

Volunteerism and Democratic Learning in an Authoritarian State

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Abstract: Extant literature on civic participation in Western democracies demonstrates a linear relationship between increased civic participation and a stronger democracy. In general, the scholarly debate revolves around the precise causal mechanisms for this relationship: holding government accountable; citizens learning 'democratic skills', such as collective mobilization and advocacy; and, building social capital and trust to overcome the dilemma of collective action. Given the rapidly increasing volunteerism in China, this study tests these theories in an authoritarian setting using evidence from the 2020 Civic

Participation in China Survey. The study finds that volunteers in China do learn ‘citizen skills’; however, these differ from those learned by volunteers in democracies. Foremost, while volunteering allows for authoritarian citizens to learn and differentiate channels most appropriate for addressing specific social problems, they generally do not try to directly hold their government accountable for poor performance. Additionally, the study finds limited support that volunteers are seeking to develop trust in other citizens, contra evidence from Western democracies. Finally, the results suggest that volunteers are participating as a means to send signals to the state that they are emerging local community leaders. These findings have important implications for increasing civic participation in authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: civic participation, state-led versus citizen-led volunteerism, authoritarianism, China

Introduction

China has experienced a dramatic increase in citizen-led volunteerism in the last decade. The number of people registered to volunteer in the nation grew from approximately 100 million in 2015 to 169 million in 2019.¹ This unprecedented growth has catalyzed debates over the implications of citizen-led, civic participation.

Most literature on civic participation originate in Western democracies, and demonstrate a linear relationship between increased civic participation and a stronger democracy.² In general, the scholarly debate revolves around the precise causal mechanisms for this relationship: holding government accountable; citizens learning ‘democratic skills’, such as collective mobilization

and advocacy; and, building social capital and trust to overcome the dilemma of collective action.³

This relationship observed in Western democracies has led many to suggest that building civil society and increasing volunteerism can bring about democratic change in authoritarian polities.⁴ Increasing controls on civil society and civic activity in (semi-)authoritarian regimes since the 2000s serve as evidence that non-democratic leaders believe in, and are fearful of, the link between civic participation and democracy.⁵

Nevertheless, new findings suggest that while civic participation in authoritarian states does facilitate some aspects of democratic learning, the ‘citizen skills’ may differ from those learned in Western democracies.⁶ As citizens in authoritarian states volunteer, they do not necessarily hold the government accountable; instead they learn skills that can further consolidate regime control such as joining patronage networks.⁷

In order to test these expectations for the outcomes of civic participation, the study uses an original survey, the 2020 Civic Participation in China Survey (CPCS), which poses a number of salient questions about volunteerism and the role of civic participation, including who is the best actor to address social problems in different contexts. The study analyzes these results using various statistical techniques to compare volunteers from the rest of the population. The findings suggest that volunteers learn certain ‘citizen skills’, as they are able to differentiate channels most appropriate for addressing varying issues. However, it does not find that volunteers are more likely to directly hold the government accountable for societal problems. In addition, the study further finds limited support that volunteers are seeking to develop trust in other citizens. Rather, the results are suggestive that volunteers are participating as a means to send signals that they are emerging local community leaders.

Framework

Civic Participation and Volunteerism in Democracies

The importance of volunteering and civic participation to healthy democracies has been well established; thus, given space constraints, the main arguments are briefly outlined before examining in more detail recent empirical support.

The classic conception looking at the relationship between civic participation and democratic learning commences with Alexis de Tocqueville. He argued that volunteering in civil society teaches citizens the skills necessary to organize, and if need be, hold their government accountable.⁸ Similarly, as Lipset argues, civic participation should be understood as a prerequisite for democracy:

More important than electoral rules in encouraging a stable [democratic] system is a strong civil society – the presence of a myriad of mediating institutions, including groups, media, and networks, that operate independently between individuals and the state.⁹

He further contends that civic participation occurs in organized groups that must

legitimate themselves by encouraging the rights of other groups to oppose them, thus providing a basis for democracy. Through these conflicts and their differing ideologies, these groups form an alternative to the state and its control of society.¹⁰

Additionally, Putnam's understanding of social capital both contributes to and expands on this argument.¹¹ Like Tocqueville, Putnam argues that civic participation is of paramount importance to democracies. He goes further in positing that social trust is the mechanism through

which civic participation contributes to healthy democracies. For example, when volunteering, individuals form relationships with people who they may not have previously interacted.

