ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Do winners spread more words? Factional competition and local media reports on corruption investigation in China

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Abstract
This paper explores how factional competition shapes local media's coverage of negative political news. Employing news reports that appeared in Chinese national and local newspapers (2000–2014) coupled with data on the networks of elites, we find that local bureaucrats connected to strong national leaders tend to criticize members of weaker factions in politically damaging news reports. These adverse reports indeed harm the promotion prospects of the province leaders reported on in the articles, weakening the already weak factions and expanding the relative power of the strong factions. Our findings suggest that the loyalty-based competitive behaviors of political elites further tilt an already uneven playing field across political factions and facilitate power concentration in China.

Keywords: authoritarianism; China; elite politics; media bias; power sharing; political faction

1. Introduction

To understand the unique logic of non-democratic governance and regime stability, scholars of authoritarianism have debated the role of formal and informal competition among authoritarian elites. Numerous recent studies suggest that power-sharing institutions, such as constitutional constraints, elections, legislatures, and political parties, contribute to the dictator's survival and the regime's longevity by allowing limited competition among elites (Geddes, 2003; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006; Gandhi, 2008; Myerson, 2008; Svolik, 2009; Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010; Svolik, 2013; Boix and Svolik, 2013; Geddes *et al.*, 2014). At the same time, theoretical and empirical studies have also noted the existence and importance of non-institutional political factions in authoritarian politics, arguing that informal competition among elites helps extend and stabilize authoritarian rule (Shih *et al.*, 2012; Zakharov, 2016). Using a novel approach that employs extensive media data from China, our study offers empirical analyses showing how informal factional competitions shape local media coverage of negative political events such as corruption investigation.

China features a single-party authoritarian regime in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) monopolizes political power. Observers of Chinese politics have long noted that political power is fundamentally concentrated among a small handful of top leaders (MacFarquhar, 1997; Shambaugh, 2008). These leaders also have their own political followers, developed through past interactions, industrial or occupational proximity, or ideological orientation (Nathan, 1973; Tsou, 1976; Shih, 2008a; Shih *et al.*, 2012; Jiang, 2018). Scholars, however, have disagreed over the character of factional politics in China. Some suggest that the factions create a balance of power

among national leaders allowing for checks and balances against the strongest faction (Nathan, 1973; Nathan and Tsai, 1995; Dittmer and Wu, 1995). In contrast, others argue that factional competition resembles a process of natural selection in which the strongest faction dominates the others (Tsou, 1976, 1995). Our paper provides an empirical test for this long-standing debate on the political consequences of factional competition by investigating whether and how stronger faction members behave differently from their weaker counterparts, *vice versa*.

Empirically, our study focuses on measuring and analyzing the competitive behavior of lower-level bureaucrats who are directly connected to national leaders, instead of the largely unobservable top-level competition. Authoritarian elites at various levels compete informally against their peers for a larger share of political power, as the system lacks formal competition such as elections. Yet daily competition among elites, particularly top leaders, is largely unobservable due to the tight media control over central politics and the informal nature of authoritarian political competition. Likewise, while numerous studies in Chinese politics illustrate the importance of factional competition among elites, observing and measuring competitive behavior across factions remains particularly difficult. As a result, competition among Chinese top elites is frequently the subject of viral rumors among citizens, especially as social media platforms expand (Zhu *et al.*, 2013; Huang, 2017), but less often a topic of systematic analysis. Recent studies on Chinese factional politics use advanced methodological techniques to examine the outcomes of factional connections, such as political promotions (Shih *et al.*, 2012; Keller, 2014) and decisions about resource allocation (Shih, 2008a; Jiang and Zhang, 2020), but rarely directly elucidate the competitive behaviors of faction members. To fill this gap, we construct a rich dataset consisting of millions of media reports in Chinese regional newspapers, along with information on the political networks of elite Chinese bureaucrats.

To measure the distribution of political power among national leaders, the patrons of factions, we generate various indicators of political influence capturing the power distribution among members of the Chinese Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) and the changes in power over time. Our principal measurement uses the frequency with which a leader's name appears in the text of major national newspapers as an indicator of the leader's political influence at the time. We also use alternative measurements such as time-invariant official rankings, network-based influence, and the frequency with which a leader's name appears in headlines. Using these indicators, we analyze how a patron's political power shapes the competitive behavior of connected local leaders, measured via inter-provincial news reports on corruption investigations. As corruption investigations are conducted by a CCP organ, the Commission for Discipline Inspection (CDI), which potentially involves top-level politics, decisions about whether a bureaucrat is corrupt go beyond factional competition at the local level. Our measure instead captures the "amplification" and "resonance" effects local news outlets have on specific corruption investigations in other provinces and their implications for informal factional politics in China.[1] As promotion decisions at the top level, such as for provincial party secretaries, is exceptionally opaque in an authoritarian system like China, details of the decision-making process are little known to the public. However, given the intensity of competition at the top, it is entirely possible that negative political news spread to the public through media reports may convey political significance or function as a convenient excuse in close cases near the final stage of decision-making.

Our empirical analyses indicate that strong factions create greater resonance effects on corruption cases in weaker factions: provincial leaders linked to a strong political patron publish more news on corruption investigations in other provinces than do their weaker counterparts. More importantly, when reporting on others, provincial party secretaries are more likely to target provinces connected to weaker political patrons. By reducing the promotion chances of the provincial leaders who appear in the reports, negative news reporting by members of strong factions

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[1]Our data show a large variation in regional media's coverage of corruption investigations in other provinces. News content also varies from that of national newspapers.

indeed threatens the political survival of weaker factions. Interestingly, strong political patrons do not necessarily protect their clients from negative news coverage: we find that a connection to a strong patron does not reduce the probability of being reported on in a corruption investigation by other provincial news media, conditional on a corruption investigation taking place within the province. This means that a factional connection does not work as a political safety net for a client facing political hardship.

Our study contributes to the literature on authoritarian politics in a number of ways. First, we provide empirical evidence relevant to a current academic debate on informal factional competition. By measuring authoritarian elites' competitive behavior directly, we show that strong factions tend to amplify negative news coverage of politically weaker factions. Our findings thus imply that informal factional competition is unlikely to produce a stable power-sharing outcome, as powerful factions will consistently challenge the weaker factions' status using their political resources. At the same time, we challenge the conventional wisdom that elite competition is a signal of regime weakness. We show that, on the contrary, strong faction leaders, having a larger stake in regime stability, allow more extensive competition among lower-level elites, rather than restraining their competitive behaviors. In doing so, the leaders can constrain the range of competition to a smaller number of regime followers. Lastly, our study broadens the scope of the data applied to authoritarian politics research by employing largely guided and biased media reports in Chinese media (King et al., 2013; Stockmann, 2013; Lorentzen, 2014) to measure the political intentions of authoritarian elites who supervise or operate the media (Chen and Hong, 2021).

