Transparency for Authoritarian Stability: Open Government Information and Contention with Institutions in China

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May 6, 2025

Abstract

Conventional wisdom holds that authoritarian states bear the cost to social stability for information disclosure. This study investigates the effect of an increasingly common transparency initiative in authoritarian countries─open government information (OGI). Through publishing policy information, OGI allows citizens to identify illegal government behavior. Drawing from the Chinese case, I theorize that while such policy transparency reveals whether governments violate laws, it encourages the use of institutional dispute resolution channels. It redirects popular discontent from the streets to institutions, fostering rather than threatening social stability in autocracies. Using online and in-the-field survey experiments about OGI on land-taking compensation, I show that policy transparency improves citizens' preference for legal and political institutions and causes them to prioritize institutions over protest when they have grievances against the government. Multiple findings about the mechanisms suggest that policy information provides evidence, which increases citizens' perceived fairness of institutions in resolving their specific cases.

Keywords: transparency, protest, dispute resolution, authoritarian politics, China

1 Introduction

Governments are reluctant to disclose information that may harm their reputation. Although the doctrine of transparent government is widely accepted today, democracies are more likely to actually develop transparency than autocracies, probably due to greater political competition and electoral accountability.[1] Authoritarian governments, on the other hand, frequently conceal or censor information in order to maintain social stability.

However, a number of authoritarian countries have adopted transparency initiatives that inform citizens when and how governments violate laws and policies. Such initiatives are outlined in acts called Open Government Information (OGI), which require governments to disclose their policies and implementation procedures. I refer to such initiatives as "policy transparency." When a government or official violates the laws during interactions with citizens, policy transparency allows citizens to identify the illegal government behavior. Until 2009, fourteen non-democratic countries, including China, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, and Turkey, had passed OGI laws.[2] In the 2010s, Russia and the United Arab Emirates, which maintain restrictive press laws and frequently repress government critics, joined this group. While the specific practices vary, most of these countries have established a complete legal framework along with a technological system to publicize a wide range of government information.

Illegal government behavior during the implementation of policies is a primary cause of protest in authoritarian countries. Local governments or other regime agents may violate the policies when performing various actions, such as taking land, distributing goods, monitoring pollution, and managing public health crises, resulting in citizen grievances. By comparing the disclosed policy and government behavior, citizens can learn whether governments violate the law.

Take China as an example. It censors and manipulates information in order to reduce protests.[3]

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[1]Andreula, Chong, and Guillen 2009; Djankov et al. 2010; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018; Berliner 2014.

[2]Data from Berliner 2014. Similar regulations are known as the Right to Information, Access to Information, or Freedom of Information in various countries. These laws stipulate both proactive and reactive disclosure of government information (McDonald 2006). This study focuses on proactive transparency, which is relatively new but understudied in developing countries.

[3]King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Huang 2018.

Meanwhile, it discloses policy information that uncovers illegal local government behaviors. China's OGI Regulation has been in effect since the early 2000s, which requires all levels of governments to publish specific policies on projects through community bulletin boards, websites, and media accounts. For example, when a local government or a politically connected developer expropriates a citizen's land, OGI requires the government to publish specific policies about the land-taking areas, procedures, and compensation standards. As a result, the citizen can determine, for instance, whether the compensation offered by the government follows the legal standard.

Why does an authoritarian regime, while being sensitive to negative government images, inform citizens whether government agencies break the law during their disputes with citizens? Does such policy transparency threaten or foster regime stability? In democracies, policy transparency solves the principal-agent problem between voters and the government[4] and becomes a tool of party competition.[5] However, its function and effect in authoritarian countries that lack electoral accountability are understudied. The literature on various types of transparency suggests that they may increase mass threats. For example, the transparency of macroeconomic statistics increases protests in autocracies[6], media freedom is used to trade some social order for better agent behavior,[7] and fiscal information allows citizens to pull the fire alarm about official corruption through contentious politics.[8] The few existing studies on OGI's impact in autocracies rely on descriptive analyses and predominantly focus on citizens' requests for information. They show that OGI encourages political participation and cultivates activism.[9]

This paper examines an important but overlooked effect of the recently popular policy transparency initiative in authoritarian countries: when citizens have grievances against the government, exposure to policy information may increase their interactions with legal or political institutions and *reduce* the likelihood of protest. To the grieved citizens, policy transparency presents an image of law-breaking government, but it also sends a positive signal that, with the legal evi-

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[4]See Prat (2006) for a survey of this literature.
[5]Berliner and Erlich 2015; Berliner et al. 2020.
[6]Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018.
[7]Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; Lorentzen 2014.
[8]Stromseth, Malesky, and Gueorguiev 2017.
[9]Distelhorst 2017; Kim et al. 2022.

dence, the institutions will be on their side. Furthermore, in autocracies, citizens may lack trust in institutions to address their grievances because institutions can easily collude with the government in the absence of policy information. Consequently, protest has become a more effective, albeit costly, weapon for citizens.[10] Because policy provides evidence of illegal government behavior, which makes the collusion more difficult, citizens will be more confident that the institutions can handle their cases fairly. Therefore, policy transparency encourages citizens to channel and re- solve their grievances through institutions, which leads to fewer protests.

I test the theory using survey experiments with a large national sample of netizens and an orig- inal in-the-field sample of underprivileged rural residents, who are the most common targets of land expropriation. The experiments ask participants to consider a hypothetical situation in which a local land-taking project offers a compensation rate that is lower than the market price. A treat- ment group is randomly assigned to read an actual OGI document that explicitly outlines the com- pensation standard, which shows that the government did not follow the policy. The outcome questions focus on two main institutional channels for dispute resolution in China: administrative litigation (legal) and administrative review (political), asking participants to report their intentions of using institutions and their preference for institutions over protest to resolve the dispute.

The OGI document significantly increases the participants' intentions to use legal and political institutions and to prioritize them over protest. Additional analyses show that policy information increases trust in the fairness of legal and political institutions to support citizens' claims and im- proves their confidence in using the institutions. Although the answers from participants in the field are noisier due to their low verbal skills, the results for the legal institution hold, whereas those for the political institution are unclear.

I check a series of alternative explanations and show that the treatment effects are not driven by (1) senses of better government type stemming from the gesture of transparency, (2) biased responses due to the fear of political sanctions, or (3) respondents failing to take into account the real-world institutional costs. Moreover, I show with observational data that citizens' actual

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[10]O'Brien and Li 2006; Chen 2012.

protests are negatively correlated with local government transparency, which echoes the experimental findings.

This study explores an increasingly common yet understudied type of transparency in autocracies. It complements the rising literature on OGI in developing countries that focuses on citizen requests for policy information.[11] It also challenges the conventional wisdom of authoritarian transparency that features an unavoidable tradeoff between checking elites and managing mass threats, as disclosing more information about political agencies improves agent-supervision but risks generating citizens' activism.[12] This paper shows that, directed by policy transparency, such activism can become institutional and peaceful. This ultimately reduces rather than increases mass threats.

Furthermore, existing literature on the functions of authoritarian transparency is dominated by the theories of (1) checking agents or (2) improving governance, yet the actions of individual citizens, who are the direct audience of public information, are largely overlooked.[13] By directly testing policy transparency and citizens' dispute resolution channels, this paper fills the gap and proposes a new mechanism of transparency in authoritarian contexts: grievance redirection. This mechanism differs from the two dominating groups of theories in the literature, suggesting additional functions of transparency.

Finally, this study adds to the discussion of authoritarian contentious politics. Existing theories contend that citizens can use laws and policies to legitimize their contentions against local governments and seek redress from higher-level leadership.[14] I take a further step, showing that policy transparency encourages resistance against local government most strongly within institutions, which is not disruptive or violent. In addition, studies on Chinese politics demonstrate that the regime controls protests through various strategies other than direct repression, including re-

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[11]Distelhorst 2017; Kim et al. 2022; Berliner et al. 2020.

