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## Managed Mobilization: Ethnic Identity and Political Participation in China

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### ABSTRACT

How does ethnic identity affect political participation in China? The Chinese government gathers information and shapes public opinion through mass mobilization. These efforts include the managed mobilization of politically sensitive ethnic minorities. We draw on a dataset of the preferred political activities among 8,000 individuals in China, including more than 1,500 ethnic minority group members and find that politically sensitive minority groups rarely stay silent when faced with problems. Instead, they are more likely than the majority Han to participate and express grievances. However, ethnic minorities overwhelmingly prefer political participation by directly contacting the government, that is, through institutionalized and carefully managed channels. We show that populist authoritarian governments encourage political action by ethnic minorities through institutionalized channels while penalizing confrontational activities. As these minorities are integrated into Chinese society, measured by language proficiency, they tend to become politically more sophisticated in using nontraditional channels such as the internet and confrontation for problem solving.

In this article, we explore political action by members of politically sensitive ethnic minority groups and their preferred channels for addressing problems with the government in authoritarian societies. In electoral contexts, ethnic minorities tend to participate in politics at lower rates than members of ethnic majority groups, although various factors, including socioeconomic status and opportunities for descriptive representation, also determine their level of participation.<sup>1</sup> In a non-democratic context, we still might expect lower rates of participation among ethnic minorities, perhaps due to the alleged repression of these groups. In contrast to this expectation, our study shows that ethnic minorities in authoritarian China participate at high rates and strongly prefer to express grievances through government-controlled channels. In the following discussion, we will embed this finding in a broader literature on political mobilization in authoritarian countries.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese governance relies on mass mobilization and public participation. Mobilization is critical for the government to shape and respond to public opinion. Different forms of participation carry different risks for participants and government and communicate different information about levels of grievance.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the government encourages participation by politically sensitive ethnic minority groups, but only through managed channels. To explore the choices of political activity among

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different ethnic groups, we draw on a new dataset of preferred political activities among 8,000 individuals in China, including more than 1,500 ethnic minority group members. We focus our analysis on Uyghurs and Tibetans—two of the largest and most politically sensitive ethnic groups in China. Overall, we find that Uyghurs and Tibetans are much more likely than Hans to actively participate and are more likely to prefer resolving issues by directly contacting the government. At the same time, among Uyghurs and Tibetans, those who are more integrated and speak better standard Mandarin, the official language of the government, are more likely to behave like the majority Han.

### **Mobilization, participation, and governance**

Mobilized political participation is a key component of contemporary authoritarian governance. Differing from the traditional characterization of the citizens in authoritarian and hybrid regimes as politically demobilized and apathetic,<sup>4</sup> a new wave of studies has focused on political mobilization in authoritarian states.<sup>5</sup> In authoritarian countries with strong state capacity, political mobilization is encouraged because the concern for out-of-control political activism is low.<sup>6</sup> In these societies, according to resource mobilization theory, authoritarian regimes are able to monopolize political organizations and their channels for mobilized mass political participation.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, authoritarian regimes routinely organize state-sponsored political participation to rally public support, eliminate potential rivals, and divide and rule among social and ethnic groups.<sup>8</sup>

Studies of ethnic conflict show that ethnic identity can be understood differently within the same ethnic group.<sup>9</sup> Authoritarian regimes are motivated to co-opt the members of ethnic groups and separate them from the radical wings of ethnonationalism.<sup>10</sup> These co-opted members of ethnic groups are willing to take side with the government because they see the radicalization of ethnonationalism through violence and terrorist attacks as against their ethnic beliefs, and it is their responsibility to join the government and fight radical ethnonationalism to protect their ethnic identity.<sup>11</sup>

In authoritarian China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also relies in part on public mobilization and participation to collect public opinion for policy making. Sometimes this process is referred to as the tradition of the Mass Line. The idea of the Mass Line comes out of Mao's writing before the Chinese Revolution, and has been used to mobilize support for anti-establishment campaigns such as the Cultural Revolution as well as Xi Jinping's recent anticorruption campaign.<sup>12</sup> The three critical components of the Mass Line include (1) direct contact between the state and society, (2) mobilization of the masses, that is, ongoing mass political participation, and (3) implicit mutual support and dependence between the state and society.<sup>13</sup> Since the Mao era, the mobilization capacity of the state has declined, but governance continues to rely on "managed" campaigns and large-scale participation.<sup>14</sup> Mobilization of the public is critically important for the state to gain information about support, policy effectiveness, and public demands. To this end, the state has developed institutional channels that provide opportunities for individuals (but not groups) within society to voice concerns and make demands on the state.<sup>15</sup> These institutional channels are particularly useful because the government can then understand and respond to public opinion among sensitive ethnic groups.

In this environment, Chinese citizens are more likely to be politically active than apathetic. Does such political activism also exist among ethnic minorities, particularly the politically sensitive groups that are under heavier government surveillance than the Han majority? One of the challenges of this mobilization—like political participation in democracies—is that not all groups of society participate at equal rates and “unequal participation means unequal influence.”<sup>16</sup> Unequal participation also means unequal buy-in and information transfer to the state. To address these concerns, under the leadership of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, Mass Line mobilization has focused on encouraging participation from groups of citizens who would not normally be inclined to actively participate in politics.

