable situations in democracies, are likely to incite fear of liberal regimes. This, in turn, induces risk-averse attitudes, including antipathy to the democratic regime and disinclination to democratic reform. Analysis of over 800,000 Weibo posts from Chinese state-affiliated media and a survey experiment support these expectations. Negative propaganda is prevalent on Chinese social media, with a large proportion focused on chaos and instability in democratic countries. The experimental evidence confirms the causal link between negative propaganda and aversion to the democratic regime, but not for domestic regime support.

This study has important implications that enrich our understanding of the current literature. First, while previous studies have extensively shown that autocrats use propaganda to shape political attitudes and behaviors by changing individuals' beliefs of the regime's competency (e.g., Guriev and Treisman 2015; Gehlbach, Sonin and Svolik 2016; Jowett and O'Donnell 2018) and signaling its power (e.g., Huang 2015*b*), this research provides evidence that the emotional elements embedded in *negative* propaganda, primarily fear, has implications on attitudes towards the

regime. Given that emotions are often elicited from propaganda, this study joins a burgeoning literature that clarifies how emotions can produce a significant effect on political attitudes in an authoritarian context (see also Bleck and Michelitch 2017; Mattingly and Yao 2022; Williamson and Malik 2020; Young 2019).

Second, this study helps understand authoritarian resilience and regime stability. As Magaloni (2006) argues, repression is not sufficient for autocrats to sustain their rule, and mass support is also essential to keep them in power (see also Wintrobe 1998). A key strategy to generate mass support is to frame the alternatives as highly risky and uncertain. In a hegemonic-party regime with direct elections like Mexico before the 2000s, the major alternatives to the ruling party is the opposition parties, while in a one-party regime without direct elections like China, a main concern of regime stability is linked with external factors. Research shows that domestic citizens in China who tend to have more positive perceptions about socioeconomic conditions in foreign countries are likely to have more negative evaluation of the Chinese government (Huang 2015*a*). This tendency is likely to engender potential instability to the authoritarian rule. Therefore, authoritarian regimes like China that face such external threats have the incentive to counterbalance this trend, and one such strategy, as illustrated by this study, is to use negative propaganda to defame foreign rivals. The results indicate that negative propaganda, and especially its emotional valence, is indeed effective to reduce positive perceptions of democratic countries.

Negative propaganda is not unique to authoritarian regimes but also prevalent in democratic contexts, especially when external threats become imminent. Moreover, rival countries usually use negative propaganda against each other simultaneously. The case of Cold War has illustrated that negative propaganda was not only limited in the Soviet Union but was also widespread in the west against the Eastern Bloc (Rawnsley 2016). More recently, similar narratives against China and the Chinese Communist Party can be also found in the western world. Does such anti-rival rhetoric in democratic countries also induce fear of the authoritarian regime and thus aversion to it? Is it effective to garner electoral support by, for example, diverting attention from charges of incompetency to a heightened risk of external threats? Future research can explore these research

questions more rigorously.

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Appendix for "Does Negative Propaganda against Foreign Rivals Cultivate Regime-Stabilizing Attitudes? Evidence from China"

Content

A The Observational Study on Weibo

A.1 Selection of Weibo accounts

The five Weibo accounts I select are *the People's Daily* (人民日报), *the Xinhua Agency* (新华社), *the CCTV News* (央视新闻), *the Global Times* (环球时报), and *Guancha.cn* (观察者网).

Three out of the five accounts are flagship state-run media: the People's Daily, the Xinhua Agency, and the CCTV News. The People's Daily is the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Its coverage and viewpoints directly reflect the political stance of the CCP. The Xinhua News Agency covers radio, newspaper, and television communication and is parented by the State Council, the chief administrative authority in China. CCTV News is a radio and television media led by the Publicity Department of the State Council. The mass media counterparts of these three accounts have a long history of development, and the messages delivered by these accounts directly reflect the state strategy of propagating foreign news. Up to 2022, these three Weibo accounts have had over 320 million followers.

I select the Global Times to represent "semiofficial" media that are commercialized but still tightly controlled by the Chinese state. The Global Times was first published as a newspaper in 1993 and is affiliated with the People's Daily Agency. However, compared with the People's Daily, the Global Times adopts a more marketized stategy and its stories are often better packaged and more interesting (Stockmann 2013). Up to 2022, The Weibo account of the Global Times has had over 25 million followers. It complements the other outlets well because it primarily focuses on international news coverage, strongly subscribes to the state ideology, but also claims to be audience and profit oriented.

The other Weibo account that serves as an example of privately-owned media is Guancha.cn. Established on the Internet in 2012, Guancha.cn has a primary focus on international political and social news. While privately-owned, Guancha.cn is considered to be highly aligned with the state's ideology of nationalism and anti-west stance when broadcasting foreign news (The Economist 2021). Since its establishment, it has rapidly gained popularity among Chinese citizens and grown into one of the most successful privately-owned media. Up to 2022, the Weibo account of the Guancha.cn has had over 15 million followers. The addition of Guancha.cn into the corpus helps illustrate how negative information of foreign rivals has been disseminated in China by media outlets that have higher freedom of news reporting.

A.2 A Full List of Keywords that Filter Weibo Posts Related to Western Democracies

[The initial keywords are bolded. The rest of the keywords derived from the word2vec model are left unbolded.]

1. Country/Capital/Location/Government names: **West (**西方**)**, **the United States (**美国**)**, **the United Kingdom (**英国**)**, **Japan (**日本**)**, **Korea (**韩国**)**, the U.S. government (美国政府/美政府), the Japanese government (日本政府), the Korean government (韩国政府), Cheong Wa Dae/The Blue House (青瓦台), Washington (华盛顿), the White House (白宫), New York (纽约), Tokyo (东京), Vietnam (越南), Europe (欧洲), Europe and the U.S. (欧美/欧美国家), France (法国), Germany (德国), Italy (意大利), Spain (西班牙), Scotland (苏格

兰), Canada (加拿大), Ireland (爱尔兰), the Philippines 菲律宾), India (印度), Australia (澳大利亚), Israel (以色列), Russia (俄罗斯), Mexico (墨西哥), Iran (伊朗), Afghanistan (阿富汗)

2. Names of political leaders in western countries: Trump (特朗普), Biden (拜登), Pompeo (蓬佩奥), Abe (安倍), Johnson (约翰逊), Prime Minister of Japan (日本首相)

3. Names of foreign media: BBC, NHK, YNA (韩联社), the U.S. media (美媒)，the U.K. media (英媒), the Japanese media (日媒), the Korean media (韩媒)

4. Other terms most related to political systems and politics in general: **Democracy (**民主), **freedom (**自由**)**, politics (政治), value (价值观), ideology (意识形态), right (权利), human rights (人权), democratic right (民主权利), freedom and democracy (自由民主), democratic freedom (自由民主), freedom of speech (言论自由), party (政党), system/institution (体制), hegemony (霸权), hegemonism (霸权主义), imperialism (帝国主义), capitalism (资本主义), unilaterialism (单边主义), politician (政客), defame (抹黑), anti-China (反华), American-style (美式), free markets (自由市场)

A.3 Coding Rules of Weibo Posts

The main purpose of coding a sample Weibo Posts related to western democracies is to generate a variable that indicates whether a post is negative against western countries and whether the post contains threatening stimuli that are likely to arouse fear. The coded sample is subsequently applied as a training set to various machine learning methods for out-of-sample prediction.

There are three possible categories of the posts. They include:

1. *Non-negative* posts: If the post does not contain negative information against foreign democratic countries, the post is coded as *non-negative*.

The rest of the posts are defined as negative. They include posts (a) exposing the dark sides, sufferings, chaos, and/or instability of foreign democratic countries/regions, or (b) reporting "groundless" attacks from the west against China or other allies, and/or China's "counterattack" against the west, or (c) criticisms, derogation, or negative comparisons.

2. *Threatening* posts: If a post is deemed negative and falls into Category (a), the post is coded as *threatening*. as it contains information that signals risk and uncertainty, which may arouse fear of the liberal regime. Category (a) comprises posts that span several dimensions:

    i. Political: Scandals, malfeasance, corruption, separatism, chaos of party politics, polarization, flooding of misinformation, security concerns, terrorist attacks;

        - Example:【#白宫国会外竖起金属围栏# 大批国民警卫队荷枪实弹把守戒备森严】近日，美国军方派遣约1.5万名国民警卫队士兵前往首都华盛顿。以保护华盛顿在当选总统拜登，即将上台之际免受"国内恐怖分子"袭击。从14日当天最新画面可以看到，华盛顿大量兵力已完成部署，各主要干道也进行了封路。白宫和国会大厦周围都竖起了金属围栏，国民警卫队荷枪实弹把守。(来自观察者网)

Translation: [**#Metal Fences Were Erected Outside the White House and the Congress# A large number of National Guard soldiers were armed with live ammunition on guard and high alert.**] Recently, the US military dispatched about 15,000 National Guard soldiers to the capital, Washington, DC, to protect the city from "domestic terrorists" attacking during President-elect Biden's upcoming inauguration. As of the latest footage on the 14th, a large number of troops have been deployed in Washington, DC, and major roads have been blocked off. Metal fences have been erected around the White House and Congress, with National Guard soldiers armed with live ammunition on guard. (*Posted by the Guancha.cn*)

ii. Economic: Scandals, malfeasance, recession, hyperinflation, unemployment

- Example:【财经观察：中产阶级缩水日本社会结构向"金字塔型"下沉】二战后，日本经济高速发展，形成中产阶级队伍庞大的"橄榄型"社会。但近年来，"安倍经济学"未惠及民众，造成贫富加剧，加上人口老龄化严重，社保负担沉重，就业形势低迷，日本社会结构逐渐向"金字塔型"下沉。（来自央视新闻）
  Translation: **[Financial Observation: The middle class is shrinking, and Japan's social structure is turning into a "pyramid"]** After World War II, Japan's economy developed rapidly, forming an "olive-shaped" society with a large middle class. However, in recent years, "Abenomics" has not benefited the people, resulting in an increase in income inequality. Coupled with the serious aging population, heavy social security burden, and sluggish employment situation, Japan's social structure has gradually turned into a "pyramid." (*Posted by the CCTV News*)

iii. Social: Violence, crimes, drugs, police brutality, protests, abuses, threats of personal security, racism, discrimination, inequality, natural disasters

- Example: #韩国华城连环杀人案调查结果#【#电影杀人回忆原型案调查结果公布#：14名女性被杀害】今天，韩国京畿道南部地方警察厅通报了发生在上世纪80年代的韩国华城连环杀人案调查结果，认定罪犯李春在（音）作案23起，杀害14名女性，强奸9名女性。由于诉讼时效已到期，根据韩国法律规定，即使被认定为凶手，也无法对其进行刑事处罚。
  #Investigation results of the Hwaseong serial murders # [#Results of these incidents, which were the archetype of the movie *Memories of Murder*, were announced#: 14 Women Were Killed] Today, the South Gyeonggi Provincial Police Department in South Korea announced the investigation results of the Hwaseong serial murder that occurred in the 1980s. The criminal, Lee Choon-jae, was found to have committed 23 crimes, killing 14 women and raping 9 women. Due to the expiration of the statute of limitations, according to Korean law, even if he is determined to be the culprit, he cannot be sentenced to any criminal punishment. (*Posted by the Guancha.cn*)

iv. Public Health: COVID-related problems, medical accidents

- Example: #美国部分医院因收入骤降临时裁员#：减少不必要手术】据美媒，在美国急需医护人员的情况下，许多医院却因收入减少，不得不通过临时裁员来降低成本。佛罗里达州一家医院表示，医院在疫情爆发后停止了非紧急手术，损失了40%收入，因财政紧张，正强制部分员工休假，主管降薪。（来自环球时报）
  #Some hospitals in the US temporarily lay off employees due to a sharp decline in income#: To reduce unnecessary surgeries. According to U.S. media, many hospitals are forced to reduce costs by temporarily laying off employees due to a decline in income, while the country is in dire need of healthcare workers. A hospital in Florida said that the hospital stopped non-emergency surgeries after the outbreak of the epidemic, losing 40% of its income. The hospital is now forcing some employees to take leave and cutting salaries of executives due to financial difficulties. (*Posted by the Global Times*)

3. *Other negative* posts: If a post is deemed negative and falls into either category (b) or (c), it is coded as *other negative*.

   Examples include: China's rightful (and other countries' groundless) assertions on certain territories, China being victimized in the Sino-U.S. trade war, The "blatant" interference with China's domestic politics (e.g., Xinjiang, Taiwan, Hong Kong) and China's defense, hegemonic behaviors against China, etc.