2. Informal elite competition and media reports under authoritarianism

Popular descriptions of dictatorships have long suggested that an autocracy with non-monopolized power is a weak regime (O'donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Przeworski, 1991). However, the literature on authoritarian power-sharing challenges such perceptions, arguing that political power-sharing institutions, such as political parties, elections, and legislatures, help dictators enhance regime sustainability by successfully limiting their unilateral power (Geddes, 2003; Myerson, 2008; Gandhi, 2008; Magaloni, 2008; Svolik, 2009; Boix and Svolik, 2013; Svolik, 2013; Pepinsky, 2014). In particular, power-sharing studies link single-party or dominant-party dictatorships to regime durability, as those parties more effectively contain power struggles among ruling elites (Geddes, 2003; Magaloni, 2008; Magaloni and Kricheli, 2010).

In this paper, we examine how power-sharing in a party dictatorship works when the main channel of power distribution and competition consists of non-institutionalized and informal political networks, i.e., factions. As a single-party authoritarian regime, the Chinese political system does not adopt many democratic institutions that are intended to decentralize de facto political power; although a few political reforms have been attempted, the extent of institutionalized power sharing remains quite limited. Scholars have viewed the Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) as a key power-sharing institution in China as it provides a system of collective leadership (Lin, 2004; Svolik, 2013). While this collective leadership is the fundamental basis of the Chinese political system, beyond a nominal division of labor among PSC members, the broad political process that influences the composition and management of the PSC is not formally institutionalized and thus hinges on an informal power struggle among past, current and potential national leaders.

Scholars of Chinese politics have discussed whether power distribution across informal political groups can induce a power-sharing or power-balance outcome. The seminal work by Nathan (1973) and a subsequent study by Dittmer and Wu (1995) claim that policy and ideological struggles between factions create an inter-factional balance of power in which multiple factions compete and maintain balance among themselves. In contrast, Tsou (Tsou, 1976, 1995) argues that elite pluralism is an empirical exception in Chinese politics and that the power struggle among

Chinese elites "always involves one side winning all and/or the other side losing all" (Tsou, 1995, p.97). Countering Tsou's point, Nathan and Tsai (1995) argue that an outcome with a balance of power is a not only frequent but also stable feature of Chinese politics. More recently, Li (2012) characterizes the collective leadership of the CCP as a system of checks and balances through "one party, two coalitions," where equally powerful factions representing different social and political groups in China hold each other in check.

Despite the long-standing theoretical debate, few studies have used empirical data to illustrate the competitive behaviors of authoritarian elites across factions. Our study contributes by providing an empirical examination of how members of strong factions and weak factions behave differently. Our period of research (2000–2014) ranges from the end of the Jiang Zemin administration (1989–2002) to the beginning of Xi Jinping's regime (2012–present). The Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao administrations (2002–2012), which constitute the bulk of the period under analysis, are not typically framed as a period in which one faction or one top leader dominated others. Furthermore, during this period intellectuals within the party actively debated the possibility of intra-party democracy (*dangneiminzhu*) (Bing, 2014).

If this seemingly balanced period is indeed characterized by power-sharing and power-balancing among political factions, our analyses will show that the relatively dominant factions are criticized or challenged by weaker counterparts alleging corruption equally or more frequently than the reverse. Previous faction politics theories support this pattern and potential balancing effects. Nathan (1973) claims that "the flexibility of the weaker factions and their capability for intermittent functioning" enhance weak factions' ability to defend. Furthermore, when a strong leader emerges, weaker factions perceive it as a common threat and band together against the strong faction (Nathan and Tsai, 1995).

HYPOTHESIS I: Powerful factions are more or equally likely to receive negative news coverage than are weaker factions.

If, on the contrary, the intrinsic nature of Chinese elite competition is to remove threats from one's political competitors in order to obtain more power as Tsou (1976, 1995) theorizes, the analyses will reveal an imbalanced pattern of attacks in which stronger factions aggressively attack their weaker counterparts, using the opportunity and power to do so. However, empirical patterns may differ depending on how these political attacks are strategized and constrained at the client level in the factional structure. On the one hand, strong faction members may hold the members of the most challenging factions in check, as the rise of these factions could threaten the status and resources enjoyed by the most powerful faction. The recent literature of elite purges in autocracies provides insights supporting this claim. Several studies investigate the targets of purges under dictatorship and find that competent and experienced elites are more likely to be purged by a dictator as they are perceived as greater threats (Wong and Chan, 2021; Goldring and Matthews, 2021; Bokobza et al., 2022).

HYPOTHESIS II: Media reports by strong factions are more likely to target the second strongest faction than to target weaker factions.

Nonetheless, attacking the second strongest faction members may come with potential political costs, especially as a client, if the attacked faction's patron retaliates in the future. This risk may induce the members of strong factions to attack an easy target, such as members of the weaker or weakest faction. This strategization is similar to the logic that dictators purge the opposing elites when the elites' capabilities to fight back are low (Sudduth, 2017) or that coup-entry dictators are more likely to purge civilian elites because the cost of purging is lower than purging military elites (Goldring and Matthews., 2022).

HYPOTHESIS III: Strong factions are more likely to attack the weakest faction(s) rather than targeting other strong factions.

We measure the competitive behavior of Chinese political elites by observing regional news reports on corruption investigations in other provinces. One principal reason for relying on local news reports is the unavailability of information on central-level political competition.

While autocracies are in general less transparent than democracies (Hollyer *et al.*, 2015), political competition among top national leaders in non-electoral autocracies like China tends to be even more opaque. One way to overcome this data limitation is to incorporate behavioral data from lower-level political elites who are directly connected to the top national leaders. The justification is that, in a hierarchical political system such as China's, the behavior of lower-level elites ought to benefit their political patrons (Shih, 2008b). In particular, this study investigates the possibility that strong factions may benefit by being able to be more vocal in criticizing the defects of other factions, as an alternative benefit of factional connection to a strong patron, creating greater legitimacy for the promotion of strong faction members not only within the party but also among the public.