[12]For example, Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; Lorentzen 2014; Stromseth, Malesky, and Gueorguiev 2017; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018; Kim et al. 2022.

[13]A few exceptions are Distelhorst 2017; Kim et al. 2022; Stromseth, Malesky, and Gueorguiev 2017.

[14]O'Brien and Li 2006; Chen 2012.

sponsive concession,[15] co-optation and persuasion,[16] and hiring informal repression agents.[17] This study identifies policy transparency as a more developed instrument for maintaining stability.

2   A Theory of Grievance Redirection

Authoritarian leaders face a tradeoff between managing agents and preventing protests when they control information flows. On the one hand, it is not surprising that they frequently censor and manipulate unfavorable information. In China, for example, the concern of mass threats is a key reason for censorship.[18] On the other hand, with open information, leaders can effectively monitor local agents through media reports, third-party evaluations, or fire alarms pulled by citizens. This increases officials' work quality and compliance with the regime.[19]

What is the effect of policy transparency in authoritarian countries? Do the rulers face the same tradeoff and risk having more protests for their adoption of OGI? Before answering the question, we should note that the policy information disclosed according to OGI differs from macro-level information, such as macroeconomic statistics and large-scale crises. Citizens typically have sufficient knowledge about local issues. Moreover, compared to other issues, citizens are less likely to tolerate policy issues that directly impact them.

This study argues that policy transparency may not increase protests and can even decrease them. This is because, when a local government violates the law during its interaction with citizens, policy information encourages the grieved citizens to seek remedies from legal or political institutions as a potential substitute for protest. Therefore, policy transparency redirects citizens' grievances from the streets to institutions.

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[15]Cai 2010; Heurlin 2016.

[16]Mattingly 2020.

[17]Ong 2022.

[18]King, Pan, and Roberts 2013.

[19]Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; Lorentzen 2014; Stromseth, Malesky, and Gueorguiev 2017; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017; Anderson et al. 2019; Huang, Boranbay-Akan, and Huang 2019; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018.

2.1 Approaches to Dispute Resolution and Authoritarian Stability

Existing research shows that formal institutions contribute to dispute resolution and limit the resort to violent conflicts in developing countries.[20] Although citizens often protest to pressure the government to address grievances,[21] legal and political institutions, such as courts and government reviews of cases, are also crucial tools for individual resistance. Even in dictatorships, such institutions are not completely unresponsive. When citizens experience conflicts with the government, courts may protect their rights despite the flawed legal system.[22] And citizens still go to the institutions despite the relatively low likelihood of winning.[23] As a Chinese law expert notes, Xi Jinping's regime intends to channel protests given three conditions:

"[F]irst, there are legitimate mass disputes affecting the rights and interests of particular groups of people; second, these groups have increasingly resorted to non-institutional, extra-legal measures to assert their rights; and, third, that the legal process is comparatively the most appropriate and effective forum for resolution of such disputes. "[24]

The choice of an institutional approach, as opposed to a contentious one, depends on two essential factors. First, the relative cost between the approaches matters. Those who stage forceful protests may attempt to address their issues by threatening social stability and risk facing repression, which comes with a substantial cost.[25] Also important is the likelihood of successfully resolving disputes through each approach. Citizens can achieve their pursuits through legal or political institutions only if the institutions support them.

Of course, one approach does not necessarily preclude the other. If institutions fail to resolve the grievance, the protest option remains available. For instance, the legal system's limitations in resolving labor disputes frequently lead to subsequent protests.[26] Nevertheless, when citizens prioritize legal or political institutions that can address their grievances, protests are less likely

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[20]Blattman, Hartman, and Blair 2014.
[21]O'Brien and Li 2006; Chen 2012; Heurlin 2016.
[22]Stern 2013; He 2014; Schaaf 2021.
[23]Baik 2023.
[24]Fu 2019.
[25]Cai 2010.
[26]Gallagher 2017.

to occur. Research finds that a potential labor protester is less likely to go on the street if she is in the midst of pursuing a legal remedy.[27] Resolving citizen-state disputes through legal process demobilizes citizens or disrupts their attempts to coordinate protests in various authoritarian countries.[28] Thus, greater use of institutions reduces the overall occurrence of protests, even though the institutions are sometimes ineffective.

The regime views protest as an undesirable scenario due to not only the extensive cost of repression but also the risk of protest escalation and diffusion.[29] Therefore, authoritarian governments spend every effort to prevent protest, using censorship, surveillance, and persuasion, even if the occurrence of protest is already low.[30] In China, local leaders are even evaluated based on their ability to maintain social stability. For example, the mayor of a city is less likely to be promoted when faced with more protests, even the ones that do not target the government.[31] During my interview with a Chinese provincial cadre who handles disputes against the government, they explained that they must "turn big issues into small ones, and small ones into nothing."[32]

In contrast, while operating legal and political institutions to resolve disputes incurs economic costs, the government's marginal cost for each case is low. The cost is outweighed by the benefit of avoiding threats to social stability that any individual case could trigger. In the interview mentioned above, the government official confirmed that going through institutions can diminish protests and petitions, which they described as a heavy burden to the government, because the process of institutions is "legal and more certain" than negotiation during protests. By directing grieved citizens from the streets to institutions, the burden of addressing protest is reduced for the central and local governments.

This grievance redirection theory complements the classic story of rightful resistance in authoritarian countries[33], in which disputants "make troubles" by breaking social stability to seek

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[27]Lee and Zhang 2013.

[28]Gallagher 2017; Hanson 2022.

[29]Cai 2010; Heurlin 2016.

[30]King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017; Mattingly 2020.

[31]Foley, Wallace, and Weiss 2018.

[32]The author's interview with the head of a governmental dispute resolution center in a northern Chinese province on February 5, 2021.

[33]O'Brien and Li 2006.

redress from higher-level governments. They may use policy information to frame a discourse of being mistreated by agents at lower levels to legitimize their protests. This implies that transparency leads to more instability. By contrast, the grievance redirection theory suggest that policy information encourages resistance against the local agents most strongly within institutions rather than through disruptive or violent actions that aims at catching the higher authority's attention. Therefore, transparency should reduce instability. In addition, under policy transparency, the higher authority can spend less time and resources on responding to conflicts caused by lower-level agents, which are instead submitted to institutions. In a positive sense, policy transparency promotes a more formal, developed, and perhaps more democratic way of dispute resolution, compared to the traditional authority-driven way in authoritarian regimes.

2.2 Open Government Information and Citizens' Preference for Institutions

Then, the following questions are, does the policy transparency stipulated in OGI laws lead to greater use of legal and political institutions, and why? Figure 1 depicts the patterns of OGI performance and citizen use of two institutions to challenge government in China, administrative litigation (legal institution) and administrative review (political institution). The figure shows that both OGI performance and cases against government through the two institutions have increased over the years. Moreover, the numbers of institutional cases are positively correlated with the level of OGI in the previous year (Table F.4), which implies that policy transparency may contribute to more institutional cases in an authoritarian context. This paper examines the theoretical reasons and the causal relations underlying this suggestive pattern.

[Figure 1 about here.]

I argue that disclosed policy information increases the grieved citizens' confidence in winning a case against local governments. When a local government's misbehavior causes grievances, the specific content of policies provides evidence that the government violates the law, which in-

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creases citizens' confidence in the institutions for addressing their disputes. Although institutions, such as the court and administrative review, are often biased in authoritarian regimes, citizens with policy information tend to believe the evidence can push the institutions to act fairly on their cases.