A.4 Predicted Probabilities of the Training Set

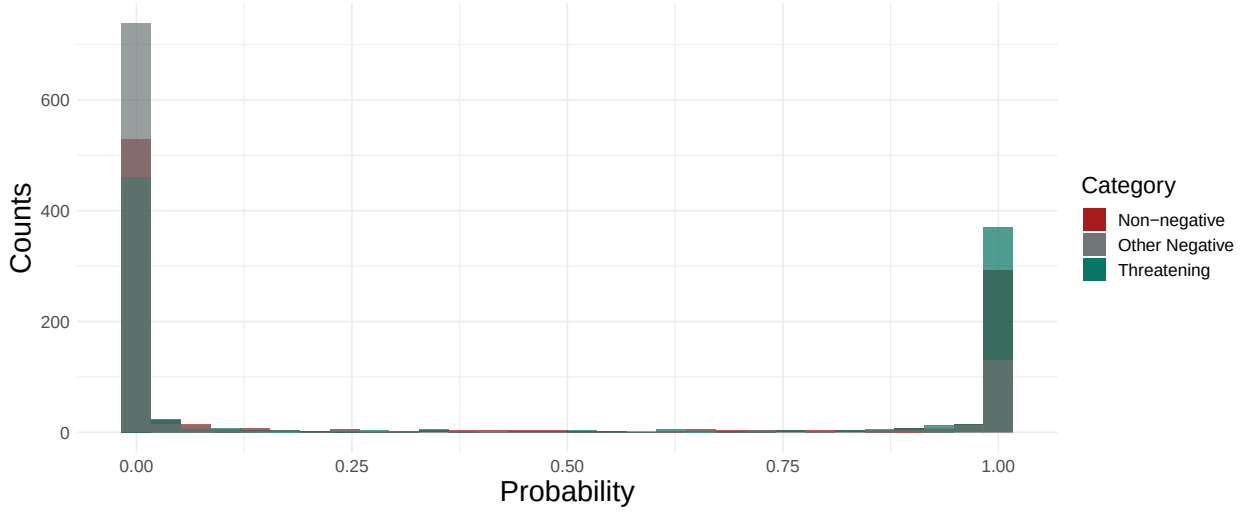


Figure A.1: The Distribution of Predicted Probabilities of the Training Set

As shown by the plot, the predicted probabilities of which category a post belongs to follow a bipolar distribution with most frequencies clustered at 0 and 1. This means that the Naive Bayes Classifier is almost certain about most posts. Therefore, it is appropriate to use 0.5 as the threshold to determine which category a post belongs to.

A.5 Descriptive Statistics of Posts Relevant to Foreign Democracies

Table A.1: Count of Posts by Category and Media Outlet

Outlet	ID	Non-Negative Posts	Threatening Posts	Other Negative Posts
People's Daily	1	7302	3344	2584
		(55.2%)	(25.3%)	(19.5%)
Xinhua Agency	2	12406	5961	2632
		(59.1%)	(28.4%)	(12.5%)
CCTV	3	8152	5596	2197
		(51.1%)	(35.1%)	(13.8%)
Global Times	4	20352	23225	7696
		(39.7%)	(45.3%)	(15.0%)
Guancha.cn	5	15161	28563	8501
		(29.0%)	(54.7%)	(16.3%)
State-Owned (1+2+3)		27860	14901	7413
		(55.5%)	(29.7%)	(14.8%)
All (1+2+3+4+5)		63373	66689	23610
		(41.2%)	(43.4%)	(15.4%)

Note: Row-wise proportion in parentheses.

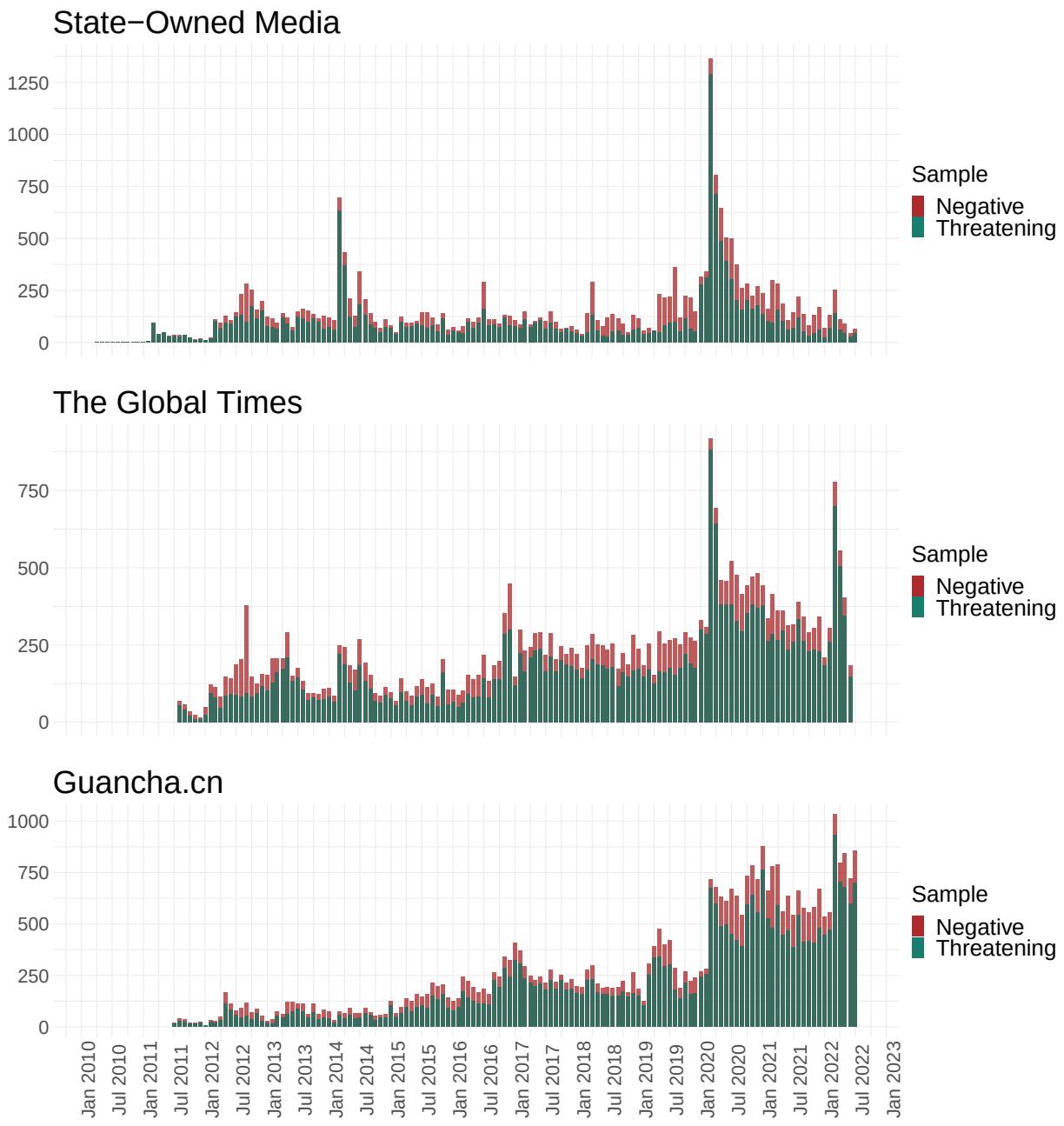


Figure A.2: Monthly Count of Negative and Threatening Posts

B Information of the Survey Sample

The survey respondents were recruited online through a licensed survey company. An online sample is appropriate and beneficial to this study because of several reasons. First, completing the survey anonymously online rather than through an in-person interview helps alleviate the social desirability bias caused by the presence of an interviewer and thus makes respondents less likely to falsify preferences (Huang and Yeh 2019). Prevention of such pressure is especially important when survey instruments include a series of questions that measure political attitudes, which may be deemed sensitive by some respondents. Second, feedback from some respondents shows that this survey is relatively innovative and they welcome more similar surveys in the future. This suggests that these respondents are unlikely to be professional survey takers of political science research. Also importantly, as illustrated by the observational study, negative propaganda has been prevalent on social media, suggesting that respondents who are active online are very likely to get exposed to messages that defame foreign rivals. The summary statistics of the sample in Table B.2 show that the respondents also spend considerable time on social media.

As shown by Table B.1, The participants in the sample exhibited a diverse range of socioeconomic backgrounds, which resembled the demographic characteristics of the Chinese Internet population and previous studies on propaganda in China, including the distribution of gender, urban-rural divide, and geographic regions (e.g., Huang and Yeh 2019; Wang and Huang 2021).One caveat for generalization of this study to the larger Chinese population or even the Chinese Internet population is that the sampled respondents are younger and better educated. However, this feature also presents an opportunity to pay attention to a generation who tend to be more politically active (Huang and Yeh 2019; Huang and Cruz 2022), and therefore, more susceptible to the effects of state propaganda. Additionally, as state media outlets disseminate similar negative information of foreign rivals through both social media and mass media, it is reasonable to assume that individuals with similar socioeconomic backgrounds outside of the online sample will hold similar political attitudes towards the Chinese regime, even if they lack exposure to the Internet.

Table B.1: Demographics of the Study Participants and Chinese Internet Users

Demographics		Online Sample	Chinese Internet Users
Age		18-24: 4.7% 25-34: 38.0% 35-44: 38.9% 45-54: 13.5% 55-64: 3.1% 65 and above: 1.6%	20-29: 21.0% 30-39: 24.2% 40-49: 22.3% 50-59: 18.6% 60 and above: 14.0%
Education	Junior school or below	59.6%	0.3%
	High school / vocational school	20.6%	8.8%
	3-Year college degree	10.5%	16.4%
	Bachelor's degree or above	9.3%	75.4%
Gender	Male	41.5%	51.0%
	Female	58.5%	49.0%
Urban/Rural	Urban	85.0%	72.4%
	Rural	14.8%	27.6%
Region	Eastern China	65.2%	46.2%
	Northeastern China	5.1%	8.4%
	Central China	11.8%	22.1%
	Western China	17.8%	23.3%

Note: Information about Chinese Internet users is from the 47th Statistical Report of Internet Development in China, issued by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) in February 2021. The regional distribution is taken from the 37th report of January 2016. The CNNIC has conducted biannual surveys of Chinese Internet users since 1997.

Table B.2: Summary Statistics of the Sample

Covariates	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Age	1,050	2.772	0.961	1	2	3	6
Education	1,050	3.726	0.743	1	3	4	5
Male	1,050	0.413	0.493	0	0	1	1
Income	1,050	4.018	1.452	1	3	5	7
Urban	1,050	0.850	0.357	0	1	1	1
Knowledge about the West	1,050	2.494	1.284	0	2	4	4
Risk Preference	1,050	4.270	1.354	1	3	5	7
Use of Social Media	1,050	3.464	1.054	1	3	4	5
Use of Mass Media	1,049	2.189	0.985	1	1	3	5
Political Interest	1,049	4.611	1.261	1	4	6	6
Use of VPN	1,049	2.663	0.842	1	2	3	4

Table B.3: Balance Table

	Control (N=356)	Gun Violence (N=350)	Jan-6 Attack (N=344)	F Statistic	Prob > F
Age	2.829	2.789	2.698	1.702	0.183
	(1.022)	(0.999)	(0.848)		
Education	3.747	3.711	3.718	0.232	0.724
	(0.738)	(0.783)	(0.707)		
Female	0.598	0.563	0.593	0.528	0.793
	(0.491)	(0.497)	(0.492)		
Income	4.059	3.989	4.006	0.225	0.590
	(1.453)	(1.501)	(1.404)		
Urban	0.868	0.837	0.846	0.700	0.798
	(0.339)	(0.37)	(0.362)		
Knowledge about the West	2.511	2.460	2.512	0.187	0.497
	(1.295)	(1.327)	(1.229)		
Risk Preference	4.261	4.263	4.285	0.033	0.829
	(1.381)	(1.302)	(1.381)		
Use of Social Media	3.402	3.449	3.544	1.643	0.968
	(1.061)	(1.071)	(1.026)		
Use of Mass Media	2.185	2.189	2.192	0.004	0.194
	(0.99)	(0.996)	(0.971)		
Political Interest	4.640	4.586	4.606	0.170	0.996
	(1.311)	(1.256)	(1.214)		
Use of VPN	2.638	2.689	2.662	0.323	0.844
	(0.869)	(0.828)	(0.829)		

Note: The first three columns denote the control group, the first treatment group exposed to a post about gun violence in the United States, and the second treatment group exposed to a post about Jan-6 Attack in the United States. Entries of these three columns are group means of for each covariate, with standard deviations in parentheses. The fourth column presents F statistic and the fifth column presents the associated p value.
Measurement of each variable can be found in the survey instruments in Appendix G.