Through this exposure to new perspectives, a general social trust is created that allows communities to overcome collective action dilemmas.¹² Democracies benefit from this diffuse social trust, as it facilitates the articulation of collective social goals and enables society to meet them. Embedded in these arguments is the notion that participation builds skills and community for democratic citizens to overcome collective action problems; to advocate for interests; and when necessary, hold the state accountable.

Contemporary research in democratic societies provides empirical support for these premises. For example, in Canada, researchers found that a mandated volunteering program for high school students increased students' civic engagement and future volunteering levels, as long as the experience was perceived as positive.¹³ Furthermore, the longer students volunteered, the higher level of civic engagement, post-graduation. Similarly, a later study found that high-quality volunteering experiences contributed to students' sense of social responsibility and desire to further volunteer.¹⁴ Initial volunteer experiences built the skills that allowed students to continue to participate civically.

Additionally, a study involving youth volunteers in Australia supports Putnam's findings regarding social capital. In that, the students felt that their service experiences exposed them to new people and situations that they would otherwise be unfamiliar with.¹⁵ They indicated that their experiences created a long-term motivation to continue their involvement in the civic (and political) sector. This linkage is further supported by research in Scandinavian countries, where volunteering and civic engagement levels have remained at remarkably high levels since the

1990s, and have a long-standing historical relationship between civil society and political institutions.¹⁶

Extending these results to democratizing regimes, Letki explored the applicability of Tocqueville and Putnam's to the post-communist Eastern European bloc.¹⁷ She found mixed results: specifically, participation in voluntary associations, versus professional or labour organizations, made citizens twice as likely to engage in political participation. However, interpersonal trust was only weakly correlated with participation. Thus, these findings might suggest only limited transferability of these theories to a democratizing context, such as skill building versus trust forming.

Civic Participation and Volunteerism in Non-Democracies

While evidence in favour of the link between civic participation and democracy is strong in contexts that are already democratic, studies looking at this relationship in non-democratic polities are more mixed. In Russia, research found that corporate volunteering triggered subsequent volunteering and charity giving.¹⁸ This was the result of employees becoming more aware of social issues, and more trusting of society. The spillover effect from corporate volunteering suggests civic participation does result in more active citizens trying to help solve problems, and leads to an increase in social trust. Similarly, research in Turkey suggested a positive relationship between volunteer engagement and 'citizen skills'. Through participating in civil society organizations (CSOs), volunteers felt that they gained self-confidence, became more aware of social problems, more tolerant of differences, and felt more satisfied and content in their lives.¹⁹ However, although the number of CSOs and civic engagement have increased, promoted social capital and active citizenship, there is little evidence that this has improved

Turkey's democracy rating.²⁰ Instead, Yabanci finds that CSOs can be useful tools to co-opt emerging youth leaders. When youths voluntarily participate in these organizations, they join the regime's vast clientelist network and have access to networking opportunities, occupational and/or scholarship opportunities.

Thus, despite some limited evidence of the transferability of civic participation outcomes, the majority of studies suggest a varying relationship between volunteering and civic engagement – one that highlights the importance of government structure and context in influencing the outcomes of volunteering.²¹ When analyzing Western democracies' promotion efforts to cultivate civic engagement levels and a stronger civil society in the Middle East, studies find little evidence to support this relationship.²² Jamal contends that these divergent outcomes are due to the different political context. Namely, despite funds directed towards improving social capital, the “polarized and state-centralized contexts of the West Bank and Morocco – and associational interaction within these contexts – override other key trust and democratic inducements.”²³ Jamal's finding that regime type is key in understanding the relationship between social trust created by civic participation and outcomes, like democratization, was further supported by research looking at Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen and Lebanon.²⁴ Additionally, public opinion data from the Qatari World Values Survey suggests that voluntary civic participation does not necessarily result in social trust or democratic skill-building. In fact, those who participated were least tolerant of others and least confident in formal governmental institutions.²⁵ Interestingly, civic participation for these citizens helped secure greater connections and access to resources. Researchers posited that civil society did not serve as a pre-requisite of democracy, but as a mechanism to legitimize the regime; citizens in Qatar are neither learning about ways to hold their government accountable nor building social

capital as proposed by Putnam and Tocqueville, but instead participating as a means to an instrumental end.