Imagine a citizen who harbors a grievance against a local government or a business connected with the government. This might involve an unsatisfactory payment for land expropriation, a low pension paid by state-run firms, or a construction project that may pollute the local environment. She believes she deserves better treatment based on her local knowledge but is unsure whether she can win through an institutional channel, such as the court. She might not believe that an institution will treat her case fairly and support her pursuit unless she holds evidence that the government has violated the law. The open policies and regulations governing local government behavior in such matters will provide evidence to the grieved citizen. In this situation, policy transparency not only shows a negative image of a government that violates the law but also sends a positive signal that, with the legal evidence, the institutions will be on her side. Existing studies have shown that a supportive signal boosts citizens' confidence in winning cases through an institution, even if the institution is generally unfair.[34] Therefore, when a citizen considers the costs and winning likelihoods of various dispute resolution channels, such a signal increases her perceived winning likelihood with institutions, making institutions the first choice.

H1 (Use of Institutions): Policy transparency increases citizens' intention of using legal or political institutions for dispute resolution with local governments.

According to the theory, policy transparency should not only increase citizens use of institutions but also their preference of institutions over protests. If they seek institutional remedies after initiating protests, the risk of social stability remains. For grievances to be channeled from the streets to the institutions, we also need to expect citizens to prioritize institutions over protest when addressing their disputes with the government.

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[34]Stockmann and Gallagher 2011; Distelhorst 2017.

H2 (Preference for Institutions over Protest): Policy transparency increases citizens' intention of choosing institutions first over protest for dispute resolution with local governments.

It is worth noting that trust in the institutions in a specific case does not equate to trust in the institutions in general, although both influence citizens' preferences for institutions. Studies have pointed out that citizens in autocracies have low trust in the institutions in their specific cases because they lack general trust in the institutions, which can collude with the government easily. Increasing general trust encourages legal resistance in various authoritarian countries.[35] In this study, I argue that policy transparency shapes citizens' trust in the institutions' fairness for specific disputes and increases their confidence in using institutions to resolve their cases, regardless of their trust in the general fairness of institutions, because the evidence for a case from policy transparency makes collusion on the case more difficult between the government and the institutions.[36]

For example, suppose a local government decides to take a citizen's land for construction. By law, the compensation standard must be set at the local market price. The local government, however, may extract rent from the land-taking project and offer compensation that is less than the local market price. A citizen learns the local market price easily from her own experience or the words of other residents. If the policy-stipulated compensation standard is disclosed, when the government offers less than the local price, the citizen can use the disclosed information to support her claim while attempting to resolve the dispute through the court or other formal institutions. Without transparency, she cannot identify the standard, and her chance of winning the case is slim even though she knows the local price, as the institutions are very likely to collude with the local government, which may refuse to admit its behavior is illegal. In contrast, with a transparent compensation standard, the citizen will be more confident that the institutions can fairly address her pursuit because the information makes it more difficult for the local government to manipulate

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[35]Landry 2008; Acemoglu et al. 2020; Schaaf 2021.

[36]In the two experiments of this study, when asked about the likelihood of using institutional dispute resolution channels in general before treatment, the participants responded with an average score of four ("somewhat likely") on the five-point Likert scale (see Table   A.1 and A.2). This pre-treatment confidence in institutions in general, as demonstrated later in the empirics, does not condition any treatment effect of policy disclosure.

the institutions, holding all other factors constant.

Some qualitative findings suggest that policy transparency helps citizens receive fair resolution of their disputes in the courts. According to O'Brien and Li's documentation, as well as my interviews with disputants, some local governments attempted to block residents' access to policy information in order to prevent them from winning legal cases against the government.[37] Moreover, judicial documents show that many Chinese citizens who won administrative litigation cases had previously obtained policy information that was proactively or reactively disclosed by the government according to the OGI Regulation.

H3a (Trust in Institutions for Solving the Case): Policy transparency increases citizens' trust in the fairness of institutions for solving the specific dispute with local governments.

In addition to providing evidence and increasing the perceived fairness of institutions, another reason why policy transparency facilitates the use of institutions may be that it raises citizens' confidence in acquiring information, making them feel more capable of using institutions. First, transparency in one case may increase citizens' trust in the availability of information in other cases. Second, being exposed to OGI may generate a sense of ability to access information. The legal promotion literature suggests that information about cases cultivates legal awareness in authoritarian countries. People with legal experience prefer the court over petitioning because they learn more information and feel capable of using the legal channel.[38] Similarly, information from legal aid increases legal awareness and the use of institutions to resolve disputes.[39] Of course, it is possible that ordinary citizens do not establish connections across issues, and the transparency of one issue will not make them feel differently about their ability to use institutions. Despite this, they may still be confident in winning their cases for trust in institutions. The experiments will test whether citizens' confidence in their information-collecting ability could be a mechanism for transparency's effect on their dispute resolution preference.

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[37]The author's interviews in August 2021 with rural workers in Shenzhen; O'Brien and Li 2004.
[38]Gallagher and Wang 2011; Gallagher 2017.
[39]Whiting 2017.

H3b (Confidence in Collecting Information): Policy transparency increases citizens' confidence about their ability to collect information to solve disputes through institutions.

3   Open Government Information and Land Disputes in China

The OGI initiative and local land disputes in China provide a prototypical case for studying policy transparency and stability in authoritarian regimes because of three features: (1) the high relevance of the OGI content to citizens' disputes with the government and their high demand for such information, (2) the fact that land disputes are of high salience and often lead to instability, and (3) the high local variation of OGI compliance and protests.

In January 2007, China's State Council passed the OGI Regulation. It required all levels of government to open an extensive range of information to the public, including policies and regulations for many government actions. To enforce the regulation, every year since 2012, the central government sets up OGI targets for local governments to complete. It also employs institutes to evaluate all levels of government's efforts to implement the regulation. The institutes conduct randomly sampled inspections of local government websites annually. The results, including the names of the localities that failed to reach the targets, are published soon after the inspections.

Chinese citizens also find policy information useful for protecting their rights. Since the adoption of OGI, the central government is estimated to have processed over a million disclosure requests each year.[40] According to Distelhorst, the transparency requests per thousand citizens are "on par with Canada and Mexico, and well ahead of the United Kingdom, India, and Germany."[41] Furthermore, legal cases have substantiated policy transparency's contribution to successful challenges against governments. In 2017, for example, two villagers in an autonomous prefecture in Sichuan Province sued their government for failing to compensate them properly when taking their timberland. The prefecture government kept silent about the compensation standard and offered a low price. The villagers had demonstrated multiple times until they found an open policy

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[40]Kim et al. 2022.
[41]Distelhorst 2017.

document in 2018 that showed the stipulated compensation standard. In the court of the prefecture, they asked for better compensation and the prefectural government's written response according to the policy. Although the government attempted to claim that the suit was redundant, the court eventually decided that the villagers should get additional compensation in line with the policy.[42]

As in many countries, land expropriation creates direct conflicts of interest between local governments and citizens in China. Since the late 1970s, rapid industrialization and urbanization have led local governments to acquire increasing amounts of land for development. While citizens have little power to decide on a land project, the Land Management Law entitles them to compensation for the market value of their land and any attachments to it. However, local officials who have monopoly power over project implementation may refuse to follow the legal compensation standard. The likelihood and extent of policy violations are largely determined by factors of the local government's incentive and capacity, such as economic demand, local power structure, and the local leader's career incentives,[43] rather than citizen demands. Household survey data shows that the majority of rural residents receive only half of the policy-promised compensation for land expropriation in China.[44]

As a result, land protests account for a significant share of grievances and social unrest in China.[45] According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, between January 2000 and September 2013, 83 out of 383 (22 percent) protests against the government with more than 100 participants were caused by demolition and land expropriation.[46] Issues related to home and land are also among the top five causes of protests reported on social media, comprising more than 20 percent. Knowing the salience of land protests, the central government has actively led land reforms and passed laws to regulate local land expropriation. Nevertheless, local governments can still strategically implement land policies to grab rents.

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[42]"张元和、张元海、凉山彝族自治州人民政府一审行政判决书"（2020）川34行初12号. The case document was obtained from China Judgments Online.

[43]Cai and Sun 2018; Jiang and Zeng 2020.

[44]Cheng et al. 2022.