### **Politically sensitive ethnic groups: Uyghurs and Tibetans**

China today is explicitly a multiethnic country, but clearly dominated by Han in terms of population, language, and culture. According to the 7<sup>th</sup> population census, Han make up 91.11% of the total population. The other 55 recognized minority groups make up the remaining 8.89%.<sup>17</sup> Still, no ethnic group in China can be considered monolithic and there are cultural and linguistic cleavages within all nationalities.<sup>18</sup>

We focus on two of the largest and most politically sensitive ethnic groups in China: Uyghurs and Tibetans. These are two groups that Hans see as “outsider” minorities because they are easily identifiable as distinct and perceived as unlikely to assimilate.<sup>19</sup> Both groups have strong linguistic, religious, and cultural identities, and tend to be less integrated with the Han majority than most other minority groups in terms of both language and culture. Without proficiency in Mandarin (the official language), socioeconomic status, mobility, and integration in mainstream China is more limited.<sup>20</sup> They are considered sensitive due to ties to communities outside of China and external support for increased cultural autonomy, political representation, and even separatism.<sup>21</sup> At least some members of each ethnic group contest their identity and position in Chinese social and political life. The Chinese government is particularly sensitive to political actions that could be viewed through a lens of ethnic politics or separatism because it views separatism or “splittism” as an existential threat.<sup>22</sup>

The recent history of Xinjiang and political action by ethnic Uyghurs helps explain Chinese government attempts to manage political mobilization. Following the fall of the USSR, changes in the regional security landscape and the potential for support from members of the same religious or ethnic group across the border led to increased vigilance by the Chinese state.<sup>23</sup> After the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks in the US, the Chinese government has been particularly vocal about concerns related to religious terrorism, the recruitment of Uyghurs to Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, and the effects of links to such groups on domestic security.

In addition, a history of resistance to CCP rule and policy has led to concerns about ethnic discontent.<sup>24</sup> In Xinjiang, there were large protests in 1989 and into 1990. While these protests started among students sympathetic to pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen, they evolved and took on a religious and ethnic tone and spread across Xinjiang. Local People’s Liberation Army forces were reinforced with additional troops from other parts of China, the protest suppressed, and “separatists” executed. Riots

again broke out in 1997 and then in 2008–09 with much the same result. Most recently, in 2013 and 2014, alleged supporters of Uyghur independence also undertook violent acts outside of Xinjiang, in Beijing and Kunming.<sup>25</sup>

The level of sympathy and support for anti-CCP and violence among the wider population is unclear.<sup>26</sup> Despite its economic and military power, the CCP regime in Xinjiang feels the need to improve its legitimacy among many Uyghurs.<sup>27</sup> The Chinese government carefully monitors minority behavior and tries to distinguish trustworthy citizens from those who might cause trouble.<sup>28</sup> Uyghurs worry that voicing any opinions that could be construed as supporting “splittism” could be harshly punished. In Xinjiang, the mass line is embedded in China’s counterterrorism efforts in the guise of “community engagement.” Mass line ideology suggests that mobilization will result in legitimacy and promote state responsiveness, but efforts seem to focus on participation and mobilization as the ends rather than the means.<sup>29</sup> Recent efforts at reforming and increasing harmony in Xinjiang have led to the internment of at least one million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in “reeducation” centers.<sup>30</sup> The mass internment escalated in the spring of 2017, after our survey finished. In an environment of intense distrust and scrutiny, silence does not provide a clear enough signal of espousing CCP rule and can be interpreted as dissent. Providing information and intelligence to Party officials, speaking Mandarin, and otherwise conforming to Han cultural practices have helped some Uyghurs avoid suspicion and detention. Others, however, may not want to be associated with radical Islamism, and may willingly side with the government.<sup>31</sup>

Tibetans have a similar history of political activity and now encounter similar efforts to manage political mobilization. Unrest in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in 1988 and 1989 led to martial law and a tightened security regime.<sup>32</sup> The Chinese government began a campaign to restrict elements of Buddhist practice and undermine loyalty to the exiled Tibetan religious and political leader, the Dalai Lama, in 1994. While the restrictions started in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, they soon spread to Tibetan areas in Sichuan, Qinghai, Yunnan, and Gansu Provinces, where some 53% of Tibetans live.<sup>33</sup> Since then, there has been ongoing small-scale violence against the state and occasional public protests. Almost 150 protests and at least 3 riots broke out in 2008. Since then, more than 1,300 detentions, prosecutions and heavy repression have occurred, and yet continuing unrest among Tibetans have been reported, including at least 140 self-immolations.<sup>34</sup>

In sum, political activity by Tibetans and Uyghurs is viewed with suspicion and carefully monitored and controlled. To demonstrate loyalty, the government and CCP expect active participation through carefully managed channels, not just passive acceptance.

### **Channels for expressing grievances in authoritarian China**

The Chinese government has created several channels for participation and political activity to gain information for decision making without competitive elections.<sup>35</sup> These opportunities vary in terms of how public or private and collective or individual the channel is as well as the degree of control by the state and Party. In this section, we

discuss the various channels for mobilization,<sup>36</sup> generally, then discuss political action by ethnic minorities, specifically, in the subsequent sections.

One of the most commonly used institutional channels for expressing grievances is contacting the local governments and their functional bureaus. Aggrieved citizens can communicate their frustration directly so that local governments can prevent problems from intensifying and escalating to higher levels. Local officials are required to set aside regular time to meet with local visitors and to set up mailboxes to receive grievances. From the central government's perspective, well-functioning local governments and their handling of citizen grievances is extremely important because the process allows for the collection of information on public dissatisfaction and prevents the escalation of problems. In addition, by encouraging the use of local government channels, collective action such as protest and group petition can be prevented because local residents are more likely to bring their problems individually or in small groups to the local government.

The courts are another managed channel for aggrieved citizens. In the post-Mao era, the importance of the Chinese legal system has grown rapidly. The Chinese court is still tightly controlled by the CCP; procedural justice is far from the norm, and the protection of individual rights often has to give way to the interest of the state.<sup>37</sup> In addition, court litigation is a costly process. It requires knowledge, time, and money. People in the lower level of socio-economic status, including politically sensitive minorities, may be less likely to rely on the court to address problems.

