

When an Authoritarian Audience Does Not Rally around the Flag: Evidence from the Hainan Island Incident

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Abstract

International crises are known to drive domestic audiences to rally around the flag. Crises may also alienate some citizens, particularly in authoritarian contexts less studied by the literature. This study argues that backlash can happen when foreign policy choices made visible by international crises do not align with citizens' evaluation standards. The theory is tested by examining Chinese public opinion following the 2001 Hainan Island incident, a U.S.-China diplomatic standoff caused by a military plane collision. A comparison of respondents from the World Values Survey in the weeks immediately before and after the incident finds no evidence of a rally effect. Trust in the military declines, while trust in the central government and the Party remain stable, without change in national pride or belonging. The effect varies among respondents with different views on executive power and national defense priority. The findings have implications for the political effects of international crises.

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1 Introduction

Having a foreign adversary is thought to be a convenient way for political leaders to unite domestic audiences. The association between international crises and popularity gains is known as the rally around the flag effect (Mueller, 1973). While the rally effect is usually studied in democratic contexts (Oneal and Bryan, 1995; Hetherington and Nelson, 2003; Merolla et al., 2007; Groeling and Baum, 2008; Baum and Groeling, 2010; Grossman et al., 2018; Holman et al., 2022), an authoritarian regime with control over the flow of information may find it easier to benefit from crises (Hale, 2018; Weiss and Dafoe, 2019; Sirotkina and Zavadskaya, 2020). In turn, the easy popularity gains from international crises can incentivize more aggressive foreign policies (Oakes, 2006; Fravel, 2010; Weiss, 2014; Aksoy et al., 2024).

This study argues that in state-controlled information environments, international crises can generate negative responses. Foreign policy making involves trade-offs, and citizens may evaluate the same government action differently because they place different weight on competing objectives (Chaudoin, 2014; Wang, 2024). These differences are in part associated with political orientations, which provide standards for evaluating foreign policy choices. International crises make those choices visible. When citizens perceive a misalignment between their standards and government actions, crises may produce weak rallies or backlash.

To test this theory, the study focuses on China, an authoritarian country with extensive involvement in international affairs (He, 2016; Zhao, 2022). As a rising global power, China's domestic politics has become increasingly sensitive to changes in the external environment (Shirk, 2008, 2023). While prior scholarship investigates how international events shape the public's political preferences (Bell and Quek, 2018; Quek and Johnston, 2018; Fang and Li, 2020; Ko, 2022; Aksoy et al., 2024), less is known about how these events affect the evaluations of state institutions. Exceptions, such as Weiss and Dafoe (2019) and Dafoe et al. (2022), provide experimental evidence on public responses during international crises,

although how opinions shift in real-world settings remains understudied.

The research design takes advantage of a foreign policy crisis that occurred during the fieldwork for the 2001 World Values Survey in China. This approach provides an opportunity to causally identify public opinion shifts during a real-world crisis by comparing respondents who were surveyed before to those who were surveyed after the crisis (Muñoz et al., 2020; Bertoli et al., 2024). The Hainan Island incident was a rare militarized interstate dispute between the U.S. and China following their diplomatic normalization (Hayes, 2013; Palmer et al., 2015). On April 1, 2001, a Chinese J-8 interceptor and a U.S. EP-3 surveillance plane collided in mid-air over China’s exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea. The collision was fatal to the Chinese pilot, and the damaged EP-3 made an emergency landing at a Chinese military air base on Hainan Island, where its 24 crew members were detained. The Chinese government assigned blame to the U.S. and demanded an apology, while the U.S. did not accept responsibility for the collision. The incident caused a diplomatic standoff between the U.S. and China, which was eventually resolved after rounds of talks between high-level officials (Keefe, 2002).

The analysis, however, finds no evidence of a rally effect. Post-incident respondents’ trust in the central government and the Party are relatively stable, while trust in the military declines compared to the pre-incident baseline. This decline is consistent throughout the first month following the incident. Further analysis does not detect changes in respondents’ national attachment, measured by their national pride and national belonging.

Who is likely to selectively blame the regime? The results indicate that respondents who prioritize national defense or express less support for unchecked executive power experience greater declines in military trust. These two moderators may reflect differences in how citizens evaluate government actions during the same crisis. The findings suggest that international crises can produce a backlash effect.

This study contributes to the understanding of how international crises affect domestic

public opinion. While existing literature has focused on industrialized democracies (Merolla et al., 2007; Groeling and Baum, 2008; Baum and Groeling, 2010; Grossman et al., 2018; Holman et al., 2022), evidence from authoritarian regimes is limited (Hale, 2018; Frye, 2019; Hale, 2022). This study shows that public backlash against state institutions can occur despite information control and lack of opposition parties. My findings have implications for authoritarian stability and the logic of diversion. If foreign crises are not unambiguously advantageous for the regime domestically, fomenting crises is thus not a risk-free strategy (Panggabean and Smith, 2011; Carter, 2019; Alrababa'h and Blaydes, 2021).

Conflict between the U.S. and China in the South China Sea is one of the highest-stakes uncertainties in contemporary international affairs (Goldstein, 2013). While the likelihood of such a confrontation in part depends on each country's public opinion at home, the public's response to international events is more opaque in China than in the U.S. (Weiss and Wallace, 2021). This study uncovers a real-world effect from China, complementing findings from existing studies that use past or hypothetical foreign policy crises (Bell and Quek, 2018; Quek and Johnston, 2018; Weiss and Dafoe, 2019; Gueorguiev et al., 2020; Dafoe et al., 2022; Yeung and Quek, 2022; Aksoy et al., 2024).

2 Theory

2.1 International Crises and Public Opinion

How do international crises affect domestic political approval? The leading prediction of the literature is the rally around the flag effect, which posits that the political system and leaders experience popularity gains (Mueller, 1970, 1973). This can happen because external threats increase national unity, strengthen national identity, and intensify emotions.