Another reason for employing local media reports is the limited discretion that local governments and local media have on reporting negative political incidents such as corruption investigations. For this, it is worth discussing how news articles are published in Chinese regional newspapers. It is well-known that media freedom is restricted in China as in many other authoritarian countries (King *et al.*, 2013; Stockmann, 2013). However, total concealment of negative information on governance is not optimal to the regime as a media environment that only allows glorifying news reports fails to provide adequate incentives for bureaucrats to perform better (Lorentzen, 2014). Furthermore, the information provided by such a government lacks credibility among citizens, leading them to look for alternative channels (Zhu *et al.*, 2013; Huang, 2017). In particular, when the legitimacy of the regime depends on internal discipline and reform efforts, information on self-discipline and reform progress must be transmitted to the public to maximize regime support. Thus, allowing negative or critical reports on local affairs can be a useful strategy for the state to maximize regime stability (Lorentzen, 2014). As our data exemplify, it is not impossible to find news reports on corruption cases in local newspapers in China, and some reports discuss the details of local officials' corruption.[2]

This does not imply, however, that Chinese local media serve as a watchdog with regard to local government. Although there is much variation in local media in terms of the extent to which different outlets criticize the government or report on sensitive social issues (Lei, 2016), surveillance or criticism by the media is still structurally unlikely and rare. This is because all local media are either operated or supervised by the local propaganda department, and the local propaganda department, in turn, is supervised by the party committee at the corresponding level, which is under the authority of the local party secretary.[3] Therefore, by design, there is little incentive for editors and managers of local media companies to criticize their own local government, as their career paths are largely decided via local leaders' evaluations. However, media outlets have much more latitude to criticize other localities' misgovernance. Criticizing other local governments does not interfere with the political fortunes of their own supervisor, and may actually contribute to the supervisor's success by disparaging local leaders who are in competition with the supervisor.

In summary, while the freedom of the Chinese media is among the most limited in the world, what circulates and resonates in media does matter in China (Distelhorst, 2012; Yang, 2020). As corruption investigations are conducted by a CCP organ, news reports about ongoing corruption investigations do not provide new information to national leaders, but the leaders still cannot necessarily control which cases are circulated by the media or which become well-known to the public (Lorentzen, 2014; Lu and Ma, 2019). At the same time, in a strictly hierarchical governance system like China, a corruption investigation of subordinates, especially one widely

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[2]Due to the limited space, we discuss the publication process of corruption investigation news in Chinese local media in detail in Figure A.2 in the Appendix

[3]At the same time, local news providers are also guided by the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (CCPPD, *zhongxuanbu*). Sometimes, the CCPPD bans local media from reporting on certain provocative topics or allows only copied reports from the national outlets Xinhua News and the People's Daily. Otherwise, local media are generally able to publish news reports without central intervention (Zhou, 2011).

known of by the public, can damage one's career and thus one's promotion chances, as it signals incompetence, negligence of political responsibility, or potentially one's own corruption (Chen and Hong, 2021).

3. Empirical strategy

3.1 Data and variables

Our key **explanatory variable** is the distribution of power among PSC members. The Chinese political system depends on collective leadership at the top level; seven to nine members constituting the PSC collectively hold central authority in the Chinese government. However, measuring the dynamic changes in relative political influence among these PSC members is not a straightforward process. The most accessible method is to employ the official rank of PSC members, but since the ranking of PSC members only renews every five years at the National Party Congress, it remains static during that period and is thus of limited use.

To measure the dynamic changes in the actual power distribution among PSC members, we generate alternative power indicators. The first alternative measure is based on national media exposure of the PSC members.[4] We take advantage of the Chinese media's close relationship with the central authority and their tendency to adapt to power shifts to measure the dynamic changes in power distribution among PSC members (Shirk, 2011; Jaros and Pan, 2018). We interpret the more frequent appearance of a PSC member's name in major national newspapers as a signal of his political importance and influence in China's politics relative to other members.

To construct this dynamic power measure, we collect all news reports that appeared in major news media from 2000 to 2014 that contained the names of PSC members at the time. We use the following four national newspapers in China: the *Peoples' Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), the *Guangming Daily* (*Guangming Ribao*), and *China Youth Daily* (*Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*). All of these newspapers are national, official party-line media, closely controlled by the CCPPD. To collect the news articles, we use the Hong-Kong based data vendor *WiseNews*, which provides the largest content database of mainland Chinese news media.[5]

The time trends of newspaper articles mentioning the names of top national leaders are illustrated in the following figures. Figure 1 presents the annual trend of all PSC members. It is notable that the top two leaders, the president and the premier, are cited in the vast majority of our data. Figure A.1 shows the monthly trend of newspaper articles mentioning the top two leaders.

Finally, we build a yearly dynamic power indicator by calculating the share of news reports on a certain PSC member (p) out of the total number of news reports on all PSC members in each year (t):

$$\text{Patron Power}_{pt} = \frac{\text{News}_{pt}}{\sum_p \text{News}_{pt}} \tag{1}$$

Using this power measure, we also generate a variable measuring the power gap between the patron of the leader of the province producing the negative reporting (p_i) and the patron of the leader of the province being reported on (p_j). For province leaders with ties to more than one PSC member, we employ the sum of their patrons' power, the highest-ranked patron's power, and the average power of their patrons in the analyses in order to rule out the possibility

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[4]Recently, the same method was used by Ban *et al.* (2018) to identify the relative power of political actors in US history. The authors use coverage in major US newspapers, i.e., the relative amount of space devoted to particular subjects in newspapers, as their data.

