

Never Meet Your Heroes: Community Policing in Contemporary China

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Abstract

In autocracies, police are tasked with both providing law and order for citizens and monitoring and repressing political opposition for the regime. For ordinary citizens, the local police represent the most common and recognizable face of coercive state power, yet, we have little systematic knowledge about how everyday, street-level policing impacts citizen’s political attitudes and behaviors in modern autocracies. We study these relationships in the context of contemporary China, a high-capacity authoritarian state that, in recent years, has invested heavily in developing its domestic security apparatus. Drawing on literatures that emphasize the physical and spatial dimensions of autocratic power, we propose that citizens living geographically closer to police stations will be both more exposed to, and reminded of, police violence, incompetence, or malfeasance—issues endemic to local policing in many autocratic states. As a result, they will be less likely to trust and participate in community political institutions. Using data from a recent nationally-representative, probability sample survey and highly precise, geo-referenced information on the location of police stations, we find evidence to support our theory: citizens who live closer to police stations (1) feel less safe, (2) express lower levels of trust in community political institutions, and (3) participate less in neighborhood political affairs. Our findings indicate that the growing investment in the physical police state may further exacerbate local information capture and the alienation of citizens from the system.

Keywords: repression, authoritarianism, police, China, grassroots governance

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1 Introduction

All states maintain police forces to provide law and order and ensure the safety of citizens. In autocracies, the police are also an important institution through which political leaders can monitor and repress opposition. Recent literature on authoritarian repression has focused on how the central state uses tools such as the military (Svolik, 2012; Svolik, 2013; Geddes, Frantz, et al., 2014; Geddes, Wright, et al., 2018), security agencies (Greitens, 2016; Hassan, 2017; Scharpf and Gläsel, 2020), and new surveillance (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, and Wright, 2020; Xu, 2020; Beraja et al., 2022) and censorship (King et al., 2013; Roberts, 2018) technologies to prevent and contain mass protest. However, for most ordinary citizens in democracies and autocracies alike, it is the local police that represent the most common and recognizable face of coercive state power (Earl et al., 2003; Soss and Weaver, 2017; Li, 2019). Yet, with the exception of a handful of recent studies set in East Africa (Arriola, 2013; Curtice, 2021; Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021; Curtice, 2022; Blair et al., 2021), we have little systematic knowledge about how street-level policing impacts citizen’s political attitudes and behaviors in modern autocracies. In this study, we seek to (re)examine the consequences of quotidian interactions between ordinary citizens and the coercive state.

Building on a literature that shows states project power and capacity through their physical presence in citizens’ daily lives Mann, 1984; Wedeen, 1999; Bray, 2005; Bush et al., 2016, and that a citizen’s literal distance from the state impacts their political attitudes and behaviors (Loveman, 2005; Tajima, 2013; Brinkerhoff et al., 2018; Chang and Manion, 2021; Bautista et al., 2021; Chang and Wang, 2022), we theorize that a citizen’s physical distance from a neighborhood police station is a key determinant of their level of trust and participation in community political institutions.

We develop a theory of disillusionment about the effect of physical proximity to the police to guide our expectations. We make a distinction between the predictable, disembodied repressive state that exists in the imaginations of citizens simply through living under an autocratic regime that constantly asserts its omnipresence through surveillance, and the more erratic, on the ground, physical manifestation of the repressive state in the form of neighborhood policing. Central to our theory is assumption that citizens who live near to police stations are more likely to observe police actions, such as incompetence, corruption, or violence—endemic to local policing in many autocratic states (Wu and Sun, 2010; Wong, 2011; Scoggins and O’Brien, 2016; Scoggins, 2021c)—that tarnish the glorified image of law enforcement propagated through state media. As a result, citizens update their beliefs accordingly.

We test our theory in the context of contemporary China. China provides a particularly interesting empirical setting for two reasons. First, China is a high-capacity authoritarian state where the central and local states have been making massive investments in the domestic security apparatus—both human and digital—to monitor and punish behavior it views as a threat to social stability (Wang, 2014; Wang and Minzner, 2015). At the same time, some forms of political participation are not only accepted, but encouraged by the state. Beijing has gone to great lengths to design and implement institutions for acceptable political participation at the grassroots such as elections (Manion, 1996; Manion, 2006; Schubert and Ahlers, 2012; Nagao and Kennedy, 2021; Martinez-Bravo et al., 2022), open hearings and consultation campaigns on local governance issues (Truex, 2017; Chen, 2017; Meng et al., 2017; Gueorguiev and Malesky, 2019), and online e-governance platforms through which citizens can complain directly to political leaders (Chen et al., 2016; Distelhorst and Hou, 2017; Jiang and Zeng, 2020). While many studies focus on examining how either coercive or responsive institutions function as levers of autocratic control, we have a unique opportunity to analyze how these institutions interact at the grassroots. Second, in light of China’s construction of a digital surveillance state, we are able to study the effect of physical police stations and human agents on citizen attitudes and behaviors in a context where the state is already extremely pervasive in citizens’ lives. Indeed, it is possible that the omnipresence of the state through digital surveillance may render physical proximity to a police station inconsequential. Choosing China as an empirical context allows us to gain preliminary insight into the relationship between different forms of repression and citizens’ political attitudes and behaviors.

Using data from a recent nationally-representative, probability sample survey (n=3,144) and highly precise, geo-referenced information on the location of police stations (Chang and Wang, 2022), we test the relationship between proximity to the police and citizens’ feelings of safety, their level of trust in government, and their participation in community political institutions. We expect that citizens that live further away from the police and therefore have less exposure to everyday policing are more likely to have a positive, untarnished impression of the police informed by official propaganda efforts to brand police as benign service providers and hero cops (Scoggins, 2021b). In contrast, we assume citizens who live closer to police stations will have more opportunities to regularly observe and interact with the police. As a result, these citizens will have relatively more negative perceptions of the police, ultimately undermining their feelings of safety and trust in the police and the larger state apparatus they work with closely (Tyler, 2004; Bradford et al., 2014; Blair et al., 2021). For citizens previously disappointed or traumatized by the police, the frequent sight of police stations may remind them of the incompetent or coercive state.

Furthermore, we theorize that these effects extend to political behaviors: citizens who live closer to police stations and observe bad, scary, or inconsistent policing first hand, may believe the police could act arbitrarily—even participating in acceptable political activities, such as voting in neighborhood elections and complaining to the government through sanctioned channels, could get them into trouble. Additionally, observing policing incompetence may give citizens the impression that the neighborhood political institutions police work with closely are so dysfunctional, corrupt, and/or ineffective that they are not worth participating in. As a result, citizens who live closer to the police will participate less in acceptable political activities. However, citizens—per their knowledge of the predictable, disembodied repressive state—expect that contentious political activity may well be met with repression regardless of whether they live near a police station or not. As such, we do not predict a significant relationship between the distance to a police station and contentious political participation such as protesting and petitioning.

We find evidence to support our theory. Living close to a police station does not make citizens feel more safe, and in fact significantly lowers perceptions of their general safety. Proximity to a police station also reduces citizen trust in community political institutions, though it has no effect on trust in the central government. Furthermore, proximity to a police station suppresses citizens’ participation in neighborhood political affairs through sanctioned channels, however, there is no effect on citizens’ likelihood of participating in more contentious political actions. Taken together, these results have several important implications that reach beyond the grassroots. First, even in an age of digital surveillance, physical manifestations of the state—human agents and brick and mortar stations—matter. Second, though citizen trust in the central government is not damaged, central propaganda cannot overcome the day-to-day reality that citizens face on the ground. Finally, the central government needs voluntarily provided information about its agents, and agents need information about their performance. As citizens abstain from airing their grievances at the grassroots, local and higher-level governments may be losing out on opportunities to gather important information. Indeed, as investment in the physical presence of the coercive state continues to grow, it may further exacerbate the alienation of citizens from the system. We return to these issues in the conclusion.

This study makes several contributions. Though there exists a robust literature on policing in democratic states (see Soss and Weaver (2017), Stuart (2018), Ang (2020), and Knox et al. (2020) among others), this study fills a significant gap in our knowledge about everyday policing in authoritarian regimes. A large literature focuses on macro-level, often centrally-

directed, dynamics of authoritarian repression. These studies address important topics such as protest prevention and response (Dragu and Przeworski, 2019), the balance between repression and co-optation (Gerschewski, 2013; Frantz and Kendall-Taylor, 2014), the role of the military and specialized security agencies (Svolik, 2012; Svolik, 2013; Geddes, Frantz, et al., 2014; Greitens, 2016; Hassan, 2017), and how new, digital technologies are allowing autocrats to repress with a greater degree of precision (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, and Wright, 2020; Xu, 2020; Beraja et al., 2022). Though the police sometimes feature as actors in these studies, more often than not, they are conceptualized as an appendage of the political center, abstracting away from the relationship between the police and citizens (Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021, 170). Yet, the police remain the most recognizable manifestation of the coercive state for ordinary citizens, and we still know relatively little about how neighborhood policing impacts citizens' political attitudes and behaviors. The few recent empirical studies that have examined local policing in autocracies—all grounded in East Africa—have focused on explaining the relationship between repression and dissent (Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021), the role of co-ethnic bias in policing and protest (Arriola, 2013; Curtice, 2022), and how police programs and actions impact citizen perceptions (Curtice, 2021; Blair et al., 2021).