Table B.4: Covariates Do Not Predict Treatment

	Gun Violence	Jan-6 Attack	Treated
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Age	−0.009	−0.039*	−0.022
	(0.022)	(0.023)	(0.017)
Education	−0.013	−0.021	−0.015
	(0.029)	(0.031)	(0.023)
Male	0.049	0.020	0.032
	(0.041)	(0.041)	(0.031)
Income	−0.005	−0.005	−0.005
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.012)
Urban	−0.048	−0.026	−0.031
	(0.056)	(0.058)	(0.044)
Risk Preference	−0.001	−0.001	−0.001
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.011)
Knowledge about the West	−0.004	0.012	0.004
	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.013)
Use of Social Media	0.010	0.031	0.019
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.015)
Use of Mass Media	0.002	−0.0002	0.002
	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.016)
Political Interest	−0.005	−0.006	−0.006
	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.014)
Use of VPN	0.021	−0.002	0.010
	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.019)
Constant	0.554***	0.607***	0.738***
	(0.164)	(0.172)	(0.130)
Observations	705	698	1,047
Adjusted R^2	−0.009	−0.004	−0.004

Note: Table B.4 presents the results of three OLS models, regressing a binary treatment indicator on covariates (Gun Violence for Column 1, Jan-6 Attack for Column 2, and a pooled treatment indicator for Column 3). The baseline comparison is the control group, who is not exposed to any messages of negative propaganda.
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
Standard errors in parentheses.

C More Details on Measurement

C.1 Emotions

I leverage the PANAS-M recommended by Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre and Utych (2021) to measure emotions induced by reading the Weibo post. This measurement involves two components. In the first part, the respondents select what emotions they experience after reading the post. There are nine emotions the respondents can choose, which can be classified into three categories (see Table C.1). In the second part, the respondents select to what extent, on a scale from 1 to 5, they experience each emotion. If the emotion is not chosen in the first part, it is coded as 0.

In the main analysis, I construct three variables, namely *Fear Level*, *Anger Level*, and *Reassurance Level*, by calculating the averaged level of the three associated options for each emotional category. I also construct three binary variables indicating whether the respondents experience fear, anger, or reassurance (i.e., *Fear Dummy*, *Anger Dummy*, and *Reassurance Dummy*). These binary variables are coded as 1 as long as one of the three associated options are chosen in the first part.

Table C.1: Categories and Options of Emotions

Category	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
fear	worried (担忧)	anxious (不安)	afraid (害怕)
anger	angry (愤怒)	outraged (难以接受)	disgusted (恶心)
reassurance	reassured (放心)	calm (平静)	confident (自信/乐观)

C.2 The Order of Measuring the Mediator and Outcome

In the survey, I choose to measure emotions (the mediator) rather than regime-related attitudes (the outcomes) first because I only have two questions to measure emotion whereas the number of outcome questions is large. Therefore, measuring mediator first would attenuate the concerns of survey fatigue as some outcome questions next to each other look very similar. Also, measuring emotions first is unlikely to affect the measurement of respondents' regime-related attitudes because indicating emotions does not prime the respondents to answer subsequent questions related to the regime.

Another concern is that indicating emotional states prior to major outcomes of interest may reduce the extent to which the subjects experience that emotion (Kassam and Mendes 2013; Young 2019). However, the pretest shows the treatment does significantly elicit fear, suggesting that this may not be a concern for this study. Another recommended measurement strategy is to randomize the order of mediator and outcome questions, whereas it takes the cost of reducing statistical power (Chaudoin, Gaines and Livny 2021). Therefore, I adopt the current design of measuring mediator then outcome, which I deem appropriate in this study.

C.3 The WAT Tests

As discussed in the main text, I use the Word Association Test (WAT) as a complementary measure of regime-related attitudes. Originally developed by the psychologist Galton (1879), the WATs are

built on the theory that activation of external stimulus such as a keyword can lead to activation of other interconnected concepts. What the WATs aim to achieve is to extract those interconnected concepts once a keyword is provided. This method is recommended and advanced in political science research by Han, Liu and Truex (2022), where they analyze political attitudes by asking respondents to indicate relevant terms related to the keywords such as "CCP (中国共产党)" and socialism "(社会主义)" within 20 seconds. Notable advantages of the WATs include less grammatical ambiguity and being free of any quantitative scales, which alleviates some concerns known for self-reported measures. More importantly, Han, Liu and Truex (2022) believe that WATs can be a sensitive question technique and therefore reduce social desirability bias because the first words that come to an individual's mind are less likely to be strategic responses. Compared with Han, Liu and Truex (2022), I slightly extended the time limit to 25 seconds because I expected many respondents to complete the survey through mobile devices, which might require a longer time to type.

The coding scheme for the responses to the two WATs, one focusing on the term "domestic regime (国内体制)" and the other focusing on the term "western democracy", is similar. A response is coded as 1 if it contains a majority of positive words towards the keyword. A response is coded as -1 if it contains a majority of negative words towards the keyword. A response is coded as 0 if it contains a majority of neutral words, or the number of positive and negative words approximately equals to each other. Words that appear with high frequencies include:

1. For the keyword "domestic regime (国内体制)":
    - Positive words include: Security (安全), happiness (幸福), satisfied (满意), suitable (适合), reassuring (放心), progressive (进步), reliable (值得信赖), harmony (和谐), etc.
    - Negative words include: Corruption (腐败), bureaucratism (官僚主义), hardened to change (僵化), dictatorship (独裁), lack of freedom of expressions (缺乏言论自由), etc.
    - Netural words include: Institutions (体制), market (市场), economy (经济), socialist (社会主义), civil servants (公务员), the Communist Party (共产党) etc.
2. For the keyword "western democracy (西方民主)":
    - Positive words include: Liberal/Free (自由的), open (开放), equal (平等), freedom of expressions (言论自由), etc.
    - Negative words include: Hypocrisy (虚伪), chaotic (混乱), fake (假的), discrimination (歧视), unstable (不稳定), arrogant (傲慢/自大), "money politics" (金钱政治), etc.
    - Neutral words include: Separations of power (三权分立), capitalism (资本主义), democracy (民主)[1], the Democratic Party (民主党), election (选举), not sure (不清楚), etc.

[1] As the keyword itself is "western democracy", it is unclear whether a response is positive by mentioning "democracy" alone.

D Treatment Effects

D.1 Treatment Effects on Regime-Related Attitudes

Table D.1: Treatment Effects on Regime-Related Attitudes (Unpooled Treatment, No Covariates)

	Western Regime		Democratic Reform	Domestic Regime		
	Western Regime	WAT Western	Democratic Reform	China Regime	Domestic Eval	WAT Domestic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Gun Violence	−0.201***	−0.156***	−0.157*	0.003	0.015	0.048
	(0.068)	(0.057)	(0.080)	(0.063)	(0.062)	(0.053)
Jan-6 Attack	−0.167**	−0.169***	−0.111	0.065	0.066	0.097*
	(0.068)	(0.058)	(0.081)	(0.064)	(0.062)	(0.053)
Constant	2.958***	−0.119***	3.149***	4.028***	3.885***	0.378***
	(0.048)	(0.040)	(0.057)	(0.045)	(0.044)	(0.037)
Observations	1,050	981	1,050	1,050	1,050	998
Adjusted R^2	0.008	0.009	0.002	−0.001	−0.001	0.001

Table D.2: Treatment Effects on Regime-Related Attitudes (Pooled Treatment, No Covariates)

	Western Regime		Democratic Reform	Domestic Regime		
	Western Regime	WAT Western	Democratic Reform	China Regime	Domestic Eval	WAT Domestic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated	−0.184***	−0.162***	−0.134*	0.034	0.040	0.072
	(0.059)	(0.049)	(0.069)	(0.055)	(0.054)	(0.046)
Constant	2.958***	−0.119***	3.149***	4.028***	3.885***	0.378***
	(0.048)	(0.040)	(0.056)	(0.045)	(0.044)	(0.037)
Observations	1,050	981	1,050	1,050	1,050	998
Adjusted R^2	0.008	0.010	0.003	−0.001	−0.0004	0.001

Note: Table D.1 presents the results of six OLS models, regressing self-reported evaluations of the western regime (Column 1), the WAT measure for western democracy (Column 2), preference for democratic reform (Column 3), self-reported evaluations of the domestic regime (Column 4), self-reported satisfaction about domestic situations (Column 5), and the WAT measure for the domestic regime (Column 6) on the unpooled treatment indicator. The baseline comparison is the control group, who is not exposed to any messages of negative propaganda. Specific measurement of each variable can be found in the survey instruments in Appendix G. The only difference between Table D.1 and Table D.2 is that the treatment in the models in D.2 is measured by a binary variable that pools the treatment statuses.
The total number of respondents is 1,050. 69 respondents did not answer the *WAT Western* question and 42 respondents did not answer *WAT Domestic* question.
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
Standard errors in parentheses.

Table D.3: Treatment Effects on Regime-Related Attitudes (Unpooled Treatment, With Covariates)

	Western Regime		Democratic Reform	Domestic Regime		
	Western Regime	WAT Western	Democratic Reform	China Regime	Domestic Eval	WAT Domestic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Gun Violence	−0.210***	−0.167***	−0.172**	0.003	0.015	0.045
	(0.067)	(0.057)	(0.079)	(0.063)	(0.061)	(0.052)
Jan-6 Attack	−0.183***	−0.182***	−0.132*	0.062	0.062	0.097*
	(0.067)	(0.057)	(0.080)	(0.063)	(0.062)	(0.053)
Age	−0.066**	−0.055*	−0.067*	0.013	0.016	0.037
	(0.033)	(0.028)	(0.039)	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.026)
Education	−0.027	0.010	−0.065	0.035	0.027	0.027
	(0.043)	(0.036)	(0.051)	(0.040)	(0.039)	(0.034)
Male	0.001	0.064	0.097	−0.074	−0.127**	−0.032
	(0.059)	(0.050)	(0.069)	(0.055)	(0.054)	(0.046)
Income	0.033	0.003	0.009	0.014	0.028	0.027
	(0.022)	(0.019)	(0.026)	(0.021)	(0.020)	(0.018)
Urban	0.009	0.114*	−0.003	−0.134*	−0.139*	−0.116*
	(0.082)	(0.069)	(0.097)	(0.076)	(0.074)	(0.065)
Risk Preference	0.070***	0.007	0.111***	−0.016	−0.006	−0.030*
	(0.021)	(0.018)	(0.025)	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.017)
Knowledge about the West	−0.045*	−0.018	−0.070**	−0.012	−0.016	−0.027
	(0.024)	(0.020)	(0.028)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.019)
Use of Social Media	−0.012	0.020	−0.013	0.032	0.051**	0.040*
	(0.028)	(0.024)	(0.033)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.022)
Use of Mass Media	0.022	−0.018	−0.027	0.108***	0.106***	0.072***
	(0.030)	(0.025)	(0.035)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.023)
Political Interest	−0.057**	−0.068***	0.007	0.059**	0.042*	−0.015
	(0.026)	(0.022)	(0.031)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.020)
Use of VPN	0.118***	0.067**	0.096**	−0.013	−0.014	−0.004
	(0.036)	(0.031)	(0.043)	(0.034)	(0.033)	(0.029)
Constant	2.865***	−0.022	3.034***	3.468***	3.295***	0.153
	(0.247)	(0.210)	(0.293)	(0.231)	(0.226)	(0.194)
Observations	1,047	980	1,047	1,047	1,047	996
Adjusted R^2	0.048	0.031	0.032	0.025	0.034	0.020

Note: Table D.3 presents the results of six OLS models, regressing self-reported evaluations of the western regime (Column 1), the WAT measure for western democracy (Column 2), preference for democratic reform (Column 3), self-reported evaluations of the domestic regime (Column 4), self-reported satisfaction about domestic situations (Column 5), and the WAT measure for the domestic regime (Column 6) on the unpooled treatment indicator. The baseline comparison is the control group, who is not exposed to any messages of negative propaganda. Specific measurement of each variable can be found in the survey instruments in Appendix G. Compared with D.1, the six OLS models in D.3 adds demographic and other pre-treatment covariates.
The total number of respondents is 1,050. In addition to respondents who did not answer the WAT tests, 3 other respondents are dropped because of no responses to other demographic/pre-treatment questions.
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table D.4: Treatment Effects on Regime-Related Attitudes (Pooled Treatment, With Covariates)