Other institutional channels for voicing grievances are online commentary and the government-controlled media. These channels can provide information on local government performance and public dissatisfaction.<sup>38</sup> The government allows online criticism of the government, even in relation to sensitive topics, but is likely to censor posts related to collective action and potential collective action.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, government-controlled media often play a role in exposing local grievances and unpopular local officials and their policies, such as environmental pollution and corruption.<sup>40</sup> It remains to be seen if the Internet and the media play similar roles in politically sensitive minority regions since they are more tightly controlled following recent protests in Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>41</sup>

Public protest and petition are the more confrontational methods of addressing grievances. While the government is concerned about stability and carefully controls information that could lead to large protests, there are still "mass incidents" every day. Protests are allowed in part because they provide useful information about local issues and concerns. Protesters have learned to frame their concerns around local issues and the misapplication of policy rather than attack the overall legitimacy of the regime, the CCP, or the system itself.<sup>42</sup> To contain the risks from protest, the state tries to prevent geographic dispersion and contagion by limiting the spread of information about these protests to other potential participants.<sup>43</sup> Local protests are tolerated and even allowed to be reported in the media if they are not threatening to the central government and are instead opportunities for the government to be seen as responsive.<sup>44</sup> Still, information from protest is more public and carries a greater risk of contagion to other locations, groups, or even causes.

Petitions are often less public but still represent a confrontational method of addressing grievances. The petition system is designed to help address issues of governance quality and performance internally and provide relatively reliable information about “routine governance” issues.<sup>45</sup> The relatively private nature of the petitions allows the government to respond without public incident and thus control the spread of information about dissatisfaction and problems with governance. However, petition is a form of direct confrontation because petitioners can bypass local offices and directly report issues up the hierarchy to those in supervisory roles. As local officials do not want negative information shared with their superiors, they are particularly responsive when citizens threaten to report misbehavior to higher-level officials.<sup>46</sup> Local officials will also obscure public accusations of wrong-doing from their superiors.<sup>47</sup> However, such behavior also runs the risk of retribution because it subjects local officials to higher-level leaders’ criticism.

Taken together, the Chinese state gathers information on governance quality and citizen satisfaction through a variety of mechanisms, but each channel has different strengths and weaknesses in relation to the reliability, audience, and content. Lorentzen argues that the Chinese state has carefully created incentives to structure citizen behavior, maximize information collection and minimize risks.<sup>48</sup> Importantly, the state is able to adjust mobilization incentives to encourage the use of different types of participation, depending on individual characteristics such as ethnic identity. We expect that citizens who want a response from the government select their method of participation carefully and that ethnic minorities respond to incentives for using these channels differently than the majority Han.

### **Theoretical expectations: managed mobilization**

While we expect that the Chinese government wants reliable information about preferences from citizens of all ethnicities, the risks associated with different communication channels vary by ethnic group. In part because channels vary in the degree of institutionalization and directness of confrontation, the risks associated with action by sensitive ethnic groups are not the same as those associated with Hans. For this reason, the state has carefully structured the opportunities for aggrieved citizens to share information while still encouraging participation. While the state encourages communication and participation by politically sensitive groups, this mobilization is carefully managed so that ethnic minorities are encouraged and incentivized to use channels that are relatively private, institutionalized, and controlled.

*H1: First, we expect to see a high degree of political activity among the politically sensitive ethnic minorities*

The state relies on political activism for information and to promote state campaigns. Together with the CCP’s populist tradition of mass mobilization, state-sponsored affirmative action policy encourages awareness of minority groups’ social and political rights and the idea of ethnic equality. For many, this policy is merely lip service. Yet listening to such propaganda every day may create a priming effect among the ethnic minorities and lead to more political activism. With a strong awareness of their rights and expected behavior, we expect that politically sensitive ethnic minorities are more

likely to give voice to their grievances rather than remain silent. The Party sometimes even provides material inducements to encourage minorities to provide actionable information to officials.<sup>49</sup> Alternatively, silence can be interpreted as dissent.<sup>50</sup>

*H2: Second, we expect that very few ethnic minorities favor confrontational modes of addressing grievances*

Protests and public action by ethnic minorities involve high risk for the Chinese state because of the potential to engage sympathetic members of that ethnic group and dissatisfaction to extend to other issues affecting co-ethnics. The government is particularly concerned that ethnic solidarity and a history of relatively widespread ethnic unrest will fuel protest contagion—the spread of protest from one community to other areas—if public protests are allowed to take place at all. Even if the original reason for protest is limited in scope, simple complaints can transform into anti-state movements. In the past, the government has interpreted ethnic grievances as existential threats and simple political complaints as anti-regime.<sup>51</sup> In response to state efforts to limit public and contentious actions and steer grievances through channels that are more private and more easily controlled, we expect survey respondents to hold strong preferences for government-managed channels.

The government's ability to provide nuanced responses to protest may be more limited in areas dominated by ethnic minority populations. Experience has shown that, once started, protests are hard to contain. In Xinjiang, the 1989 protests started in Urumqi but then spread to cities and towns across the region. In Tibet, protests started in Lhasa, spread to the rest of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), then to Tibetan areas outside the region. The government is concerned that individual protest events, rather than just providing reliable information, will serve as the “spark” that would start a revolution or at least broader separatist activity.<sup>52</sup> Adding to this worry, the government does not know how widespread grievances really are.<sup>53</sup> There is high risk, therefore, in finding out about strong anti-CCP sentiment through mass incidents.

Members of an ethnic group learn from their own experience and the experience of others and choose to take political action that they think the government will respond to most favorably. Experience shows that the government is likely to crack down very severely on public protests related to politically sensitive issues such as ethnic identity or separatism. Even though many observers think the 2008 protests in Tibet and Xinjiang were about general grievances and not necessarily separatism,<sup>54</sup> the possibility of viewing these actions as separatist or anti-CCP is too risky. The lesson for the state is that public protest and airing of grievances should be avoided in order to prevent protest contagion to co-ethnics. Tibetans and Uyghurs are well aware of the political risks of speaking out and potential for repression, arrest, or worse.<sup>55</sup> Thus, only the most seriously aggrieved or risk-acceptant would be willing to choose a confrontational course of action over others that are more likely to receive a more favorable response.