In the context of China, the last two decades has produced a sizeable, primarily descriptive literature on policing that examines the history and evolution of law enforcement (Dutton, 1992; Cao et al., 2013), citizen attitudes towards the police (Wu and Sun, 2009; Wu and Sun, 2010; Sun et al., 2013), and detailed ethnographic and case-study analysis (Xu, 2014; Scoggins and O'Brien, 2016; Fu and Distelhorst, 2018; Scoggins, 2021c). However, due to data gathering constraints, systematic, quantitative studies of police-society relations remain scarce. Empirically, our study leverages hyper-local spatial variation to examine the effect of the physical distribution of police stations on individual-level outcomes. We provide strong quantitative evidence of the correlation between geographic proximity to the police, feelings of safety, and trust and engagement in neighborhood politics, suggesting that citizens have generally negative perceptions regarding the intertwined nature of policing and community political institutions.

Finally, while a rich body of literature has examined factors such as personal/demographic characteristics (Croke et al., 2016), cultural predisposition (Shi, 2001; Zhai, 2018), government performance (Wang, 2005; Yang and Tang, 2010), and more, as determinants of political trust and participation in authoritarian regimes, few studies have explored how spatial factors impact these outcomes. Furthermore, this study covers a wide spectrum of political activities, both contentious and non-contentious. In the authoritarian politics literature, most studies focus on a single type of political participation. In the case of studying

repression, this is often collective action. Other studies look at distinct forms of more sanctioned types of political participation, such as voting (Magaloni, 2006; Blaydes, 2011; Croke et al., 2016), or submitting on and offline feedback through formal channels to government officials (Distelhorst and Hou, 2017; Chen et al., 2016). Particularly in the authoritarian context, it is important to compare different forms of political participation given the distinct implications for both the regime and the participants themselves.

This paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 provides institutional context on everyday policing and political participation and trust in Chinese neighborhoods. Section 3 develops our theory and states our hypotheses. Section 4 discusses our data, measures, and empirical strategy. Section 5 presents results. Section 6 conducts several robustness checks and addresses alternative explanations. Section 7 concludes.

2 Institutional Context

2.1 Everyday Policing in Chinese Neighborhoods

In general, the police are only one of many repressive institutions states utilize to maintain control over society, but they represent the most public, recognizable, and common forms of coercive state power (Earl et al., 2003; Soss and Weaver, 2017; Li, 2019). As “street-level bureaucrats” who “represent” the government to the people’ (Lipsky, 1980), police are manifestations of the state. However, police are not simply repressive agents. They are also instrumental in enforcing law, order, and safety as one of the most important and basic public goods states provides. This contributes to complex and potentially contradictory views of the police among ordinary citizens: they have reason to simultaneously fear and resent repression, but also expect and demand safety from the same institution (Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021).¹

Since China’s economic opening up and reform in the late 1970s, the police have grappled with soaring crime rates driven by social inequality, deteriorating police-community relations, and waves of corruption and abuse scandals (Wu, Jiang, et al., 2011; Sun et al., 2013). In 1981, three years into the reform, the nationwide crime rate was 8.9 per 10,000 people; thirty years later in 2001, it had increased to 35 per 10,000 people. During the same period, the number of robberies increased 18-fold (Wong, 2011, 2-3). Sweeping police

¹We note that police in democracies and autocracies alike engage in repressive acts such as targeting minority groups at disproportional rates and violently shutting down collective action by citizens. Our focus on this study is policing in autocracies.

reform in the 1980 and 1990s implemented “Strike Hard” (严打) campaigns to swiftly and brutally crack down on issues like drugs and organized crime, reconfigured policing hierarchy and responsibilities, and popularized a new paradigm of “community policing” (Wong, 2001; Wu, Jiang, et al., 2011). Under the community policing model, tens of thousands of city and county-level police officers across the country were reallocated to neighborhood police stations (派出所), accounting for 83% of the total number of public security officers in China by 2007 (Yin and Zhang, 2007; Wu, Jiang, et al., 2011). Organizationally, more authority and discretion was delegated to frontline officers in neighborhood police stations (Wu and Sun, 2009). In an effort to cultivate an active partnership between police and communities in solving problems, day to day, frontline officers are expected to take part in community affairs such as participating in the neighborhood or village committee to coordinate local community affairs more effectively, patrolling the same areas to establish a stable presence, and hosting open days for community members to come to the station to ask questions and express concerns (Wong, 2001; Chen, 2002; Li and Beckley, 2018).

However, in practice, community-police relations are strained: reports of police violence are on the rise (Scoggins, 2021a) and front-line officers struggle to do their jobs (Scoggins and O’Brien, 2016; Scoggins, 2021c). Although lacking systematic empirical investigation, anecdotal evidence and qualitative data suggest that many Chinese people do not cooperate with their neighborhood police (Wu, Jiang, et al., 2011). Compared to their western counterparts, Chinese police have a massive range of responsibilities and discretionary power that directly impact the lives of ordinary citizens. In Wong (2011)’s comprehensive study of police reform in China, he asserts that police

“are charged with no less than 19 official functions, including maintaining order, investigating crime, supervising prisoners, administrating household registrations, directing traffic, fighting fires, regulating the border, and more. They have comprehensive control over every citizen’s life, from cradle to grave, on the land, in the water, in the air, and at the border. People cannot give birth, live, work, move, visit with relatives, migrate, demonstrate, engage in business, drive, travel abroad, or indeed die without the police being involved in the process. The police are vested with extensive authority in the execution of their legal duties. They have the power to examine a citizen’s resident card. They are authorized to use force, including deadly force, to maintain law and order. They are equipped with lethal weapons, including firearms, and they can interfere with a citizen’s freedom and property rights at will” (299).

Amendments have been made to existing laws and regulations to increase police accountability and supervision in an effort to reduce systemic issues such as placing suspects under extended detention without judicial review or approval, corruption, and issuing inconsistent

administrative penalties.² However, holding police accountable to the law continues to be an uphill battle. A rare survey of over 350 officers at a Chinese police university conducted in 2015 revealed that there exists a pervasive “code of silence” in reporting the misconduct of fellow officers, and that most officers hold lenient attitudes toward the excessive use of force (Wu, Makin, et al., 2018).

In recent years, a litany of high profile police violence events widely discussed on the internet have drawn the public’s attention to police violence and accountability issues.³ In 2016, the case of Lei Yang, a 29 year old, well-educated Beijing man who died mysteriously in police custody, was named the “biggest domestic public opinion incident” of the year by official media outlet *The Global Times*.⁴ In the wake of the incident, Chinese social media platforms were abuzz with anxious and irate netizens asking if they could be the next Lei Yang (Koetse, 2016; Scoggins, 2021b). Other citizen-police interactions gone awry, recorded on video, and disseminated online have contributed to the souring of police-society relations and a pervasive feeling that even the most routine interactions with the police can quickly spiral out of control. For instance, in 2017, a viral video clip of a Shanghai police officer shoving a woman carrying an infant to the ground over a parking violation sparked widespread public condemnation.⁵ In another 2017 case that captured the public’s attention, a man was detained by police after he complained about the cost and quality of hospital food.⁶

In addition to public anxiety over police violence, inconsistent enforcement, and abuse of power, recent studies raise more mundane—but likely more widespread—concerns about the basic competencies of street-level police officers in China. Through interviews with frontline police officers, Scoggins (2021c) finds that local police departments are often underfunded and overwhelmed—many police officers report that they struggle to do their jobs effectively given their heavy caseloads, administrative duties, and lack of training and resources.

²For example, the 1989 Administrative Litigation Law gave residents the right to sue government agencies, including the police; the PRC Police Law 1995 allowed residents to file official complaints with police departments or the people’s procuratorate; the 2007 NPC Supervision Law of the Standing Committee of the People’s Congresses exerted greater police oversight at various levels (Wong, 2011; Scoggins, 2021a).

³Lacking systematic data, it is difficult to quantify the magnitude of such police-society conflict. For a more extensive chronicle of events, see Chapter 6 of Scoggins (2021a).

⁴“Editorial: 2016 was not an easy year—China, are you doing okay? 社评: 2016年大国都不易, 中国你还好吗?,” *Global Times*, December 27, 2016, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJZpTN>.

⁵“Shanghai policeman suspended for slamming woman carrying baby into ground,” *CGTN*, September 2, 2017, https://news.cgtn.com/news/77457a4e32557a6333566d54/share_p.html.

⁶“Chinese police apologise for detaining patient over hospital food,” Sarah Zheng, *South China Morning Post*, August 20, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2107526/chinese-man-detained-complaining-about-hospital-food>.

Though China has made headlines for its massive domestic security budget, it has one of the smaller per capita police forces in the world, and studies indicate that officers at the grassroots face chronic funding shortages (Xie, 2013). The lack of direction from higher-levels of government also gives rise to police incompetence at the grassroots. While response protocols to political crimes are tightly coordinated with higher-level offices, for non-political street crimes—which comprise the vast majority of everyday policing—“decentralized control over the lower levels actually opens up frontline forces to competing interests that sabotage enforcement efforts...[and] discretionary space for street-level agents causes more trouble than it solves” (Scoggins, 2021c, 310).

Even frontline officers themselves recognize their limited capacity: of the 39 frontline officers Scoggins interviewed, only a single officer had faith in his station’s ability to effectively handle workaday street crime like theft. Scoggins (2021c) concludes bluntly: “police who are systematically dissatisfied with their ability to manage everyday crime and fundamentally underprepared to do their jobs simply do not make for good public servants” (324). The implications of an incompetent police presence at the grassroots are vast.⁷ If the police are unable to help citizens with routine problems, those failures can decrease citizens’ feelings of trust and security—not only in the police, but in the larger governing apparatus. To be sure, police violence and incompetence are not mutually exclusive, and are in fact likely reinforcing. Poorly trained police officers are more likely to allow an everyday incident to get out of control and become violent.