[5]In the final dataset, out of total 72,231 articles mentioning national leaders, observations collected from the *Peoples' Daily* constitute the vast majority, contributing 81 percent, followed by and the *Guangming Daily* and *China Youth Daily*, representing 18 and 1 percent, respectively.
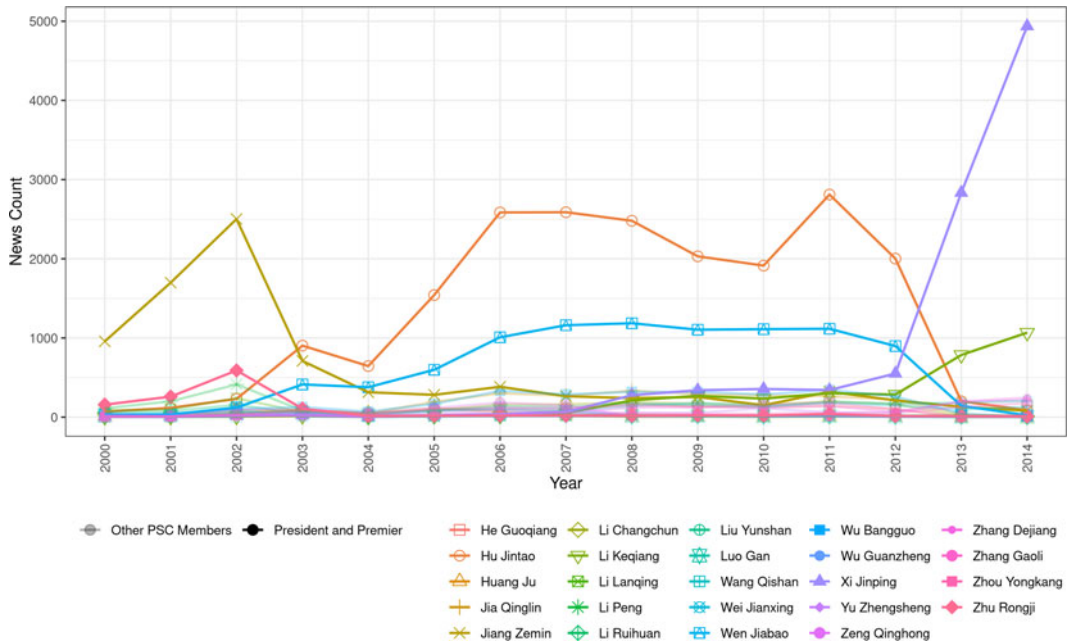
Fig. 1. Annual news reports on the Politburo Standing Committee members.

that the results are driven by a particular identification strategy.

$$\text{Power Difference}_{p_i p_j t} = \text{Patron Power}_{p_i t} - \text{Patron Power}_{p_j t} \qquad (2)$$

In the empirical analyses, we employ these two dynamic power indicators as the main independent variables. To confirm that the empirical findings are not based on a specific measurement strategy, we use the various alternative measures, including one based on the official ranking and a power index based on the connectedness of the patron's political network. In addition, we generate another power index from national news media reports, in which we restrict the media exposure to those articles that mention a PSC member's name in the headline, rather than in the text of the article.

Our main **dependent variable** is political competition among provincial leaders, measured through inter-provincial "negative" news reports. We employ regional news media coverage of corruption investigations that took place in other provinces. To capture the competitive nature of news reporting on corruption, we create a province dyad pairing a news reporting province (news province, i) and a reported-on province (event province, j).

To collect the news reports from each province, we scraped the news contents of 143 local mainstream newspapers, i.e., provincial and prefectural newspapers, in China from *WiseNews*. Among these 143 newspapers, 49 are party-line newspapers directly controlled by the provincial or major prefectural party committees, and the remaining 94 are commercial newspapers operated by regional news corporations (Table A.1). After selecting newspapers, we searched for news reports on corruption investigations using the keyword "*shuanggui*."[6]

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[6]*Shuanggui* refers to a unique intra-party CCP disciplinary process for party members suspected of corruption, conducted by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI, *zhongjiwei*) or the provincial CDI. Information on *shuanggui* is monopolized by the CCDI, and any related information is released selectively by the CCDI after consideration of the political impacts. Hence the coverage of any *shuanggui* case in a Chinese newspaper is only possible with the CCDI's approval. Local

We then created direct data for each province dyad for each year. We include 30 provincial-level administrative divisions, excepting Beijing.[7] Each province is coded as a news province and an event province for each year. In other words, the unit of observation is a pair of provinces consisting of one news (reporting) province and one event (reported on) province, with a value that captures the number of news reports published by the news province on corruption investigations in the event province in a specific year. This design of the dependent variable results in 13,050 province dyads (30 news provinces × 29 event provinces × 15 years) consisting of 450 leader-years (30 provincial party secretaries × 15 years).[8]

To identify the political network that exists between regional political leaders and top central leaders, we constructed a political elites dataset that captures details about the political careers of all provincial party secretaries and all CPS members during the period 2000–2014. We first incorporate the names of those provincial party secretaries from the *China Communist Yearbook* (*zhonggongnianbao*). We then extract biographical and career information from their personal biographies, including age, gender, place of birth, education, and work history, using the Chinese search engine *Baidu Baike*. Finally, we match the personal information and work histories of provincial leaders with information on the incumbent PSC members to construct faction networks for each provincial official. We assume a provincial party secretary is connected to a PSC member if they were born in the same province, graduated from the same school, or previously served in the same work unit for over a year, following Shih *et al.* (2012). More recently, scholars have argued that workplace connections are a more accurate measure of factional relationships (Jia *et al.*, 2015; Keller, 2016; Jiang, 2018). As the first robustness check, we employ the workplace connection exclusively.[9]

3.2 Specification

The analyses are based on the following empirical specification.

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\begin{aligned}
NegNewsCount_{ijt} = {} & \beta_1 PatronPower_{it} + \beta_2 PatronPower_{jt} \\
& + \beta_3 PS-GN\,SameFaction_{it} + \beta_4 PS-GN\,SameFaction_{jt} \\
& + \beta_5 AgeGap_{ijt} + \beta_6 TenureGap_{ijt} \\
& + X_{ijt}\mu + \eta_{ij} + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{ijt}
\end{aligned}
\tag{3}
$$

Our key dependent variable *NegNewsCount* represents the number of bilateral news reports published in province i (news province) on corruption investigations that occurred in province j (event province) in year t. To capture the dyadic reporting dynamics, we create two different news report variables: (1) the *number* of corruption investigation reports by i on corruption scandals in j and (2) the *share* of total news reports by i on event province j and j's prefectures that cover corruption investigations. Our independent variable is the power of the patrons connected to the leaders of the reporting and the reported-on provinces. We additionally examine the

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newspaper editors have some autonomy with regard to how deeply and frequently they cover a specific case, unless directed otherwise by the central propaganda department (CCPPD) or their local leaders.

[7]Many Beijing newspapers serve as *de facto* national newspapers or are known to have a close connection to nationwide newspapers due to the geographic proximity of operation units.

[8]The cutoff date for leadership is 30 June of each year, following Li and Zhou (2005).