While some crises pose security risks, a situation qualifies as a potential rally event when

it is “focused and dramatic” and involves opposition between two parties. For example, when the U.S. imposed sanctions on another country or conducted military operations overseas, there was no immediate risk to the American public safety, and some of these events produced rally effects (Mueller, 1973). Originated in the context of U.S. foreign affairs (Oneal and Bryan, 1995), studies of the rally effect have extended to a broader range of events, including terrorism (Hetherington and Nelson, 2003), natural disasters (Boittin et al., 2020), and economic sanctions (Grossman et al., 2018).

Authoritarian regimes are seemingly in a position to easily benefit from crises as they control the information and narratives (Gruffydd-Jones, 2019; Sirotkina and Zavadskaya, 2020). For example, during the Falklands War, the military regime of Argentina received overwhelming public support until it lost the war (Oakes, 2006). Similarly, Russian citizens increased their approval of the regime following the Annexation of Crimea, although the observed popularity surge in popularity was susceptible to preference falsification (Hale, 2018, 2022). However, Frye (2019) finds no evidence of a more favorable evaluation of Russian leadership when survey respondents reacted to economic sanctions. Although the evidence is limited, the mixed findings suggest nuanced consequences of how international events affect domestic public opinion (Seo and Horiuchi, 2024).

Existing studies, mostly in democratic settings, offer several explanations for the absence of rally effects during international crises. Opposition groups can exploit the moment and blame the incumbent, leading to a negative opinion shift (Bali, 2007). Under free flow of information, the public can eventually overcome initial informational disadvantage, so an immediate rally can turn into a backlash in the long run (Baum and Groeling, 2010). Leaders’ personal traits also matter. Real-world and experimental evidence show that voters tend to display biases against female leaders and are more critical of their performance during crises (Holman et al., 2016, 2022). These explanations may not apply to authoritarian contexts, where opposition is symbolic, information is controlled, and leaders

tend to cultivate strongman images.

2.2 Political Orientations and Foreign Policy Evaluation

Foreign policy making involves trade-offs. The classic gun and butter argument posits that a focus on security diverts resources from domestic investment in non-military issues (Powell, 1993). Within foreign affairs, the government must weigh deterrence against escalation, resolve against restraint, and short-term gains against long-term interests (Schelling, 1960). Under uncertainty and competing objectives, foreign policy choices rarely have one single correct answer.

Citizens differ in how they think the government should balance these competing objectives (Wang, 2024), and these differences are linked to broader political orientations (Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987). Some value security and prioritize national defense, and others place greater weight on development and stability. Some also value toughness in diplomacy and are willing to defer decisions to the government, while others are more skeptical of concentrated power and demand greater transparency (Merolla et al., 2007). These orientations provide standards for evaluating foreign policy choices, which may or may not be associated with political ideologies or a single hawk-dove dimension, or specific policy positions.

International crises are among the few events that reveal government actions or intentions, at least indirectly. Sometimes, crises are the consequences of foreign policy choices or require the government to make further choices in response (Shirk, 2023). By making those choices visible, crises provide opportunities for citizens to evaluate how the government has balanced foreign policy goals, such as protecting national interests as opposed to creating risks (Chaudoin, 2014). Citizens with different political orientations may apply different standards at evaluating the same foreign policy choice. When citizens perceive government actions consistent with their preferred way of balancing competing objectives, they are more likely to view the crisis as justified or necessary and evaluate the government favorably.

When they perceive inconsistency, citizens may view the crisis as unnecessary or avoidable, leading to weak rally effects or even backlash.

Authoritarian regimes attempt to generate public support through information control and mobilization, especially in times of crisis. State media manipulates international affairs coverage and framing to sway public opinion for political purposes (Alrababa'h and Blaydes, 2021; Wang, 2024). However, citizens still experience risks associated with policy choices, such as wars and economic costs. The information environment may shape how citizens interpret crises, but pre-existing political orientations continue to affect how they evaluate government choices. This leads to my hypotheses:

H1. International crises can produce weak rallies or backlash in a state-controlled information environment.

H2. Citizens' responses to the same international crisis vary by their political orientations.

3 Background

3.1 Foreign Affairs and Public Opinion in China

The increasing stakes of conflicts between China and other countries have drawn scholarly attention to exploring the effects of international events on public opinion. This line of research broadly falls into two categories. The first strand examines how public opinion influences foreign policy-making, such as international bargaining and policy choices. While China is a high-capacity authoritarian regime, studies show that it is not free from audience costs, which serve as a constraint on elite behavior (Weeks, 2012; Bell and Quek, 2018; Quek and Johnston, 2018; Li and Chen, 2021). Anticipating public reactions, the government strategically steer opinion in directions that align with its political agenda, including escalating or de-escalating crises (Weiss, 2014; He, 2016; Wang, 2024).

The second strand of literature investigates the factors that shape individuals' political preferences. Research shows that the public is more likely to support the political status quo when they perceive threats from foreign actors (Gruffydd-Jones, 2019; Yeung and Quek, 2022), consistent with the rally effect prediction. In addition to external threat, historical justifications are particularly effective in swaying individual reactions toward a more hawkish policy stance (Huang and Liu, 2018; Fang and Li, 2020; Ko, 2022; Xu and Zhao, 2023).

Among this growing line of research, an understudied question is how international crises affect domestic opinion, particularly trust or approval of state institutions (Dafoe et al., 2022). China appears to be an easy case for testing the rally effect during international crises because of its capacity to control information and steer public opinion. However, little evidence supports this assumption. It is not uncommon to observe a surge in anti-foreign sentiment when China is involved in an international crisis, but it remains unclear whether negative feelings toward external actors translate into positive approval of the regime (Weiss, 2014; Zhao, 2022).