[45]Cai 2003; Heurlin 2016.

[46]Tian et al. 2014.

According to the OGI Regulation, when a land-taking plan starts, the local government must make the specific policy dictating compensation or resettlement of the residents of the expropriated area transparent.[47] Then, the project operator that is affiliated or connected with the government proposes compensation to the owners. If an owner is dissatisfied with the proposal, she can either file a case with the court, starting an "administrative litigation," or with a specific government department at the same or higher level, initiating an "administrative review." If she wins the case, she will get the compensation she is entitled to for the land and possibly compensation for her loss due to the government's misbehavior.[48]

Yet in many cases, a local government does not disclose the compensation and resettlement policies in order to hide its rent-seeking behavior. The result is a wide variation in local policy transparency, even though the central government makes considerable efforts to promote and enforce OGI Regulation. For example, until early 2021, while some local governments disclose all the information systematically as required on their websites, many do not even have an accessible platform for OGI. According to the author's interviews with rural citizens in 2021, while some governments make all policy information public and even hold hearings in villages, many others keep citizens in the dark.

Land protests often occur in areas with low policy transparency. Two violent protests in the 2010s occurred in two villages in Guangdong Province, Wukan and Xian. Governments in both villages, colluding with construction firms and corrupt officials, secretly sold the villagers' land at a low price. The government leaders received massive bribes. The villagers attempted to defend their land but lacked policy information about the issue. Throughout the conflicts, the governments kept concealing information about the land sale and even prevented people from knowing how much land they owned, despite their repeated calls for transparency. In both cases, the villagers had a deep distrust in the local authorities and institutions. In Xian, protesters rejected the mayor's invitation to negotiate and called for an investigation by the central government. Because

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[47]There is no private ownership of land in China. An individual villager's "ownership" is actually either the right to use the land or a share of the right from the village's collective ownership.

[48]O'Brien and Li 2004.

the local governments refused to be transparent as they made illegal deals that expropriated public lands, citizens lost confidence in the local institutions and eventually resorted to violent collective actions.[49]

4 Experiments of OGI Learning

4.1 Experimental Design

The main study was conducted with 3,003 adult participants from 31 provinces in mainland China recruited through a crowd-sourcing survey platform accessible via mobile devices in the summer of 2021. In the survey, I first ask questions about demographic information, knowledge about OGI and institutional ways of land or demolition dispute resolution, and their dispute experiences. To match the real-world situation as closely as possible with the treatment condition, I base the design on existing documentation of Chinese land-taking cases. The vignette provides all participants with a hypothetical grievance context in which they are residents of an actual city, Dongguan, in China. They are told that the government will take their land and offer them a certain amount of compensation that is less than the local land price.[50]

The prompt reads, "Please put yourself in the following hypothetical situation and answer questions. Suppose you live in Dongguan. The Dongguan city government will take a 0.1-acre piece of land from your household for a construction project and offer you some compensation. The project office offers you 3 million CNY/acre (you would get 0.3 million CNY) as compensation. However, you learn that the market price of neighboring land is 6 million CNY/acre (you would get 0.6 million CNY)." [51]

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[49]Details about the two cases are reported in the news articles: Li 2016; Wang 2016.

[50]Dongguan is a well-known prefecture-level city in southeastern China, where land conflicts are common. It is also similar to Shenzhen, the site of my in-the-field survey, in terms of geographical location, economic growth, and many demographic features. These facts maximize the respondents' familiarity and understanding of the context. In addition, controlling for fixed effects on respondents' residence places does not change any results.

[51]I also include a more commonly used unofficial Chinese metric: mu. The average arable land per capita in Dongguan and China is 0.1 acre. To make the scenario appear real, I choose 3 million, a number close to the lower bound of the land compensation standard in Dongguan.

Chinese law requires the government to compensate citizens in line with the local land price, which is calculated in a stipulated way and passed by higher-level governments. It roughly matches the market and citizens' local knowledge.[52] Discrepancies between actual compensation and residents' knowledge are the main source of land conflicts against local governments in China.

Treatment

After reading the message, survey participants are randomized into three groups: *Control*, *OGI Content*, and *OGI Announcement*. The control group does not read any additional information. *OGI Content* is the main treatment group. People in this group are told that the city government discloses the stipulated compensation, and they read an actual policy document from the city government's website, confirming the local market price they have learned, which is higher than the official offer. This informs participants that, by policy, the government should have offered more. While all participants learn a discrepancy between their local knowledge of land market price and the local government's offer, the gap between the legal compensation standard and the offer is only provided to the *OGI Content* group. I expect this treatment to increase the participants' intentions of using legal or political institutions and prioritizing institutions over protests.

A common concern about informational treatments in survey experiments is the truthfulness of the information. Respondents may not trust the treatment provided by researchers and interpret it differently from the real-world situation. More importantly, in this case, the real-world learning process involves the citizen reading the relevant official document that provides the policy information, not receiving unsourced text. To address this concern, I provide treatment information in a screenshot of a real compensation policy document.[53]

It also worth noting that the treatment is not already-known but new information to the respondents. The document, as well as other transparent policy information in the real world, is open upon searching by citizens but not widely spread by the media. Indeed, without transparency, citi-

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[52]Article 48, *Land Management Law of the People's Republic of China (2019)*. Article 32, "Regulation on Implementing the *Land Management Law of the People's Republic of China* (2021)."

[53]In order to reduce the participants' cognitive load, I edit out irrelevant information and keep only the project's background, the compensation policy, and the official features of the document.

zens have no access to the specific policy information regarding government actions, although the policies have already been made. They would have to choose their responses to government actions without the information. The experimental design matches this situation and tests the causal effect of transparency by providing informational treatment in a context in which citizens do not know the information beforehand.[54]

The treatment reads, "Our country stipulates that local governments should publicize information about land projects on their websites. For example, the government of Dongguan publishes the legal compensation standard for land projects. The following figure shows the open information from its website." The screenshot appears below this statement, showing that the legal compensation standard is 6 million CNY/acre (Figure 2).[55] A word-for-word English translation of the document is:

Title: Announcement of Dongguan Government's Land Compensation Plan

(government document number)

For more efficient land development and better local land production, the Government of Dongguan plans to take 3.8683 acres of land that is collectively owned by the village. The specific place area is shown with red lines in a coordinated map. Following Article 47 of People's Republic of China Land Administration Law, we make the Land Compensation Plan and announce it below.

Resettlement: 10 percent of the expropriated land will be kept for the village (0.3868 acre) and will be compensated as cash according to the village's will. The compensation standard is 6 million CNY/acre, and the total compensation is 2.3208 million CNY.

The Announcement is hereby given.

(Government Stamp and Date)

The document is proactively open.

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[54]Similar experimental designs have been adopted in a number of extant studies of transparency. For example, see Kosack and Fung 2014.

[55]According to Cheng et al. (2022), in more than half of the cases, the gap between the government's offer and the stipulated compensation for land expropriation is 40 to 57 percent, so I select an OGI document that doubles the number in the hypothetical offer.

[Figure 2 about here.]

The compensation policy informs the grieved citizen whether the local government has violated the policy, which increases her confidence in winning her case through the institutions and leads to a preference for the institutions over protest. However, it is possible that the government does not need to actually disclose the policy. Instead, simply reminding people that the government is transparent may influence their choice of dispute resolution channel. If this is true, the regime may not even need to enforce transparency—perhaps OGI maintains social stability through promoting a positive, transparent government image rather than through increasing people's knowledge of the policies (and of local governments' policy violations). To check the possibility, I randomly assign about one-third of the participants to receive an *OGI Announcement* message. The message does not include the screenshot but the description of government actions: "Our country stipulates that local governments should publicize information about land projects on their websites. For example, the government of Dongguan publishes the legal compensation standard for land projects." In the theory, it is the disclosed information, not just a claim of transparency, that influences people's choices. Therefore, I expect this treatment to have little if any effect on the outcomes in comparison to the control group. Figure 3 summarizes the full structure of the survey.