*H3: Third, when faced with a problem, we expect members of politically sensitive ethnic groups to prefer government-managed channels of redress*

For ethnic minorities, participation is the best way to ensure their actions are interpreted as loyalty to the state system, even if they are complaining about government

policy or officials. While research shows that online requests for government help overall receive slower response rates if the name of the petitioner is Muslim, in regions with larger local Muslim populations, response time for minorities improve.<sup>56</sup> Thus, in Xinjiang and Tibet, regions where the government is particularly focused on responding to grievances among Uyghurs and Tibetans, minorities can expect a highly responsive government. This responsiveness then reinforces a preference for choosing government channels. Direct communication and compliance with the government can even be met with material rewards.<sup>57</sup> In addition, government offices in minority regions are typically staffed by at least some members of local ethnic groups. The presence of minority officials may help encourage contacts by co-ethnics, as in other countries.<sup>58</sup> In part, co-ethnic officials are more likely to speak local minority languages, making direct communication through state channels relatively easy. Therefore, direct engagement via government managed channels is the safest way for ethnic minorities to seek redress.

*H4: Fourth, we expect that the ability to communicate in the language of the state—standard Mandarin—will increase the variation in the types of mobilization favored by ethnic minorities*

Mandarin proficiency is particularly important for accessing channels such as the media, Internet, and courts. Uyghur and Tibetan languages are from different language families than Chinese and use unrelated scripts. In autonomous regions, minorities are supposed to be able to use their native language to speak with local officials rather than relying on Mandarin or dialects of Chinese.<sup>59</sup> Those who can speak Mandarin can access the full range of channels, similar to ethnic Hans, rather than rely exclusively on co-ethnic officials. In addition, proficiency in Mandarin allows a level of integration that may be accompanied by better understanding and familiarity with alternative options for addressing grievances.

In sum, while the Chinese government encourages mass mobilization as a way to shape and respond to public opinion, mobilization among politically sensitive ethnic minorities is likely to follow a more carefully managed pattern. Our expectations are that compared to the Han majority, Uyghurs and Tibetans are (1) more likely to voice their opinion than remain silent, (2) less likely to prefer confrontational channels such as protest and petition, (3) more likely to directly address the government when they have an issue, and (4) behave more like Han if they have higher Mandarin proficiency.

## Research design and data

Our data are from a telephone survey of 8,000 urban residents in 17 cities in four waves of 2,000 respondents in October 2013, May 2014, October 2014, and May 2015. They were conducted by the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University. The bi-annual surveys were carried out in four waves and were designed to track public satisfaction with government policies over time (see appendix for survey details). We selected cities based on their political, economic, cultural, and ethnic importance and the representativeness of their geographic locations. Within each city, respondents were randomly selected in four steps to assure sample representativeness. First, the beginning

7 digits of the 11-digit mobile phone numbers were randomly chosen. Second, the last 4 digits within each 7-digit number were again randomly selected. Third, age, gender, and ethnicity quota were created based on the 6<sup>th</sup> Census data in each city and applied to the final sampling process.<sup>60</sup> Finally, a weight variable is created in the dataset using census information to assure the ultimate representativeness of the dataset.

One of the most valuable components of the survey is the oversampling of 15 ethnic minority groups in the sample, consisting of 1,500 (almost 20%) of the total 8,000 respondents (see appendix for groups). The questionnaire was also translated into Uyghur and Tibetan, and native speakers of the two languages conducted interviews. Mobile phone was the only way to access the Uyghur and Tibetan populations because face-to-face survey interviews have been banned since the unrests took place in these two regions in 2008 and 2009. Our focus in this paper is on comparing Han with Tibetans and Uyghurs, and we have dropped the other minority respondents from our analyses. Our subsample thus includes 165 Tibetans, 415 Uyghurs, and 5,766 Hans.

### **Choice of action**

The task here is to assess variation in the likelihood of participation in different types of activity in response to problems with the government. The key dependent variable is based on the question “if you are unfairly treated by the government or if you are dissatisfied with a governmental official or a government policy, such as government corruption, unfair land acquisition, forced taxation, or unfair treatment by local street police, which choice of action are you most likely to take?”<sup>61</sup> Possible responses include protest and petition, going to court, the media, or the Internet, finding the relevant government department, or doing nothing.

These possible responses vary both in the level of state control and in the level of publicity. For example, going to the government directly is both private and highly institutionalized and thus relatively low risk for the government. Using the media or Internet is more public and thus slightly higher risk, although these channels are still controlled by the state. Protesting, however, is less easily managed by the state. We include petitioning and the survey option of “other more radical means of problem solving” as confrontation because these activities demonstrate open conflict with local leaders and are therefore risky.<sup>62</sup>

Table 1 displays the number of respondents and the weighted percent of each ethnic group that selects each type of action. On average among all groups, the most popular recourse (approximately 38%) is approaching the government directly. About 12% of respondents would go to the courts, while 7% and 11% would use the media and Internet, respectively, to address grievances. Only 14% reported they would prefer petitioning, protesting, or taking more confrontational action. Finally, almost 18% of people say they would take no action at all.

Table 1 highlights clear differences across ethnic groups. Interestingly, and as we expected, the politically sensitive minority groups are only rarely passive (Hypothesis 1). Hans are by far the most likely to report that they prefer confrontation than the other two ethnic groups (Hypothesis 2). In contrast, Uyghurs and Tibetans prefer to seek recourse by directly addressing the government (Hypothesis 3).

**Table 1.** Action by each ethnic group (weighted %).

Ethnic group	If you are unfairly treated by the government, which choice of action are you most likely to take?						Total
	No action	Ask gov't	Courts	Media	Internet	Confront	
Han	1,226 22.2%	1,672 29.6%	683 11.6%	817 13.4%	583 9.4%	785 13.9%	5,766 100%
Uyghur	29 7.1%	331 79.8%	36 8.7%	10 2.5%	2 0.5%	7 1.5%	415 100%
Tibetan	3 0.3%	96 63.7%	52 29.2%	7 6.3%	6 0.5%	1 0.1%	165 100%
Total	1,258 17.8%	2,099 37.7%	771 14.24%	834 11.7%	591 7.5%	793 11.0%	6,346 100%

Sources: Chinese Urban Surveys (Oct13, May14, Oct14 and May15).