	Western Regime		Democratic reform	Domestic Regime		
	Western Regime	WAT Western	Democratic Reform	China Regime	Domestic Eval	WAT Domestic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated	−0.197***	−0.174***	−0.153**	0.032	0.038	0.070
	(0.058)	(0.049)	(0.069)	(0.054)	(0.053)	(0.046)
Age	−0.066**	−0.054*	−0.068*	0.012	0.015	0.036
	(0.033)	(0.028)	(0.039)	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.026)
Male	−0.027	0.011	−0.066	0.035	0.027	0.027
	(0.043)	(0.036)	(0.051)	(0.040)	(0.039)	(0.034)
Income	0.001	0.065	0.096	−0.075	−0.128**	−0.033
	(0.059)	(0.050)	(0.069)	(0.055)	(0.054)	(0.046)
Urban	0.033	0.003	0.009	0.014	0.028	0.027
	(0.022)	(0.019)	(0.026)	(0.021)	(0.020)	(0.018)
Risk Preference	0.010	0.114	−0.003	−0.133*	−0.139*	−0.115*
	(0.082)	(0.069)	(0.096)	(0.076)	(0.074)	(0.065)
Knowledge about the West	0.070***	0.007	0.111***	−0.016	−0.006	−0.030*
	(0.021)	(0.018)	(0.025)	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.017)
Use of Social Media	−0.045*	−0.018	−0.070**	−0.012	−0.015	−0.026
	(0.024)	(0.020)	(0.028)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.019)
Use of Mass Media	−0.011	0.020	−0.013	0.033	0.052**	0.041*
	(0.028)	(0.024)	(0.033)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.022)
Political Interest	0.022	−0.018	−0.027	0.108***	0.106***	0.072***
	(0.030)	(0.025)	(0.035)	(0.028)	(0.027)	(0.023)
Use of VPN	−0.057**	−0.068***	0.007	0.059**	0.042*	−0.015
	(0.026)	(0.022)	(0.031)	(0.024)	(0.024)	(0.020)
vpn	0.118***	0.067**	0.095**	−0.014	−0.014	−0.004
	(0.036)	(0.031)	(0.043)	(0.034)	(0.033)	(0.029)
Constant	2.866***	−0.023	3.035***	3.470***	3.297***	0.154
	(0.247)	(0.210)	(0.293)	(0.231)	(0.226)	(0.194)
Observations	1,047	980	1,047	1,047	1,047	996
Adjusted R^2	0.049	0.032	0.033	0.025	0.034	0.020

Note: Table D.4 presents the results of six OLS models, regressing self-reported evaluations of the western regime (Column 1), the WAT measure for western democracy (Column 2), preference for democratic reform (Column 3), self-reported evaluations of the domestic regime (Column 4), self-reported satisfaction about domestic situations (Column 5), and the WAT measure for the domestic regime (Column 6) on the binary treatment indicator that pools the two treatment groups. The baseline comparison is the control group, who is not exposed to any messages of negative propaganda. Specific measurement of each variable can be found in the survey instruments in Appendix G.

Like Table D.3, the six OLS models in D.4 adds demographic and other pre-treatment covariates.

The total number of respondents is 1,050. In addition to respondents who did not answer the WAT tests, 3 other respondents are dropped because of no responses to other demographic/pre-treatment questions.

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

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

D.2 Treatment Effects on Fear

Table D.5: Treatment Effects on Fear (Unpooled Treatment)

	Fear Level		Fear Dummy			
	OLS		*OLS*		*logistic*	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Gun Violence	2.084***	2.089***	0.769***	0.771***	4.449***	4.494***
	(0.088)	(0.087)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.279)	(0.282)
Jan-6 Attack	1.236***	1.232***	0.595***	0.592***	3.531***	3.546***
	(0.088)	(0.088)	(0.028)	(0.029)	(0.267)	(0.269)
Age		0.026		0.003		0.020
		(0.042)		(0.014)		(0.100)
Education		−0.012		0.009		0.057
		(0.056)		(0.018)		(0.131)
Male		−0.064		−0.008		−0.066
		(0.076)		(0.025)		(0.177)
Income		0.045		0.013		0.096
		(0.029)		(0.009)		(0.068)
Urban		0.120		0.025		0.162
		(0.106)		(0.035)		(0.241)
Risk Preference		−0.048*		−0.0004		0.004
		(0.028)		(0.009)		(0.064)
Knowledge about the West		0.013		−0.0003		0.0001
		(0.031)		(0.010)		(0.074)
Use of Social Media		0.090**		0.016		0.111
		(0.037)		(0.012)		(0.084)
Use of Mass Media		0.028		−0.010		−0.069
		(0.038)		(0.013)		(0.089)
Political Interest		0.049		−0.003		−0.016
		(0.034)		(0.011)		(0.079)
Use of VPN		0.089*		−0.003		−0.027
		(0.047)		(0.015)		(0.110)
Constant	0.061	−0.890***	0.051**	−0.073	−2.933***	−3.827***
	(0.062)	(0.321)	(0.020)	(0.105)	(0.242)	(0.788)
Observations	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047
Adjusted R^2	0.353	0.367	0.437	0.435		

Note: Table D.5 presents the results of regressing measures of fear on the unpooled treatment indicator. Column (1) and (2) use OLS models and the averaged level of fear across three options (see Appendix C.1) as the dependent variables, with the latter including covariates. Column (3) and (4) also use OLS models but use a binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables. Column (5) and (6) use the same binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables but use logistic regression models instead. The baseline comparison is the control group, who is not exposed to any messages of negative propaganda. Specific measurement of each variable can be found in the survey instruments in Appendix G.

The total number of respondents is 1,050. 3 other respondents are dropped in Column (2), (4), and (6) because of no responses to other demographic/pre-treatment questions.

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

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table D.6: Treatment Effects on Fear (Pooled Treatment)

	Fear Level		Fear Dummy			
	OLS		*OLS*		*logistic*	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated	1.663***	1.666***	0.683***	0.683***	3.945***	3.971***
	(0.079)	(0.079)	(0.025)	(0.025)	(0.257)	(0.259)
Age		0.042		0.006		0.044
		(0.044)		(0.014)		(0.097)
Education		−0.006		0.010		0.064
		(0.058)		(0.019)		(0.127)
Male		−0.050		−0.005		−0.046
		(0.080)		(0.025)		(0.174)
Income		0.045		0.013		0.091
		(0.030)		(0.010)		(0.066)
Urban		0.103		0.022		0.137
		(0.111)		(0.035)		(0.235)
Risk Preference		−0.049*		−0.001		0.001
		(0.029)		(0.009)		(0.063)
Knowledge about the West		0.004		−0.002		−0.014
		(0.032)		(0.010)		(0.072)
Use of Social Media		0.078**		0.014		0.089
		(0.038)		(0.012)		(0.083)
Use of Mass Media		0.030		−0.009		−0.061
		(0.040)		(0.013)		(0.087)
Political Interest		0.049		−0.003		−0.018
		(0.035)		(0.011)		(0.077)
Use of VPN		0.103**		0.0002		−0.005
		(0.049)		(0.016)		(0.108)
Constant	0.061	−0.921***	0.051**	−0.080	−2.933***	−3.829***
	(0.064)	(0.336)	(0.020)	(0.107)	(0.242)	(0.769)
Observations	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047
Adjusted R^2	0.296	0.310	0.417	0.414		

Note: Table D.6 presents the results of regressing measures of fear on the binary treatment indicator that pools the two treatment groups. Column (1) and (2) use OLS models and the averaged level of fear across three options (see Appendix C.1) as the dependent variables, with the latter including covariates. Column (3) and (4) also use OLS models but use a binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables. Column (5) and (6) use the same binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables but use logistic regression models instead. The baseline comparison is the control group, who is not exposed to any messages of negative propaganda. Specific measurement of each variable can be found in the survey instruments in Appendix G.
The total number of respondents is 1,050. 3 other respondents are dropped in Column (2), (4), and (6) because of no responses to other demographic/pre-treatment questions.
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
Robust standard errors in parentheses.

E Causal Mediation Analysis

Table E.1: Fear Mediates the Treatment Effects on Regime-Stabilizing Attitudes

Mediator	Outcome	Gun Violence		Jan-6 Attack		Treated	
		ACME	ADE	ACME	ADE	ACME	ADE
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Fear Level	Western Regime	-0.249**	0.038	-0.179**	-0.005	-0.201**	0.005
		[-0.387, -0.107]	[-0.136, 0.218]	[-0.271, -0.084]	[-0.16, 0.144]	[-0.284, -0.118]	[-0.137, 0.143]
	WAT Western	-0.099**	-0.068	-0.046	-0.137**	-0.070**	-0.104
		[-0.208, 0.003]	[-0.219, 0.096]	[-0.127, 0.041]	[-0.288, -0.002]	[-0.139, -0.004]	[-0.225, 0.007]
	Democratic Reform	-0.259**	0.086	-0.101*	-0.031	-0.173**	0.022
		[-0.416, -0.102]	[-0.128, 0.304]	[-0.203, 0.01]	[-0.218, 0.149]	[-0.264, -0.084]	[-0.138, 0.18]
	China Regime	0.174**	-0.169	0.078**	-0.013	0.109**	-0.078
		[0.031, 0.314]	[-0.381, 0.027]	[0.002, 0.156]	[-0.149, 0.124]	[0.034, 0.189]	[-0.211, 0.051]
	Domestic Eval	0.118	-0.096	0.082**	-0.021	0.089**	-0.052
		[-0.016, 0.242]	[-0.273, 0.088]	[0.005, 0.161]	[-0.156, 0.123]	[0.011, 0.166]	[-0.173, 0.082]
	WAT Domestic	0.120**	-0.073	0.060	0.032	0.076**	-0.007
		[0.006, 0.228]	[-0.22, 0.079]	[-0.013, 0.129]	[-0.095, 0.157]	[0.015, 0.135]	[-0.118, 0.103]

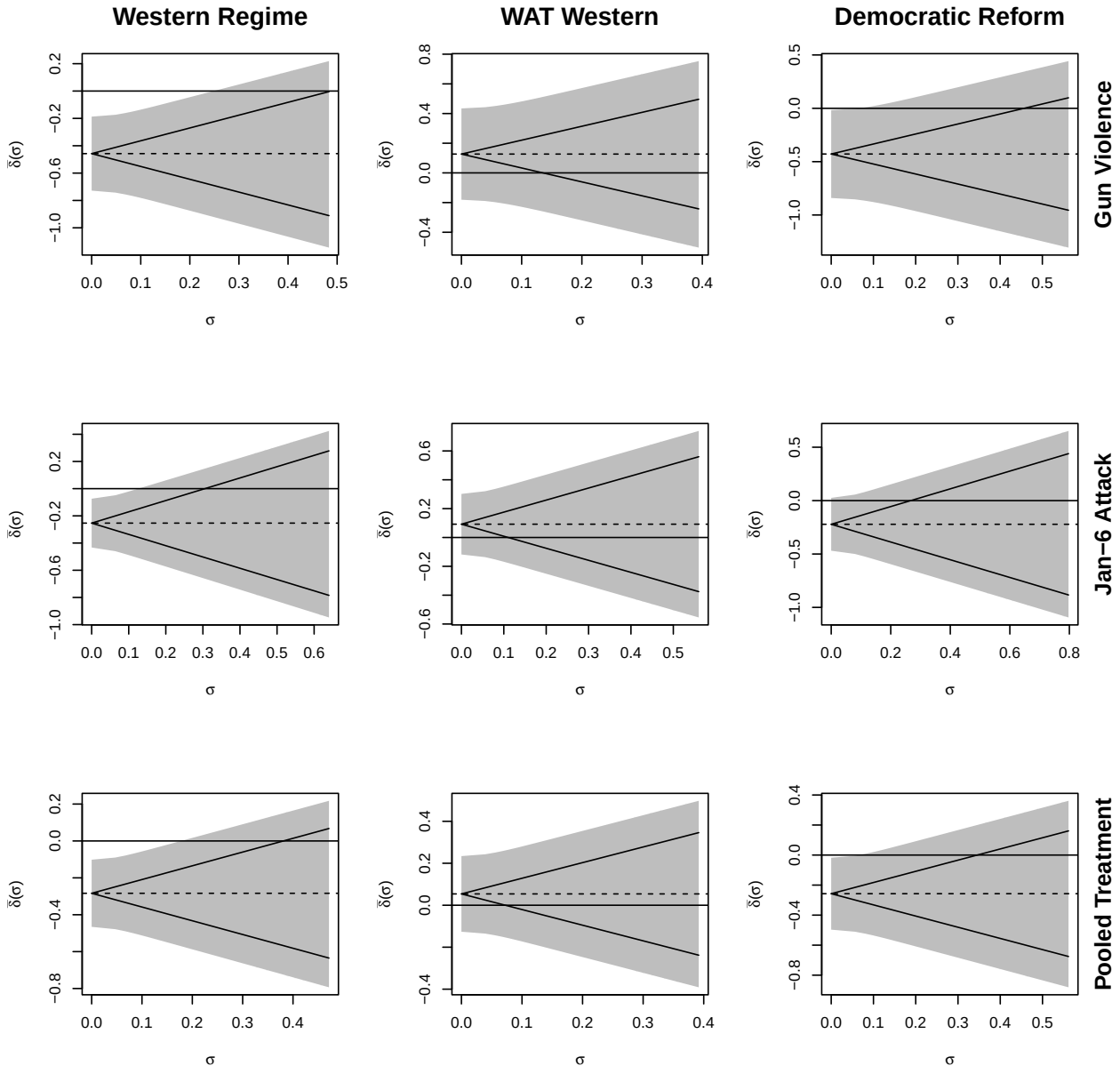
Note: Table E.1 summarizes the results of mediation analyses using regime-stabilizing attitudes as the outcome, a binary treatment indicator, and fear as the mediator. Columns (1) and (2) report the Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME) and Average Direct Effect (ADE), respectively, for the *Gun Violence* treatment group, while columns (3) and (4) report the ACME and ADE, respectively, for the *Jan-6* treatment group. Column (5) and (6) report the ACME and ADE, respectively, for a pooled treatment indicator that combines the two treatment groups. Each row corresponds to a specific attitudinal measure.
95% bootstrapping confidence intervals in parentheses.
*p<0.1; **p<0.05.