[Figure 3 about here.]

Outcomes

The survey asks the respondents, before and after treatment, how likely they are to pursue compensation through legal and political institutions. The post-treatment questions are set in the hypothetical grievance case they have read in the vignette.[56] I randomize the questions' order to prevent individuals from being primed by the first channel they are asked about.

The outcome variables for H1 are the intentions of using legal and political institutions. The

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[56]In plain words to an ordinary citizen, I explain a legal institution as filing a lawsuit that will be decided by the court and a political institution as applying for administrative review—sending the case to government offices.

difference in means between the control and the treatment indicates whether the treated people are more likely to select institutions. I also estimate the difference in differences across groups for the intentions of using the institutions. In this way, I compare the changes from the general choice of dispute resolution channel to a specific case setting between the treatment and control groups. I expect the *OGI Content* treatment to have a positive effect on the intention of using institutions. For later reference, I denote the post-treatment outcome variables with *use legal* and *use political*, and the pre-post difference variables Δ *use legal* and Δ *use political*, respectively.

A disputant may want to exhaust all channels to protect her rights, including institutions as well as protest. The theory suggests that policy transparency encourages people to address their grievances through institutions first, which leads to an overall decline in protests. Thus, I investigate whether a disputant would choose institutions first over protest (H2) with two questions. The first one is a direct question: "If you want more compensation, compared to protests (banner holding, sit-in, assembly, collective petition, etc.), how likely are you going to use the institutions first?" (*direct protest later*). The second question asks participants to rank four approaches they would try in sequential order if they would like to get more compensation:

(a) hold a banner or sit in to demonstrate,

(b) go to court,

(c) administrative review, and

(d) assemble with other disputants to demonstrate or petition collectively.

Option (d) differs from Option (a) in that it is a collective action. An answer is labeled as "protest later (1)" when both (a) and (d) are ranked after (b) and (c), and as "protest first (0)" otherwise (*rank protest later*). In other words, to be counted as prioritizing institutions (1), the respondent must rank both institutions before both protest options, which is a conservative measure. The option orders in appearance are randomized for each individual. I expect participants in the *OGI Content* group to be more likely to use protest later than the control group.

I also examine the participants' tolerance of the status quo by asking them how likely they would take the official offer (*accept status quo*). Although the citizen has local knowledge about

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her rights and believes that she deserves more than the offer, the disclosed official information may strengthen this belief. Therefore, it is likely that policy transparency actually triggers more resistance by increasing their discontent, which might not help reduce protests. If the treatment effect on the likelihood of taking the offer is significantly negative and substantively large compared to the results for H1 and H2, it does not support the theory. In other words, we should observe no substantial treatment effect on the acceptance of the status quo.

Several post-treatment questions test the mechanisms. I first ask about participants' confidence in the institutions for protecting their rights (*institution confidence*). The second question asks how likely they are to believe they can be fairly treated when using institutions in this dispute. This question corresponds to H3a, the trust in the institution's fairness for solving the specific dispute (*legal fair* and *political fair*). Finally, I ask their feelings about collecting information to use institutions, which tests the alternative mechanism H3b, confidence in information collection (*collect information*). The outcome questions, except for the ranking one, are asked on a five-point Likert scale. I present the results on a zero-to-one scale for percentage point interpretation.

The field survey, which will be discussed in later sections, asks similar questions to the main study. The summary of statistics, tests for balance across treatment arms, full models with all coefficients, and a full set of survey instruments displayed for the two experiments are presented in the appendix. In the two experiments, the missing rates for almost all main and auxiliary outcome variables range between 0 and 3 percent. The exception is the rank question, which is the most costly in cognition. The missing rates of answers to this question in the Internet and field samples are 27 percent and 10 percent, respectively (Table F.1). To address the issue, I estimate the trimming bounds of the treatment effects.[57] The results with bounds are generally the same (Table F.2).

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[57]Lee 2009; Gerber and Green 2012.

4.2 Main Result

The main treatment effects are estimated with ordinary least squares (OLS) models comparing the *OGI Content* and the control groups. The result supports H1 regarding the use of institutions. Table 1 shows that with either difference-in-means (Columns 1-2, 5-6) or difference-in-differences estimation (Columns 3-4, 7-8), exposure to the *OGI Content* treatment makes respondents more likely to use legal and political institutions to resolve their conflict with the local government. Even though the control group reports a generally high baseline intention for using the two institutions (on average 0.7 on the zero-to-one scale or "somewhat likely"), the information treatment still elicits a positive significant effect. When respondents pursue more compensation, observing the open compensation policy increases their intentions of filing a lawsuit and an administrative review by about 4 percentage points.

[Table 1 about here.]

In line with H2, OGI increases citizens' preference for legal and political institutions over protest in the context of a land dispute with the local government. People in the control group, while having high baseline intention for using the two institutions, report a relatively low baseline intention to choose institutions over protest (on average 0.4 or "somewhat unlikely"). Table 2 shows that, while the *OGI Content* treatment does not make citizens more likely to believe that the local government's offer is unacceptable (Columns 1-2), it increases respondents' intentions of prioritizing institutions by 2 percentage points when they are asked the direct question about the likelihood of trying institutions first over protest. People in the treatment group are also about 5 to 6 percentage points more likely to rank institutions over protest behavior in sequential order (Columns 5-6).

[Table 2 about here.]

Table 3 shows results for the mechanisms. Respondents in the *OGI Content* treatment group are 2 percentage points more confident to use institutions (Columns 1-2) than those in the control group. Columns 5-8 show strong support for increasing trust in institutions (H3a). Observing

compensation policy makes respondents 2 to 3 percentage points more likely to believe that legal and political institutions will fairly treat their case of dispute. The evidence for increasing confidence in collecting information for dispute resolution (H3b) is less clear. The treatment group is somewhat more confident in collecting government information than the control group, but the effect is not consistently significant. These findings suggest that transparency encourages the choice of institutions by raising citizens' confidence in the effectiveness of this channel but not necessarily their own information ability.

[Table 3 about here.]

4.3 Alternative Explanations

One alternative explanation for the findings is that the treatment effects come from the mere existence of a transparency initiative instead of the content of the information itself. The *OGI Content* message can also be interpreted as signaling government endorsement of transparency. The image of a transparent government may increase citizens' satisfaction with the regime as well as trust in its institutions and, consequently, make them less inclined to protest. Another concern is that the treatment message also shows "good government type" to the respondents, as it implies that the city government is willing and able to provide institutional procedures of transparency.

The *OGI Announcement* treatment is designed to isolate these explanations. It clearly conveys the central government's transparency stipulation as well as the Dongguan government's disclosure of land-taking compensation. It also states that the information is available on the government website. The distinction from *OGI Content* is that it does not provide any specific information helpful for using institutions. If signaling good governance (either the central government's mandate for transparency or the local government's adoption of relevant procedures) drives the differences in outcomes, then exposure to *OGI Announcement* should produce results similar to those of *OGI Content*. I do not find any consistent effect of the *OGI Announcement* treatment on the choice of institutions, preference for institutions over protest, or the mechanisms. The coefficient for using the legal institution is even negative (see Appendix C).

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Furthermore, evidence from some other outcomes goes against the local government type explanation. If it was this factor that drives the result, we should have found the *OGI Content* treatment to elicit greater trust in the government institution than in the court. However, Table 3 suggests the opposite. As I will show in the next section, the experiment in the field yields similar results. In addition, the treatment effects are conditional on neither of the two pre-treatment variables pertinent to the evaluation of government—personal connection to government and trust in government information.