[9]The definition and measurement of a workplace connection has varied across previous studies. We employ Shih *et al.* (2012)'s definition; we identify an official as being in a patron's faction if the official worked within two administrative steps of the leader within the same work unit for over a year. Jia *et al.* (2015) use a broader definition; officials are connected if they work in the same branch of the CCP or of the government at the same time. Jiang (2018) employs a more limited definition; two officials are connected when one is promoted by the other to a leadership position.

relative power of the patrons of the reporting and the reported-on provinces (*Patron Power$_{it}$* − *Patron Power$_{jt}$*).

We control for covariates affecting local leaders' political incentives or competitive behavior. First, *PS-GN Faction* is an indicator variable for cases where the party secretary and the governor of a province belong to the same faction. The rationale behind this variable is that belonging to the same faction may encourage a province's leadership team to attack another province or may insulate a province from negative media reports. It is also necessary to consider other individual-level confounders that may lead certain leaders to compete more intensely with each other. For instance, all else being equal, public officials with similar ages or years of tenure are more likely to be in competition for promotion in the following evaluation cycle. To address these incentives, we control for the age gap and the years-in-current-office gap between the party secretaries in the two provinces that form each dyad. Our variables are summarized in Table A.2.

Furthermore, to control for any unobserved characteristics specific to individual provinces, inter-provincial relationships, or particular years, we employ two sets of fixed effects: for province dyad (η_{ij}) and for year (λ_t). Province dyad fixed effects address not only province-specific effects but also dyad-specific effects. Province-specific effects are particularly important to address because Chinese provinces enjoy considerably different levels of media availability and freedom (Lei, 2016; Stockmann, 2013). They also address the estimation bias caused by certain provinces being reported on more frequently because their officials tend to be more corrupt, as in the case of Shanxi province (Lorentzen and Lu., 2018). Addressing dyad-specific effects is also crucial, as they will absorb the potential bias created from rivalry-prone provinces. Year fixed effects along with dyad fixed effects also prevent the possibility that certain events, i.e., a major event such as Bo Xilai's corruption case, drive our results. Finally, we use a linear model for panel data in the main analysis.[10] All errors are clustered at the dyad level to address the unique structure of dyadic data (Cameron and Miller, 2014; Aronow *et al.*, 2015).

4. Results

4.1 Media reports analysis

Before presenting the regression results, we draw a scatter plot with a lowess line to describe the pattern (Figure 2). The figure illustrates that the power of a news province's patron has a strong correlation with negative news reporting on other provinces. The results in Table 1 confirm the pattern and reject Hypothesis I. When a local leader is connected to a PSC member with greater political influence, the local leader is more likely to promote negative news reports on corruption investigations in other provinces. This suggests that factional competition encourages strong factions to attack weaker factions more frequently than the reverse. The findings are consistent in models (1) to (3), where we use the absolute number of negative reports, and in models (4) through (6) where we employ negative reports as a share of total news articles.

The analysis in Table 1 presents another interesting and important finding. While a strong patron facilitates negative news reporting on other provinces, having a strong political patron does not prevent provincial leaders from being the subject of reporting in provinces with rival leaders. The patron power of the leader of an event province fails to pass standards of statistical significance in all models. This finding implies that a factional relationship with a strong patron does not or cannot offer insurance against a provincial leader's political downfall.

To investigate whether the pattern of negative news reporting relies on the type of factional tie, we further examine the details of factional ties across provincial dyads. Models (2) and (5) further control for the factional ties of each provincial dyad to see if a particular type of dyad leads to more hostile news reporting. We control for cases where only the event province's party secretary

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[10]We employ a linear regression with many levels of fixed effects using the command *reghdfe* in STATA (Correia, 2015), as we regress with multiple levels of fixed effects and clustered standard errors.
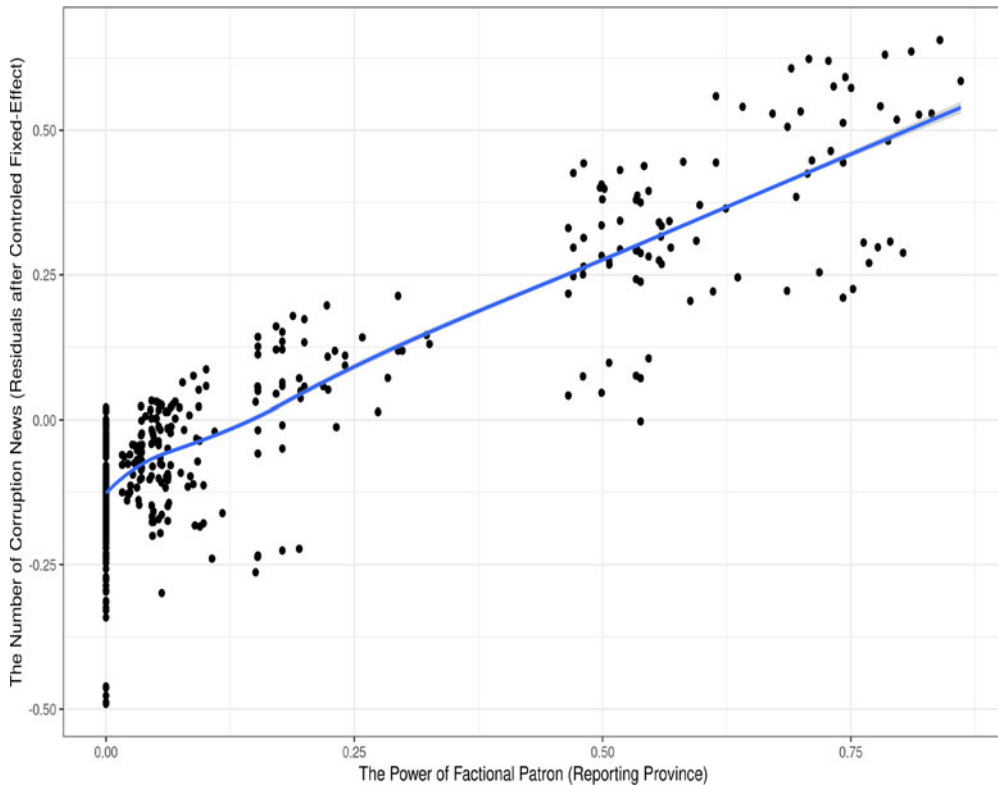
Fig. 2. Lowess plot over news province patron's power.