Although volunteers in democracies might also seek instrumental ends, in authoritarian regimes, scholars find that civic engagement has become a venue of access to material benefits distributed by authoritarian rulers.²⁶ Those that were most likely to engage in civic participation were those seeking access to **clientelist patronage** networks and the most likely to believe in the existing social order. For example, in Malaysia, members of the urban middle class have emerged as leaders in civil society and become a “power resource” for the regime to nurture emerging pro-government leaders.²⁷ Instead of promoting democratization, civic participation might give autocrats more control over emerging leaders in civil society.

In summary, theories suggesting the relationship between civic participation and its democratizing potential have received mixed empirical support in non-democratic or democratizing states. Several studies find that instead of serving as a catalyst for democratic values, volunteers and civil society help autocratic regimes understand emerging societal needs and recognize emerging elites.

The Evolution of Civic Participation in China

The rise of volunteerism in China amidst a strengthening of the authoritarian state creates an interesting case in which to test the theoretical foundations laid forth by Putnam and Tocqueville. After the reform and opening-up of 1978, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) selectively promoted charities and volunteer organizations, and allowed citizens the relative freedom to voluntarily contribute their labour.²⁸ In more recent years, the Chinese government has explicitly supported models of civic engagement to increasingly engage the public sphere. In 2007, the CCP introduced a new framework for social management, specifically promoting public

participation and civic engagement.²⁹ This type of civic engagement has been growing rapidly since the mid-2000s, until there were 265 million adult Chinese volunteers by 2018, a number that comprises 25.5 percent of the adult population in China.³⁰

Similar to other authoritarian regimes, the CCP promoted volunteerism efforts as a tool to “strengthen the state’s ideological hegemony, implement innovative social management for social stability, and facilitate the rule of the CCP and party building for its long-term rule.”³¹ While the state tends to directly manage large-scale volunteering events, like the 2008 Beijing Olympics, national-level control structures are duplicated in lower levels of government and are similarly implemented through smaller projects. Many provinces operate “provincial volunteer centers” to assign volunteers to different organizations and projects, as do universities. **This type of state-led volunteerism mediates the process such that volunteers are not necessarily selecting groups or projects based on their own interests, but instead being assigned volunteer experiences.**

Additionally, the Communist Youth League (CYL) operates as a major conduit for government-organized volunteering, especially through its regulation of university students’ associational life. If students want to establish organizations or commence community activities they must obtain CYL approval.³² This is a form of a corporatism model³³ in that the CCP can connect with a wider swath of society through youth volunteering. Since implementing an official volunteer registration system in 2001, the CYL’s Young Volunteers Operation has enlisted over 40 million volunteers.³⁴ Among the CCP’s various goals in promoting volunteering, volunteerism can be widely seen as a means of social management.³⁵ Social management allows the CCP to identify pressing issues and solve them with the help of volunteers³⁶, effectively enhancing social harmony by regulating citizens’ thoughts and behaviour. **As a result, the kind of civic engagement that stems from state-led volunteerism likely serves as a tool for the CCP to**

maintain its power, rather than building ‘citizen skills’ or social trust.³⁷ In fact, studies have indicated that volunteers mobilized by the CCP are dissatisfied with the top-down state volunteering projects: they often felt that their work was conducted formalistically, or in some cases, merely for photo-ops.³⁸ Instead, volunteers sought more meaningful experiences, suggesting the limited transferability of Putnam’s social capital hypothesis **in the context of state-led volunteering.**