In response to escalating police-society conflict, officials at the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and beyond have engaged in a protracted public relations campaign to humanize frontline officers and project a relatable and reliable image of the police force to the people (Scoggins, 2021b). In recent years, these efforts have become more media-savvy and yielded impressive results: one of the longest-running primetime reality shows, *Tan Tan Jiao Tong* (谭谈交通), stars Officer Tan, a good-natured Chengdu traffic cop who stops and educates rule-breakers. The social media following of municipal public security bureaus (e.g. Pingan Beijing 平安北京) on Weibo, China’s Twitter equivalent, numbers in the tens of millions. The central MPS has collaborated with commercial streaming platforms like Youku and iQiyi to promote police image in pop culture. Together, they have produced some of the most commercially successful movies and TV shows in China, such as *Operation Mekong* (湄公

⁷There are other street-level law enforcement agents that are not technically police who might be involved in a conflict, such as the *chengguan* (city administration enforcers) and the *xiejing* (auxiliary officers). Following Scoggins (2021a), we argue the type of agent is of little consequence because the uniforms often look similar and ordinary citizens are likely not to distinguish between particular affiliations.

河行动), one of the highest-grossing domestic movies in 2016, and Day and Night (白夜追凶), a top hit TV show bought by Netflix to distribute to global audiences in 2017. In 2016, Meng Jianzhu, then Secretary of Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission and Politburo member, staged an official audience with the production teams of Operation Mekong and said it “showcases the glorious image of Chinese police officers who are wise, brave, and willing to sacrifice everything for the people’s interests, highlighting the firm stance of the Chinese Party and government in defending the fundamental interests of the people and inspiring patriotic sentiments and national pride among the audience.”⁸ Indeed, Chinese “copaganda” has achieved both political and commercial success in shaping the hearts and minds of the Chinese public.⁹

2.2 Trust and Participation in Community Political Institutions

The activities of community political institutions are closely intertwined with that of the neighborhood police (Read, 2012; Cao et al., 2013; Mittelstaedt, 2022; Chen, 2002). Indeed, the police carry out the objectives of the broader political-economic elite (Davenport et al., 2011, 155) and for many citizens, “police operate as one of the most visible and proximate instantiations of state power” (Soss and Weaver, 2017, 574). In this way, the police act as both a tool of the state, and represent the state itself.

In the Chinese context, neighborhood and village committees are the community political institutions that form the lowest level of government, and represent the juncture at which state meets society.¹⁰ These committees provide their constituents with both administration, such as the distribution of social security benefits, and services, such as implementing neighborhood security watches, adjudicating minor disputes between residents, and repairing public facilities. However, they also play a key role in infiltrating residents’ private lives to gather information and maintain social order (Read, 2012; Tomba, 2014; Audin, 2015; Koss,

⁸“Meng Jianzhu had a discussion with the main creators of the movie Operation Mekong 孟建柱与电影《湄公河行动》主创人员座谈,” People’s Daily CPC News, November 2, 2016, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1102/c64094-28829786.html>.

⁹In the American/western context, such public relations efforts to improve police image by redirecting attention away from news which may convey a negative view of law enforcement are known as “copaganda”—a portmanteau word of “cop” and “propaganda.” e.g. a video of a police departments’ dance off going viral on TikTok redirecting attention away from a case of a white officer killing an unarmed black man.

¹⁰The lowest administrative units in urban areas is the neighborhood/residential community (社区); in rural areas it is the villages (村). These bodies belong to these units: in urban areas, they are called residency or neighborhood committees (居民委员会); in rural areas, they are village committees (村民委员会). We refer to them here as generically as “neighborhood committees” or just “committees.”

2018). Though they are technically elected and legally defined as “autonomous,”¹¹ committees are responsible for implementing state policy—they are the “nerve tips” of a massive, multi-tiered, and administratively complex authoritarian state.¹²

While committees themselves do not play a coercive role, information about residents’ personal and political lives flows freely between the police and neighborhood committees (Tang, 2020; Chen, 2002). Indeed, the neighbor committee “plays a significant role in helping the police keep tight surveillance on the subject population. . . [and] serves as the eyes and ears of the police” (Cao et al., 2013, 320-321). Several qualitative studies based on in-depth fieldwork find a substantive, positive correlation between citizen evaluations of residency committees and attitudes towards local police (Read, 2012; Hu, 2016), and report that police often oversee and participate in neighborhood election committees (Read, 2012; Cao et al., 2013).

Importantly, this close connection between neighborhood governance bodies and the police can also manifest in systematic corruption through which they collude to pursue private—and often illegal—interests. For instance, in one illustrative case in 2013 that drew national and international attention, provincial authorities in Guangdong conducted a drug raid on Boshe village—a tiny hamlet of 14,000 residents on less than a square mile—that produced over a third of China’s methamphetamine supply. Authorities untangled a sordid web of collusion between the drug manufacturers, a dozen local police officers who protected the drug operations, and village party chief, Cai Dongjia, who was labeled the “biggest drug trafficker” in the region and sentenced to death.¹³ For citizens, cases like these highlight the collusion between corrupt local officials and police, and undermine trust and participation in grassroots political institutions. In the case of Boshe village, village committee elections

¹¹1989 Organic Law of Urban Residents’ Committees of the People’s Republic of China (中华人民共和国城市居民委员会组织法): see: <https://npcobserver.com/legislation/urban-residents-committees-organic-law/>.

¹²The residency and village committees we study here are unique to the Chinese context, but the idea of an autocratic regime creating nominally autonomous grassroots organizations to help the state infiltrate local society is not. For example, the Cuban Communist Party has long used neighborhood organizations called Committees for the Defense of the Revolution to keep tabs on residents and enforce the law (Levi, 1988, 65). In Venezuela, neighborhood groups called *colectivos* help the state monitor the population and repress dissent (Torres and Casey, 2017). In Turkey, networks of local headmen established in the Ottoman Empire, function as a link between state and society (Massicard, 2022).

¹³“The Raid on China’s No. 1 Meth Village,” Liz Carter, *Foreign Policy*, January 2, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/02/the-raid-on-chinas-no-1-meth-village/>; “What are the ‘umbrellas’ behind the Icebreaker prototype? 《破冰行动》原型背后有哪些“保护伞”,” *Sina News*, May 20, 2019, <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2019-05-20/doc-ihvhiqay0112504.shtml>.

were once so competitive that different families would physically fight for votes. However, once Cai Dongjia came to power, no one else dared to voluntarily campaign against him, and turnout was dampened.¹⁴

Neighborhood committees, among other local political institutions, have been opened to citizen participation in recent decades. Since the late 1980s, citizens have been able to cast votes to elect their village and neighborhood committee leaders (Jennings, 1997; Schubert and Ahlers, 2012; Duckett and Wang, 2013; Nagao and Kennedy, 2021). In recent years, at the behest of the central government, local governments have created an array of on and offline quasi-democratic institutions such as online “Mayor’s Mailboxes” (Hartford, 2005), public administrative hearings, and notice and comment periods on legislation (Gueorguiev and Malesky, 2019), to solicit and respond to citizen input. The state has allowed and encouraged citizen participation through these sanctioned channels for a number of reasons, including improving the quality of decision making, heading off protest, monitoring the performance of local leaders, and to extract accurate and timely “voluntarily provided information” (Dimitrov, 2015) about everyday grievances and problems of local governance. Though the range of channels through which Chinese citizens can participate politically at the grassroots has widened considerably, these activities still remain highly circumscribed by the state (Cai, 2004; Fu and Distelhorst, 2018). More contentious forms of political activity such as protests, strikes, and petitioning (see O’Brien and Li (2006), Cai (2010), Lee and Zhang (2013), Fu, 2017, among others) remain politically risky.

3 Theory and Hypotheses

Existing studies have shown that physical distance to repressive autocratic institutions can impact citizens’ political attitudes and behaviors. For instance, Bautista et al. (2021) find that residents of counties closer to military bases in Pinochet-era Chile were more exposed to state violence, and, as a result voted against Pinochet’s continuation in power at higher rates. Similarly, in the Indonesian context, Tajima (2013) uses shorter distance to the police to proxy greater exposure to the military and coercive capacity of the state. Building on a prominent strand of literature that suggests that physical signals of authoritarian power often fail to promote attitudes of support, but can produce behavioral compliance (Wedeen, 1999; Huang, 2015; Bush et al., 2016), we argue that even in a context where the state is already extremely pervasive in citizen’s lives through digital and online surveillance, the physical presence of the state still matters. Indeed, in the case of China, recent studies have

¹⁴“Boshe: Clans and Drugs in Super Villages 博社: 超级村庄的宗族与毒品,” Wei Yiping, *Lifeweek*, June 30, 2014, <https://www.lifeweek.com.cn/article/2498>.

shown that the geographic location of a citizen vis a vis the state has been shown to increase self-censorship (Chang and Manion, 2021) and reduce protest (Chang and Wang, 2022).