Table E.2: Fear Mediates the Treatment Effects on Regime-Stabilizing Attitudes after Controlling Anger and Reassurance as Alternative Mechanisms

Mediator	Outcome	Gun Violence		Jan-6 Attack		Treated	
		ACME	ADE	ACME	ADE	ACME	ADE
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Fear Level	Western Regime	-0.458**	0.244	-0.253**	0.053	-0.284**	0.177
		[-0.728, -0.187]	[-0.037, 0.525]	[-0.444, -0.063]	[-0.162, 0.268]	[-0.448, -0.119]	[-0.136, 0.489]
	WAT Western	0.127	-0.287*	0.092	-0.272**	0.054	-0.349**
		[-0.181, 0.434]	[-0.614, 0.04]	[-0.124, 0.308]	[-0.512, -0.033]	[-0.121, 0.229]	[-0.682, -0.016]
	Democratic Reform	-0.428**	0.254	-0.222*	0.065	-0.257**	0.201
		[-0.84, -0.016]	[-0.175, 0.683]	[-0.459, 0.015]	[-0.208, 0.338]	[-0.459, -0.056]	[-0.183, 0.585]
	China Regime	0.202	-0.2	0.14	-0.064	0.137	-0.134
		[-0.201, 0.605]	[-0.643, 0.243]	[-0.113, 0.394]	[-0.325, 0.196]	[-0.098, 0.371]	[-0.598, 0.33]
	Domestic Eval	0.108	-0.092	0.074	-0.014	0.079	-0.026
		[-0.253, 0.469]	[-0.476, 0.293]	[-0.142, 0.29]	[-0.252, 0.223]	[-0.107, 0.265]	[-0.391, 0.339]
	WAT Domestic	0.148	-0.11	0.067	0.022	0.087	-0.032
		[-0.161, 0.457]	[-0.433, 0.214]	[-0.122, 0.255]	[-0.179, 0.223]	[-0.082, 0.257]	[-0.354, 0.291]

Note: Table E.2 summarizes the results of mediation analyses using regime-stabilizing attitudes as the outcome, a binary treatment indicator, fear as the mediator, and controlling anger and reassurance as potential alternative mediators. Columns (1) and (2) report the Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME) and Average Direct Effect (ADE), respectively, for the *Gun Violence* treatment group, while columns (3) and (4) report the ACME and ADE, respectively, for the *Jan-6* treatment group. Column (5) and (6) report the ACME and ADE, respectively, for a pooled treatment indicator that combines the two treatment groups. Each row corresponds to a specific attitudinal measure.
95% bootstrapping confidence intervals in parentheses.
*p<0.1; **p<0.05.

Figure E.1: Sensitivity Analysis for Mediation Analyses Controlling Anger and Reassurance



Note: Each subplot represents a sensitivity analysis for a mediation analysis model by using an attitudinal measure as the outcome and a binary treatment indicator. All the subplots use fear as the mediator and control anger and reassurance as potential alternative mediators. The x-axis in each subplot, σ, stands for the degree of heterogeneity in the treatment–mediator interaction effect. The y-axis stands for the ACME corresponding to a specific value of σ.

F Alternative Mechanisms

F.1 Anger or Assurance as the Mediators?

Table F.1 displays the pairwise correlation coefficients among the levels of fear, anger, and reassurance. The results show that the pairwise correlation is not high and at a level similar to the study conducted by Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre and Utych (2021), who endorse the use of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANA-M).

Table F.2 to F.5 show that respondents exposed to negative propaganda do report a significantly higher level of anger and lower level of reassurance. To further test whether anger or reassurance mediates the relationship between the treatment and outcomes, I conducted additional mediation analyses by using anger and reassurance as the main mediator, conditional on potential emotional mechanisms. The results in Table F.6 show the ACMEs are generally insignificant when using anger or reassurance as the main mediator, suggesting that these emotions generally do not mediate the relationship between exposure to negative propaganda and evaluation of the democratic regime/preference for a democratic reform.

Table F.1: Pairwise Correlations Among Fear, Anger, and Reassurance

Emotions	Fear	Anger	Reassurance
Fear	1	0.392	-0.466
Anger	0.392	1	-0.393
Reassurance	-0.466	-0.393	1

Table F.2: Treatment Effects on Anger (Unpooled Treatment)

	Anger Level		Anger Dummy			
	OLS		*OLS*		*logistic*	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Gun Violence	1.111***	1.121***	0.592***	0.596***	4.130***	4.235***
	(0.073)	(0.072)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.355)	(0.359)
Jan-6 Attack	1.050***	1.036***	0.515***	0.513***	3.815***	3.878***
	(0.074)	(0.073)	(0.031)	(0.031)	(0.355)	(0.358)
Age		0.047		0.018		0.106
		(0.035)		(0.015)		(0.093)
Education		−0.025		−0.004		−0.032
		(0.047)		(0.020)		(0.121)
Male		−0.092		−0.044		−0.297*
		(0.063)		(0.027)		(0.164)
Income		0.068***		0.014		0.088
		(0.024)		(0.010)		(0.062)
Urban		−0.020		0.015		0.050
		(0.088)		(0.038)		(0.223)
Risk Preference		0.016		0.0005		0.015
		(0.023)		(0.010)		(0.059)
Knowledge about the West		0.040		0.00004		0.006
		(0.026)		(0.011)		(0.068)
Use of Social Media		0.090***		0.022*		0.141*
		(0.030)		(0.013)		(0.078)
Use of Mass Media		0.069**		0.008		0.053
		(0.032)		(0.014)		(0.082)
Political Interest		0.002		0.010		0.078
		(0.028)		(0.012)		(0.072)
Use of VPN		−0.004		0.021		0.130
		(0.039)		(0.017)		(0.102)
Constant	0.045	−0.841***	0.025	−0.259**	−3.652***	−5.566***
	(0.052)	(0.267)	(0.022)	(0.114)	(0.338)	(0.789)
Observations	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047
Adjusted R^2	0.216	0.240	0.291	0.298		

Note: Table F.2 presents the results of regressing measures of anger on the unpooled treatment indicator. Column (1) and (2) use OLS models and the averaged level of fear across three options (see Appendix C.1) as the dependent variables, with the latter including covariates. Column (3) and (4) also use OLS models but use a binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables. Column (5) and (6) use the same binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables but use logistic regression models instead. The baseline comparison is the control group, who is not exposed to any messages of negative propaganda. Specific measurement of each variable can be found in the survey instruments in Appendix G.

The total number of respondents is 1,050. 3 other respondents are dropped in Column (2), (4), and (6) because of no responses to other demographic/pre-treatment questions.

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

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table F.3: Treatment Effects on Anger (Pooled Treatment)

	Anger Level		Anger Dummy			
	OLS		*OLS*		*logistic*	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated	1.081***	1.079***	0.554***	0.555***	3.972***	4.054***
	(0.064)	(0.063)	(0.027)	(0.027)	(0.346)	(0.349)
Age		0.048		0.019		0.115
		(0.035)		(0.015)		(0.092)
Education		−0.025		−0.003		−0.027
		(0.047)		(0.020)		(0.120)
Male		−0.091		−0.042		−0.286*
		(0.063)		(0.027)		(0.164)
Income		0.068***		0.014		0.087
		(0.024)		(0.010)		(0.062)
Urban		−0.022		0.013		0.042
		(0.088)		(0.038)		(0.221)
Risk Preference		0.016		0.0004		0.014
		(0.023)		(0.010)		(0.059)
Knowledge about the West		0.039		−0.001		0.001
		(0.026)		(0.011)		(0.067)
Use of Social Media		0.089***		0.021		0.133*
		(0.030)		(0.013)		(0.078)
Use of Mass Media		0.070**		0.008		0.054
		(0.032)		(0.014)		(0.082)
Political Interest		0.002		0.010		0.077
		(0.028)		(0.012)		(0.072)
Use of VPN		−0.003		0.022		0.137
		(0.039)		(0.017)		(0.102)
Constant	0.045	−0.844***	0.025	−0.262**	−3.652***	−5.568***
	(0.052)	(0.267)	(0.022)	(0.114)	(0.338)	(0.786)
Observations	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047
Adjusted R^2	0.216	0.239	0.288	0.294		

Note: Table F.3 presents the results of regressing measures of anger on the binary treatment indicator that pools the two treatment groups. Column (1) and (2) use OLS models and the averaged level of fear across three options (see Appendix C.1) as the dependent variables, with the latter including covariates. Column (3) and (4) also use OLS models but use a binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables. Column (5) and (6) use the same binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables but use logistic regression models instead. The baseline comparison is the control group, who is not exposed to any messages of negative propaganda. Specific measurement of each variable can be found in the survey instruments in Appendix G.
The total number of respondents is 1,050. 3 other respondents are dropped in Column (2), (4), and (6) because of no responses to other demographic/pre-treatment questions.
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table F.4: Treatment Effects on Reassurance (Unpooled Treatment)

	Reassurance Level		Reassurance Dummy			
	OLS		*OLS*		*logistic*	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Gun Violence	−1.458***	−1.461***	−0.706***	−0.707***	−4.334***	−4.387***
	(0.056)	(0.055)	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.308)	(0.311)
Jan-6 Attack	−1.240***	−1.245***	−0.519***	−0.516***	−3.495***	−3.517***
	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.030)	(0.030)	(0.303)	(0.305)
Age		−0.026		−0.011		−0.069
		(0.027)		(0.015)		(0.095)
Education		−0.056		−0.017		−0.102
		(0.035)		(0.019)		(0.124)
Male		−0.025		0.004		0.045
		(0.048)		(0.026)		(0.169)
Income		−0.015		−0.016		−0.106*
		(0.018)		(0.010)		(0.064)
Urban		−0.010		−0.007		−0.037
		(0.067)		(0.036)		(0.231)
Risk Preference		0.034*		−0.006		−0.044
		(0.017)		(0.009)		(0.061)
Knowledge about the West		0.012		0.004		0.024
		(0.020)		(0.011)		(0.070)
Use of Social Media		0.011		−0.019		−0.120
		(0.023)		(0.013)		(0.080)
Use of Mass Media		0.091***		0.019		0.121
		(0.024)		(0.013)		(0.084)
Political Interest		0.026		0.002		0.006
		(0.021)		(0.012)		(0.075)
Use of VPN		0.033		0.0002		0.012
		(0.030)		(0.016)		(0.105)
Constant	1.810***	1.557***	0.963***	1.154***	3.273***	4.536***
	(0.039)	(0.204)	(0.021)	(0.111)	(0.283)	(0.773)
Observations	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047
Adjusted R^2	0.432	0.444	0.364	0.364		

Note: Table F.4 presents the results of regressing measures of anger on the unpooled treatment indicator. Column (1) and (2) use OLS models and the averaged level of fear across three options (see Appendix C.1) as the dependent variables, with the latter including covariates. Column (3) and (4) also use OLS models but use a binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables. Column (5) and (6) use the same binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables but use logistic regression models instead. The baseline comparison is the control group, who is not exposed to any messages of negative propaganda. Specific measurement of each variable can be found in the survey instruments in Appendix G.