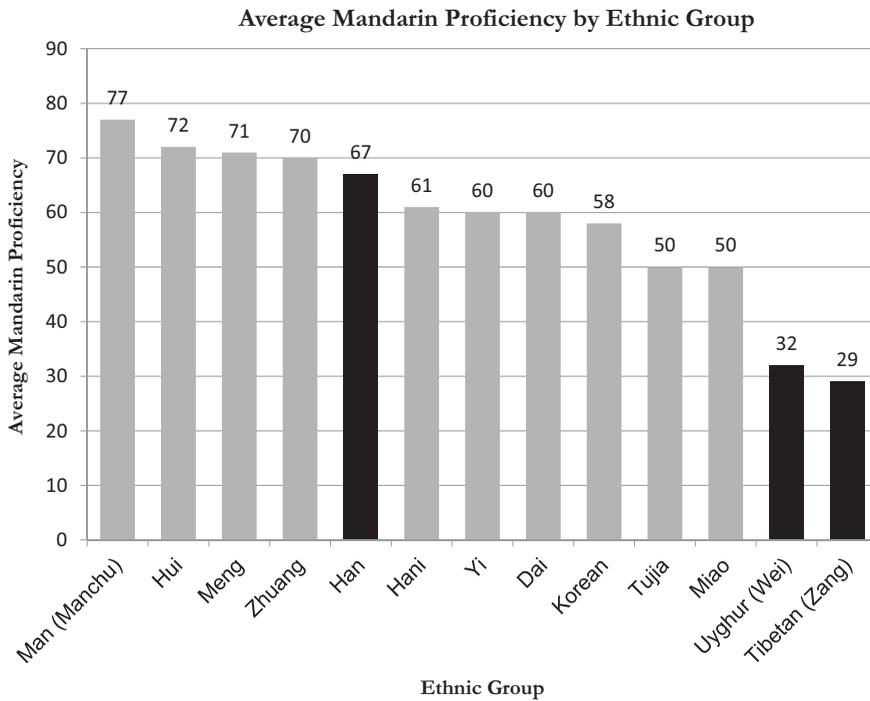
### Control variables

We expect that social and contextual barriers to action matter.<sup>63</sup> We therefore control for age, years of education, gender, social status, income, Mandarin ability, and the residence status of each respondent (local or migrant and rural or urban *hukou*). Summary statistics for the whole sample and by ethnic groups are included in the appendix (Supplemental Tables A1 and A2).

There are two notable differences between ethnic groups on key demographic factors. First, Hans are more educated than any other ethnic group, which could affect access to government offices and knowledge about the methods of addressing problems with the government. Second, and most importantly, minority proficiency in Mandarin is markedly lower than among Hans. While Mandarin is the official language of the state and state media and is taught in schools, proficiency varies widely. Many minority ethnic groups, including Uyghurs and Tibetans, have their own languages, but most regions also have local dialects, some of which are very different from Mandarin (for example, Cantonese). In the 4<sup>th</sup> wave of the Chinese Urban Survey conducted in May 2015, we asked the respondents about their Mandarin proficiency.

Figure 1 shows the average proficiency of each ethnic group on a scale of 0–100. The Mandarin ability of the Han population (67) is much higher than Uyghurs or Tibetans (32 and 29, respectively). Studies have shown that Uyghurs and Tibetans who speak better Mandarin may have more opportunities to improve their economic conditions.<sup>64</sup> What we are interested in finding in this study is how such language integration will affect Uyghurs' and Tibetans' political behavior.

Research on “reeducation” efforts in Xinjiang highlight the importance of Mandarin proficiency for Uyghurs. Officials trying to identify “extremist religious behavior” evaluate 75 behaviors, including the willingness to allow children to learn Mandarin and support of bilingual education.<sup>65</sup> Mandarin proficiency is seen as a sign of integration and loyalty, and “reeducation” includes Mandarin lessons. Zenz even reports that one person was able to avoid being sent to reeducation classes by demonstrating their Mandarin proficiency.<sup>66</sup> These studies point to the importance of Mandarin for integration, as a signal of trustworthiness, and as a sign of assimilation with cultural expectations. We expect Mandarin therefore allows more leeway for participation and action.



**Figure 1.** Mandarin proficiency by ethnicity (weighted %). *Sources:* Chinese Urban Surveys, May15.

### **Data reliability**

One concern about data related to China, especially survey data, is that individuals have an incentive to lie to surveyors, just as they have an incentive to lie to the government. In the 4<sup>th</sup> wave of the survey, we included a list experiment to detect social desirability bias related to bribery (more details in the appendix). We asked the Han and Uyghur respondents explicitly if they ever bribed an official, and 15% Han and 11% Uyghurs answered yes. The list experiment is designed to allow the respondents to admit their bribery covertly. In the list experiment, 22% Han and 24% Uyghurs admitted to bribery. In other words, about 7% (22–15%) of Han and 13% (24–11%) of Uyghur respondents hid their bribery when they were asked directly. Only 6% more Uyghurs shied away from this sensitive question than the Han respondents. This difference in single digit between the two ethnic groups is unlikely to change the overall difference between the various ethnic groups in [Table 1](#), where most of the gaps are in double digits. Admittedly, this is only an indirect measure of political sensitivity and the effect of being interviewed.

### **Multivariate analysis**

Because the dependent variable has six unordered categories (no action, approaching government, courts, media, internet, and open confrontation), we used a multinomial logistic regression to assess the relative likelihood that an individual in each group will take each action. Additional analyses test of the effect of Mandarin proficiency on the first and second choices of action for Tibetans and Uyghurs relative to Hans. Finally,

**Table 2.** Predicted probability of action by ethnic group.

	No action		Ask gov't		Courts		Media		Internet		Confront	
Han	0.184	***	0.350	***	0.129	***	0.103	***	0.083	***	0.150	***
Uyghur	0.059	***	0.811	***	0.075	***	0.036	***	0.004	–	0.015	**
Tibetan	0.009	–	0.489	***	0.285	***	0.207	**	0.009	–	0.001	–

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ .

