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Title

“Big Tiger, Big Data”: Learning Social Reactions to China’s Unprecedented Anticorruption Campaign Through Online Feedbacks

Abstract

Corruption, commonly defined as the abuse of public office for private gain (Nye 1967), undermines the economy, public trust in government, and regime legitimacy (Seligson 2002; Villoria, Ryzin, and Lavena 2013). Governments sometimes, to combat corruption, launch intensive campaigns (e.g. Manion 2004; Quah 1999), which involve extraordinary mobilization of administrative resources under strong political sponsorship (Liu, Lo, Zhan, and Wang 2015). In addition to strengthening regulatory enforcement, governments during anticorruption campaigns also aim to signal commitment against corruption and boost public support. While existing literature often focuses on evaluating the campaign effectiveness in terms of increasing policy compliance (e.g. Wedeman 2005), not much research has studied how well intensive anticorruption campaigns can help government win popular support. We attempt to fill the lacuna by exploring the social reactions to China’s anticorruption campaign through online feedbacks using the big data approach.

The Chinese government launched an unprecedented large-scale and long-lasting anticorruption campaign after the 18th Party Congress in 2012. Unlike previous ones, the current campaign has targeted at not only low-level cadres--“the flies”, but also hunted a large number of “big tigers”, or high-level officials, including a former

member of the standing committee of the Politburo. A major objective of the new administration is to use the campaign to win public support, which is widely regarded as one of the most important determinants of regime stability regardless of political systems (Chen and Shi 2001). While showing sincerity against official corruption, such a large-scale campaign has also revealed a lot of outrageous corruption cases and problems of the ruling party that are out of people's previous expectations. Thus, how has the Chinese society reacted to the ongoing campaign? Has the anticorruption campaign increased or decreased people's trust in the government? Which components of the government win support and which components lose over time?

We answer these questions by utilizing netizens' comments on five large portal websites from the end of 2012 to 2015 to conduct a big data analysis. This approach provides us the opportunity to monitor public opinions over a long period of time, across a large geographic space, and be open to a variety of sentiments, which regular surveys do not. In particular, we examine the public sentiments following the downfall of "big tigers" and lodge public trust in different levels of government influenced by the campaign based on "the hierarchical trust phenomenon" observed in extant literature (e.g. Li 2013). We find, in comparison to government institutions, individual top leader, i.e. Xi Jinping, wins the most support through the campaign, whereas trust to local government is further diluted by the campaign.

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Keyword

Anticorruption, Campaign-style enforcement, China, Public trust, Big data, Online