Understanding the public's response to international crises requires taking their pre-existing political preferences into account. Relative to China's assertive diplomacy today, its approach to international affairs was more cautious since the economic reform in 1978 until roughly around the 2008 financial crisis (Shirk, 2023). When China underwent market reforms, the national priority transitioned from ideological confrontation to economic modernization. Foreign policy, as an extension of domestic politics, also shifted from aggression to cooperation, particularly in relations with the West, which was conducive to trade and technology transfers (Chen and Wang, 2011). By being a member of many international organizations, China was a more active status-quo player in international governance compared to other countries with a similar stage of development (Johnston, 2008). During this period, domestic propaganda lessened and rarely demonized Japan and the U.S. as capitalist and imperialist powers.

Establishing a partnership with the U.S was a highlight of China’s achievements during this era ([Shambaugh, 1993](#)). Since the normalization of their diplomatic relations, China and the U.S. gradually built social, political, and economic ties. This bilateral relationship paved the way for China to join the World Trade Organization, which in hindsight boosted China’s rise as a global economic power. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, China further committed to the doctrine of “hide capabilities and bid time” despite tensions that threatened the prospect of their relationship, marked by the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the release of the Cox Report, and the 2001 U.S.-China military plane collision ([Hayes, 2013](#)). China was willing to take conciliatory actions to maintain a peaceful relationship with the U.S. in exchange for cooperation on development.

3.2 The Hainan Island Incident

On the morning of April 1, 2001, two Chinese fighter jets J-8 were performing an aerial intercept of a U.S. reconnaissance plane EP-3 over China’s exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea. Unfortunately, a mid-air collision occurred between one of the J-8 and the EP-3. This collision was fatal to the Chinese pilot who had to parachute into the sea, and his body was never recovered. The damaged EP-3 made an unauthorized emergency landing at a Chinese military airbase on Hainan Island, where all 24 crew members were detained. The Hainan Island incident is recorded in the Militarized Interstate Disputes Project (MID Number 4280) with full description in [Appendix A \(Palmer et al., 2015\)](#).

This plane collision was a surprise to the leaderships of both countries and led to a diplomatic standoff ([Keefe, 2002](#)). Before the U.S. had time to investigate, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on the night of the collision and accused the U.S. plane of making an unexpected maneuver that caused the collision. In addition to assigning blame to the U.S., the Chinese government made two demands: an apology from the U.S.

government to the pilot and his family and the stopping of surveillance in the South China Sea. The U.S. did not accept either demand, as it believed that their crew was not at fault. An official apology would imply guilt. Although neither side took responsibility for the collision, they did not seek to escalate the crisis (He, 2016).

After rounds of negotiations, the U.S. issued a carefully worded letter 10 days later, expressing regret without implying responsibility. China released the U.S. crew the next day after receiving this “very sorry” letter, which marked the cooldown of the crisis. The rescue for the pilot failed and ended after two weeks of search in the sea. An honorary title, “Guardian of the Sea and the Air,” was conferred on the pilot, who, together with his plane, became a national symbol. The negotiation over the return of the EP-3 took several more months. China refused the proposal of on-site repair because a U.S. surveillance plane taking off from China’s soil would be seen as damaging to its national reputation. The final solution was to dismantle and transport the plane in pieces by air. The U.S. soon ignored China’s second demand and resumed surveillance flights in May, and this time China eased its confrontational posture in monitoring U.S. planes (Keefe, 2002; He, 2016).

The incident triggered nationwide anti-American sentiment in China. The reaction from the public was spontaneous rather than orchestrated by state propaganda (Gries, 2004; Weiss, 2014; Zhao, 2022). Media outlets from China depicted China as a victim in this crisis and denounced U.S. aggression (Slingerland et al., 2007), reminiscent of the 1999 United States bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade two years ago, in which the U.S. apologized and claimed it to be an accident (Gries, 2001). The Hainan Island incident has become an event of collective memory in China and has been commemorated by media on anniversaries (Weiss, 2014), but whether and how the incident changed citizens’ evaluations of the regime, including various state institutions, has remained unknown.

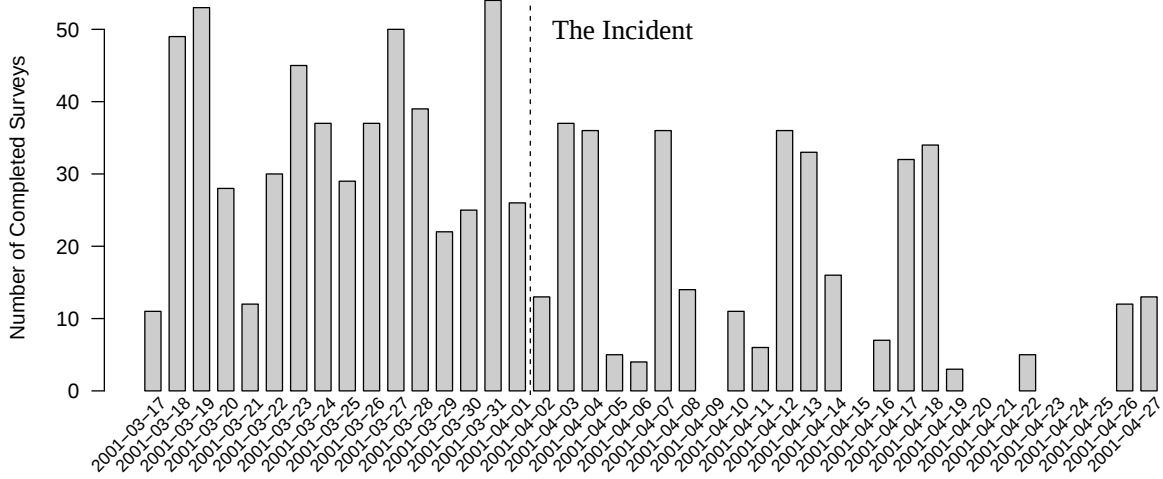
4 Research Design

To analyze how the Hainan Island incident affected Chinese public opinion, I take advantage of the timing of the World Values Survey (WVS) in China in 2001 (Inglehart et al., 2018), which happened to coincide with the incident. Figure 1 shows the sampling timeline of the survey between March and April. There are no particular response patterns between pre- and post-incident periods. The plane collision was an accident, as neither country planned it. Aerial intercepts were rarely known to the public, so it was not possible for respondents to anticipate the collision. The declining number of responses is likely due to the possibility that some regional teams completed their field work earlier than others. The field implementation report does not indicate disruptions caused by the incident.