has a factional tie (news = 0 and event = 1), only the news province's party secretary has a factional tie (news = 1 and event = 0), and where both party secretaries have a factional tie (news = 1 and event = 1); the reference category consists of dyads in which neither party secretary has any factional tie. The analysis indicates that no particular type of dyad is more likely to promote negative news reports in terms of the absolute number of reports (model (2)). Regarding negative news as a share of total news, whereas this is the only model in which no significant effect of the patron's political influence is found, connected province leaders are more likely to report negatively on unconnected provinces (model (5)). In addition, we test whether having factional ties to a single patron versus multiple patrons affects the behaviors of provincial party secretaries (model (3) and model (6)). Again, the reference categories are the provincial leaders with no factional ties. We find no statistically significant difference emerging from having a multiplicity of factional ties.[11]

Next, we examine whether relative power differentials between the patrons of an event province and a news province affect the competitive behaviors of clients. The scatter plot with lowess line in Figure 3 and the analyses in Table 2 elucidate the motivation behind the promotion of negative news reports in regional newspapers, and the nature of elite competition. As we

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[11]One possibility is that the effects may differ between those whose patron is one of the top two leaders (i.e., president or the premier) and those not. In Table A.3 we divide the types of patrons and rerun the analysis. We find clear evidence of heterogenous effects that the negative interprovincial news reports increase when the patron of the reporting province is either the president or the premier and their power is large. We also find another heterogenous effect that when the patrons are not the top two leaders, the clients are more likely to be targeted when their patron's power is strong. These findings imply that the overall effects are not entirely driven by the factions of top two leaders.

Table 1. Patron's power and interprovincial news reports on corruption cases

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Corruption news			Corruption news/Total news		
Patron power for PS (news)	1.146***	1.108***	1.082***	0.216***	0.053	0.286***
	(0.221)	(0.218)	(0.219)	(0.055)	(0.065)	(0.076)
Patron power for PS (event)	0.173	0.196	−0.003	−0.039	−0.057	−0.108
	(0.176)	(0.175)	(0.173)	(0.055)	(0.060)	(0.094)
PS-GN same faction (news)	0.192+	0.175+	0.170	−0.088**	−0.165***	−0.140***
	(0.101)	(0.104)	(0.104)	(0.029)	(0.042)	(0.037)
PS-GN same faction (event)	0.088	0.098	0.072	0.072	0.064	0.062
	(0.096)	(0.103)	(0.107)	(0.069)	(0.067)	(0.066)
Age gap	−0.017	−0.017 +	−0.014	−0.002	−0.004	−0.009
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Years in office gap	−0.093***	−0.094***	−0.095***	0.005	0.007	0.008
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)
News=0 and Event=1		−0.058			0.490	
		(0.215)			(0.312)	
News=1 and Event=0		0.061			0.891*	
		(0.211)			(0.395)	
News=1 and Event=1		0.019			0.816*	
		(0.212)			(0.339)	
Single faction ties (news)			0.056			0.598***
			(0.109)			(0.171)
Multiple faction ties (news)			0.093			0.212*
			(0.103)			(0.103)
Single faction ties (event)			−0.163			0.013
			(0.101)			(0.066)
Multiple faction ties (event)			0.116			0.089
			(0.136)			(0.075)
News–event province dyad FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	12992	12992	12992	9380	9380	9380
Adjusted R^2	0.353	0.353	0.353	0.127	0.128	0.129

Notes. Standard errors clustered at the dyad level are reported in parentheses. +p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

hypothesize, on one hand, if a power struggle among factions relates to policy or ideological competition, one should expect more negative reporting among provincial leaders whose patrons have similar political influence, and strong factions should challenge one another. On the other hand, if factional competition is undertaken to limit winning coalitions, province leaders should be more likely to attack clients with weak patrons than clients backed by a strong patron. Our results show that the bigger the power gap between the patrons, the more frequent the negative reporting is, rejecting the former hypothesis and supporting the latter: provincial leaders connected to a strong patron are more likely to target members of the weakest faction.

4.2 Promotion analysis

Finally, we analyze whether these negative reports indeed harm the reported-on cadres and their factions. We expect that implicit trends in informal factional competition, measured by interprovincial news reporting on corruption investigations, impair the weaker elite factions and concentrate power within smaller ruling coalitions. To support the argument, we should not only show that strong factions target their weaker counterparts, but also that the consequence of such negative reporting is indeed the diminishment of the weaker faction's political power. To show this link in our empirical data, we examine how the promotion prospects of provincial party secretaries are affected by negative news reports from other provinces, above and beyond the effect of factional strength and the negative effects of the corruption investigations themselves.
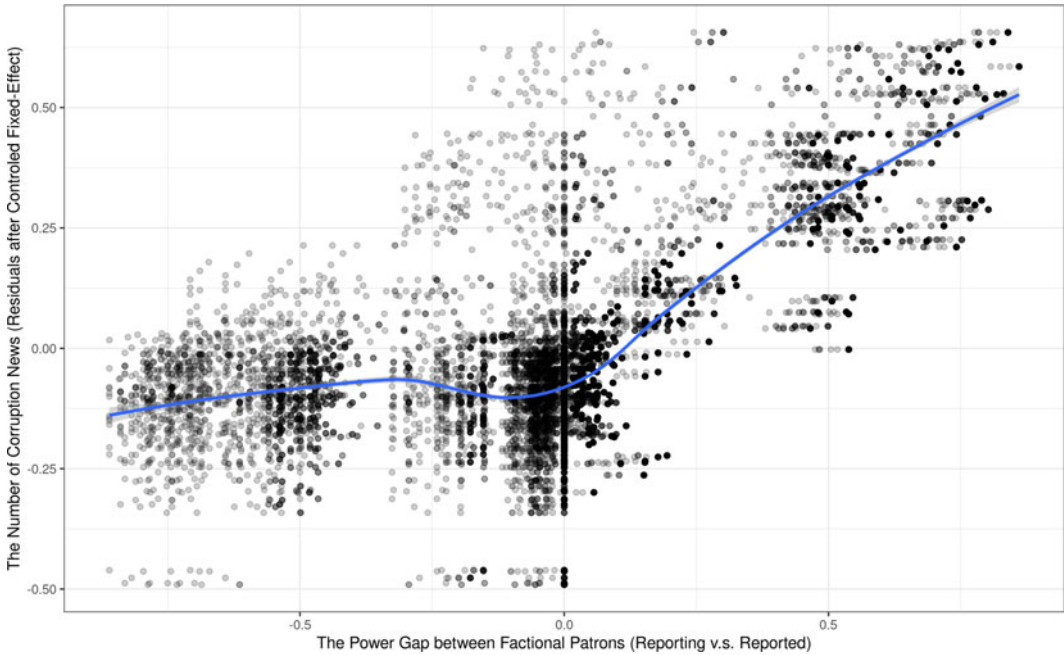
Fig. 3. Lowess plot over news–event province patrons' power difference.