Nonetheless, research on civic engagement in China finds that Putnam’s social capital hypothesis still hold limited traction, in that volunteers indicated increased levels of social trust and satisfaction as a result of civic engagement. However, the ‘democratic skill building’ and the subsequent “holding the government accountable” hypotheses, do not receive support in the extant literature. Instead, similar to the evidence from other authoritarian regimes, civic engagement seems to benefit the state more than challenge it. In that, volunteers help solve social problems and more importantly help the CCP identify and co-opt emerging social leaders. For example, in one study individuals who indicated high levels of sociopolitical control³⁹ at the outset, were the ones most to civically engage.⁴⁰

Based on this theoretical background from democracies and authoritarian states, the study tests the argument that volunteers will develop the ‘citizens skills’ that allow them to differentiate appropriate channels to solve issues. It examines whether volunteers will stop short of trying to hold the government accountable, especially during situations of poor performance in resolving these issues. Additionally, it posits volunteers will develop social trust in other citizens. Finally, the study looks at whether citizens will develop the authoritarian skill of signaling to the regime that they are emerging leaders ready to join political networks.

Methodology

Survey

The individual-level data for this study was extracted from the 2020 Civic Participation in China Survey (CPCS), administered online by the authors. CPCS 2020 ($N=4,999$; conducted December 2019 to February 2020) is the second iteration of the survey, following CPCS 2018. It utilizes stratified, random sampling techniques, and surveys six urban centers in mainland China: Beijing, Changsha, Chuzhou, Kunming, Shanghai, and Wuhan. These urban areas span China's regional spectrum, and vary between small to large cities in terms of both population size and GDP.

IP addresses served as unique identifiers to ensure the same individual was not taking the survey more than once, reduced the potential for clustering amongst individuals and, promoted a stratified, online sampling methodology. Although there are concerns about using online surveys, such as the ability to have representative samples, many scholars argue that web-based surveys can be as reliable as face-to-face surveys, and might help collect information otherwise inaccessible in an authoritarian context (see Simmons and Bobo 2015).

Validity was determined based on completeness, meaning that invalid surveys left one or more required questions incomplete. It should be acknowledged that this standard, survey administration practice has the small potential to add bias in the results.

Due to potential sampling variances between CPCS 2020 and the national profile of urban residents – as elucidated in the National Bureau of Statistics of China's 2018 Statistical Yearbook – models not reported here were tested with both weighted and unweighted demographic variables. There were no significant variations in the findings pertaining to the analysis presented in this article.

The survey captured respondent's attitudes toward, and experiences with, volunteering and charitable giving (state-led and citizen-initiated), as well as their understanding of which channels should be used to solve different social problems.

Of the valid responses, 50.8 percent were female and the most common age group were 30-39 years old (28.3 percent). 86.5 percent of respondents were not members of the Communist Party, and more than two-thirds of respondents (67.3 percent) had exposure to tertiary education (that is, they completed or in the process of undertaking an undergraduate degree). Additionally, 64.6 percent are currently employed full-time, 14.8 percent are currently students, and 20.6 percent reported other employment statuses, including part-time, retired, or unemployed. The most common type of employment is in the domestic private sector (48.9 percent), followed by freelance work (15.7 percent) and state-owned enterprises (15.3 percent). The most frequent personal income category amongst respondents (43.1 percent) was 5,000-9,999 RMB per month (770-1,540 USD); and household income category (31.0 percent) was 10,000-14,999 RMB per month (1,540-2,310 USD). Overall, the demographic composition suggests that the sample is slightly younger and better educated than the general population – consistent with other online survey results in China. For the purpose of examining the influence of volunteering, this population is more likely to have these experiences. This sample thus allows one to generalize to younger, educated, urban Chinese.

Hypotheses, Measures, and Models

Based on extant literature, the expectation is that as citizens volunteer, they build social trust and develop 'citizen skills', including seeking to hold the government accountable when needed. However, the literature from authoritarian regimes suggests that while citizens build social trust,

the ‘citizen skills’ developed are the ones promoted by the state, such as joining patronage networks. Therefore, authoritarian regimes might use volunteering to identify and co-opt emerging elites, rather than citizens holding the government accountable.