This empirical approach, known as the “unexpected event during survey design” formalized by Muñoz et al. (2020), offers three advantages. First, it establishes baseline attitudes by having respondents interviewed before the incident so that tracking attitudinal change is feasible. In contrast, studies with only post-incident measures lack control groups for comparisons. Second, responses from a nationally sampled survey are more likely to represent the opinion of the general public than selected samples from a particular platform, which only reflects attitudes of particular groups of citizens. Third, compared to interventions that require priming or respondents’ retrospective recollection of specific events, this approach preserves the natural setting and recovers real-time opinion change.

The independent variable is exposure to the Hainan Island incident coded as 1 for post-incident respondents and 0 for pre-incident respondents. Because news of the incident did not circulate until the evening of April 1 when the Chinese government issued a public statement on national television, respondents surveyed on or before April 1 are defined as the pre-incident control group, as they could not possibly learn about the incident. Respondents surveyed on or after April 2 are defined as the post-incident treatment group. Post-incident

Figure 1: The Timeline of the World Values Survey in China (March-April, 2001)



Notes: There are 100 more respondents surveyed between May 25 and June 25. Since these responses were two months after the incident and all came from Shandong province, they are excluded from the main analysis and only used in the placebo test.

respondents who were not aware of the incident would introduce the attenuation bias, and including those respondents in the sample is unlikely to bias for finding an effect.

To measure political trust, the survey asked respondents' level of trust in a list of state institutions, including the military, the central government, and the political party on a 4-point scale (not trust at all, somewhat distrust, somewhat trust, a great deal of trust). In this incident, the military was a directly involved government agency, while the central government and the Party represent broader political institutions. Respondents were likely to interpret the survey question as referring to the Chinese Communist Party, even though it did not specify a political party.

The main estimating equation is:

$$Y_{ip} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 PostIncident_i + \beta_2 X_i + \delta_p + \epsilon_{ip} \quad (1)$$

where β_1 is the quantity of interest; Y_{ip} represents the outcome variable; *PostIncident* is an indicator that equals 1 if respondent i is surveyed on or after April 2, and 0 otherwise; X_i is the vector of covariates, including gender, age, political affiliation, education level, and income bracket, and the predictive mean matching method is used to impute missing income values; δ_p is province fixed effects.

The choice of including province fixed effects involves a trade-off between sample size and accuracy (Table A.1-Table A.2). Since some provinces were entirely sampled either before or after the incident, those samples do not add variation for comparison if the model specification includes province fixed effects. Since individuals' political attitudes are correlated with their socioeconomic backgrounds, which are different between regions (Pan and Xu, 2018), accounting for differences in baseline attitudes across provinces helps to reduce demographic bias. The provinces, which have respondents surveyed both before and after the incident, are Beijing, Hebei, Jilin Heilongjiang, Shanghai, Henan, Hunan. The estimates without province fixed effects are reported in the appendix.

Choosing the bandwidths of pre- and post-incident periods is an empirical consideration. The default pre-incident bandwidth is between the first day of the survey and the day of the plane collision (March 17-April 1), which helps to establish a stable and representative baseline. A narrower pre-incident bandwidth is used as a robustness check. The post-incident bandwidths are chosen to best match with the key events during the incident, the immediate public response following the collision (+7 days), the release of the U.S. crew and the end of the Chinese pilot's rescue search (+14 days), and the cooldown period (+28 days).

5 Results

5.1 Institutional Trust

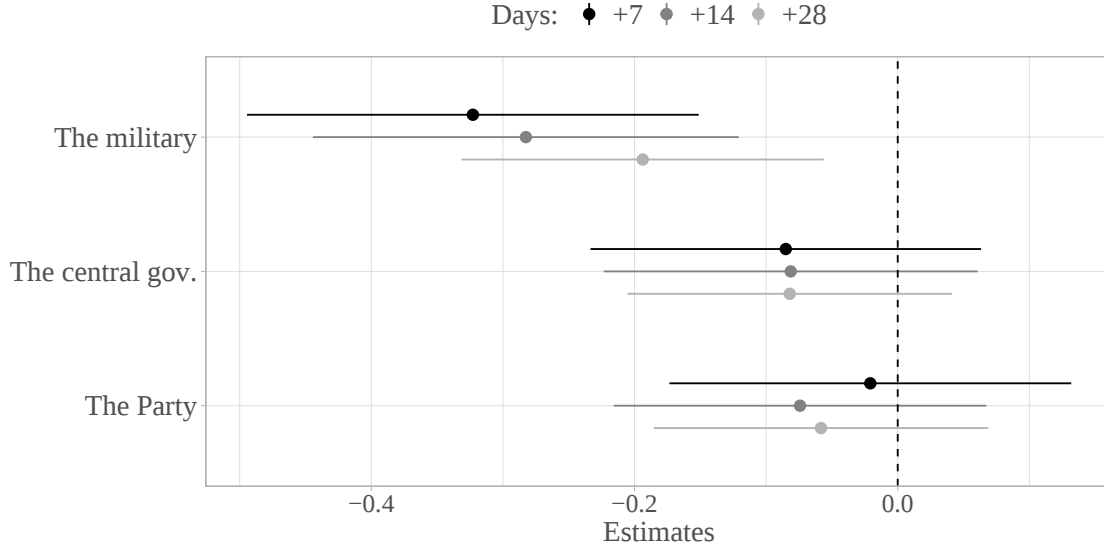
Figure 2 reports Chinese political trust following the Hainan Island incident. I find no evidence of a rally effect, as none of the estimates for state institutions moves in a positive direction. Instead, the results show a selective decline in trust, with the effect varying across institutions. Post-incident respondents' trust in the central government and the Chinese Communist Party are relatively unchanged. Their respective point estimates are consistently close to zero and do not reach statistical significance throughout the first month following the incident. The findings suggest that respondents do not blame nor rally around these institutions, which represent the general political system.