In our study, we make a key distinction between the predictable, disembodied repressive state that exists in the imaginations of citizens simply through living under an autocratic regime that constantly asserts its omnipresence through surveillance, and the more erratic, on the ground, physical manifestation of the repressive state in the form of neighborhood policing. Central to our theory is the assumption that citizens who live near to police stations are more likely to observe or experience police violence, incompetence, and/or malfeasance—issues endemic to local policing in China (Wong, 2011; Scoggins and O’Brien, 2016; Scoggins, 2021c). We argue that proximity to a police station translates to more frequent interactions with, and observations of, the local police state. Indeed, in a recent study evaluating the efficacy of community policing programs in Uganda, Blair et al. (2021) found that while the programs did not increase citizens’ perceptions of safety or improve their assessments of the police, it did increase the frequency of interactions between civilians and the police. As a result of these interactions, citizens—consciously or subconsciously—update their beliefs accordingly.

Absent actual interaction with the police, citizens’ “opinions of the police are often formed by the mass media’s portrayal of [police] functions” (Lovell, 2001, 101), which, in the case of China, are often glorified official accounts. However, citizen perceptions of the police are complex and multi-dimensional (Stoutland, 2001; Curtice and Behlendorf, 2021). Existing studies conducted in China and elsewhere have shown that while the public may have a quite high overall support for the police as an abstract institution, that support declines significantly when it comes to evaluating known police organizations, practices, or policies (Cox and Falkenberg, 1987; Hurst and Frank, 2000; Wu, Jiang, et al., 2011; Wu and Sun, 2010).

As discussed in the previous section, these positive perceptions are driven, in part, by portrayals of the police in propaganda and popular media as dutiful service providers and crime-fighting heroes. Theoretically then, for citizens who live far from a police station and have little exposure to everyday policing, this highly-curated image is more likely to remain intact. Incidents such as the Lei Yang case then come as a shock to the public because of this baseline (mis)perception. In the media, the cops at fault in these incidents are portrayed as bad apples rather than manifestations of a systemic illness. Lacking actual exposure to the police, this explanation might make sense. However, proximity to police stations give citizens more frequent opportunities to gain insights into how the police operate in real life.

It is not surprising that the reality is less pleasant than the media depicts. Indeed, what a police station symbolizes is not independent from a person’s lived experience—interactions with, and observations of, the police alter people’s perceptions.

In summary, people that live further away from police stations are more likely to have abstract impressions of the police that are informed predominantly by positive propaganda and media portrayals. In contrast, proximity to police stations increases people’s real life interactions with, and observations of, the police force. This both tilts people’s perceptions of the police away from the propagated positive image toward a reality of repression, incompetence, or malfeasance, amplified by the sheer frequency of experiences. For citizens who already have negative priors about the police, the frequent sight of the neighborhood police stations can serve to remind them of the incompetent, coercive, or corrupt side of the state.

We begin our analysis by testing our basic premise that close police presence does not make citizens feel more safe, and may even make them feel less safe. This is an important step, as even in an autocracy, it is not clear that citizens necessarily perceive the presence of nearby coercive institutions as scary or threatening. Whereas some studies show that community policing does not increase citizens’ perceptions of safety (Blair et al., 2021), recent survey evidence shows that some Chinese citizens view a highly pervasive coercive state as safe and reassuring rather than repressive, citing rising public safety concerns amid urbanization, lower expectations regarding privacy and civil liberties, and limited access to information (Kostka, 2018; Cunningham et al., 2020; Su et al., 2022). However, we theorize that given the baseline positive image of police conveyed in official propaganda, citizens that live closer to stations, and therefore have more exposure to the police, will inevitably be disillusioned by a less pleasant reality. We expect proximity to the police to reveal flaws in neighborhood policing such as incompetence, arbitrary or excessive use of force, or corruption that will color citizen perceptions of the police. As a result, living close to a police station will not make citizens feel more safe—and may even make them feel less safe. This leads to our first testable hypothesis:

H0. Living closer to a police station does not make citizens feel more safe.

Next, we want to gauge the impact of proximity to the police on citizens’ level of political trust. The police act as both a tool of the state, and represent the state itself, giving us reason to examine the relationship between proximity to the police and how citizens’ perceive and interact with the state. Political trust is the public’s evaluation of how the government is doing its job in comparison to their expectations of its performance (Stokes,

1962; Miller, 1971; Hetherington, 2005). It is well-established that trust in the police and trust in the state are highly correlated: negative observations of, and interactions with, the police undermine citizens’ feelings of trust and security not only in the police, but also in the larger state apparatus (Tyler, 2004; Bradford et al., 2014; Blair et al., 2021). Observing police repression, malfeasance, or incompetence up close gives citizens a negative impression of the police and, by association, the community political institutions they work with closely, creating a disconnect between expectations and reality. We theorize that ultimately, these factors work to undermine citizen trust in neighborhood governance:

H1. The closer a citizen lives to a police station, the less trust they will have in community political institutions.

As a placebo test, we also test the impact of distance to the police on trust in the central government. Though trust in local government and trust in the central government are correlated, a large literature documents a “trust gap” between high levels of trust in the upper levels of government and comparatively lower trust in lower levels of government (Shi, 2001; Bernstein and Lü, 2000; Li, 2013; Chen, 2017). Here, however, we are explicitly investigating community institutions, and thus do not expect this effect to extend to higher levels of government.

We not only want to gauge the effect of proximity of coercive institutions on citizens’ political attitudes, but also citizens’ political behaviors. We expect that distance to a police station impacts some types of political behavior, but not others. Citizens who live closer to police stations and therefore have more frequent opportunities to observe bad, scary, or inconsistent policing first hand, may believe the police could act arbitrarily—even participating in acceptable, non-contentious political activities could lead to trouble.

Moreover, observing policing up close may give citizens the impression that neighborhood institutions are so dysfunctional, ineffective, or fraudulent that they are not worth participating in. Indeed, many authoritarian states compel political participation as a demonstration of compliance and support, rather than as a form of actual representation (Levitsky and Way, 2002; Magaloni, 2006; Benton, 2016; Nagao and Kennedy, 2021). In the Chinese context, political participation through state-sanctioned channels has been described as “managed” (Cai, 2004). Community governance provides a sanctioned and convenient venue for political participation, however “much of this participation fills government-defined roles that are intended to channel people’s energies into pursuits that serve the state rather than make demands of it” (Read, 2012, 10). Under these conditions, “political participation loses both

its normative and instrumental appeals,” sometimes resulting in what Croke et al. (2016) terms “deliberate disengagement.” This leads to our final set of testable hypotheses:

H2. The closer a citizen lives to a police station, the less likely they will be to participate in sanctioned political activities.

As an additional placebo test, we examine the relationship between distance to the police and contentious political activity. We do not expect a significant relationship between distance to a police station and activities such as protesting or petitioning. Everyone—regardless of whether they live near a police station or not—expects that these types of political behaviors may well be met with repression.

Our theoretical predictions for Hypotheses 1 and 2 are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Theoretical Expectations

		Political Trust		Political Actions	
		H1: Community	Central	H2: Acceptable	Contentious
Distance to Police	Near	Low	No Impact	Low	No Impact
	Far	High		High	

4 Research Design

4.1 Data

The data from this study come from two primary sources: (1) the China Internet Survey, a nationally representative probability sample survey of 3,144 adults in 63 cities across 24 of China’s 31 provincial-level jurisdictions¹⁵ conducted in the summer of 2018, and (2) Chang and Wang (2022)’s State Reach dataset which provides precise geolocation information on the location of state agencies in China.

¹⁵The survey was not conducted in: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Xinjiang, Hainan, Jilin, Hubei, Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan.

4.1.1 2018 China Internet Survey

The respondent location and primary dependent variable data used in this study comes from the China Internet Survey. Importantly, though one of the primary aims of the CIS is to gauge citizens’ online behaviors and preferences, the survey was carried out in-person—not online. The CIS was conducted from July to September 2018 via face-to-face conversations in respondents’ homes with experienced and trained interviewers affiliated with a research center at a major Chinese university. The population of interest consisted of Chinese residents from 18 to 65 years of age. The survey made use of iterative spatial sampling via global positioning system in order to appropriately capture the large numbers of internal migrants who are not officially registered at their place of residence, a major source of bias in other surveys in China (for more information, see Landry and Shen (2005)). A total of 4,686 eligible samples were drawn, yielding a final sample size of 3,144. The response rate was 67.1%. The survey took 44 minutes to complete on average. Participants’ responses were recorded via paper-and-pencil. In order to obtain a representative sample of the working-age Chinese population, survey weights were calculated based on age, gender, and education information from China’s Sixth National Population Census, conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2010.¹⁶

Given pandemic-related restrictions on access and a deteriorating environment for survey research in China in recent years, data from a relatively recent, nationally representative, face-to-face survey is rare.

4.1.2 State Reach Data

The data on the location of police stations come from the State Reach dataset, compiled by Chang and Wang (2022). The authors create a novel operationalization of territorial state reach based on geo-referenced points-of-interest (POI) data related to state agencies provided by A-map (高德地图), a Chinese location-based service company. A-map, owned by Chinese internet conglomerate Alibaba, offers location-based services to major internet companies in China for ride sharing, food and package delivery, and social media. A-map constructs its location database by combining geological surveying, street-level sensing and image processing, crowdsourcing, and user contributions. A-map’s POIs constitute the most competitive mapping service in China in terms of both volume and geographical accuracy.