The results in Table 4 address two other issues. First, because the survey only examines respondents' intentions of using institutions, they are likely to ignore the cost of institutions, which applies only if they actually experience the grievance. While administrative reviews are free in China, hiring a lawyer to appear in court is costly for many people. In the real world, this cost may counteract any positive effect of OGI on the use of institutions. Although the survey cannot measure people's real behavior, I investigate the robustness of the treatment effect when people are asked to consider the cost of legal remedies. Specifically, I ask, "How much do you agree with the statement: I will consider filing a lawsuit only if hiring a lawyer is inexpensive?" Stronger agreement with the statement means that the legal cost is more important to the participants. If we see no treatment effect on the agreement, transparency probably does not change their concern about that cost. The analysis shows a negative treatment effect, which suggests that people who observe the policy care less about the cost of lawyers when they are prompted to consider it, and they are still more likely to file a lawsuit against the government (Columns 1-2). Furthermore, I measure pre-treatment demographic features related to the cost of using institutions, including gender, education level, economic status, occupation, rural residence, and connection with local officials and lawyers. I did not find any consistent heterogeneous treatment effects conditional on these covariates.

Second, respondents may be reluctant to declare their protest intentions due to fear of government sanctions or social desirability bias, which can be exacerbated by the presence of an official document in the *OGI Content* treatment. I test whether the treatment group views social resis-

tance as more sensitive than others do by asking, "Have you ever posted criticisms of any officials or policies on social media or participated in any protests?" Because this question asks people to report their own real dissenting activities, it is even more sensitive than the outcome questions in a hypothetical environment. They can choose between "yes," "no," and "no answer." The numbers of respondents who chose "yes" and "no answer" are similar. Meanwhile, neither of the two answers receives a significant treatment effect (Columns 3-6). Due to the scarcity of actual dissent activities in China, the question cannot determine the existence of fear for government or social sanctions in this survey, but the null findings indicate that the fear does not drive the experimental results.

[Table 4 about here.]

Finally, it is also possible that citizens do not trust the information disclosed by the government. But even if this is true, we still find treatment effects on the outcomes. Furthermore, Figure A.2 shows that, although most people did not know OGI well and only half of them had accessed government information before taking the survey, more than 90 percent of them trust its reliability. The treatment effects are not conditional on the respondents' pre-treatment trust in government information.

5   An Experiment in the Field

The advantage of the online survey is that it captures the effect of policy transparency on a large nationwide sample. Yet most respondents are young and relatively educated, have a higher economic status, and are therefore less likely to experience land disputes with local governments. Such disputants in China are more likely to come from rural areas and have low income and education. To investigate the effect on this population of interest, I recruited an original field sample of 717 migrant employees from two private-sector manufacturing firms in Shenzhen, a metropolitan Chinese city with a geographically diverse population, and conducted an experiment similar to the online survey. Participant recruitment through private-sector firms is a reliable way to circum-

vent political intervention in a study on state-society relations. Although these individuals work in a city, the survey focuses on issues related to their knowledge and experiences in their rural hometowns. In this sample, 70 percent of the respondents reported having experienced or heard of land-taking disputes in their close connections.

The participants came from 27 out of 31 provinces in China. Among them, 85 percent registered as rural residents, 60 percent did not receive a high-school degree, 53 percent are low-skilled labor, and 83 percent self-identified as low or mid-low class in the city. As displayed in Figure A.1, the field sample contains significantly more low-income and less-educated people than the internet sample. The age distribution of the sample is also more representative of China's adult population.

5.1 Survey Distribution and Ethics

The survey administered to this sample is similar in design to the one used in the main study. Some pre-treatment demographic questions are worded for the specific context. To retain more statistical power, I keep only the control and the *OGI Content* treatment in the vignette. About half of the sample worked in Firm X and the other half in five departments of Firm Y. The Firm X group participates in the survey through anonymous mobile phone links. The treatment assignment follows a simple Bernoulli randomization, with about one-half observing the treatment in Firm X. The Firm Y group receives the survey with printed hard copies, and the treatment is assigned to them with block randomization by department. Important demographic variables such as the respondents' gender, education, and income are highly correlated with their departments. Table A.6 presents details for the survey distribution.

The enumerators of our research team and the firms' staff members distribute the survey and help address questions from the participants. Neither our enumerators nor the staff have access to their answers unless a participant asks for help completing the survey. Meanwhile, participation in the survey and the answers to all questions are entirely voluntary. Participants are asked to voluntarily leave a phone number if they would like to participate in a follow-up interview. The

records of these numbers are destroyed upon the completion of the study. The compensation for participating in the survey or interview is distributed in cash or to participants' mobile wallets with a privately designed application that does not record any personal information. These strategies minimize coercion and maximize confidentiality for participants. Finally, we did not receive any reports of risks or concerns from the participants during or after the study.

5.2   Result

Tables 5 and 6 show the results from OLS models controlling for department and province dummies.[58] The *OGI content* group is 3 percentage points more likely to choose institutions over protest for dispute resolution when they are asked the direct question comparing the two approaches. However, I do not find a treatment effect on whether they rank both legal and political institutions over protest (Table 5). A comparison of the odd and even columns in Table 6 suggests a possible explanation: the treatment effects are significant for the legal but not the political institution. The treatment increases participants' willingness to go to court by 3 percentage points (Column 1). Furthermore, in the rank question, a smaller number in 1–4 indicates a higher rank. Therefore, Columns 3 and 4 suggest that the policy information leads participants to assign higher rank to the court but not necessarily to administrative review. In line with H3a, the treatment makes them about 3 percentage points more likely to believe that the legal institution would resolve the dispute fairly (Column 5). Adding or removing control variables does not change the results.

The findings show that policy transparency can channel low-income and low-education rural people from the streets to the courts. Meanwhile, these people seem not to have the same trust in the political institution (administrative review) as the Internet sample. In addition, like in the main study, no effect is found in this sample for H3b, the confidence in information-collecting ability.

[Table 5 about here.]

[Table 6 about here.]

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[58]Because the sampling of participants is clustered by department, I cluster the standard errors at the department level (Abadie et al. 2017).

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This survey yields similar results to the main study for the checks on the alternative explanations (Table F.3). Moreover, while this study does not focus on collective action, it is worthwhile to explore respondents' beliefs about other disputants' actions. Existing theories contend that transparency leads to more protest because open information generates a shared belief in each other's protest intentions, thereby facilitating collective action.[59] While OGI reduces individual citizens' intentions to protest, it may also make those intended protests grow into collective ones more easily. I ask a post-treatment question about respondents' beliefs about others' collaboration on protest: "How likely do you think other disputants are to join you if you protest for more compensation?" The treatment effect on the responses is not even close to significant. While the small sample size may account for this finding, it still implies that, if such an effect exists, it is minor compared to the ones found in this study. More research is needed, however, to understand the role of policy transparency in the real-world formation of collective action, especially about the intention of free riding.

There is one caveat to the findings in this sample. Because most participants have low education levels, questions with relatively high cognitive loads may be difficult to answer. Although missing rates are low for most variables (Table F.1), some people may answer difficult questions randomly. In addition to the pre-treatment attention-check question, we identify another type of low quality: some participants chose the same option for several questions in a row. Controlling for attention and treating the low-quality responses as missing do not influence the results. Nevertheless, given the low education levels of participants, we need to be cautious in interpreting the null results. Furthermore, in both the Internet and the field samples, respondents' pre-treatment preferences for legal and political institutions are very similar, implying that they may not perceive much distinction between the two channels for dispute resolution. We cannot rule out the possibility that the null results for administrative review are due to some low-quality responses.

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[59]Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2018.

6   What People Say about OGI and Institutions

To further investigate how transparency encourages citizens' interactions with institutions, I ask participants at the end of the main survey why they think "OGI is helpful for using legal or political institutions to solve their disputes" with the government in an open-ended question. Participants are selected to answer this question if they previously self-identified as agreeing with or being indifferent about this statement, which accounts for roughly 90 percent of the total sample. I then conduct a text analysis with a structural topic model that controls for a series of important covariates.