The total number of respondents is 1,050. 3 other respondents are dropped in Column (2), (4), and (6) because of no responses to other demographic/pre-treatment questions.

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

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table F.5: Treatment Effects on Reassurance (Pooled Treatment)

	Reassurance Level		Reassurance Dummy			
	OLS		*OLS*		*logistic*	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated	−1.350***	−1.355***	−0.613***	−0.613***	−3.891***	−3.926***
	(0.049)	(0.048)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.294)	(0.295)
Age		−0.030		−0.014		−0.089
		(0.027)		(0.015)		(0.093)
Education		−0.057		−0.018		−0.106
		(0.036)		(0.020)		(0.121)
Male		−0.028		0.001		0.026
		(0.049)		(0.027)		(0.166)
Income		−0.015		−0.016		−0.101
		(0.018)		(0.010)		(0.063)
Urban		−0.006		−0.004		−0.017
		(0.068)		(0.037)		(0.226)
Risk Preference		0.034*		−0.005		−0.039
		(0.018)		(0.010)		(0.060)
Knowledge about the West		0.014		0.006		0.037
		(0.020)		(0.011)		(0.068)
Use of Social Media		0.014		−0.017		−0.098
		(0.023)		(0.013)		(0.079)
Use of Mass Media		0.090***		0.019		0.113
		(0.025)		(0.013)		(0.083)
Political Interest		0.026		0.002		0.007
		(0.021)		(0.012)		(0.073)
Use of VPN		0.029		−0.003		−0.008
		(0.030)		(0.016)		(0.103)
Constant	1.810***	1.565***	0.963***	1.161***	3.273***	4.517***
	(0.039)	(0.205)	(0.021)	(0.113)	(0.283)	(0.757)
Observations	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047	1,050	1,047
Adjusted R^2	0.424	0.437	0.341	0.339		

Note: Table F.5 presents the results of regressing measures of reassurance on the binary treatment indicator that pools the two treatment groups. Column (1) and (2) use OLS models and the averaged level of fear across three options (see Appendix C.1) as the dependent variables, with the latter including covariates. Column (3) and (4) also use OLS models but use a binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables. Column (5) and (6) use the same binary indicator of fear as the dependent variables but use logistic regression models instead. The baseline comparison is the control group, who is not exposed to any messages of negative propaganda. Specific measurement of each variable can be found in the survey instruments in Appendix G.
The total number of respondents is 1,050. 3 other respondents are dropped in Column (2), (4), and (6) because of no responses to other demographic/pre-treatment questions.
*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01.
Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Table F.6: Anger and Reassurance do not Mediate the Relationship after Controlling Potential Alternative Emotional Mechanisms

Outcome	Treatment: Gun Violence			Treatment: Jan-6 Attack		
	Mediator:			Mediator:		
	Fear	Anger	Reassurance	Fear	Anger	Reassurance
Western Regime	-0.458**	0.158	-0.044	-0.253**	0.099	0.092
WAT Western	0.127	0.002	0.012	0.092	-0.028	0.081
Democratic Reform	-0.428**	0.267	-0.012	-0.222*	0.232	-0.004
China Regime	0.202	0.148	-0.142**	0.14	0.127	-0.084
Domestic Eval	0.108	0.134	-0.124	0.074	0.105	-0.108**
WAT Domestic	0.148	0.015	-0.009	0.067	0.037	-0.058

Note: The results of the mediation analyses are presented in Table F.6, with fear, anger, or reassurance serving as the primary mediator and the remaining two emotions as alternative mediators. Each entry in the table corresponds to the ACME obtained using a specific outcome variable and treatment indicator.
95% bootstrapping confidence intervals in parentheses.
*p<0.1; **p<0.05.

F.2 Informational Mechanism?

In this section, I elaborate the three explanations for why the presence of the informational mechanism is not likely to affect the validity of the fear mechanism, including the long-term exposure to negative propaganda, the limited information carried by the treatment, and the potential heterogeneity of the treatment effects based on pre-treatment covariates that indicated respondents' informativeness about western democracies.

When negative propaganda against western democracies was still not prevalent in China, it is likely that respondents who lacked exposure to information about foreign countries will update their beliefs on the performance of the democracies and the domestic regime. However, as the observational analysis on the Weibo data shows, negative propaganda has been nothing new to Chinese citizens. The Chinese state-affiliated media have been consistently disseminating information that portrays the dark sides of western democracies and thereby potentially induces fear of liberal regimes for over ten years. This implies most Chinese citizens who have been continuously exposed to these negative messages against foreign rivals are less and less likely to obtain new information from many topics in negative propaganda and update their beliefs. Given how strictly the Chinese government controls the information flow (Stockmann 2013), most Chinese also lack direct foreign media exposure to obtain extra information from abroad to update their beliefs on the democratic regime.

As for the Weibo posts selected as the treatment, they had been pretested for their relatively high familiarity to the Chinese citizens prior to the survey experiment. These Weibo posts were also among those frequently discussed by the Chinese state-affiliated media. Therefore, if any significant treatment effects can still be observed, it is less likely that the informational mechanism plays a primary role in driving attitudes towards the democratic and the domestic regime.

If the informational mechanism is pivotal to explain the relationship between exposure to negative propaganda and regime-stabilizing attitudes, it is expected that the treatment effects will be stronger among respondents with less knowledge about the west, lower political interest, less usage of VPN, and lower media exposure. This is because these participants tend to be less informed about western democracies prior to the treatment and are thus more likely to leverage the information from the treatments to update their beliefs. To examine the plausibility of these expectations, I ran a series interaction models to examine the heterogeneous treatment effects by these pre-treatment covariates. Results from Table F.7 to Table F.11 fail to support these expectations, as the interaction terms are generally very small and indistinguishable from zero. While some interaction terms are statistically significant when the outcomes are attitudes towards western democracies and democratic reform, those coefficients are all negative, indicating that the treatment effect is actually the weakest among the less informed. These results suggest that the informational mechanism may not be a powerful explanation for the negative treatment effect of negative propaganda on regime-related attitudes.

Although these explanations may be imperfect and context-specific, the main evidence shows that even after continuous exposure to negative propaganda, respondents in the treatment groups still express significantly lower evaluations of western democracies and preferences for democratic reform. These results, along with the mediation analyses, suggest that emotions, particularly fear, are likely to be an important mechanism that explains the effectiveness of negative propaganda.

Table F.7: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects on Regime-Stabilizing Attitudes by Knowledge about the West

	Western Regime		Democratic Reform	Domestic Regime		
	Western Regime	WAT Western	Democratic Reform	China Regime	Domestic Eval	WAT Domestic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated X Knowledge about the West	−0.041	−0.068	0.026	0.031	0.011	0.046
	(0.045)	(0.053)	(0.038)	(0.042)	(0.041)	(0.036)
Treated	−0.094	0.018	−0.240**	−0.045	0.010	−0.044
	(0.127)	(0.150)	(0.107)	(0.119)	(0.116)	(0.100)
Knowledge about the West	−0.018	−0.026	−0.035	−0.032	−0.023	−0.056*
	(0.038)	(0.045)	(0.032)	(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.030)
Constant	2.807***	2.937***	0.014	3.515***	3.313***	0.221
	(0.256)	(0.303)	(0.217)	(0.239)	(0.234)	(0.201)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,047	980	1,047	1,047	1,047	996
Adjusted R^2	0.047	0.030	0.032	0.024	0.034	0.019
Note:						*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table F.8: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects on Regime-Related Attitudes by Political Interest

	Western Regime		Democratic Reform	Domestic Regime		
	Western Regime	WAT Western	Democratic Reform	China Regime	Domestic Eval	WAT Domestic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated X Political Interest	−0.084*	−0.078	−0.034	−0.011	−0.028	0.030
	(0.045)	(0.054)	(0.038)	(0.042)	(0.041)	(0.036)
Treated	0.191	0.209	−0.019	0.082	0.168	−0.067
	(0.217)	(0.257)	(0.183)	(0.203)	(0.199)	(0.171)
Political Interest	−0.004	0.057	−0.046	0.066*	0.060*	−0.034
	(0.039)	(0.046)	(0.032)	(0.036)	(0.035)	(0.031)
Constant	2.634***	2.819***	−0.116	3.440***	3.219***	0.237
	(0.277)	(0.328)	(0.235)	(0.260)	(0.253)	(0.218)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,047	980	1,047	1,047	1,047	996
Adjusted R^2	0.047	0.030	0.032	0.024	0.034	0.019
Note:						*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table F.9: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects on Regime-Related Attitudes by Usage of VPN

	Western Regime		Democratic Reform	Domestic Regime		
	Western Regime	WAT Western	Democratic Reform	China Regime	Domestic Eval	WAT Domestic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated X VPN	−0.058	−0.060	−0.023	0.036	0.050	0.007
	(0.069)	(0.081)	(0.058)	(0.064)	(0.063)	(0.055)
Treated	−0.043	0.007	−0.114	−0.064	−0.094	0.051
	(0.191)	(0.226)	(0.163)	(0.179)	(0.175)	(0.152)
VPN	0.155***	0.134**	0.082*	−0.038	−0.047	−0.009
	(0.057)	(0.067)	(0.048)	(0.053)	(0.052)	(0.045)
Constant	2.767***	2.932***	−0.062	3.533***	3.383***	0.167
	(0.274)	(0.324)	(0.233)	(0.256)	(0.250)	(0.216)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,047	980	1,047	1,047	1,047	996
Adjusted R^2	0.047	0.030	0.032	0.024	0.034	0.019
Note:						*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table F.10: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects on Regime-Related Attitudes by Social Media Exposure

	Western Regime		Democratic Reform	Domestic Regime		
	Western Regime	WAT Western	Democratic Reform	China Regime	Domestic Eval	WAT Domestic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated X Social Media	−0.118**	−0.083	−0.057	0.038	0.060	0.037
	(0.055)	(0.066)	(0.047)	(0.052)	(0.051)	(0.044)
Treated	0.207	0.134	0.022	−0.097	−0.167	−0.057
	(0.199)	(0.236)	(0.169)	(0.186)	(0.182)	(0.157)
Social Media	0.068	0.043	0.058	0.007	0.012	0.016
	(0.047)	(0.055)	(0.039)	(0.044)	(0.043)	(0.037)
Constant	2.603***	2.849***	−0.152	3.554***	3.430***	0.237
	(0.276)	(0.327)	(0.235)	(0.259)	(0.253)	(0.218)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,047	980	1,047	1,047	1,047	996
Adjusted R^2	0.047	0.030	0.032	0.024	0.034	0.019
Note:						*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table F.11: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects on Regime-Related Attitudes by Mass Media Exposure

	Western Regime		Democratic Reform	Domestic Regime		
	Western Regime	WAT Western	Democratic Reform	China Regime	Domestic Eval	WAT Domestic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treated X Mass Media	−0.167***	−0.124*	−0.106**	−0.033	−0.017	−0.025
	(0.059)	(0.070)	(0.050)	(0.055)	(0.054)	(0.046)
Treated	0.169	0.120	0.059	0.105	0.076	0.124
	(0.141)	(0.167)	(0.119)	(0.133)	(0.129)	(0.111)
Mass Media	0.133***	0.056	0.053	0.130***	0.118***	0.088**
	(0.049)	(0.058)	(0.041)	(0.046)	(0.045)	(0.039)
Constant	2.653***	2.876***	−0.157	3.428***	3.275***	0.123
	(0.258)	(0.306)	(0.219)	(0.242)	(0.236)	(0.203)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,047	980	1,047	1,047	1,047	996
Adjusted R^2	0.047	0.030	0.032	0.024	0.034	0.019

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

G Survey Instruments for the Experiment

[Page break is default between questions if not otherwise specified.]
[Respondents can skip the question they do not want to answer.]

G.1 Demographics

[The order of demographic questions is randomized.]