The difference in the two literatures is addressed by dividing the first hypothesis into two levels: first, simply learning how social problems are addressed; and second, using that knowledge to exert pressure on the government to resolve the problem. Volunteers might learn more about how different parts of the government address a specific issue, like the environment, by volunteering, but not necessarily use that information to advocate for change in an authoritarian environment that would discourage such advocacy. The third hypothesis offers another ‘citizen skill’ that emerges from the literature on volunteerism in authoritarian regimes, namely that these skills might diverge from those learned by volunteering in democracies. In authoritarian regimes with more control over the economy and civil service, volunteering might be a way for youth to signal to the regime to be included in these clientelist patronage networks. The hypotheses are formally stated as follows:

Hypothesis 1a: volunteers develop the ‘citizen skill’ of learning to navigate the government to resolve specific problems.

Hypothesis 1b: volunteers develop the ‘citizen skill’ of holding the government accountable for poor performance in resolving specific problems.

Hypothesis 2: volunteers develop social trust in other citizens.

Hypothesis 3: volunteers develop the ‘citizen skill’ of signaling to join patronage networks.

For the explanatory variable, volunteering is measured as both a dichotomous choice and by intensity, and find that almost 67 percent of the sample have volunteered, and that 56 percent are spending at least one to two hours per month volunteering. Further, more than 14 percent spend upwards of 6 hours per month volunteering. Additionally, roughly equal participation through both channels is found – state-led student organizations and government organizations, and citizen-organized international organizations and NGOs. State-led volunteering is done through state- or party-organized groups, and is mediated by campus or provincial volunteering centers to match prospective volunteers with these organizations. In contrast, citizen-led volunteering is done through groups organized by concerned citizens, and requires the volunteer to identify and apply for the volunteer opportunity directly.

As the main test for the hypotheses, survey respondents were asked to select the most useful channel for resolving seven different social problems: (1) natural disasters, (2) pollution, (3) climate change, (4) income inequality, (5) “left-behind” children, (6) local political corruption, and (7) insufficient school infrastructure. Given that many individuals first volunteer when they perceive a problem in their communities, and the study has an analytical interest in examining ‘citizen skills’ such as advocacy and accountability, this question was phrased in the survey around solving issues that are prominently discussed as problems or challenges in China.

Respondents could choose among the following options for solving for each problem: (1) family and personal networks, (2) government, (3) private companies, (3) social organizations, (4) courts, (5) online promotional activities and media, and (6) protests and demonstrations.

As the dependent variable was a categorical variable with more than two response options, multinomial regression modeling was utilized to explore the probability of respondents selecting different options. As expected in an authoritarian regime, the most frequent answer choice for all types of social problems was option 2, government. Therefore, the multinomial regression model sets government as the base response option, and then estimates the odds that a respondent would select a different answer than government. This model allows us to calculate the odds ratio that volunteers would select an option other than government for each distinct social issue to illustrate potential variation influenced by volunteering; which is evidence for citizen learning. The control variables included gender, age, city (weighted), Communist Party membership, level of education (weighted), employment status, and household income.

Results and Findings

With the exception of “left-behind” children (39 percent), on all other issues half to two-thirds of respondents selected government to resolve problems. Given this overwhelming preference for government (see Appendix Table 2), the pattern of the odds that a volunteer would select an option other than government, as a way to distinguish any other effects of volunteering, is analyzed next.

Table 1 shows how respondents who volunteer answered this question, compared to all other respondents. When interpreting these models, a positive coefficient indicates a respondent who volunteers is more likely to select the specified channel than government, compared to non-volunteers; the negative coefficient indicates a respondent who is less likely to select the specified channel than government, compared to somebody who does not volunteer. An odds

ratio greater than one means that the outcome is more likely to occur, and can be translated into a percentage likelihood.

The multinomial regression analysis suggests a process of civic learning (‘citizen skills’) is occurring, in that volunteers differentiate varying channels depending on issue. For instance, when examining respondents who volunteer across the seven social problems, they are 75 percent less likely to select “protests and demonstrations” or “online promotional activities and media” over the base response of government, and are 15 percent more likely to select “family and personal networks” than government, compared to all other respondents.