Citizens' responses to the open-ended question reflect directly how they perceive the relationship between OGI and institutions outside of the experimental context and free of any response options designed by the researcher. Appendix D displays the topic distribution and vocabulary associations, as well as more details about model parameter choices and specifications. Many of the responses do not specify a clear reason. Some people, for example, simply answer, "Because OGI can help us protect our rights." However, topics regarding fairness, evidence, or confidence take up major shares in the respondents' self-reports. This indicates that citizens are well aware that OGI can provide evidence and improve the fairness of institutions during disputes. In addition, the answers are not conditioned by the assignment of the policy document.

7   Observational Evidence and External Validity

One common concern for studying costly behaviors with survey experiments is that people's intentions captured in the surveys might differ from their real-world actions. For instance, research in a Chinese village finds that people report preferences regarding legal mobilization differently when being asked about actual experiences and hypothetical contexts.[60] In this study, although controlling for dispute experience does not change the results, and introducing the cost of the legal institution generates a consistent finding, it is still worthwhile to investigate whether Chinese

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[60]Whiting and Ma 2021.

citizens' protests actually decline with local transparency.

To examine this external validity issue, I test the correlation between observed transparency and protests with a two-way fixed-effects model, using provincial transparency scores and social media-reported protests in China during 2011–2016. I calculate the number of protests in each province in each year with a dataset of Chinese protest events between 2011 and 2016, developed by Zhang and Pan. The dataset is derived from social media reports of offline protests using a deep learning approach. It was found to be little affected by online censorship and thus reliable for identifying protest events in China.[61] This data source from social media has three advantages. First, as Göbel and Steinhardt have found, social media covers considerably more protest events in China than traditional news media. Second, they also show that social media reports suffer less from the selection issue due to state coercion or protester violence.[62] Finally, compared to fieldwork-derived protest events, the dataset covers a wider geographical scope and a longer time span, which is critical for quantitative analyses. In addition to the total number, I also count the numbers of violent protests, home-related protests, and land-related protests, respectively, based on the dataset's labels of protest issues. To account for the large spatial variation caused by population, I use the numbers of protests per million people as the dependent variables.

For local government's transparency, I use reports on provincial government websites issued by a data center affiliated with a department of the central government. Every year from 2005 to 2018, the center visited and evaluated the websites based on a list of criteria, and then reported scores on their transparency performance.[63] Because the data center is only responsible to the central government, these reports should not be biased towards any of the local governments. From multiple indices of the website performance scores, I take one that measures the websites' transparency of various policy and project issues according to the OGI Regulation. These issues include, but are not limited to, land-taking policies. Therefore, it provides a comprehensive snapshot of proactive transparency in China.

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[61] Zhang and Pan 2019.

[62] Göbel and Steinhardt 2022.

[63] The data center published the criteria and part of the data in their annual reports, which can be found on its website: https://www.cstc.org.cn/.

The results are estimated using OLS models with province and year fixed effects to account for regional and temporal variations. I also control for a series of variables to capture local development and governance, as well as the potential for land- and demolition- related disputes. These variables include GDP, built area, the proportion of land taken by the government, Internet coverage, unemployment, and illiteracy rate. Measuring the less tangible aspects of governance, such as government effort in policy implementation, is inherently challenging. To address this, I control for a variable that incentivizes local compliance with policy goals, drawing on a dataset of government discipline in China that tracks whether local leaders were targeted during the central authority's anti-corruption campaign.[64] This disciplinary mechanism compels local governments to exert greater effort in achieving governance objectives, including transparency and many others.

As shown in Table B.1, a 0.1 increase in the transparency score is correlated with a reduction of around 0.6 protests per million people in a province in the next year, as well as a 0.3, 0.2, and 0.2 decline in demolition-related, land-related, and violent protests per million people, respectively. In 2019, the median population of provinces in mainland China was around 39 million, meaning that for a median province, a ten-percentage-point increase in transparency is correlated with around 22 fewer protests in total per year and nearly 10 fewer for each of the three types of protests.

Addtionally, transparency has a smaller and less significant impact on each category of protest compared to overall protest. The comprehensive OGI index covers a wide range of policy issues, not just land taking and demolition. Because the theory suggests that policy transparency redirects grievances by providing citizens with the specific information rather than a general sense of transparency, we should expect OGI on other issues to have little effect on protest regarding land and demolition. In other words, the effect of comprehensive OGI on these two issues may be diluted by other issues it captures. Therefore, the result is consistent with the theory.

We should acknowledge several limitations of the observation study. It is based on a small

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[64]The data is collected by Jiang, Shao, and Zhang 2022.

sample due to the limited availability of Chinese protest data, and most of the variation is absorbed by the province and year fixed effects. Although significant results are still obtained across different models, it is possible that the true effect magnitudes are overestimated. This is because statistically significant results in small samples could be driven by the larger estimates. Furthermore, the result should not be interpreted as a causal relationship, which is tested by the experiments.

In short, using the best available data on protest and policy transparency in China, I find observational evidence at the sub-national level that echoes my experimental findings at the individual level: policy transparency mitigates protest pressure, while the magnitude of the sub-national effect should be interpreted with caution.

8   Discussion

It is widely agreed that concern for stability usually leads to information restrictions in autocracies. Nevertheless, in the past twenty years, an increasing number of non-democratic countries that censor and manipulate information have adopted OGI initiatives that publicize various policies. It turns out that policy transparency is more than window dressing. It provides legal confirmation when a local government mistreats citizens. Like other types of information, open policies can involve monitoring and constraining government agents. However, unlike the disclosure of macro-level performance or crises, which expands mass threats, policy transparency can undermine the risk of protests. This study shows with experimental evidence from different groups of Chinese citizens that policy transparency channels people away from the streets and towards institutions to resolve their disputes with the government, thereby preserving social stability. This is because, holding evidence of a local government's policy violation, citizens become more confident that the institutions can address their grievances fairly.

The logic of channeling citizens from the streets to institutions can extend to various principal-agent problems that generate mass threats, which are prevalent in authoritarian countries. For

instance, in 1980s Egypt, the central government employed citizens' legal resistance to curb excessive local extraction. The principal-agent dynamics are not limited to central-local government relations. In Turkey, when members of the military persecuted citizens, the civilian government used information to encourage judicial challenges, thereby containing the military.

Of course, transparency is not a silver bullet for preventing contentious politics in these countries. On the one hand, effective enforcement of transparency requires both central and local governments to possess sufficient technological and administrative capacity. Additionally, regimes may co-opt local elites by allowing them to exploit citizens, which reduces motivation for transparency. On the other hand, the field study in this paper reveals a deficiency of public knowledge about OGI. My interviews with Chinese rural disputants suggest that the success in dispute resolution is closely linked to local transparency, yet most remain uninformed about how the OGI Regulation is implemented. A similar challenge exists beyond China. In Pakistan, for example, the effectiveness of OGI is undermined by limited public awareness and obstruction by local officials.[65] This paper hopes to highlight the necessity of grassroots OGI promotion in the developing world.

Transparency encourages citizens to use more institutional, less extreme, and therefore less risky channels to protect their rights from local expropriation. Yet we should caveat that authoritarian institutions are often unfair, with or without transparency. In this study, the preferences for institutions are generally high, both pre- and post-treatment. Meanwhile, the treatment effects of the experiments are substantively small, which could be due to ceiling effects from the already high confidence in institutions. However, according to studies on legal resistance in China, courts sometimes turn down sensitive legal cases, making the litigants disenchanted with courts.[66] In my interviews, a few disputants expressed their frustrations when the institutions did not work as they had hoped. These people have the potential to protest after exhausting legal and political approaches. Consequently, the effect of policy transparency on them may decline over time, delaying rather than eliminating their protests. Despite these cases, transparency reduces the overall

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[65]Bashir and Nisar 2020.
[66]Gallagher 2017; Kim et al. 2022.

likelihood of protests compared to situations where little policy information is disclosed. The gap between citizens' perceived and actual effectiveness of institutions may cause policy transparency to benefit the regime more than citizens. While transparency encourages grieved citizens to use institutions, which alleviates the regime's pressure to preserve social stability, we need more studies to understand whether it helps protect citizens' rights in their conflicts with the government.