1. What is your sex?
   (a) Female
   (b) Male
   (c) Other (Please specify:)
2. In which interval does your age fall?
   (a) 18 - 24
   (b) 25 - 34
   (c) 35 - 44
   (d) 45 - 54
   (e) 55 - 64
   (f) Above 65
3. What is your ethnicity?
   (a) Han
   (b) Not Han (Please specify:)
4. What is your highest level of education?
   (a) Junior school or below
   (b) High school/vocational school
   (c) Three-year college degree
   (d) Bachelor's degree
   (e) Master's or Doctorate degree
5. In which interval does your monthly personal income fall?
   (a) 3,000 yuan or below
   (b) 3,001 - 5,000 yuan
   (c) 5,001 - 8,000 yuan
   (d) 8,001 - 10,000 yuan

(e) 10,001 - 15,000 yuan

(f) 15,001 - 20,000 yuan

(g) Above 20,000 yuan

6. In which region of China do you live?

   (a) South China

   (b) East China

   (c) North China

   (d) West China

   (e) Central China

   (f) Northeast China

7. Did you grow up in the countryside, a small town, or the city?

   (a) The countryside

   (b) The city

   (c) Others (Please specify:)

G.2 Pre-treatment Moderators

G.2.1 Knowledge about the West

[Correct answers marked at the end of the question. The order of the following questions are randomized. Response options for each question are also randomized.]

1. Which party is the current President of the United States, Joseph Biden, affiliated with? [d]

   (a) The Labour Party

   (b) The Republican Party

   (c) The Conservative Party

   (d) The Democratic Party

   (e) I am not sure

2. Who is the current Prime Minister of Japan? [b]

   (a) Yoshihide Suga

   (b) Fumio Kishida

   (c) Junichiro Koizumi

   (d) Shinzo Abe

   (e) I am not sure

3. In which country is the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine developed? [a]

(a) The United States

(b) China

(c) The United Kingdom

(d) Japan

(e) I am not sure

4. The UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson resigned in July 2022. Who did he succeed in 2019? [d]

   (a) Tony Blair

   (b) David Cameron

   (c) Gordon Brown

   (d) Theresa May

   (e) I am not sure

G.2.2 Risk Orientation

Risk Orientations: Some people say you should be cautious about making major changes in life. Suppose these people are located at 1. Others say that you will never achieve much in life unless you act boldly. Suppose these people are located at 7. And others have views in between. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

G.2.3 Media Exposure

1. Apart from work, how long do you spend on social media (including Weibo, WeChat, QQ, Tiktok, etc.) during a typical day?

   (a) Less half an hour

   (b) Half an hour to an hour

   (c) An hour to two hours

   (d) Two hours to three hours

   (e) Three hours or above

2. Apart from work, how long do you spend on mass media (including TV, newspaper, radio, etc.) during a typical day?

   (a) Less half an hour

   (b) Half an hour to an hour

   (c) An hour to two hours

   (d) Two hours to three hours

   (e) Three hours or above

3. How often do you follow political news (including social media and mass media)?

   (a) Less than once a month
   (b) Once a month
   (c) Once every half a month
   (d) Once a week
   (e) Once every two or three days
   (f) Once a day
   (g) More than once a day

4. Have you heard of and used VPN (Virtual Private Network) before?

   (a) Heard of and used frequently
   (b) Heard of and used occasionally
   (c) Heard of but have not used before
   (d) Never heard of

G.3 Attention Check

[Failure to answer this question correctly will be screened out.]

We are interested in which types of news people watch because these habits can possibly affect their judgments. However, in this question, we are only interested in whether people read the questions of the survey carefully. Therefore, in this question, please only choose Sports and Economics. Yes, to inform us that you have read this far, you do not need to care about the following question and only choose the two options we suggest.

Regardless of the frequency of watching news, which types of news are your favorite (Multiple answers allowed):

The choices are: National, Local, International, Economics, Real Estate, Fashion, Entertainment, Animation, Science and Technology, Sports, All of the Above, None of the Above

G.4 Treatments

Respondents are randomly assigned to read one of the following three Weibo posts/images shared by the Global Times. The actual presentation of texts + image is vertical rather than horizontal, which adheres to the original alignment of the post. Respondents are required to read the post for at least 20 seconds before they are allowed to click next.

- **Control group: A post unrelated to negative propaganda**

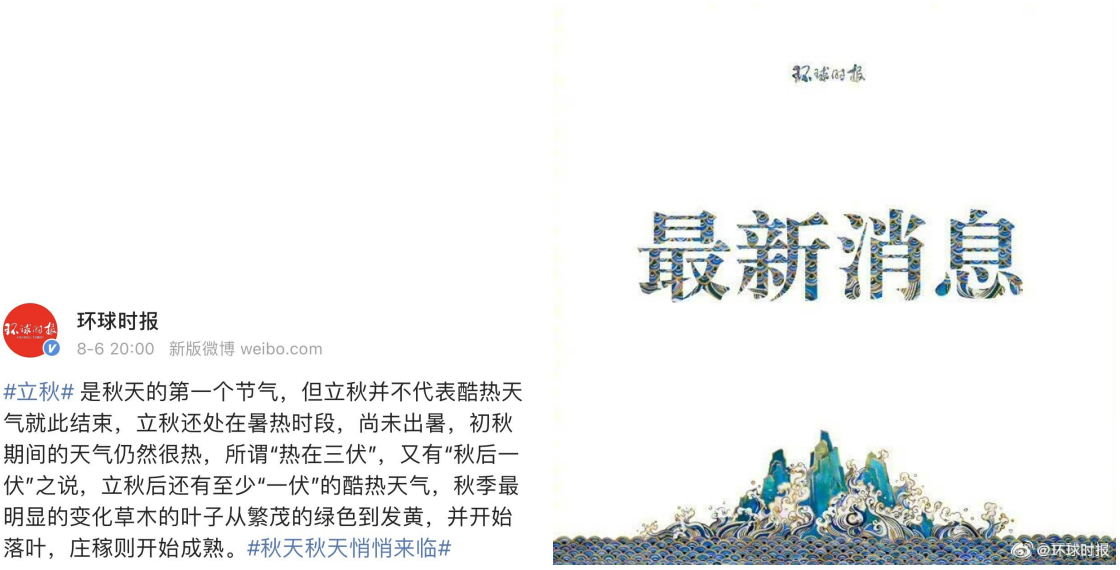


Figure G.1: Control Group: Seasons

Translation of the Weibo post:

#立秋(*Liqiu*)# is the first solar term in autumn, but *Liqiu* does not mean the end of the hot weather. *Liqiu* is still in the heat period, and the summer has not yet ended. As the saying goes, “Heat is in Dog Days of Summer” and “Dog Days last after Autumn.” There will still be some dog days after *Liqiu*. That said, the most obvious change in autumn is that the leaves of plants and trees turn from lush green to yellow and begin to fall, as well as crops begin to mature. #Autumn autumn come quietly#

Translation of the text on the image:

First line: The Global Times
Second line: Latest News

- **Treatment group 1 (gun violence):**

Figure G.2: Treatment Group 1: Gun Violence

Translation of the Weibo post:

[#86 shootings occurred in one day in the United States#] According to real-time data released by the US "Gun Violence Archives" website, from the 16th to the 17th at 4 p.m. Eastern time, a total of 100 shooting incidents occurred across the United States. Among them, at least 86 incidents occurred in one day on the 16th. On the same day, at least 8 shootings occurred in New York City in just a few hours, resulting in 9 people being shot and 1 dead. (Global Information)

- **Treatment group 2 (Jan-6 Capitol attack + fear-inducing image):**

Figure G.3: Treatment Group 1: Jan-6 Capitol Attack

Translation of the Weibo post:

[#Police shot and killed a female Trump supporter#: The female was shot and killed by the police when trying to enter the Congress] On January 6, a female Trump supporter was shot and killed by the police when she forced her way into the Capitol. Footage showed that the woman fell to the ground instantly when she tried to climb over the gate but shot by the police. It is reported that the woman was shot in the neck, and the bleeding continued after falling to the ground. The police later confirmed that she was sent to the hospital but died. #The woman shot dead in the US Capitol riots is a veteran female soldier#

G.5 Treatment Reinforcement

1. For treatment group 1: Based on the Weibo post you just read, at least how many shootings happened during the 16th? [d]

   (a) 20

   (b) 45

   (c) 67

   (d) 86

2. For treatment group 2: Based on the Weibo post you just read, on January 6 during the Capitol attack, why was the Trump supporter shot by the police? [b]

   (a) Because she chanted a pro-Trump slogan outside the Congress

   (b) Because she forced her way into the Congress

   (c) Because she protested silently in the crowd

   (d) Because she intended to pull out her gun against the police

3. For control group: Which is the first solar term in autumn?

   (a) *Liqiu*

   (b) *Chushu*

   (c) *Qiufen*

   (d) *Bailu*

G.6 Self-Reported Emotions

[Adapted from (Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre and Utych 2021):]

1. Now we want to ask some questions about your current feelings. Please select the following emotions you felt:

   Answers include: Worried; Anxious; Afraid; Angry; Outraged; Disgusted; Reassured; Content; Calm; Optimistic; Resigned

2. To what extent do you feel each of the following emotions (presented in random order)? (Only the selected emotions will be presented; The scale is 1-5)

G.7 Political Attitudes

1. **Regime-related attitudes:**

   (a) *China Regime*: "How well do you think our current political regime functions?"
   The choices are: "very well,", "well," "neither well nor badly," "badly," and "very badly".

(b) *Western Regime*: "How well do you think liberal democracies (*xifang minzhutizhu*) function in western countries?"
The choices are: "very well,", "well," "neither well nor badly," "badly," and "very badly".

(c) *Democratic Reform*: "To what extent do you agree with the following statement?: China should adapt features from liberal democracies to improve its own political regime."
The choices are: "strongly agree," "agree,", "neither agree nor disagree," "disagree," "strongly disagree".

[The following are adapted from Huang (2015), Huang (2018), Huang and Yeh (2019):]

(a) *Domestic Eval*: "To what extent are you satisfied with the overall current situation in China?"
The choices are "very satisfied," "satisfied," "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied," "dissatisfied," "very dissatisfied."

(b) *Dissent*: If there is a government policy that you strongly oppose, how likely are you to voice your opinion (e.g., sign a petition and dissent on social media)?
The choices are: "highly likely,", "likely," "neither likely nor unlikely," "unlikely," and "highly unlikely".

2. **Word Association Test** (Han, Liu and Truex 2022): Respondents will have 25 seconds for each trial. There will be 2 trials. For each trial, respondents will see a keyword ("domestic situation" and "western democracy", with order randomized). Respondents are suggested to write down as many words relevant to the keyword as they can in the allotted 25 seconds.

H Pre-Analysis Plan

This project conducts a survey experiment to examine whether and how negative propaganda, which disproportionately spreads disparaging news, commentary, and misinformation about foreign rivals, can cultivate pro-regime attitudes in authoritarian regimes. I propose that fear as an emotional mechanism can explain this relationship. Negative propaganda that portrays an exclusively gloomy picture of a foreign target with frightening topics contains many threatening stimuli. Individual appraisals of such stimuli, as theories of emotions suggest, can incite fear because these stimuli are associated with danger and uncontrollable situations (Frijda 1986; Lazarus 1991; Roseman 1996). A downstream implication is that individuals who experience fear as a consequence of negative propaganda become more risk-averse (Johnson and Tversky 1983; Lerner and Keltner 2001; Lerner et al. 2003) and, therefore, more likely to resist the "dangerous" democratic regime and democratic reform that may bring the country into chaos. However, being risk-averse to institutions that may give rise to chaos is not equivalent to embracing the domestic regime, so individuals exposed to negative propaganda are not necessarily more likely to support the domestic regime. In the experiment, I randomly expose respondents to a Weibo post with both texts and an image shared by the Chinese state-affiliated media. The control group reads a post irrelevant to negative propaganda or politics, and the treatment group reads a post that shares negative information against the United States.

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of how authoritarian regimes can curb the liberalizing role of media, turn it into their own weapons, and thrive in the face of intense interstate rivalries and a competitive information environment. Second, how negative propaganda alters political attitudes through informational and emotional mechanisms speaks to and extends the current discussion about how propaganda works, which mainly focuses on how it persuades the citizens by updating their beliefs on the regime's capability (e.g., Gehlbach, Sonin and Svolik 2016; Guriev and Treisman 2015; Jowett and O'Donnell 2018). Recent research suggests that this literature may have overly concentrated on the power of information but neglected emotional channels as efficient drivers for political attitudes and behaviors (Young 2019). This study joins this burgeoning literature (e.g., Bleck and Michelitch 2017; Williamson and Malik 2020; **?**) by underlining fear as another main driver of attitudinal formation.