As Chang and Wang (2022) point out, these data address major challenges with existing measures of “state reach,” namely it is based on firm-produced rather than government-

¹⁶For more information about the China Internet Survey, see: <https://chinainternetsurvey.net/>

produced data and is therefore more reliable, it is up-to-date, it is not tied to any particular administrative level and can therefore be easily aggregated, and it covers all types of state agencies. Importantly, the A-map database is not without limitations. Military institutions (e.g., People’s Liberation Army) and politically sensitive buildings (e.g., “re-education camps” in Xinjiang) are not included.¹⁷

Using these data, we calculate that there were roughly 1.4 million physical state agencies nationwide at the end of 2017 (see Table A1). Of these, 5.6% (79,617) are police stations. In order to ensure that survey respondents are aware of police stations in their neighborhoods, we source the POI data from the end of 2017, roughly 7 months before the CIS survey went into the field.

4.2 Measures

4.2.1 Independent Variable: Distance to Police

The primary independent variable in the study is an individual-level measure of a survey respondent’s proximity to the nearest police station.

To create this measure, we first draw a 10 kilometer buffer zone around the coordinates of each survey respondent. The respondent coordinates are given at the hectare level, i.e., 100m*100m grid.¹⁸ A hectare grid is roughly as large as a neighborhood, giving us enough precision to capture nuanced variation in our respondents’ distance to the nearest police station. Neighborhoods in China are usually gated and have only designated entries (Li, Wan, et al., 2021), so residents in the same neighborhood would have the same exposure to the nearest police station irrespective of which part of the neighborhood they reside in. However, the hectare level is not too precise that our respondents will be put in danger of identification, as a neighborhood can have several building complexes that house hundreds—or even thousands—of people. We then use Chang and Wang’s State Reach data to identify all the police stations¹⁹ within the buffer zone of each respondent. The variable takes the

¹⁷For more information on this dataset, see: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3736763.

¹⁸In each hectare (tertiary sampling unit), the survey implementers choose several buildings. Therefore, some respondents share the same coordinates, indicating that they live in the same 100m*100m grid. Some respondents are from the same building, however no respondents are from the same household. The secondary sampling unit corresponds to 30 seconds of longitude*30 seconds of latitude, equivalent to the size of an urban community or a village committee. The primary sampling unit corresponds to a township level administrative unit.

¹⁹We code all locations under the type of “public safety (公安)” in the dataset as police stations. This include not only various outposts of general police, but also other functional law enforcement organs of

form of the distance to the nearest police station (kilometers). For respondents who do not have a police station within 10 km, we set the value to 10. As the histogram below shows, 75% of respondents in the survey live within 3 km of the nearest police station and 97% live within 10km of a station.²⁰

Figure 2: Histogram of Respondent Distance to Police

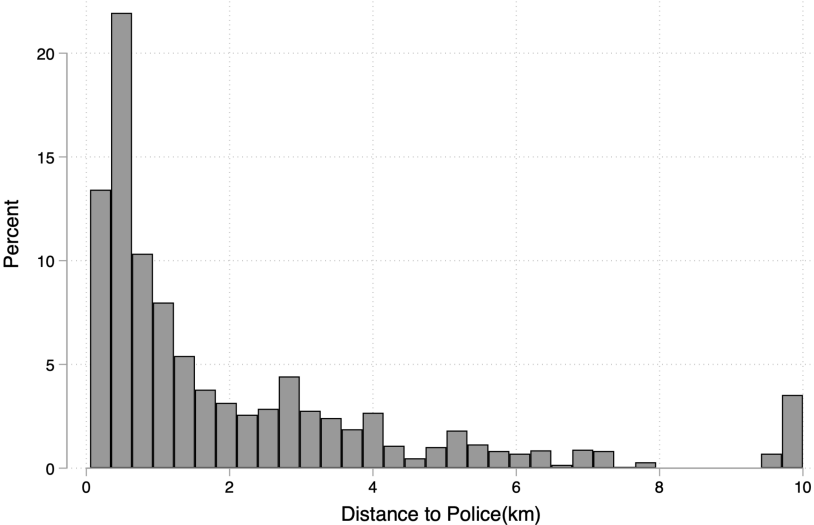
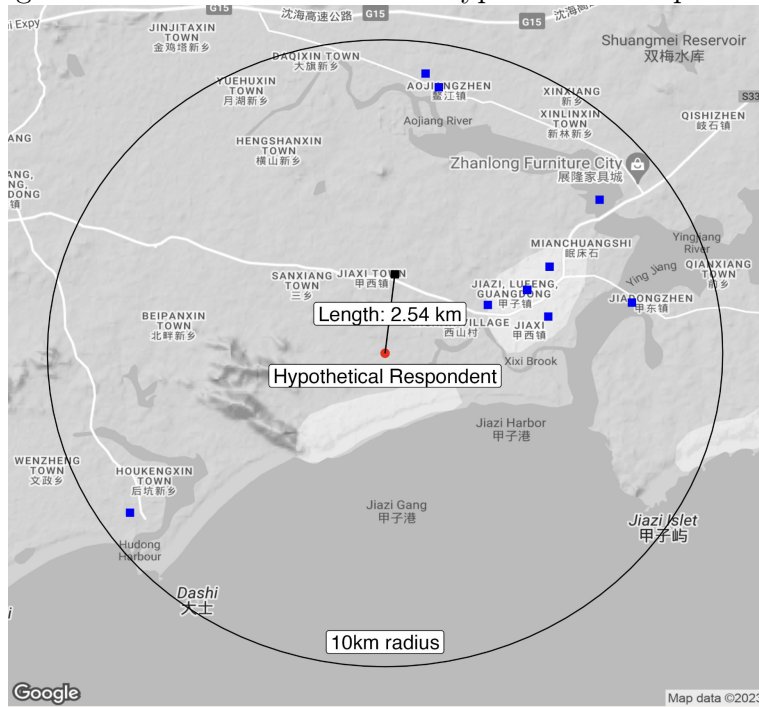


Figure 3 shows an example of all police stations within the 10 km buffer zone of a hypothetical respondent in Boshe Village. The red dot represents the location of the hypothetical respondent. Each square symbolizes a police station, with the black square being the nearest police station to the respondent. The distance between them, 2.54 km in this case, is our variable of interest. The blue squares represent other police stations that are within the 10 km radius.

urban management (城管), transportation, market supervision, etc.

²⁰A potential alternative measure could be the number of police stations around respondents. However, this approach is sensitive to the selection of distance ranges. Choosing a smaller range would result in a higher percentage of respondents having a density of zero, given that 25% of them do not have a police station within a 3 km radius. On the other hand, selecting a larger range would lead to minimal variation among respondents living in the same city, as their buffer zones would overlap significantly.

Figure 3: Police Stations Near a Hypothetical Respondent



4.2.2 Dependent Variables: Safety, Political Trust, and Participation

To test our hypothesis on perceived safety, we use a question that asks respondents how great of a concern safety is in their place of residence on a scale of 0-10.

To test our hypotheses on political trust, we use a series of questions directly asking respondents to indicate how much they trust each level of government—central and neighborhood/village—on a scale of 1-10.

To test our hypotheses on political participation, we use a series of questions that asks respondents whether they have participated or would participate in a number of political actions if faced with a problem such as housing or pollution that required government help. Some of these actions—such as complaining directly to the government—are sanctioned, and often actively encouraged, by local officials. Others—such as protesting and petitioning—can carry significant political risk. Essentially, the more official the venue or intermediary, the more acceptable the action. We also look at responses pertaining specifically to participation in village/neighborhood committee elections. We measure political participation through whether or not the respondent cast a vote in the last election. Note that this question asks directly about voting in the last election, mitigating potential issues with the hypothetical nature of the first set of participation questions.

To test our theory, we divide these political actions into sanctioned and contentious political participation. Sanctioned political participation includes: complaining to the government and voting in the last village or neighborhood committee meeting. Contentious political participation includes protesting and petitioning. More information on the survey and questions we use in our analyses can be found in Appendix 1.

4.2.3 Control Variables

All models include standard demographic controls: sex, age, age-squared, ethnicity, education, income, and marital status. We control for the type of neighborhood (urban or rural) such that distance’s effect is not a result of urban-rural division. We also control for official residence status (urban or rural), communist party membership, and ties outside of mainland China. Finally, we control for whether or not respondents have young children, as we expect that this may increase their personal risk assessment and make them feel more favorably towards a neighborhood police presence.²¹

We include province fixed effects and date fixed effects to control for province-specific unobservables on all dates and date-specific unobservables in all provinces. The smallest sample size in a province is 41, just enough for statistical inference. Date fixed effects are important because news cycles and national events can have impacts on respondents’ responses. Summary statistics for variables used in the analysis are reported in Appendix 3.

4.3 Empirical Strategy

We use ordinary least squares (OLS) to fit the following models with province and date fixed effects to estimate the impact of distance to police on citizens’ perceptions of safety, and political trust and participation (we use trust in community government as an example):

$$CommunityTrust_{tpi} = \theta_1 distancetopolice2017_i + \chi B + \eta_t + \zeta_p + \epsilon_i,$$

where $CommunityTrust_{tpi}$ is the reported trust in community government of respondent i who resides in province p on date t , and $distancetopolice2017$ is the distance between the respondent’s home grid and the nearest police station documented by A-Map in 2017. χ is a vector of control variables discussed in the previous section. η_t and ζ_p are date fixed effects and province fixed effects, respectively.

²¹The survey instrument does not measure this directly. However, an interviewer checklist asks about the presence of others during the interview. We create a dichotomous measure that takes the value of 1 for presence of children under six years old and 0 otherwise.