Respondents' trust in the military declines compared to the pre-incident baseline. The negative effect peaks during the first week and gradually moves closer to the baseline over the subsequent weeks. The overall effect throughout the first month remains consistently negative and statistically significant. Substantively, the Hainan incident causes roughly a 12% decline in military trust in the immediate short term. The findings suggest that respondents selectively attribute blame to the specific state agency.

The results provide support for my first hypothesis regarding a backlash effect during international crises. Selective attribution may occur because citizens understand the state not as a unified actor but different agencies and attribute responsibility according to institutional roles (Carlin et al., 2015). Citizens may express disappointment with a foreign policy outcome without opposing the general political system.

Could the results be explained by scapegoating or social desirability bias? Throughout the course of the crisis, the Chinese government insisted that the U.S. was at fault, although the U.S. rebutted this claim and made the same accusation against China. Unlike lower-

Figure 2: Effect on Trust in State Institutions



Note: Lines are 95% confidence interval.

tier branches in the organizational hierarchy, the military is part of the ruling coalition, with the President of China serving as the Chairman of the Central Military Commission. Respondents' baseline trust in the military is similar if not higher than their trust in the central government and the Party, suggesting no signs of differential reporting bias. Neither scapegoating nor social desirability is likely to explain the decline in military trust.

5.2 Robustness Checks

Based on [Muñoz et al. \(2020\)](#)'s and [Bertoli et al. \(2024\)](#)'s suggestions, the analysis conducts a list of tests to support the validity of the results. These tests reduce concerns regarding anticipation bias, demographic bias, temporal factors, and other confounders. Considering that the collision between military planes was completely unexpected and accidental, this event was not possible for the public to predict. Because pre- and post-incident respondents were equally unlikely to anticipate the accident, anticipation bias should not apply.

While excluding province fixed effects fails to account for baseline attitudinal differences

across provinces, it provides a broader coverage of opinion, expanding the sample from seven to 23 provinces. [Figure B.4](#) reports models without province fixed effects, and the estimates are consistent with the main results. As shown in [Figure B.6](#), models controlling for a linear time trend also yield similar estimates. This test reduces potential temporal concerns, such as weather, which might affect response patterns.

To further mitigate the risk of confounding events that might happen around the time of the incident, an alternative specification uses a different control group, which consists of respondents surveyed during the 10 days before the incident (March 23–April 1). The results from [Figure B.5](#) are substantively similar. Furthermore, I conduct placebo tests to examine whether any treatment effect is present during periods when no incident occurred. Splitting each of the two samples that are entirely from the pre-incident period in March and the post-incident period in June, no such effects are detected. ([Figure B.7](#)). These tests increase confidence that the results are not due to chance.

6 Discussion

6.1 Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

To explore whether heterogeneous responses are consistent with the theory, I examine respondents' views on defense as a national priority and unchecked executive power. The former reflects individuals' security orientation, which is relevant to this military plane collision, while the latter captures attitudes regarding the constraints on executive or state power, which can become salient during international crises.

Respondents are asked to identify the most important and second most important national goals for the next ten years from four options: economic growth, national defense, public participation, and beautiful cities and countryside. [Figure 3a](#) shows that respondents

who view national defense as the first priority experience the largest decline in military trust, followed by respondents who select it as the second priority, and those who do not prioritize national defense do not experience a significant decline. This pattern is consistent with a binary coding rule that compares respondents who select national defense as either the first or second priority with those who do not (Figure B.3a). Respondents who prioritize national defense may perceive greater external threats, favor strengthening hard power, or expect high military effectiveness. While the survey cannot determine the underlying reasons, the results suggest that individuals who place different weight on national defense respond differently to the same crisis.

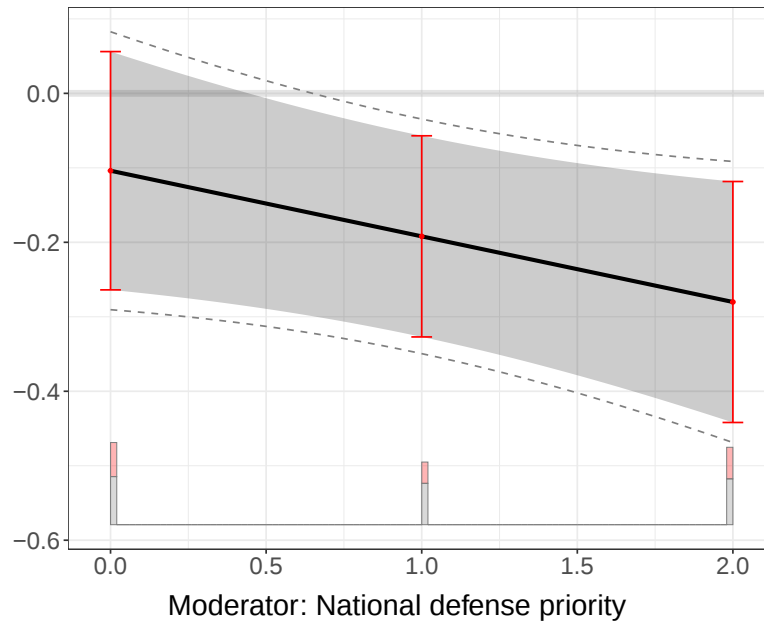
Regarding executive power, respondents are asked whether a political system with a strong leader unconstrained by parliament would be very good, good, bad, or very bad. Figure 3b shows that respondents who are less supportive of unchecked executive power experienced a larger decline in military trust. To account for the small number of respondents in the extreme categories, the measure is also collapsed into a binary indicator, and the result is substantively similar Figure B.3b. One possible interpretation is that respondents who place greater value on institutional constraints hold the government to a stricter standard in crisis evaluation.