How respondents answered this question based on whether they volunteered or not is also examined. This is conducted by comparing which options respondents who volunteered ($N=3,343$) selected for solving social problems, relative to respondents who did not volunteer ($N=1,656$). Controlling for gender, age, city, Communist Party membership, level of education, employment status, and household income, there was not a statistically significant difference in how respondents who volunteered answered this question compared to those who did not.

**** TABLE 1 AROUND HERE ****

As seen in Table 2, respondents selected “social organizations”, and then “private companies”, as the best channels to deal with income inequality, they selected the “legal system” and then “private companies” as better channels to resolve climate change. Although government was the first choice, the frequency does range by issue, with 61.2 percent of the sample selecting this for “income inequality”, but only 38.5 percent selecting it for “left-behind children”. The mean frequency of selecting government was 52.3 percent, showing that depending on the issue,

respondents thought others might also be able to help resolve these issues. For example, for “left-behind children” the second choice was social organizations at 26 percent.

**** TABLE 2 AROUND HERE ****

These results support hypothesis 1a in that the variation by issue shows learning regarding where government performs relatively better. Volunteers seem to have learned that the government has not been able to resolve the issue of “left-behind” children, and that social organizations are better positioned to help in this area.

As a robustness check, how respondents who volunteered answered two additional survey questions about social issues were tested. Respondents were promoted to answer “yes” or “no” to the following questions:

Do you think the government is providing enough assistance to people in need (Question 32)?

Should social organizations play a role in providing assistance to people in need (Question 33)?

As the dependent variable was a binary variable, difference-in-means testing was used to analyze responses (see Appendix Table 3). Participation in volunteer activities did significantly impact how respondents answered both of these questions. Overall, respondents who volunteered were more likely to agree with both statements: that government support is sufficient, and that social organizations should help. For example, only 58.8 percent of non-volunteers agreed that government support was sufficient, while 67.8 percent of volunteers agreed. However, the

difference was smaller for responses to whether social organizations should assist. Overall, 97.3 percent of respondents agreed with this statement, and the difference between volunteers and non-volunteers was only 0.011.

Logistic regression modeling confirmed these findings in probabilistic terms.⁴¹ Respondents who volunteered were 1.599 times (60 percent) more likely to agree that the government provides sufficient help to disadvantaged groups when the city variable was weighted ($p < 0.001$). With the education variable weighted, respondents who volunteered were 1.466 times (47 percent) more likely to agree with this statement ($p < 0.001$). Respondents who volunteered were also 1.771 times (77 percent) more likely to agree that social organizations are required to assist disadvantaged groups, with a weighted city variable ($p < 0.001$). They were 1.309 times as likely, or 31 percent more likely, to agree with this statement when the education variable was weighted ($p = 0.001$).

Thus, the data does not find support for hypothesis 1b. That is, volunteers seem to learn ‘citizen skills’ to differentiate appropriate actors across issue areas, and that social organizations may play a role in assisting the state in certain areas; however, volunteers are less likely to hold the government to account for these problems than non-volunteers.

**** TABLE 3 AROUND HERE ****

Regarding the creation of social trust, the findings mirror similar findings on social trust for volunteers in other authoritarian states such as Russia.⁴² Although the study does not have a direct measure of social trust before and after the volunteer experience, there is limited support when examining the motivation of volunteers (see Appendix Table 4). Seemingly, most

volunteers are motivated to participate to increase social trust: a plurality of respondents ranked “have fun” first (40.5 percent), and ranked “make friends” second (31.0 percent). The second motivation to volunteer relates to increasing and signalling one’s social status (e.g. resume building, or supervisor request); and, the third motivation was civic in nature (help others or your nation). This shows limited support for hypothesis 2 that volunteers in an authoritarian setting desire gaining social trust, although the study cannot directly measure if they then build this trust by volunteering.