We use the distance recorded in 2017 to ensure the state presence preceded respondents’ behaviors and perceptions from when they were surveyed in mid-2018. Since every respondent in the same 100*100 m grid level is assigned with the same distance to the nearest police station, standard errors are also clustered at that level to match the treatment level. We note that our empirical strategy relies on selection on observables and fixed effects. To strengthen our causal claim, we address alternative explanations to our findings and conduct several robustness checks in Section 6.

5 Results

Our results provide support for our theorized relationship between a citizen’s distance to a police station and their general feelings of safety, and political attitudes and behaviors. Testing H0 (Table 1), we find that respondents residing nearer to police stations not only do not feel safer, but are in fact more likely to view safety as a serious problem in their area of residence. This demonstrates that, regardless of their prior beliefs, nearby police stations have failed to meet residents’ expectations of performance, lending support to our mechanism of proximity leading to increased exposure to police incompetence, repression, or malfeasance.

Table 1: Safety Concerns and Distance to Police

	(1)
	Safety Concerns
Distance to Police(km)	-0.056* (0.024)
Constant	4.192* (0.631)
Province FE	Yes
Date FE	Yes
Controls	Yes
Observations	3007
R-squared	0.277

Standard errors clustered around 100m*100m grids.

* $p < 0.05$

Testing H1, Table 2 shows how the distance to the nearest police station impacts citizen trust in government. Living nearer to police stations does not impact trust in the central

government. However, as expected, respondents living closer to police stations have significantly lower trust in community governments, such as village and neighborhood committees. Substantively, approaching police stations by 10 km on average lowers the trust score by 1.2 points in an eleven-point range (0-10).

These results lend support to the validity of our measures, and are supported by a large literature that finds a “trust gap” between central and local governments, where most Chinese have comparatively very high levels of trust in the central government (Shi, 2001; *Asia Barometer Survey 2002–2011*; Chen, 2017). The effect is illustrated in Figure 4 which plots the predicted values of trust in both central and community governments at different distances to the nearest police station, holding other variables at their mean. Trust in the central government does not change with distance from police stations while trust in community governments becomes much lower as the respondent lives closer to police stations.

Table 2: Political Trust and Distance to Police

	(1)	(2)
	Trust Central Govt	Trust Grassroots Govt
Distance to Police(km)	0.020 (0.020)	0.119* (0.032)
Province FE	Yes	Yes
Date FE	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes
Observations	2912	2822
R-squared	0.257	0.262

Standard errors clustered around 100m*100m grids.

* $p < 0.05$

Table 3 shows that respondents living closer to a police station participate in fewer acceptable political actions but there is no evidence of such impact on unacceptable actions. Substantively, approaching police stations by 10 km on average decreases the probability to complain to governments and to vote in community elections by 20% and 14%, respectively. Meanwhile, there is no significant impact from distance from the police station on petitioning or protesting.

Following our theoretical expectations, these results are not significant as citizens do not

Figure 4: Predicted Probabilities of Political Trust

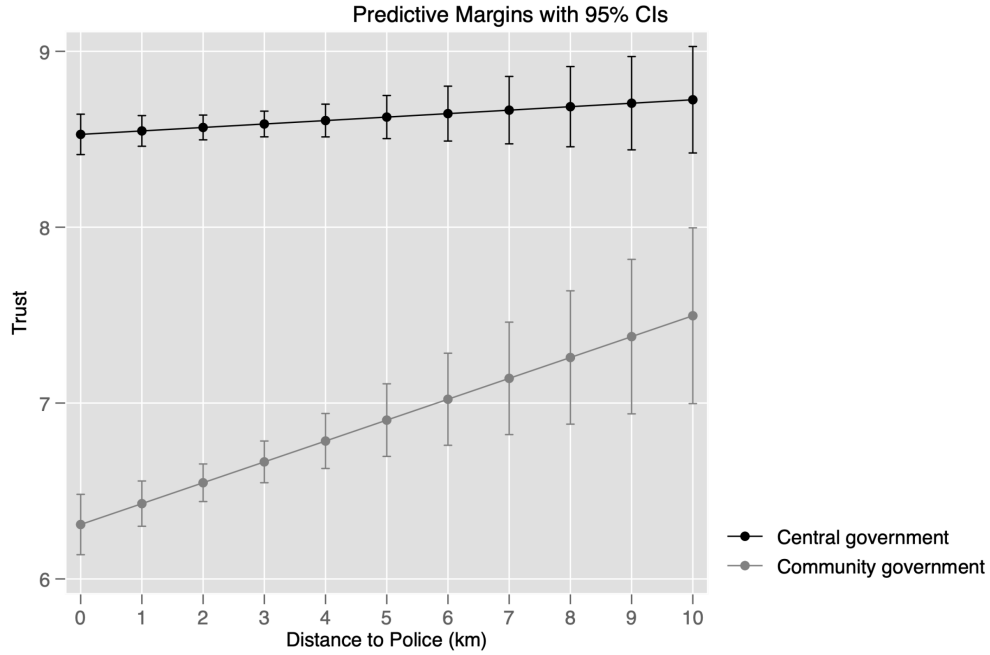


Table 3: Political Participation and Distance to Police

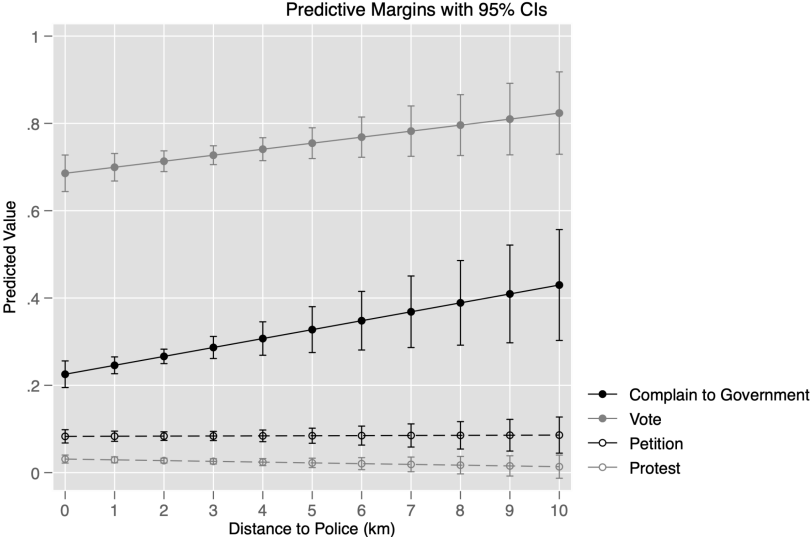
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Complain to Govt	Voted	Petition	Protest
Distance to Police(km)	0.020*	0.014*	0.000	-0.002
	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.003)	(0.002)
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Date FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2787	1523	2868	2926
R-squared	0.220	0.230	0.187	0.127

Standard errors clustered around 100m*100m grids.

* $p < 0.05$

need to observe coercive institutions to understand that these activities may well face retribution from the local state. These contrasting effects are exemplified in Figure 5, which plots the predicted probability of all four political actions at different distances to the nearest police station, holding other variables at their mean. The black and gray solid lines show the probabilities of complaining to the government and voting in the last community election decrease as the respondent lives closer to police stations. The black and gray dashed lines show the probabilities of petitioning and protesting are flat at different distances from police stations.

Figure 5: Predicted Probabilities of Political Participation



6 Robustness Checks

Lacking a real or natural experiment to alleviate threats to inference, our analysis above relies on selection on observables. In this section we address several alternative explanations and conduct robustness checks to strengthen our causal claim.

6.1 Reverse Causality

It may be that the locations of police stations are not randomly assigned: proximity to police is not causing lower levels of trust and participation, but rather, police stations are being built in neighborhoods where the state perceives citizens have subversive political attitudes and behaviors. We find limited evidence of this sort of preemptive planning in our dataset given that most demographic controls are insignificant in predicting distance to police stations. The only demographics that could predict the placement of police stations is urban

residency and ties abroad, when controlling for provincial fixed-effects (Table A3(1)). Characteristics that are often suspected to be subversive such as non-Han ethnicity, non-CCP members, and high levels of education do not significantly correlate with the distance to police stations. If we look only at within-city variations (Table A3(2)), ties abroad is no longer correlated with proximity to police stations. Note that we are not asserting that there is *no* intentional placement of police stations anywhere. However, our survey data indicates that strategic placement is unlikely to be the driving force behind our results, otherwise we would have found positive correlations between demographics perceived as subversive and proximity to police stations.

Our empirical strategy includes several steps that mitigates remaining concerns. First, we measure the distance to coercive institutions that were established at least six months prior to the start of the survey to mechanically exclude the possibility that our survey results impacted these institutions' locations. Second, these responses are private information that is systematically collected only by the face-to-face survey. Therefore, it is very unlikely that this information would be observable to the government in any way. That is to say, it is not possible that government officials could build or relocate police stations based on the information in the survey regarding respondents' political attitudes and behaviors. Finally, while it is possible that the government can infer citizen attitudes from observable traits, controlling for an extensive array of demographic variables observable to the state—such as ethnicity, education, and party membership—addresses this concern.

Although the state can only use observable demographics to allocate police stations, respondents, knowing their private preferences, might self-select into areas close to police stations, leading to pre-treatment attitudinal and behavioral differences. However, we would expect citizens who trust the government more to choose to live closer to police stations, but we find the opposite relationship. Therefore, even if there is self-selection in respondents' distance from police stations, we expect it to bias against our results. The proximity to police stations would have to over-compensate for this bias, suggesting that our findings would be even stronger if this potential self-selection exists.