$N = 6,195$ .

Sources: Chinese Urban Surveys (Oct13, May14, Oct14 and May15).

Note: Predicted probabilities are converted from log-odds of multinomial logistic regression with robust standard errors. Age, education, social status, gender, local *hukou*, geographic location at provincial level, and wave are included in the analysis but not shown here. The full model of the multinomial regression is presented in supplemental appendix Table A3.

we check the robustness of results with matching and multiple imputation. Our findings are consistent across model specifications and demonstrate that there are clear differences in preferred behavior by different ethnic groups.

We start with a simple model of the relative probability of different types of political action among ethnic groups. Controls include age, years of education, social status, gender, local *hukou* status, and regional and survey wave controls. Because we include only Han, Uyghur, and Tibetan respondents, our model includes 6,195 observations. For ease of interpretation, we converted the log-odds to predicted probabilities of taking each type of action (Table 2) but include the original multinomial logistic regression results in the appendix (Supplemental Table A3).

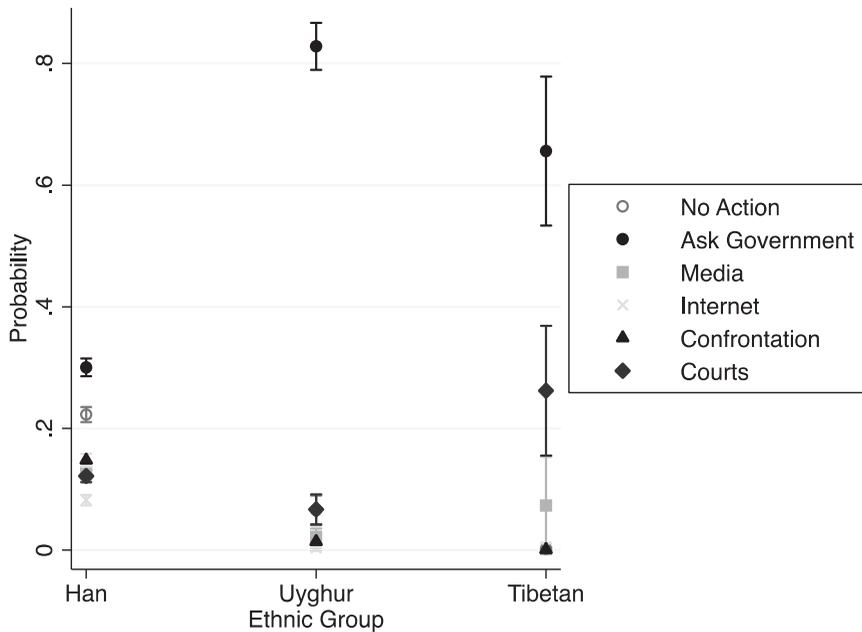
When asked what their first recourse would be, Han are almost evenly split between asking the government (35%), using publicity through the media or Internet (19%), and taking no action (18%). Relative to other minority groups, Han are the most likely to report that they would take confrontational measures like petitions and protest.

In contrast, both Tibetan and Uyghur respondents report that their first choice is to directly ask the government for help. The probability that an aggrieved Uyghur respondent would go to the government directly is particularly high at 0.81. As the results in Table 2 demonstrate, ethnic minorities strongly favor asking the government over other possible options and at a much higher rate than the ethnic majority Hans.

To better visualize the results of this initial analysis, Figure 2 displays the predicted probability of each type of action for each ethnic group with the 95% confidence intervals. Clearly, asking the government is the most likely option for Uyghurs and Tibetans and is significantly more likely for these two groups than for Hans (Hypothesis 3). The likelihood of confrontation is particularly low for both Uyghurs and Tibetans. In fact, only one Tibetan and seven Uyghur respondents reported that their first choice is confrontation (Hypothesis 2).

For both Uyghurs and Tibetans, taking no action is also quite unappealing—there is only a 6% chance that a Uyghur respondent would forego action and far less than that for Tibetans (Hypothesis 1).

It is also interesting to note the differences in responses and the likelihood of action between Tibetans and Uyghurs. Clearly Uyghurs are less likely than Tibetans to use alternate institutions of the media, Internet, or even the courts. Some of these differences may be related to integration and the availability of alternate institutions in predominantly Uyghur and Tibetan areas. We therefore turn to one way to measure integration: Mandarin proficiency.

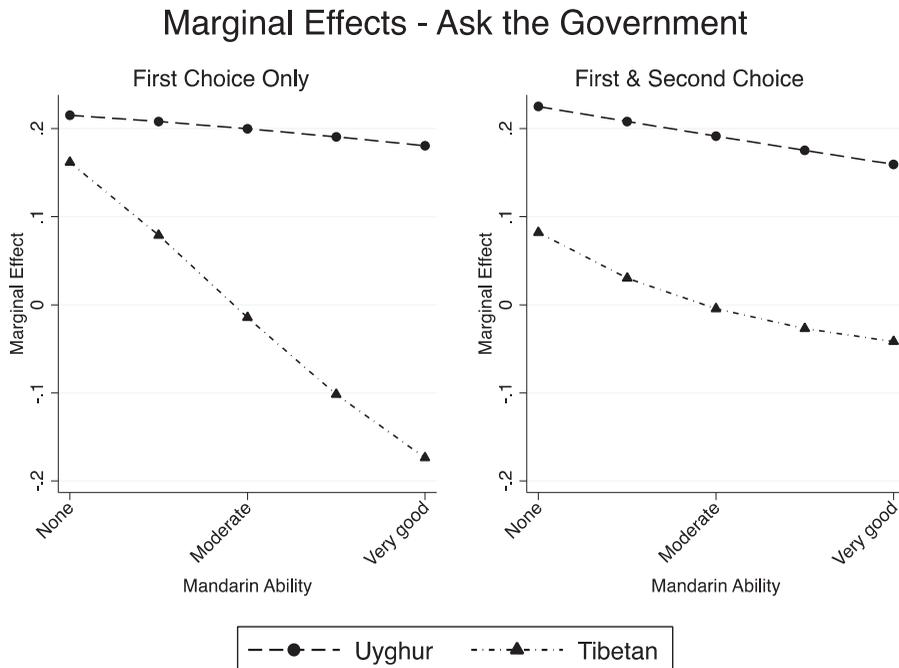


**Figure 2.** Predicted probability of action by ethnic groups with 95% CIs. The predicted probability that each ethnic group will take each type of action. Results are based on multinomial logistic regressions presented in the [supplemental appendix \(Table A3\)](#).