Results from this exploratory analysis support my second hypothesis regarding heterogeneous responses to international crises. These two moderators are associated with how respondents evaluate the government during the crisis, but they are not measures of foreign policy preferences. The findings are consistent with the argument that citizens with different political orientations respond to the same crisis differently.

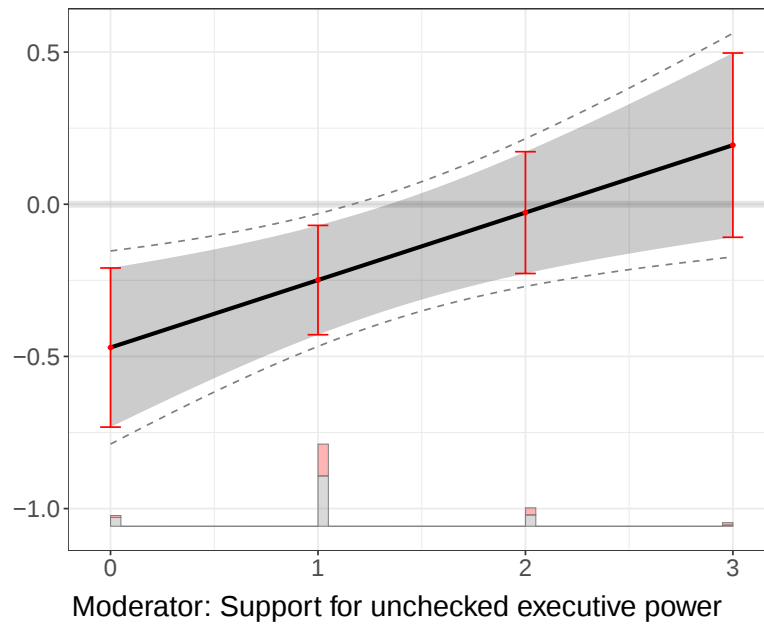
6.2 Alternative Explanations

National attachment. Existing literature shows that citizens' national attachment tends to surge during international crises (Merolla et al., 2007; Weiss, 2014), which can in turn

Figure 3: Marginal Effect of the Incident on Military Trust



(a)



(b)

Notes: National defense priority is coded as first choice (2), second choice (1), and otherwise (0). Unchecked executive power is coded as very good (3), good (2), bad (1), and very bad (0). The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

translate into political support. One possible explanation for the decline in military trust is that national sentiment also shifts during the crisis. Two questions in the survey reflect individuals' national attachment: "As a Chinese national, how proud are you" on a four-point scale (not proud at all, not very proud, quite proud, very proud); "In the following geographical areas (locality, province, China, Asia, the world), where do you think you belong first? And second?" If respondents' first choice was China, national belonging was coded as 1, and 0 otherwise.

As shown in [Figure B.1](#), no evidence suggests that exposure to the Hainan Island incident changes respondents' national pride or national belonging in either a positive or negative direction. The estimates are small, with confidence intervals crossing zero throughout the first few weeks following the incident. The decline in military trust is not accompanied by changes in national attachment, which suggests that an identity-based explanation is unlikely.

Government response. When a crisis occurs, in addition to interpreting its causes, citizens also evaluate how the government handles it. If citizens perceive the government's subsequent response as weak or ineffective, they may evaluate the government more negatively. If dissatisfaction primarily stems from government response, it is likely to extend beyond a specific agency to broader political institutions. However, stable trust in the central government and the Party do not support a general loss of confidence in the political system. Military trust on average does not continue to decline after the first week following the incident, which provides little support for increasing skepticism about how the government handled the crisis. These patterns are less consistent with an explanation based on the government's crisis response.

General mood. Another possibility is that emotional reactions to the incident influence political attitudes. Non-political events, such as sports, can affect citizens' evaluations of the government ([Chen and MacDonald, 2020](#)). [Figure B.2](#) shows that self-rated happiness and

health do not differ between pre- and post-incident respondents. These measures, however, do not capture specific emotions, which may influence attitudes in more complex ways. These findings suggests that the decline in military trust is unlikely to reflect a mood change.

7 Conclusion

In the context of an intense diplomatic standoff between China and the U.S. resulting from a military plane collision, this study finds that an international crisis can produce a backlash effect that undermines domestic political trust. While individuals' trust in the general political system is stable, their trust in the military declines, and the effect varies by relevant political orientations. The results show that citizens can attribute blame to the regime, at least part of it, despite propaganda. The Hainan Island incident was not an isolated international crisis for China. Territorial disputes with neighboring countries, including Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines, have occurred at an alarming rate, involving ship collisions and fishermen casualties. While these incidents appear to spark patriotic feelings on both sides, the findings suggest that these emotions do not necessarily translate into higher support for the government.

According to the Pentagon, between fall 2021 and fall 2023, China performed more than 180 aerial intercepts against the U.S. in the South China Sea. In some incidents, planes were within several feet of each other ([Garamone, 2023](#)). These military encounters are not only in the South China Sea but also off the U.S. coast. During military drills by Russia and China in the Bering Strait off Alaska in 2023 and 2024, the U.S. had to initiate intercepts both in the air and at the sea ([Gordon and Youssef, 2024](#)). If international crises have multiple effects on political popularity, regimes may rethink their approaches to crisis preparedness, whether by design or miscalculation ([Jost, 2023](#); [Zhang, 2023](#)).