6.2 Non-Linearity

A further consideration is that the relationship between distance to police and citizens' political attitudes and behaviors may be non-linear. Perhaps police work harder to maintain good community relations and lower crime rates in the neighborhoods immediately adjacent to police stations, resulting in higher levels of trust among these residents. To be sure, it would reflect negatively on the police if the areas immediately adjacent to their stations had

high crime rates. This would result in an in a U-shaped curve, as trust is high at the shortest distances, decrease at medium distances where police were less invested in doing a good job but citizens still had significant exposure, and then increased again as distances grew farther away and citizens had less exposure.

Alternatively, it could be the case that citizens living in the immediate vicinity of police stations are less likely to participate in sanctioned activities such as complaining to the government or voting due to fear of retaliation. This would result in an inverted-U shaped curve as the citizens living nearest to the police would participate less, citizens at medium distances who were exposed to the police but are less fearful of immediate retaliation would complain more, and as distances continued to increase, citizens would both care less and be less exposed to the police and therefore be less likely to participate.

In Appendix 5, we show the results to these tests. By adding a quadratic term of distance to the regression, we explore distance’s non-linear relation to dependent variables. With the exception of complaining to the government, there is little evidence of a non-linear relationship between distance to police and citizen’s attitudes and behaviors. We do find evidence of an inverted-U relationship between distance and complaining to the government such that police stations’ impact is not monotonic (Table A.4(3)). Respondents who reside within a medium distance of the nearest police station complain the most to the government (vertex at 6 km), while those residing in the immediate vicinity of the police and those residing the furthest from the police complain less (Figure A.1).

6.3 Alternative Model Specifications

One concern is that our chosen measures of political participation may not adequately represent the general concepts of acceptable and unacceptable actions. To address this concern, we test alternative measures of these concepts. Specifically, we regress attending public hearings and non-voting electoral activities (e.g., attending meetings introducing candidates, persuading others to attend meetings or vote, reporting election issues to the relevant government department) on the distance to police stations and find significant results in the same direction as other acceptable actions (Table A5(1-2)). For unacceptable actions, we use alternative measures such as posting complaints online and complaining to an NGO or media outlet (Table A5(3-4)) and find that living closer to police stations has no significant impact.

It is reasonable to anticipate certain correlations in the nature of police-citizen interactions within a province. In Table A8, we conducted a regression analysis of political participation with province-level clustering, and obtain the same result as with grid-level clustering.

6.4 Coercive State Institutions vs. Non-Coercive State Institutions

Another concern is that it may not be distance to a coercive institution that is driving our results, but rather, distance to state agencies in general. It is possible that the state institutions cluster in certain locations such that distances to different types of state institutions are highly correlated. If this is the case, our results may be picking up the effects of other state institutions on citizen trust and participation. For example, citizens may observe incompetence or corruption of civil servants and officials while residing near government buildings. Exposure to these “ugly truths” could undermine citizen trust and participation in neighborhood governance. Alternatively, some unobservable traits of respondents may impact both living distance to state institutions and their political behaviors. For instance, people living near state institutions may be more connected to the state such that they have backdoor channels to voice concerns to the government, rendering political participation unnecessary.

To address these concerns, we control for an alternative independent variable: distance to nearest grassroots government and institutions. This designation includes institutions such as village committee offices that provide services to residents (e.g. Chang village committee in Gaocheng’s Lianzhou town 藁城市廉州镇常家庄村民委员会), local employment offices and finance bureaus (e.g. Hengjie neighborhood committee employment station 横街居委会就业服务站), and town halls (e.g. Xiazhuang town service hall 夏庄镇便民服务大厅). In Tables A6 and A7, our results show that even after controlling for the distance to the nearest community government and institutions, living closer to police stations still significantly correlates with less sanctioned political participation and lower trust in community governments, while proximity to non-coercive government institutions is insignificant. Therefore, we have confidence that our results are not driven by any state presence, but coercive state presence in particular.

6.5 Self-Censorship

Finally, we recognize concerns of bias in survey research in authoritarian contexts, especially with regard to questions about political attitudes and behaviors. To be sure, interpreting survey results in China has been the subject of much scholarly debate (see Li (2021) for an overview). Some studies suggest that survey measures are inflated (Li, 2013; Li, 2021) or biased (Ratigan and Rabin, 2020), while others argue that measurement error resulting from political fear is much smaller than commonly assumed (Lei and Lu, 2017; Stockmann et al., 2018; Shen and Truex, 2021).

Furthermore, following existing literature (Shen and Truex, 2021; Su et al., 2022), we build

a self-censorship index based on item non-response rate to address this concern. This proxy is imperfect, but it captures the frequency with which respondents choose “I don’t know” or “I prefer not to respond” to politically sensitive questions, with higher non-response rates indicating that respondents are self-censoring. The index considers the non-response rate to four sensitive questions about political participation (posting about the problem online; signing petitions; participating in protests and demonstrations; and complaining directly to local congress representatives, media/press, social and political organizations).

We replicate our analyses adding the self-censorship as a control variable. Table A8 shows that even accounting for self-censorship, our results of acceptable actions remain significant. The fact that our self-censorship measure significantly increases some of the sanctioned participation suggests the validity of the proxy.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, we use data from a nationally-representative, probability sample survey and highly precise, geo-referenced information on the location of police stations to examine the relationship between a citizen’s distance from a police station and their feelings of safety, and levels of political trust and participation in community political institutions. We find compelling evidence that citizens who live closer to a police station do not have increased feelings of general safety, and in fact perceive safety to be a more serious issue in their neighborhoods. In terms of political attitudes and behaviors, citizens living nearer to the police have lower levels of trust in community political institutions, however their trust in the central government is unharmed. Furthermore, living near a police station dampens citizen participation in community political affairs through sanctioned channels such as voting in neighborhood elections and complaining to the government through official platforms. There is no effect on citizens’ likelihood of participating in more contentious political actions such as protesting and petitioning.

These findings have several interesting implications. First, it is notable that even in a context where state presence is already extremely pervasive through “invisible” digital surveillance technologies (Frantz, Kendall-Taylor, and Wright, 2020; Xu, 2020), physical state presence still matters. With the virtual omnipresence of digital surveillance of citizens’ on and offline behaviors, Chinese citizens are generally aware of an intrusive state presence in their private lives (Su et al., 2022)—it is unclear whether a physical coercive institution located nearby would have any impact at all. Our findings support existing studies that suggest that physical signals of authoritarian power impact citizen attitudes and behavior—and though they

often fail to promote attitudes of support for the state, they can produce behavioral compliance (Wedeen, 1999; Huang, 2015; Bush et al., 2016). Our findings that physical police stations have negative effects on citizen feelings of safety and political trust, and dampen sanctioned political activity lends support for autocrats to invest more in digital surveillance and policing technologies that are less observable. The interactions and tradeoffs between human/physical repressive institutions and digital surveillance are promising avenues for future research.

Second, our results to the trust hypotheses indicate that while proximity to police does not impact citizen trust in the central state, center-led propaganda efforts to portray the police as part of a “safe state” cannot overcome the day-to-day reality citizens face on the ground. In fact, the closer citizens are to the physical police state, the less trusting of the local state they become. More explicit investigations of the connection between exposure to police, police propaganda, and citizen attitudes and behaviors are another interesting direction for further research.

Finally, the central government needs voluntarily provided information about its agents, and agents need information about their performance. Much of the rationale behind opening up political participation at the grassroots is to generate sufficient information on local policy preferences and feedback on local official performance, so that autocrats at higher-levels can improve policy efficiency and raise citizens’ satisfaction with their rule. Citizen participation channels also serve to incorporate citizens into local policy administration and co-opt them into existing authoritarian institutions that buttress the regime (Jayasuriya and Rodan, 2007; He and Warren, 2011; Truex, 2017). Our findings indicate that citizens proximate to police stations abstain from airing their grievances through these channels. As a result, local and higher-level governments may be losing out on opportunities to gather important information about citizen opinions, preferences, and grievances. The failure of these mechanisms at the grassroots could create an information chokepoint, creating a widening rift between upper-level officials and the everyday concerns and grievances of ordinary citizens.

Incompetence, corruption, and repression by grassroots police is eroding citizen trust and participation in the community political institutions. The number of coercive institutions across the country is growing—based on Chang and Wang’s data, between 2016 and 2018, the number of police stations increased from 81,946 to 97,280. In 2023, the Ministry of Public Security released the “Three-Year Action Plan for Strengthening the Work of Public Security Police Stations in the New Era (2023-2025),” to significantly increase the deploy-

ment of officers into residential communities and “promote the downward shift of the center of gravity” to the community level “through three years of unremitting efforts.”²² However, the center’s campaign to double down on the physical presence of police in local lives may further exacerbate the trust deficit and information capture at the grassroots. Indeed, as the physical presence of the coercive state continues to grow, it may further exacerbate the alienation of citizens from the system.

²²The Ministry of Public Security issued the "Three-Year Action Plan for Strengthening the Work of Public Security Police Stations in the New Era (2023-2025)" 公安部印发《加强新时代公安派出所工作三年行动计划（2023-2025年）》，March 28, 2023, see: http://www.chinapeace.gov.cn/chinapeace/c100007/2023-03/28/content_12644601.shtml.