### **Mandarin proficiency and political action**

Language is one of the key barriers to certain channels of political action. Local government offices should include minority staff and be able to speak the local minority language, to the fullest extent possible.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, the media, courts, and the Internet predominantly use Mandarin or at least Chinese characters. We expect that Mandarin proficiency opens new channels for expressing grievances, allows access to alternatives to visiting Uyghur- and Tibetan-speaking government officials, and may signal better understanding and familiarity with both state power and methods of resolving problems. We therefore examine the effect of Mandarin ability on each political action.

In the fourth wave of our survey, respondents were asked about their first choices of action if mistreated by the government (as discussed in [Table 2](#)) and then asked what their second choice would be if the first was not successful. Note that respondents can select the same type of action for their first and second choice of action. Based on these questions, we created six outcome variables, one for each type of action. From lowest to highest, the outcomes are: (0) not a selected action, (1) second choice of action only, (2) first choice of action only, (3) first and second choice of action (the values, scaled 0–1, are summarized in [Supplemental Table A4](#)). We analyze the likelihood of selecting each outcome separately instead of including all choices of action into one regression so that we can take advantage of the ordered nature the selections.<sup>68</sup> We use ordered logistic regressions to analyze the relative likelihood of different ethnic groups choosing each type of action. Each of the six political actions, now with four ordered values, is the dependent variable for one analysis. Our interest here is whether Mandarin proficiency changes the differences in preference between ethnic groups, so key independent



**Figure 3.** Marginal effects—ethnic groups and Mandarin proficiency. The marginal effects of ethnic groups on asking the government as a first choice (left) and both first and second choice (right). Results are based on ordered log logistic regressions presented in the [supplemental appendix \(Table A5\)](#). See [Supplemental Figure A2](#) for the effect of mandaring proficiency on all types of political actions (ask gov't, courts, media, internet, courts, protest, and no action).

variables include ethnicity, Mandarin proficiency, and their interaction. Control variables are age, education, gender, CCP membership, household registration status, and region (results are in [Supplemental Tables A5](#)). We focus our discussion on asking the government, but all results are included in [Supplemental Table A5](#). Only some interaction effects are statistically significant, but the results still suggest a general pattern that language proficiency encourages Uyghurs and Tibetans to diversify the channels of political participation for these ethnic groups. Uyghurs and Tibetans are still more likely to approach the government than Han, but minorities with higher levels of Mandarin proficiency prefer a more diverse set of activities. While low Mandarin proficiency may limit the opportunities to use the nontraditional channels (Figure 2A in supplemental appendix), overall ethnic minorities remain highly mobilized and actively communicate with the government.

[Figure 3](#) shows the marginal effect of ethnic difference on the choice to ask the government as only the first or both the first and second choice of action. The figure highlights the declining marginal effect of minority status compared to Han as Mandarin proficiency improves, especially among Tibetans. Overall, the results suggest that minorities with better Mandarin proficiency are more similar to Hans in their preferred choice of action (Hypothesis 4).

There are some interesting differences and similarities between the two ethnic groups. Tibetans were more likely to go through courts than Uyghurs ([Table 1](#)), perhaps due to

the difference in minority policies in the two regions. It is likely that the use of courts was discouraged in Xinjiang due to the concern of publicizing private dissatisfaction through court cases, which may trigger collective action in a politically charged region, where Tibet was relatively calm during the time of our surveys. Participation through nontraditional channels such as protest and internet as well as political activism increased significantly among both Uyghurs and Tibetans through language integration (see [Figure A2 in supplemental appendix](#)). This is partly due to their ability to acquire more political information through the common language, and partly because of the reduced fear by the government about radical separatist movement under greater integration of the politically sensitive ethnic groups into the mainstream Chinese society. This integration effect also is reflected among Uyghurs and Tibetans in their tendency to increase their political activism through channels other than directly contacting the government.

### **Robustness checks**

To check the robustness of our findings, we replicate our analysis using coarsened exact matching and multiple imputation. Due to space considerations, we include tables and more detailed explanation in the appendix ([Supplemental Tables A6–A9](#)). We employ coarsened exact matching (CEM) to pair each minority observation with a similar Han resident based on covariate similarities.<sup>69</sup> The goal of this analysis is to create a set of observations that are balanced on age, education, social status, gender, and hukou status. We use CEM because our covariates are both categorical and continuous and exact matching is unlikely to produce many pairs and is unnecessary to identify appropriate pairs. For example, CEM allows us to find pairs that are close in age, thus allowing for consideration of generational or age effects without the unnecessary constraint of the pair being the exact same age. The results are consistent with our previous analyses in terms of magnitude and significance (see [Supplemental Tables A6–A8](#)). Uyghurs and Tibetans are more likely than Hans to approach the government when they face a problem.

In addition, because some of our variables—including Mandarin ability—have high rates of missingness, we repeated our analyses after filling in our missing data with multiple imputations. Overall, there are no notable differences in the significance or magnitude of relationships estimated with and without imputed data (see [Supplemental Table A9](#)). The control variables include our index of government satisfaction and Mandarin proficiency, income and rural *hukou* as well as the originally included age, education, social status, gender, local *hukou*, and region. Consistent with our previous findings, the relative likelihood that an individual will choose to go to the government over stay silent is higher for members of these minority ethnic groups than for Han.