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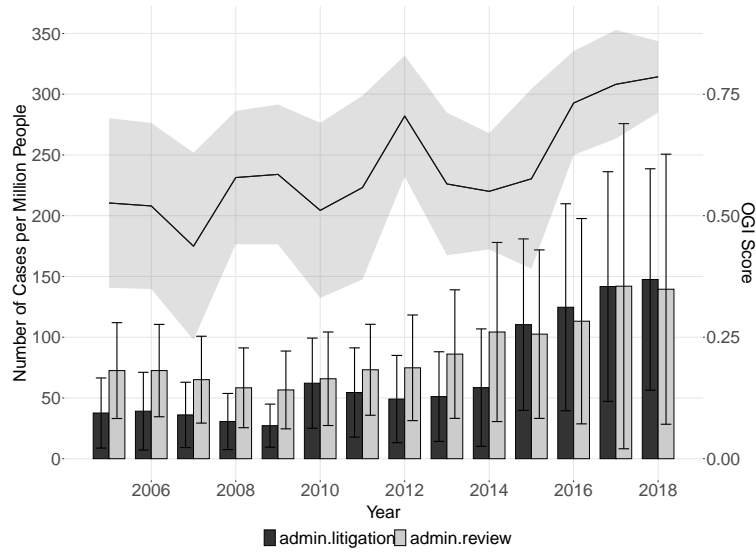
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List of Figures

The dark line shows a 0–1 transparency score of the provincial government websites. The bars are average numbers (per million people) of administrative litigation and administrative review cases that are accepted by the respective institutions. Segments and shadows are standard deviations.

Figure 1: Transparency Scores and Administrative Cases in Chinese Provinces

东莞市人民政府征收土地补偿安置方案公告

（28）〔2020〕第 7 号

　　为实现土地集约利用，保证土地成片开发建设，提高区域土地利用效益，东莞市人民政府拟征收谢岗镇稔子园股份经济联合社、谢岗镇曹乐格塘股份经济合作社的集体土地 3.8683 公顷。具体征地范围以征地地形图红线圈定和坐标标定的位置为准（见征地范围红线图）。根据《中华人民共和国土地管理法》第 47 条规定，现拟定了《征收土地补偿安置方案》，并将有关内容和事项公告如下：

　　四、留用地安置

　　留用地按实际征地面积的 10%划留给被征地集体（即 0.3868 公顷），根据被征地村集体意愿折算成货币补偿，折算补偿标准为 600 万元/公顷，补偿总额为 232.08 万元。

　　特此公告。

东莞市人民政府
2020 年 9 月 16 日

公开方式：主动公开

Figure 2: The OGI Content Treatment Message in Chinese
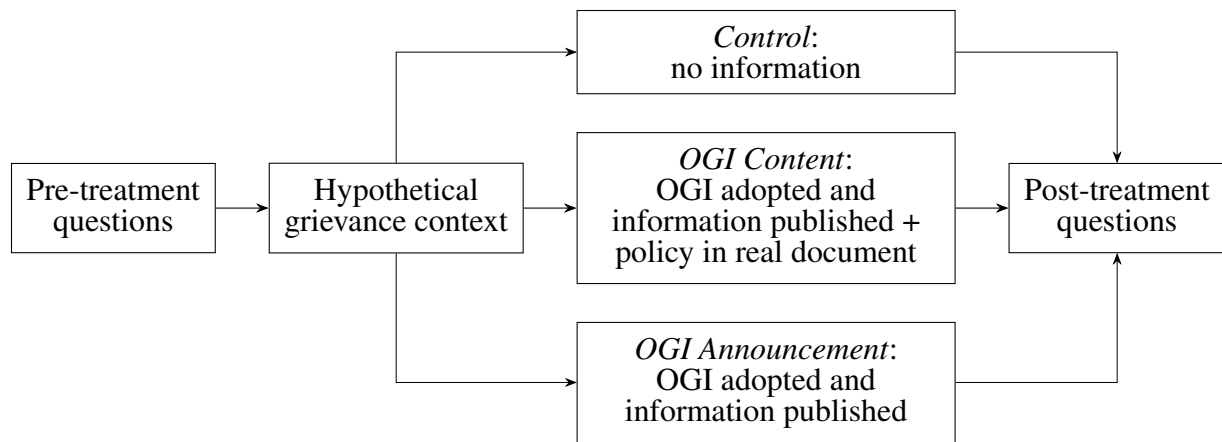
Figure 3: The Survey Flow

List of Tables

	H1: Use of Institutions							
	use legal		Δ use legal		use political		Δ use political	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
OGI content	0.036***	0.036***	0.044***	0.036***	0.044***	0.043***	0.040***	0.043***
	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.009)
Control	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Adj. R^2	0.006	0.244	0.009	0.271	0.010	0.219	0.007	0.290
Num. obs.	1935	1895	1935	1895	1936	1896	1924	1896

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; †$p < 0.1$. The "Control=Y" models include a full set of pre-treatment variables and province fixed effects. The notations apply to all following tables.

Table 1: The Effect of Transparency on Citizen Use of Institutions

	accept status quo		H2: Prefer Institutions over Protest			
			direct protest later		rank protest later	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
OGI content	−0.012	−0.018	0.023†	0.020*	0.052*	0.061*
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.026)	(0.025)
Control	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Adj. R^2	0.000	0.073	0.001	0.421	0.002	0.114
Num. obs.	1936	1896	1930	1892	1404	1385

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{\dagger}p < 0.1$.

Table 2: The Effect of Transparency on the Choice of Institutions over Protest

	institution confidence		H3b: Info Collection collect information		H3a: Trust in Institutions			
					legal fair		political fair	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
OGI content	0.023^{*}	0.020^{*}	$0.019^{\dagger}$	0.015	0.032^{***}	0.030^{***}	0.025^{**}	0.024^{**}
	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.008)
Control	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Adj. R^2	0.002	0.167	0.001	0.155	0.006	0.163	0.003	0.165
Num. obs.	1874	1840	1886	1850	1934	1895	1920	1883

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{\dagger}p < 0.1$.

Table 3: The Effect of Transparency on the Mechanisms

	care about legal cost		dissent: have posted		dissent: no answer	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
OGI content	-0.103^*	-0.117^*	-0.009	-0.009	0.006	0.008
	(0.047)	(0.047)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.010)	(0.010)
Control	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Adj. R^2	0.002	0.056	0.000	0.052	-0.000	0.021
Num. obs.	1877	1839	1844	1806	1936	1896

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^*p < 0.05$; $^\dagger p < 0.1$.

Table 4: Alternative Explanations

	accept status quo	direct protest later	rank protest later
	(1)	(2)	(3)
OGI content	0.018	0.033*	−0.011
	(0.022)	(0.009)	(0.026)
Adj. R^2	0.026	−0.007	−0.002
Num. obs.	705	701	637

$^{***}p < 0.001$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{\dagger}p < 0.1$. Standard errors clustered at the department level.

Table 5: The Effect of Transparency on the Choice of Institutions over Protest (Field Sample)

	use legal	use political	rank legal	rank political	fair legal	fair political
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
OGI content	0.027**	0.028	$-0.138^{\dagger}$	-0.026	0.031*	0.015
	(0.005)	(0.015)	(0.067)	(0.035)	(0.010)	(0.008)
Adj. R^2	0.014	0.029	0.022	0.023	0.019	0.059
Num. obs.	704	704	658	661	705	693

$^{***}p < 0.001; ^{**}p < 0.01; ^{*}p < 0.05; ^{\dagger}p < 0.1$. Standard errors clustered at the department level.

Table 6: The Effect of Transparency on Use of Institutions and the Mechanisms (Field Sample)