Interestingly, when analyzing which type of volunteer selects “protests and demonstrations” as an appropriate channel for dealing with a social issue, those volunteering to resolve social issues are more likely to think that protests are a viable channel than other types of volunteers (see Table 3). ‘Social trust’ volunteers only select protests as a viable channel for one choice (school infrastructure), and ‘social status’ volunteers selected this for two choices (natural disasters and “left-behind” children). However, ‘citizen skill’ volunteers selected protests as a viable channel for all four issues, although only two of these are statistically significant. This provides some limited evidence for hypothesis 1b that volunteers seeking ‘citizen skills’ to solve social issues are more willing to hold government accountable via protests and demonstrations. This level of citizen skill-building appears reserved for those that volunteer due to civic motivations, like solving community problems or helping their nation, and not for the rest of the volunteers. Thus, the interaction of motivation and volunteering seem to be driving this outcome.

**** TABLE 4 AROUND HERE ****

Correspondingly, while the study is unable to say if volunteering met respondent's expectations, the models using motivation as the independent variable produce statistically significant results in how respondents answered the dependent variable. Significantly, those who volunteered for 'citizen skills' or 'social status' reasons were more likely to select a variety of channels other than the government response, which may indicate that they are better able to differentiate as a result of their volunteering experience. By contrast, those who volunteered for social trust reasons (have fun and make friends) were less likely to move away from the government response option. Put differently, the results reported in Table 4 show limited support for hypothesis 3 "signaling", in that the second motivation was to demonstrate social leadership skills.

**** TABLE 5 AROUND HERE ****

To further explore this idea, an analysis of whether the type of volunteer experience mattered was conducted, by dividing volunteering channels into state-led and citizen-led. According to the authoritarian literature, one would expect that volunteers using state-led channels would be trying to build closer ties to the state. As illustrated in Table 5, those who signed up to volunteer through state-led methods were less likely to select government as their top choice for the dependent variable. This finding is the opposite of what one would expect if someone were trying to signal through state-led volunteering channels. Prevailing studies have found that volunteers who sign up for state-led experiences complain that these are not "authentic" and are mostly "photo-ops", which might explain this counterintuitive finding.⁴³ Therefore, there is some limited support for hypothesis 3, but those signals appear to be lost – at least on the part of the

‘social status’ seeking cohort – if the volunteering experience is not meaningful and “authentic”.

This suggests that the experience of volunteering itself matters to outcomes, and that state-led volunteering must focus on allowing volunteers to choose their own experiences and to ensure that these experiences feel authentic and meaningful.

Implications and Conclusion

The study supports the hypothesis that volunteers develop the ‘citizen skill’ of learning to navigate the government to resolve specific problems. In an authoritarian context such as China, citizens expect the government to take the lead on most social issues, but they seemingly recognize that the government may not be able to solve all social problems, and there is a role for social organizations to assist. Furthermore, the analysis does not find evidence that volunteers are more likely to develop the ‘citizen skill’ of holding the government accountable for poor performance in resolving specific problems. However, the study does find that a specific type of volunteer who is looking to solve social problems is more likely to be willing to protest in order to hold the government accountable. Additionally, volunteers were willing to protest regarding select issues (e.g. school infrastructure, “left-behind” children), suggesting that certain social problems have the potential to galvanize civic mobilization if not adequately addressed.

The implications of the findings are mixed. From a theory-building standpoint, citizen-led volunteerism does improve governance outcomes and strengthen authoritarian regimes through social trust regardless of regime type – democratic or authoritarian. Moreover, civic participation does teach political skills, but the regime type matters for which skills are taught and stressed. In the case of China, increasing civic participation is not a threat to the regime as imagined by leaders after the Arab Spring, but is instead beneficial in helping to solve social problems and

improve governance; and further, in identifying and recruiting civic leaders, and elite cohesion activities. Put differently, the findings suggest that civic participation does facilitate learning on the part of citizens and states. However, these lessons differ from democracies in that participation provides less social trust, less interest in holding the state accountable, and more use of volunteering for instrumental means such as signaling leadership skills to the regime.