The growing complexity of international issues poses challenges to the collective efforts

of global governance. Security issues have expanded from conventional warfare to terrorist attacks, infectious diseases, and climate change, all of which transcend national borders (Acharya, 2016). Attributing responsibility remains challenging both between and within governments (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014; Carlin et al., 2015). This study calls for further research to examine attitude shifts, not only toward political leaders but also toward state institutions in times of crisis.

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Appendix

A Additional Background and Sample Statistics

The following is the narrative for the Hainan Island incident documented in the Militarized Interstate Disputes Project (MID Number 4280):

“This dispute involves 5 incidents between the US & China that center around American reconnaissance near the Chinese coast. On 4/1/2001 an American spy plane crash-landed on China’s Hainan Island after colliding with a Chinese fighter over international waters. The Chinese pilot was killed in the accidental collision. China, after the crash, seized both the American crew and plane. The United States responded to the crash and seizure by demanding release of the crew and return of the plane. The US also responded by moving 3 destroyers to the waters off China. China scrambled 10 fighters on 4501 when it detected a US spy plane off the China coast. The dispute was resolved on 7301 after the US expressed regret and the plane was returned to the US. The crew was released on 41101” ([Palmer et al., 2015](#)).

Table A.1: Summary Statistics for the Sample Without Province Fixed Effects

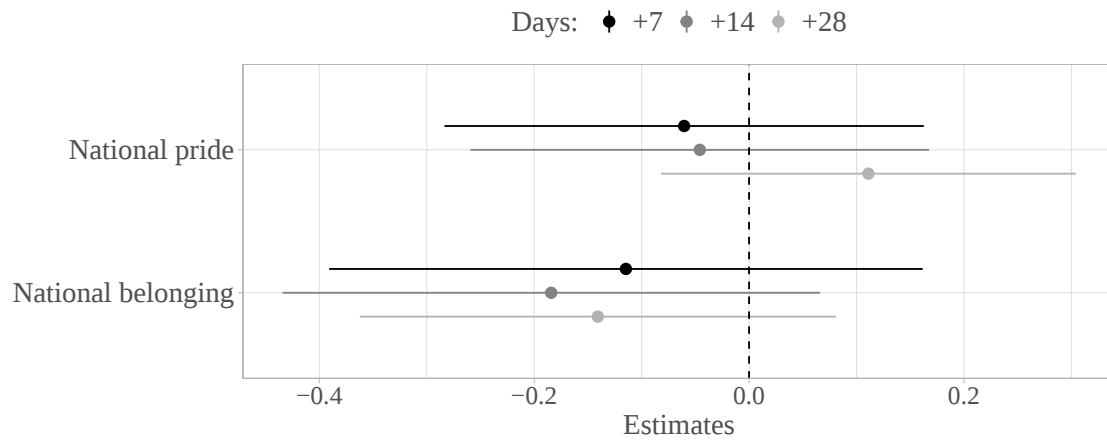
	Control Group			Treatment Group		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Male	0.492	0.500	547	0.496	0.501	353
Age	39.931	11.268	547	40.119	11.977	353
Party member	0.088	0.283	547	0.096	0.295	353
Education	1.799	0.994	547	1.623	1.075	353
Income	5.814	2.079	547	6.034	2.078	353
Trust in military	2.431	0.549	540	2.369	0.586	347
Trust in central gov.	2.346	0.545	541	2.372	0.572	344
Trust in Party	2.210	0.594	514	2.267	0.591	329
Defense priority	0.980	0.835	547	0.966	0.872	353
Executive power	1.067	0.581	401	1.231	0.618	247
National pride	2.027	0.783	522	2.057	0.715	333
National belonging	1.218	0.880	547	1.198	0.898	353
Happiness	1.857	0.663	545	1.832	0.626	351
Health	1.674	1.049	546	1.878	0.948	352

Table A.2: Summary Statistics for the Sample With Province Fixed Effects

	Control Group			Treatment Group		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Male	0.494	0.501	172	0.477	0.501	128
Age	39.035	11.206	172	41.977	11.175	128
Party member	0.122	0.328	172	0.117	0.323	128
Education	1.843	1.022	172	1.812	0.978	128
Income	6.081	2.047	172	5.930	1.945	128
Trust in military	2.388	0.546	170	2.192	0.578	125
Trust in central gov.	2.256	0.513	168	2.156	0.546	122
Trust in Party	2.062	0.601	160	2.077	0.544	117
Defense priority	1.017	0.882	172	1.070	0.889	128
Executive power	1.352	0.642	122	1.143	0.451	77
National pride	2.000	0.846	166	2.144	0.683	118
National belonging	1.256	0.881	172	1.133	0.891	128
Happiness	1.930	0.590	171	1.891	0.667	128
Health	1.713	1.093	171	1.773	0.974	128