Table 2. Power gap between news and event patrons and interprovincial news report on corruption cases

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Corruption news			Corruption news/Total news		
ΔPatron power	0.486***	0.456***	0.542***	0.127**	0.055	0.200**
	(0.120)	(0.125)	(0.130)	(0.042)	(0.046)	(0.064)
PS-GN same faction (news)	0.285**	0.232*	0.197+	−0.074**	−0.165***	−0.133***
	(0.110)	(0.109)	(0.107)	(0.027)	(0.042)	(0.036)
PS-GN same faction (event)	0.181+	0.154	0.099	0.082	0.064	0.065
	(0.094)	(0.101)	(0.107)	(0.067)	(0.065)	(0.065)
Age gap	−0.013	−0.016	−0.011	−0.001	−0.004	−0.008
	(0.010)	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Years in office gap	−0.084***	−0.087***	−0.093***	0.006	0.007	0.008
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)
News–event provinces connected	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Single/multiple patrons	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
News–event province dyad FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	12992	12992	12992	9380	9380	9380
Adjusted R^2	0.351	0.351	0.352	0.127	0.129	0.129

Notes. Standard errors clustered at the dyad level are reported in parentheses. +p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

To capture the effects of actual corruption cases, we collect data on all provincial- and prefecture-level corruption investigations from *Procuratorial Daily* (*Jiancha Ribao*) and include the number of these within a province each year as a key explanatory variable in the promotion regression. Faction politics have long been suspected to affect anti-corruption investigations (Zhu and Zhang, 2017). By including the variable capturing the number of local corruption cases, we attempt to distinguish the impact of faction politics on anti-corruption investigations from the effect of factional politics on regional media reporting. Another critical variable we control for in all models is a patron's political influence, i.e., a faction's power. This variable addresses

Table 3. Patron power, corruption news reports, and provincial party secretaries' promotion

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
			Political turnover			
	(4=Promotion; 3=lateral transfer/stay; 2=retirement; 1=termination)					
Major corruption cases	−0.033***	−0.032***	−0.032***	−0.033***	−0.039***	−0.040***
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Patron power	0.064	0.123	0.010	0.071	0.132	0.017
	(0.148)	(0.175)	(0.145)	(0.158)	(0.207)	(0.181)
Patron power × major corruption cases	0.182*	0.176*	0.179*	0.185*	0.045	0.060
	(0.088)	(0.089)	(0.087)	(0.088)	(0.123)	(0.120)
Reported by other province	−0.156**		−0.187***			
	(0.048)		(0.036)			
Reporting on other province		0.070*	0.119***			
		(0.034)	(0.030)			
Reported by other province (share)				−0.951		−1.129
				(0.769)		(0.749)
Reporting on other province (share)					−0.000	0.000
					(0.001)	(0.001)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	420	420	420	406	308	295
Adjusted R^2	0.259	0.220	0.283	0.236	0.197	0.246

Notes. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. Variables not shown include factional ties (single tie, multiple ties), GDP growth, local GDP per capita, cadre's age, age^2, and cadre's years of education. +$p < 0.10$, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

the boosting effect of a connection to a strong patron on a client's chances of promotion (Shih *et al.*, 2012; Keller, 2014). We also include the interaction term between corruption and patron power to address the possibility that the personnel outcome of a corruption investigation is influenced by a strong leader. That is, a provincial party secretary belonging to a strong faction may be less likely to be punished or even rewarded for anti-corruption efforts (Zhu and Zhang, 2017). We control for a number of covariates that previous studies have found to be related to cadre promotion such as local GDP growth, local GDP per capita, cadre's factional ties, age (in quadratic form), and education level (Li and Zhou, 2005; Shih *et al.*, 2012; Yao and Zhang, 2015).

The results in Table 3 highlight several notable features of factional competition and promotion mechanisms in China. First, corruption investigations conducted within a province significantly diminish the promotion prospects of the provincial party secretary. In all models, we find that corruption cases within a province have significant negative effects on the promotion prospects of the party secretary. In China's hierarchical leadership system, the regional leaders, especially party secretaries, who are considered to be political leaders rather than administrative leaders, are more likely to hold the political responsibility and suffer a substantial disadvantage with regard to promotion if more corrupt cadres are caught within their region. Second, a faction's power *per se* does not systematically increase the client's promotion probability. In all models, the estimates for patron's power are positive but statistically insignificant.[12] This finding suggests that factional connections are not a sufficient condition for promotion, particularly when one approaches the peak of the political pyramid. This does not mean, however, that there is no benefit to belonging to a strong faction. First, although the results are only marginally significant, strong faction members tend to benefit from major corruption cases. Furthermore, our results also show that news reports on corruption substantially reduce the promotion chances of the reported-on province's party secretary, while leaders of provinces where the media reports on other provinces' corruption cases enjoy a higher probability of promotion. In previous

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[12]We also examine whether the number of major corruption cases is correlated to patron's power and find no correlation.

analyses, we showed that provinces where party secretaries are connected to strong patrons publish more negative news articles on other provinces. Together with the results in Table 3, our analyses suggest that imbalanced negative reporting indeed works to promote strong faction members. As a result, such reporting patterns strengthen the strong faction while weakening weaker factions. We do not intend to claim that negative news reporting "determines" the promotion probability of provincial leaders. Rather, together with existent studies on factional ties and career advancement in China, this study sheds light on another channel through which faction competition may affect the promotion probability.

Why may the cumulative effects of regional news reports affect the promotion probability of provincial cadres in an authoritarian system? It is well-known that the career paths of public officials are determined by the organization department of the upper-level government, in our case, the organization department of the CCP. It is unlikely that the organization department follows all regional newspapers in China. However, while the Chinese personnel system, including promotion, demotion, and allocation of party cadres, is not transparent, one of the factors that the CCP formally emphasizes in cadre evaluation is public perception (Tang, 2016; Ding, 2020). Without an electoral mechanism, it is not straightforward to elicit the public's evaluation of a cadre or its governance, but the media strongly affect public opinion in China (Young, 2012). In such circumstances, the media's role is critical, as a channel through which both information from the government is delivered to citizens and the public's evaluations of the Party governance are shaped and conveyed to the regime (Lu and Ma, 2019).