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Appendix 1: Exact Survey Wording for Main Analysis

H0: How serious do you think the following issues are in your place of residence? 0 indicates that in your place of residence there is no problem about this issue while 10 indicates that in your place of residence the problem of this issue is very serious. Please pick the number from 1-10 that represents your attitude. (Issue: Safety)

请问您所居住的区县是否存在以下方面的问题，0 代表这方面在您居住的地区没有问题，10 代表这方面在您所居住的地区问题非常严重，请您在0 到10 之间选择一个数字代表您的态度。(社会治安)

H1: To what extent do you trust the following institutions? Responses: 0–10, with 0= not at all, 10= strongly trust. (Central government, village committee/residential committee)

您在多大程度上信任下列机构？0=非常不信任，10=非常信任。(中央政府，村/居委会)

H2: Facing problems like housing reform or environmental pollution that require government help, have you or would you participate in the following activities? (Complain directly to the government, sign a petition, protest/demonstrate)

面对诸如住房改革，环境污染，和其他需要找政府帮忙的问题，您是否参加过/会参加以下活动？(直接向政府或有关部门反映过意见，请愿书上签过名，集体游行，静坐)

Have you ever voted in the village/residency committee election in your current living area?

您在目前所在的村/居委会选举中投过票吗？

Appendix 2: Descriptive Statistics for A-Map Database

Table A1: Distribution of State Agencies in 2017

Category	Description	Count	Percent
Government and Admin Services	Functional depts (e.g. labor, education), fire department, traffic safety	1,176,918	82.77
Public Safety	Police and public safety stations	79,617	5.60
Other Coercive	Stability maintenance offices	67,860	2.68
Legal	Courts, procuratorates, notary	56,368	3.96
Fiscal	Industrial and commercial regulation, tax offices	71,016	4.99
Total		1,422,059	100

Appendix 3: Summary Statistics

Table A2: Summary Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Education	3139	3.05	1.72	1	9
Age	3144	46.31	13.86	18	65
Age squared	3144	2337.09	1210.01	324	4225
Marital status	3144	0.83	0.37	0	1
Urban hukou	3138	0.33	0.47	0	1
Relative income	3118	2.08	0.55	1	4
Urban	3144	0.74	0.44	0	1
Gender	3144	0.49	0.5	0	1
Ties abroad	3142	0.06	0.24	0	1
Han ethnicity	3103	0.9	0.3	0	1
CCP membership	3104	0.05	0.22	0	1
Children under 6	3144	0.07	0.26	0	1
Public hearing	2910	0.32	0.47	0	1
Complain to govt	2880	0.27	0.44	0	1
Join offline groups	3013	0.05	0.21	0	1
Voted	1570	0.72	0.45	0	1
Electoral participation	1567	0.05	0.14	0	1
Trust central govt	2964	7.31	2.47	0	10
Trust community govt	2928	6.58	2.7	0	10
Distance to police (km)	3144	2.11	2.36	0.05	10
Distance to govt (km)	3144	1.81	2.19	0.02	10

Appendix 4: Reverse Causality

Table A3: Determinants of Distance to Police

	(1)	(2)
	Distance to Police(km)	Distance to Police(km)
Education background	-0.018 (0.032)	-0.024 (0.020)
Age	0.019 (0.018)	-0.008 (0.012)
Agesq	-0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Marital status	-0.163 (0.122)	0.025 (0.103)
Urban hukou	-1.330* (0.152)	-0.204* (0.094)
Relative income	-0.035 (0.074)	-0.006 (0.045)
Urban	-1.264* (0.201)	-1.464* (0.174)
Gender	-0.005 (0.065)	0.047 (0.042)
Ties abroad	-0.368* (0.137)	0.040 (0.107)
Ethnicity	-0.453 (0.309)	-0.060 (0.142)
CCP member	0.056 (0.131)	0.108 (0.096)
Child under 6	0.011 (0.140)	0.168 (0.092)
Self-censor index	0.102 (0.103)	0.012 (0.055)
Constant	3.426* (0.566)	3.412* (0.332)
Province FE	Yes	
City FE		Yes
Controls		
Observations	3029	3029
R-squared	0.337	0.694

Standard errors clustered around 100m*100m grids.

* $p < 0.05$

Appendix 5: Non-Linearity

Figure 6: Non-Linear Relationship between Distance to Police and Complaining to Government

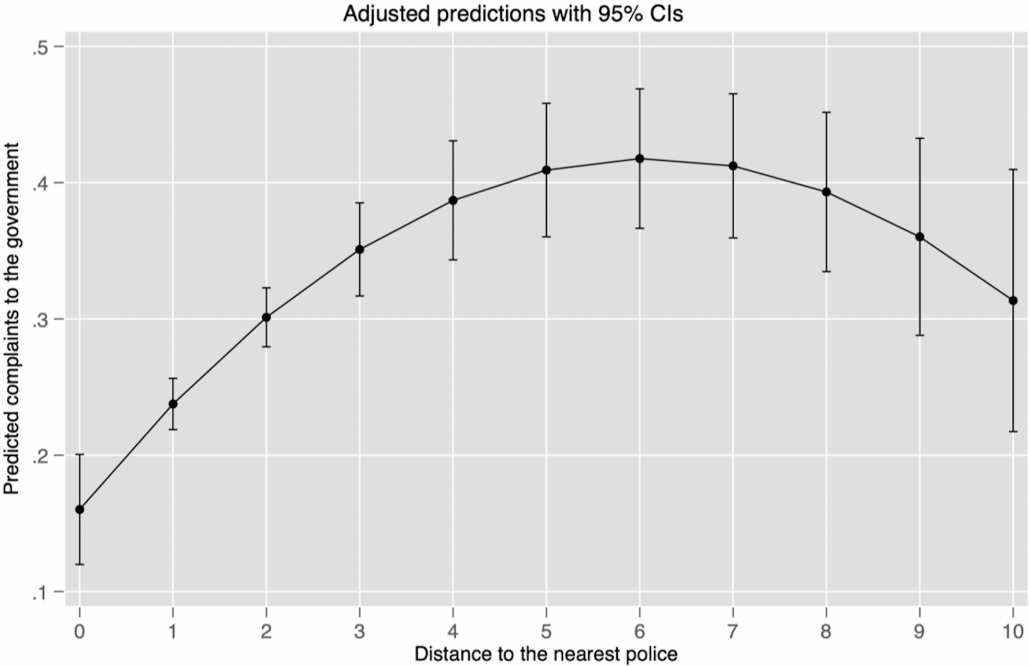


Table A4: Non-Linear Model Using Distance Squared

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Security Concern	Trust Comm Govt	Complain to Govt	Voted	Petition	Protest
Distance to Police(km)	-0.051 (0.080)	-0.086 (0.105)	0.084 (0.016)	0.007 (0.022)	0.017 (0.010)	0.003 (0.006)
Distance-squared	-0.000 (0.008)	0.022 (0.011)	-0.007 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Province FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Date FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	3007	2822	2787	1523	2868	2926
R-squared	0.277	0.264	0.226	0.230	0.188	0.127

Notes: Significant results at $p < 0.05$ bolded. Standard errors clustered around 100m*100m grids.

Appendix 6: Alternative Model Specifications

Table A5: Alternative Measures of Political Participation

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Public Hearing	Electoral Particip.	Post Online	Complain to Other
Distance to Police(km)	0.011*	0.003*	-0.001	0.002
	(0.005)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Date FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2809	1522	2920	2843
R-squared	0.189	0.235	0.165	0.122

Standard errors clustered around 100m*100m grids.

* $p < 0.05$

Table A6: Political Participation and Province-level Clustering

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Complain to Government	Voted	Petition	Protest
Distance to Police(km)	0.020*	0.014*	0.000	-0.002
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.003)	(0.001)
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Date FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2787	1523	2868	2926
R-squared	0.220	0.230	0.187	0.127

Standard errors clustered around provinces

* $p < 0.05$

Appendix 7: Non-coercive Government Institutions Robustness Check

Table A7: Political Trust and Distance to Non-Coercive Govt Institution

	(1)	(2)
	Trust Central Govt	Trust Community Govt
Distance to Police(km)	0.009 (0.023)	0.135* (0.034)
Distance to Government(km)	0.033 (0.028)	-0.055 (0.039)
Province FE	Yes	Yes
Date FE	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes
Observations	2912	2822
R-squared	0.258	0.263

Standard errors clustered around 100m*100m grids.

* $p < 0.05$

Table A8: Political Participation and Distance to Non-Coercive Govt Institution

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Complain to Government	Voted	Petition	Protest
Distance to Police(km)	0.019* (0.008)	0.008 (0.007)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.001)
Distance to Government(km)	0.004 (0.006)	0.019* (0.009)	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.001)
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Date FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2787	1523	2868	2926
R-squared	0.220	0.234	0.188	0.127

Standard errors clustered around 100m*100m grids.

* $p < 0.05$

Appendix 8: Self-Censorship Robustness Check

Table A9: Self-Censorship Index and Acceptable Actions

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Public Hearing	Complain to Govt	Voted	Electoral Particip.	Trust Comm Govt
Distance to Police(km)	0.012* (0.005)	0.021* (0.008)	0.014* (0.007)	0.003* (0.002)	0.119* (0.032)
Self-censor Index	0.057* (0.018)	0.148* (0.031)	0.009 (0.020)	-0.001 (0.006)	0.001 (0.083)
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Date FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2809	2787	1523	1522	2822
R-squared	0.192	0.229	0.230	0.235	0.262

Standard errors clustered around 100m*100m grids.

* $p < 0.05$