Finally, we have changed the specifications of our main analyses. We disaggregated petitions from confrontational activities ([Supplemental Table A11](#)) with no notable changes in results. Next, we replicate the main analysis using clustered standard errors ([A12](#)). Clustered standard errors assumes that observations are independent across groups but not within groups. We also conducted individual logistic regressions for

each outcome relative to no action (A13). The results are nearly identical to the main analyses in terms of significance and magnitude.

## Discussion

Our findings in this study confirm the theoretical expectations about political action among China's politically sensitive ethnic minorities. First, the public is highly active and mobilized in China. Broadly speaking, political inaction remains unappealing, but is particularly unlikely for Uyghurs and Tibetans. The Chinese government is highly sensitive to public opinion but needs information about public opinion in order to effectively respond. The government desires communication from ethnic minorities especially, since they have relatively little information about the true preferences of Uyghurs and Tibetans.<sup>70</sup> For minorities, silence does not provide a clear signal of cooperation or loyalty and leaves room for misinterpretation. Getting reliable information from ethnic minorities is difficult but expanding the lines of communication offers the impression that the state actually listens to minorities. The high level of activism, especially among minorities, corresponds to state efforts to mobilize the population in general, as well as to the ongoing need for information relevant to the experiences of ethnic minorities, specifically.

Second, ethnic minorities in China prefer government-managed channels to solve problems, particularly visiting government offices directly. While both Uyghurs and Tibetans are much more likely than Han to ask the government directly for assistance, Tibetans are sometimes more willing to address grievances through the courts. Still, the courts are controlled by the government and thus carefully monitored and managed by the state.

Further, while Hans are more likely to consider confrontational action, it is unlikely that Uyghurs and Tibetans will confront the government directly. These differences between Hans and ethnic minorities are reliable across our analyses and remain stable when we control for satisfaction with the government and the level of integration of the ethnic minorities. The contrast between the high frequency of visiting government offices and avoiding confrontational behavior, such as protest, is the consequence of the structural incentive fostered by the current ethnic policy. In other words, the government incentivizes different behaviors for Uyghurs and Tibetans than for Hans. Mobilization is still promoted, but much more carefully managed for ethnic minority groups than for the majority Han.

Finally, language integration changes the patterns of activity among ethnic minorities and Hans. Mandarin proficiency diversifies the channels of political participation that are open to Uyghurs and Tibetans. Those with better Mandarin ability are less reliant on government offices and more able to take advantage of alternative methods of redress. One implication is that we can expect these ethnic groups to be more vocal in voicing their demands as they become more integrated into the common language environment. Such increased political activism, however, may not be as threatening to the CCP in the future, since language integration may also change how they perceive their political and cultural identities and provide other opportunities.

In the years since our survey was conducted, there has been a reported increase in internment of Uyghurs and other minorities in “reeducation” camps.<sup>71</sup> Initial reports of these institutions surfaced as early as 2013, but intensified since the spring of 2017, a year and a half after our survey concluded.<sup>72</sup> Even though the mass reeducation program likely didn’t start until after our survey completed, it is important to keep in mind that minorities in Xinjiang, especially, live in a political environment where extreme state action is possible. The effort to conform with state expectations—including directly communicating and providing information to the government—is even more urgent when distrusted radical minorities are detained.

The key lesson from this study is that direct government channels are more popular among Uyghurs and Tibetans than among Han. One of the reasons the government tolerates protests and the public airing of grievances among Han in particular is that they provide information; other forms of communication are less reliable. This begs the question of whether our respondents are misrepresenting their preferred course of action, deliberately or not. Hypothetical questions pose a certain challenge as individuals tend to overestimate the likelihood that they will take action, especially legal action.<sup>73</sup> However, it’s not clear that minorities would respond to hypothetical scenarios differently. The list experiment embedded in the survey suggests a relatively small chance for the minorities to shy away from politically and socially sensitive questions or answer questions differently from Hans. Even if the respondents were prevaricating, our results are noteworthy. Typically, we expect people to falsify responses in a way that reflects social desirability and/or political expediency. Interestingly, when we asked individuals which avenues they would pursue when faced with a problem, they responded by saying that they would seek the assistance of the government as opposed to remaining silent. We interpret their willingness to communicate with the government directly as a signal that the government has incentivized people to report problems. This choice is pronounced, especially among the most sensitive ethnic groups, where the politically desirable action is to prioritize communication over silence and inaction. We conclude that this finding represents a compelling paradigm of the way government institutions shape and manage mobilization among ethnic minorities in authoritarian societies.

## Conclusion

While in many contexts, ethnic minorities engage in political activity at lower rates than members of larger ethnic groups, this is not the case in China. In this article, we compare the preferred form of political engagement of Uyghurs and Tibetans to that of the Han majority. The results demonstrate that Uyghurs and Tibetans are more likely to prefer direct communication with the government over staying silent or using any other potential channel for expressing grievances. These findings are consistent with the new wave of studies on mobilized political participation in other authoritarian regimes.<sup>74</sup>

Our results demonstrate that ethnic minorities choose less confrontational and more institutionalized methods of political activity than the Han majority. We show that these preferences reflect carefully managed mobilization by the Chinese state. While the

government needs feedback from the public, each form of participation involves a degree of risk. Therefore, the government discourages public action and instead promotes private, controlled channels as opportunities for politically sensitive ethnic minorities to express their concerns to the government.

Even as we have seen mass demonstrations and alleged repression of Uyghurs and Tibetans, our findings suggest these actions are part of a broader spectrum of political activities and are relatively unlikely. The opportunities for contentious public action by Uyghurs and Tibetans are increasingly limited, but this does not mean that communications between citizen and state are limited. Instead, our findings reveal that ethnic minorities are encouraged to address the government directly via private, institutionalized channels. Overall participation in non-democracies may not be limited in quantity, but is carefully limited in its form and forum, particularly for politically sensitive ethnic groups.

## Notes

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