In addition to volunteer motivations, it is apparent that the type of volunteering experience matters. As volunteers participate through state-led volunteer organizations, if the experience is not a meaningful, authentic one, volunteers tend to have more negative views about the state than those participating through private channels, like INGOs or domestic NGOs. This implies that as the state attempts to increase social management by channeling volunteers into state projects and organizations, these attempts are likely to fail unless the state-led projects and organizations invest in delivering positive and authentic volunteer experiences. In fact, the very nature of state-led volunteering often leads to more ritualistic and less authentic volunteer experiences, and thus, authoritarian governments should create more space for civil society groups focused on social problems rather than restrictions. As the data analysis shows, civic participation through volunteering does not challenge state legitimacy, but enhances it while also creating social trust and a more knowledgeable citizenry.

Notes

1. Ministry of Civil Affairs, "Social Service Development Report."
2. Tocqueville et al., *Democracy in America*; Verba et al., "Voice and Equality."
3. Putnam, "Bowling Alone"; Putnam et al., "Making Democracy Work."
4. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*.

5. Diamond, "Towards Democratic Consolidation."
6. Hsu et al., "The Construction and Performance of Citizenship in Contemporary China";
Hasmath et al. "Performance Legitimacy and COVID-19."
7. Patronage networks in this context means the networks that political, economic, and social power flow through in authoritarian regimes.
8. Tocqueville et al., *Democracy in America*
9. Lipset, "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited", 12.
10. Ibid., 13.
11. Putnam, "Bowling Alone"; Putnam et al., "Making Democracy Work."
12. Boix and Posner, "Making Social Capital Work."
13. Brown et al., "The Impact of High School Mandatory Community Service Programs on Subsequent Volunteering and Civic Engagement."
14. Gallant et al., "Civic Engagement Through Mandatory Community Service."
15. Webber, "Volunteering among Australian Adolescents."
16. Henriksen et al., *Civic Engagement in Scandinavia*.
17. Letki, "Socialization for Participation?"
18. Krasnopolskaya et al., "The Relationship Between Corporate Volunteering and Employee Civic Engagement Outside the Workplace in Russia."
19. Cakmakh, "Active Citizenship in Turkey."
20. Yabanci, "Turkey's Tamed Civil Society."
21. Ciftci and Bernick, "Utilitarian and Modern"; Gengler et al., "Civic Life and Democratic Citizenship in Qatar"; Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*; Hustinx et al., "Student Volunteering

in China and Canada.”

22. Hawthorne, “Middle Eastern Democracy.”
23. Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*.
24. Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World*.
25. Gengler et al., “Civic Life and Democratic Citizenship in Qatar.”
26. Ciftci and Bernick, “Utilitarian and Modern.”
27. Giersdorf and Croissant, “Civil Society and Competitive Authoritarianism in Malaysia.”
28. Hu, “Making the State’s Volunteers in Contemporary China”; Yang et al., “Alienation of Civic Engagement in China?”
29. Hu, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All.”
30. Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, “2018 Survey on Volunteer Service Participation in China”.
31. Hu, “Making the State’s Volunteers in Contemporary China.”
32. Spires, “Chinese Youth and Alternative Narratives of Volunteering.”
33. Hsu and Hasmath, *The Chinese Corporatist State*.
34. Xi, “China’s Volunteers Face Challenges.”
35. Hu, “Making the State’s Volunteers in Contemporary China.”
36. Hsu et al., “NGO Strategies in an Authoritarian Context, and their Implications for Citizenship.”
37. Yang et al. “Alienation of Civic Engagement in China?”
38. Spires, “Chinese Youth and Alternative Narratives of Volunteering.”

39. Socio-political control is measured along two dimensions: leadership competence and policy control.
40. Chan and Mak, “Empowerment for Civic Engagement and Well-Being in Emerging Adulthood.”
41. The control variables for the logistic regression modeling included gender, age, city, Communist Party membership, level of education, employment status, and household income. The models were run with both weighted and unweighted city and education variables.
42. Krasnopolskaya et al., “The Relationship Between Corporate Volunteering and Employee Civic Engagement Outside the Workplace in Russia.”
43. Spires, “Chinese Youth and Alternative Narratives of Volunteering.”

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