

Study reveals how China's local bureaucrats struggle for power through negative media coverage

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Recent research on China's factional competition uncovers how local bureaucrats, who are connected to influential national leaders,

strategically use the media to criticize members of rival factions, thus harming their promotion prospects and weakening their factions.

The work is [published](#) in the journal *Political Science Research and Methods*.

Led by Ji Yeon (Jean) Hong, associate professor of political science at the University of Michigan, the research analyzed millions of media reports in Chinese national and regional newspapers spanning from 2000-2014, along with information on the political networks of elite Chinese bureaucrats. It mapped out patterns of behavior among local bureaucrats in leveraging negative media coverage to attack political rivals.

Given the limited freedom of local media on criticizing [local governments](#), provincial leaders linked to strong national leaders, such as Politburo Standing Committee members, encouraged local media to cover negative political incidents such as [corruption investigation](#) in other provinces.

More importantly, when reporting on others, provincial leaders are more likely to target provinces connected to weaker national political leaders. The bigger the power gap between the national leaders, the more frequent the negative reporting is.

"This suggests that factional competition encourages strong factions to attack weaker factions more frequently than the reverse," Hong said. "This often leads to power consolidation, strengthening strong factions and weakening weaker factions."

The research further explores the consequences of such negative news coverage on the promotion prospects of provincial leaders. It finds that these negative reports indeed harm the reported-on cadres and their

factions.

Specifically, news reports on corruption substantially reduce the promotion chances of the reported-on province's party secretary, the top local political leader, who is likely to hold political responsibility and suffer a substantial disadvantage if more corrupt cadres are caught within his or her region, while leaders of provinces where the media reports on other provinces' corruption cases enjoy a higher probability of promotion.

Even though the Chinese personnel system--including promotion, demotion and allocation of party cadres--is not transparent, one of the factors that the Communist Party formally emphasizes in cadre evaluation is [public perception](#). 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. In such circumstances, the media role is critical.

The research covers the period ranging from the end of the Jiang Zemin administration to the beginning of Xi Jinping's regime. The Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao administrations, 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 intraparty democracy.

"This 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," Hong said.

More information: Ji Yeon Hong et al, Do winners spread more words? Factional competition and local media reports on corruption investigation in China, *Political Science Research and Methods* (2022). DOI: [10.1017/psrm.2022.35](https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2022.35)

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