H.1 Theory

Authoritarian regimes have constantly emphasized and used negative propaganda in various authoritarian regimes. However, less is known about whether and through which mechanisms such negative propaganda works. In this paper, I focus on an important emotional mechanism: fear.

Fear plays a prominent role in the effectiveness of negative propaganda. It is in the interests of the authoritarian state to show the superiority of its own regime over the foreign alternatives, which provides the state with an incentive to publicize to its citizens the most horrific incidents taking place in these rival countries. When such negative propaganda associates these foreign regimes with threatening texts, imagery, and videos, it has the power to incite fear (Gadarian 2010). Research in neuroscience and different strands of the emotional theories also posits that fear stems from the processing of threatening events and unfavorable circumstances (Frijda 1986;

Lazarus 1991; LeDoux 1996; Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen 2000; Roseman 1996) [2].

The emotional theories further suggest that fear directly impacts how individuals process information and therefore, can result in distinctive attitudinal and behavioral tendencies. Specifically, fear can induce pessimistic risk assessments and risk aversion because the threatening stimuli stimulates appraisals of uncertainty and lack of individual control (Johnson and Tversky 1983; Lerner and Keltner 2001; Lerner et al. 2003). This effect of fear has strong implications on political judgments and behaviors. Empirical evidence shows that fear is associated with risk-averse attitudes such as lower support for counterterrorist actions, hawkish foreign policies, and aggressive fiscal policies (see Mintz, Valentino and Wayne 2022, for a summary). In an authoritarian context, Young (2019) demonstrates that individuals who sense more fear are more pessimistic about the risk of dissent behaviors and express less dissent against the regime. Therefore, it is expected that negative propaganda that disproportionately ties threatening topics with foreign democracies can arouse individuals' aversion to the liberal regime and democratic reform, as the attempts of alternating to a liberal regime can bring them to a potentially chaotic situation that they fear. Specifically, I hypothesize that

H_1: Negative propaganda reduces the evaluation of the democratic regime.

H_2: Negative propaganda reduces preference for democratic reform.

However, it remains less clear whether negative propaganda can encourage domestic regime support, as an aversion to the democratic regime is not necessarily equivalent higher attachment to the domestic regime. For example, political chaos and social instability may also exist in the domestic regime, so individuals tend to have a lower evaluation of the domestic regime, even if they meanwhile dislike the democratic regime because of negative propaganda. Also, it is likely that the individuals already have a highly positive evaluation of the domestic regime, so exposure to negative propaganda cannot further cultivate regime support. Therefore, negative propaganda does not necessarily improve domestic regime support:

H_3: Negative propaganda does not improve the evaluation of the domestic regime.

H.2 Research Design

To test my hypotheses, I will conduct a survey experiment in China that randomly assigns respondents to read a Weibo post shared by the state media about the political and social chaos in western democracies. Then, I will compare pro-regime attitudes and the level of fear between the control and treatment groups to identify the causal effect of exposing respondents to negative propaganda. I will also leverage causal mediation analysis to test the plausibility of the fear mechanism (Imai, Keele and Yamamoto 2010; Imai et al. 2011; Imai and Yamamoto 2013). The full survey is included in the Appendix.

[2] While sharing similar conclusions on how fear can be aroused by a threatening stimuli, different strands of emotional theories such as the Cognitive Appraisal Theories (CAT) and the Affective Intelligence Theories (AIT), nonetheless, propose slightly different micro-level mechanisms on how such arousal exactly happens. This discussion is out of the scope of this paper but well documented in the cited literature. Also see Mintz, Valentino and Wayne (2022) for a summary.

H.3 Treatment Conditions

Respondents who pass an attention check will read a Weibo post shared by a Chinese state-affiliated media, but the content of the post differs by treatment conditions. Specifically, I will randomize respondents to read either a Weibo post unrelated to politics (the control group) or a Weibo post about political and social turmoil in the United States (the treatment groups).

In addition, I will also randomize the topics the treatment groups received to investigate whether the strength of the hypothesized pro-regime inclination is a function of a particular type of incident. Specifically, I will adapt two real Weibo posts that the Chinese state-affiliated media recently shared on their social media accounts. The first post reported that at least 86 shootings occurred in one day in the United States, which resulted in 9 people shot and 1 dead. The other post reported that a female Trump supporter was shot and killed in a conflict between police and protesters during the Capitol Attack on January 6, 2021. The respondents will be fully informed that the posts they read are real but may be from different state media accounts, so there is no deception.

H.4 Measurement

After the treatment, I will ask respondents to recall some details of the post as treatment reinforcement. Then, I will ask respondents to report their emotional state by filling in the Positive and Negative Attitude Schedule-M (PANAS-M), a modified version of the PANAS (Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre and Utych 2021). The original PANAS developed by Watson, Clark and Tellegen (1988) is a one-step scheme that asks participants to simultaneously indicate all different kinds of positive and negative emotions on a scale from 1 to 5. While widely applied across research projects (Brader and Marcus 2013), this scale can lead to potential measurement error because different types of negative emotions such as fear and anger tend to be highly correlated. Instead, the PANAS-M takes a two-step approach, which requires respondents to first indicate whether they feel any of the emotions on the list and subsequently to report on a 1-5 scale to what extent they feel the emotions they selected at the first step. Rhodes-Purdy, Navarre and Utych (2021) show that the PANAS-M lowers the correlations between different emotions and hence strengthens the internal validity of the measured emotions. I will create two variables that indicated whether the respondents experienced fear (*Fear Dummy*) and if so, the level of fear (*Fear Level*).[3] *Fear Level* will be coded as 0 if *Fear Dummy* is 0.

After measuring emotions, I will measure respondents' (a) evaluation of the democratic regime, (b) preference for democratic reform, and (c) evaluation of the domestic regime. First, I will ask respondents to self-report how well China's political regime functioned in China (*China Regime*), how well the democratic regime functioned in western countries (*Western Regime*), and preference for reform by learning from the democratic regime (*Democratic Reform*). I will also ask respondents to evaluate the current domestic situations in China (*Domestic Eval*). I will adapt these questions from previous experimental studies that investigate the effectiveness of positive propaganda in shaping domestic political attitudes in China (Huang 2015, 2018; Huang and Yeh 2019).

[3] In addition to fear, I will also measure whether and to what extent respondents experience other emotions, including anger and reassurance, because different categories of emotions can arise simultaneously and tend to be correlated, such as anger and fear. Therefore, measuring emotions in addition to fear, and especially anger, helps test whether emotions other than fear can be alternative mechanisms that mediate the relationship between exposure to negative propaganda and pro-regime attitudes.

All of these questions were placed on a 1-5 Likert scale.

In addition, I will include the Word Association Test (WAT) as a complementary measure of regime-related attitudes Han, Liu and Truex (2022). The WATs require respondents to provide concepts interconnected with a given keyword. Specifically, I will ask respondents to indicate relevant terms to "domestic regime (国内体制)" and "western democracy (西方民主)" within 25 seconds. For the keyword "domestic situation," a variable *WAT Domestic* will be generated, where the responses were coded as 1 if a majority of terms are positive about the Chinese regime, -1 if a majority of terms are negative about the Chinese regime, and 0 if a majority of terms are neutral or the number of positive terms and negative terms is the same. Similarly, for the keyword "western democracy," a variable *WAT Western* is coded as 1 if a majority of terms are positive about the western democracies, -1 if a majority of terms are negative about the western democracies, and 0 if a majority of terms are neutral or the number of positive terms and negative terms is the same.

H.5 Recruitment

Recruitment of participants in the experiment will be delivered to a Chinese survey company, whose duty is similar to Lakuten Insights and Prolific. After being recruited by the company, the respondents will be directed to a Qualtrics website and complete the survey anonymously. Randomization of treatments is embedded in the Qualtrics survey. As the population of this study is Chinese citizens, the sample will include a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds that represent the construction of the Chinese population.

I conduct a power analysis to determine the sample size. Figure H.1 presents the relationship between the effect size measured by Cohen's d and the sample size. Previous experimental studies on the relationship between propaganda and political attitudes show that the effect size is between 0.18 and 0.27 (Huang 2018; **?**). With a significance level of 0.05, the power analysis shows that the estimated sample size per group needed to guarantee a 80% power will be between 216 and 485. Therefore, I plan to recruit 300 participants for each group, and 900 parcipants in total.

H.6 Analysis

This section includes the analysis of treatment effects, which aims to show the effect of negative propaganda on pro-regime attitudes, as well as the causal mediation analysis, which aims to show whether fear mediates the causal relationship.

H.6.1 Treatment Effects

I will use difference-in-means and ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions to analyze the data from the survey and gauge the cuasal effect. For the difference-in-means estimator, I will calculate the means for each group and get the differences between the control and the first/second treatment group. The result of the difference-in-means is the estimate for the corresponding treatment effects.

I also use multivariate regressions to control demographical and pre-treatment covariates inluding political knowledge, risk perceptions, and media exposure. The main specification is:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \mathbf{T_i}^T\beta + \mathbf{X_i}^T\gamma + \epsilon_i,$$

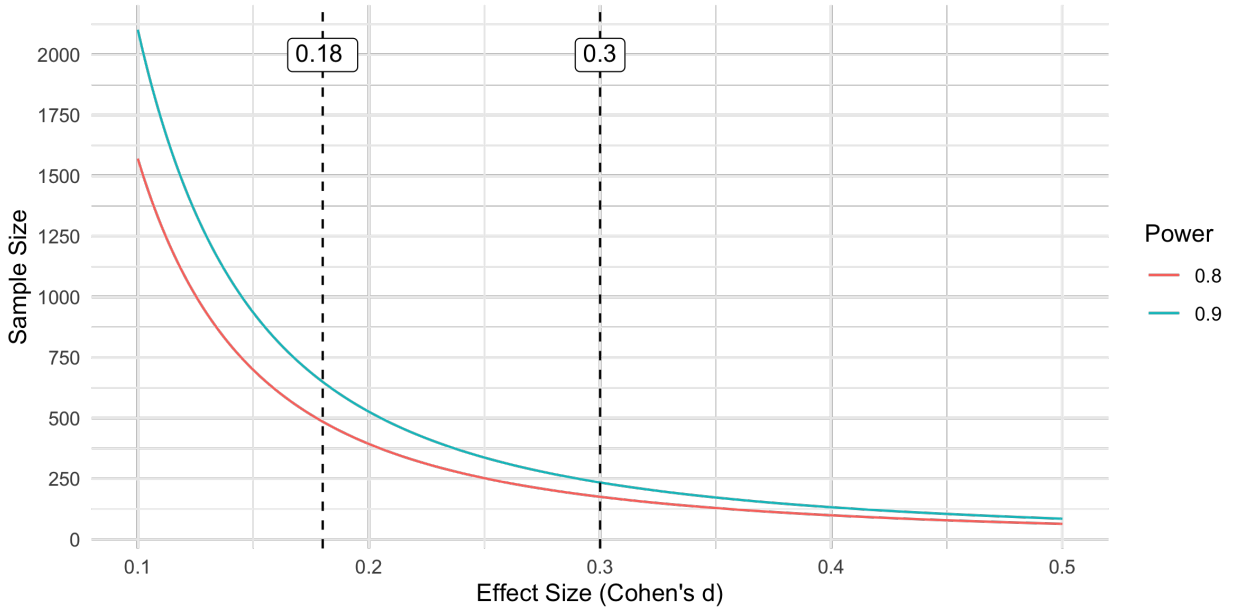


Figure H.1: Power Analysis

where Y_i denotes attitudes towards the regime, $\mathbf{T_i}$ is a vector of dummy variables denoting in which group a respondent is, $\mathbf{X_i}$ denotes the pre-treatment covariates, and ϵ_i is the idiosyncratic error term.

I will also interact the pre-treatment covariates with the treatment status to explore any heterogeneous treatment effect.

H.6.2 Causal Mediation Analysis

I use causal mediation analysis to test the fear mechanism. The methods I will apply are proposed by Imai, Keele and Yamamoto (2010); Imai et al. (2011). The main quantity of interest is the average causal mediation effect (ACME), which represents the proportion of treatment effects that can be explained by the mediator. To rule out other emotions as potential mediators, I will also leverage the extended framework proposed by Imai and Yamamoto (2013), where I can include main and alternative mediators. The analysis will be implemented by the `mediate` and `multimed` function in the **mediation** package (Tingley et al. 2014).

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