4.3 Robustness checks

4.3.1 Alternative definition of factional connection
While the seminal empirical works by Shih (Shih, 2008a; Shih *et al.*, 2012) adopt a broad definition based on the traditional Chinese concept of *guanxi*, more recent empirical analyses find that coworker networks best capture the underlying social networks among Chinese elites (Jia *et al.*, 2015; Keller, 2016; Jiang, 2018). Taking the more recent approaches into account, we limit the definition of a factional connection to a connection through the workplace. The results shown in Tables A.4 and A.5 are largely consistent with the results in Tables 1 and 2.

4.3.2 Alternative measure of faction
Previously, we define each PSC member as a patron of a faction. Here, we adopt an alternative definition of factions as the two or three major groups involved in top-level politics in China, such as the Shanghai Clique, the Youth League, and the Princelings. Table A.6 describes how we group the PSC members under this new definition. Tables A.7 and A.8 replicate the main analyses using the new definition of factions, with different methods of classifying the patrons and clients with no clear connection to the major factions.[13] The findings remain similar.

4.3.3 Power concentration
Our findings may counter the views of many China scholars and researchers of authoritarian regimes, who have often observed a pattern in which the top political leader tends to suppress power struggles and political disputes in the name of national integration, if only as a matter of political rhetoric. More specifically, when the top central leaders amass significantly more power than other potential challengers, they tend to publicly stress strength in unity. In Table A.9, we test whether power concentrated in a top leader has a repressive effect on competitive behaviors within the ruling party. The findings are somewhat mixed. Models (1) to (3) show that a powerful president, measured by the degree of media exposure, significantly reduces the

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[13]For analysis in Table A.7 we merge the PSC members with no connection to the major factions as one separate faction, while Table A.8 defines them as individual factions.

number of negative media reports about political elites. Nevertheless, interestingly, the share of negative news (corruption reports divided by total news reports on the event province) increases significantly to the extent that the president's political power exceeds that of other patrons, indicating that the proportion of negative reports increases when the president is powerful. Our explanation is that when the president exerts greater influence, news reports concentrate on the president rather than on local issues in other provinces (Figure A.3).

4.3.4 Political uncertainty

We test whether the pattern of negative news reporting changes according to the political cycle by looking at the year of the National Party Congress (NPC), which is held every five years. The NPC is considered the most important event in Chinese politics, mostly because it selects the central leadership, including PSC members. In other words, the distribution of power is most uncertain in an NPC year, as a number of PSC members will be replaced, but future leadership has not yet been appointed. In our period of analysis, three NPCs took place, in 2002, 2007, and 2012. In Table A.10, we use an interaction term between the NPC year variables and the patron power of provincial leaders. While in non-NPC years the patron power of reporting province leaders is significantly associated with negative reporting, during the NPC year, there is a clear repressive tendency.

4.3.5 Type of newspaper

In addition, we examine how the unit of operation affects the inter-provincial reporting patterns described above. In China, while all local newspapers are supervised by the local government agency, the operating unit varies, especially across the commercial news press and the party or government press (Stockmann, 2013). If our argument is true, we should expect the findings to be more dramatic in party-line newspapers than in commercial newspapers, as party-line newspapers reflect the political incentives of local leaders more directly. The results presented in Table A.11 support our claim. Analyses restricted to party-line newspapers show much larger effects than those of commercial newspapers.

4.3.6 Alternative measures of patron power

Next, we examine alternative measures of patron power to show that an arbitrary definition of the distribution of power does not drive our core findings.

First, we employ a power measure based on PSC members' official ranking (Table A.12). The outcomes from the official rankings are consistent with the previous findings but somewhat weaker. For both measures of negative reporting, the patron power of a reporting province's leaders still has a significant and positive correlation with news reports on other provinces.

Second, in the main results section, our measure of patron power was based on the total number of newspaper articles covering all of a client's connected patrons. This measurement method inevitably assigns much greater patron power to clients with multiple factional ties. While there is no conclusion in the literature as to whether multiple ties indicate more political resources available to clients, we nevertheless wish to prevent any potential bias stemming from our measurement strategy. We employ the average patron power instead of total patron power as the independent variable. Table A.13 replicates the main analyses in Table 1 and 2. We find the results are qualitatively identical.

Third, instead of counting the appearance of the patron's name in the national news papers, we take a logarithmic transformation (Table A.14).

Fourth, in Table A.15, we use the appearance of a patron's name in the headlines of major newspaper articles, rather than the text of the articles, to construct a more conservative measure of patron power. Using this more conservative measure, we find that the results remain the same as the main findings.

Lastly, we generate and employ a power index for connectedness. We take the number of connected provincial party secretaries in a PSC member's network as a proxy of his political power. Table A.16 shows that the results of this network measure confirm that faction members of well-connected patrons are more likely to encourage negative reporting on other province.

5. Conclusion

This study examines whether local officials behave differently depending on their patron's political power. We use observations of inter-provincial news reports on corruption investigations to show competitive behaviors among members of different factions. Our analyses show that provincial leaders connected to politically strong patrons are more likely to promote negative news reporting on other provinces. Moreover, they are more likely to promote negative news reporting when the political power of their own patron is far greater than that of the patron of the event province's leader. While we do not intend to argue that local media competition determines the promotion prospects of public officials, the promotion probability of reported-on cadres diminishes with the reports. These findings imply that competition among informal political groups tends toward power concentration rather than power sharing.

Our findings suggest that informal factional competition in China has a tendency to further skew the unlevel playing field. Strong faction members attempt to limit power to a smaller coalition to maximize their survival and promotion probability, and no institution exists to check this power consolidation. Hence, our study implies that the recent personalization of power in China's central politics might not be a unique feature of the current leadership, but an outcome of latent behavioral patterns in China's elite politics.

Our study leaves a few critical questions for future research. First, we take our key explanatory variable, the power distribution among national leaders, as a given. Yet distributions of power may not be exogenous but rather an outcome of complex and consistent political interactions among elites at various levels. While our research design attempts to circumvent the reverse causality problem by using competitive behavior among local cadres as the dependent variable, we refrain from labeling the findings as causal, as we do not address the endogeneity of national leaders' power distributions. Second, and more fundamentally, we do not address the conditions under which some authoritarian regimes introduce formal power-sharing institutions while others allow transitory power-sharing outcomes as a consequence of internal competition. We also do not address how this difference affects long-term regime stability. Future research might build on our study to examine these aspects of authoritarian institutions and elite competition.

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