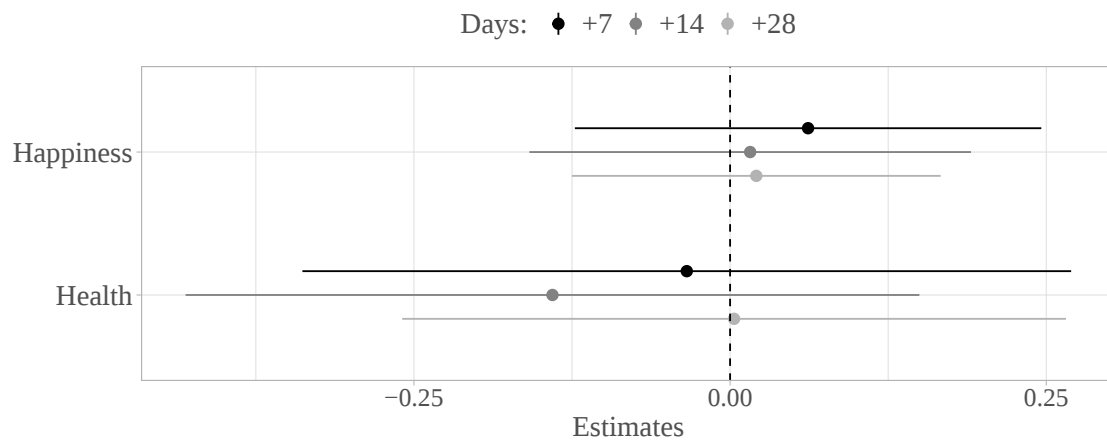
B Further Results and Robustness

Figure B.1: Effect on National Attachment



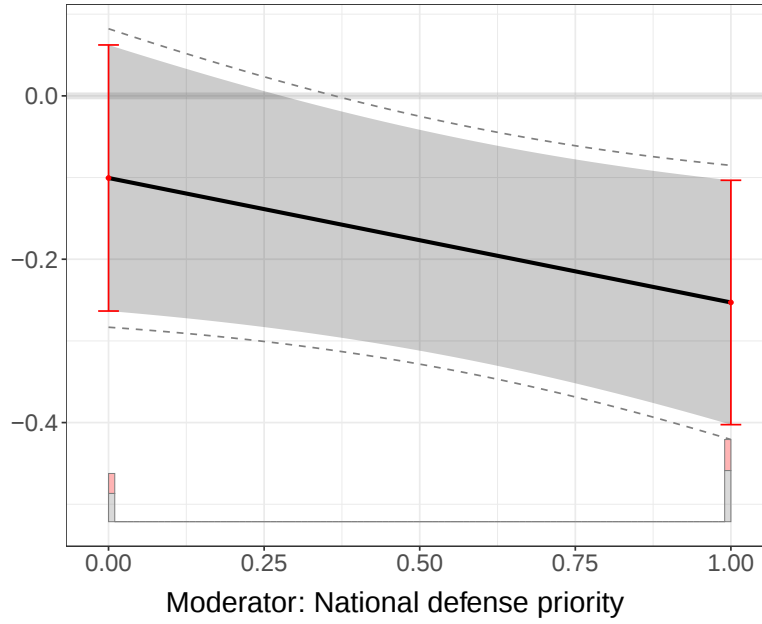
Note: Lines are 95% confidence interval.

Figure B.2: Effect on General Mood

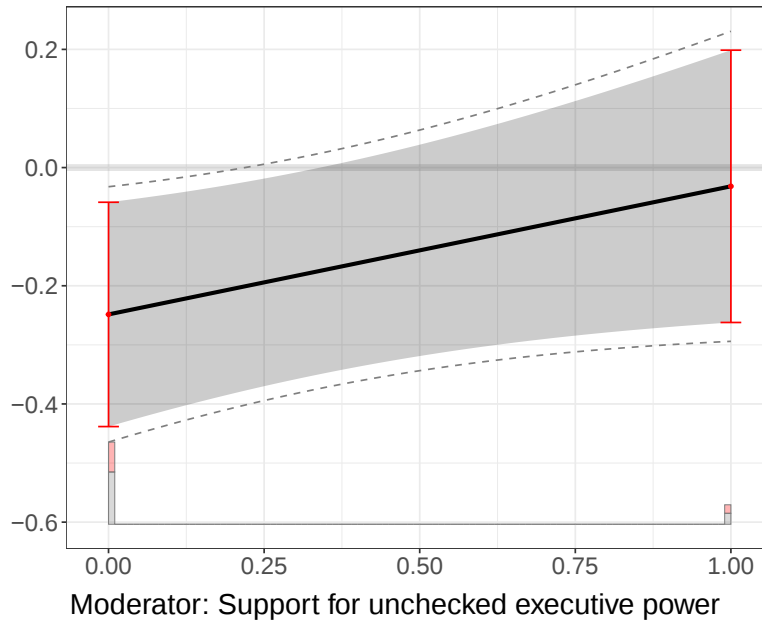


Note: Lines are 95% confidence interval.

Figure B.3: Marginal Effect of the Incident on Military Trust (Binary Moderators)



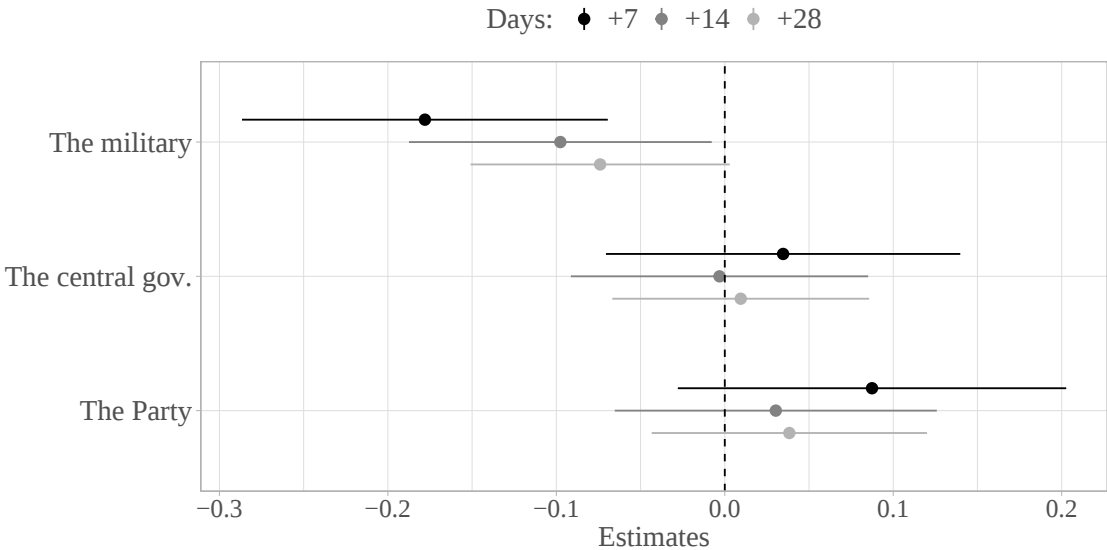
(a)



(b)

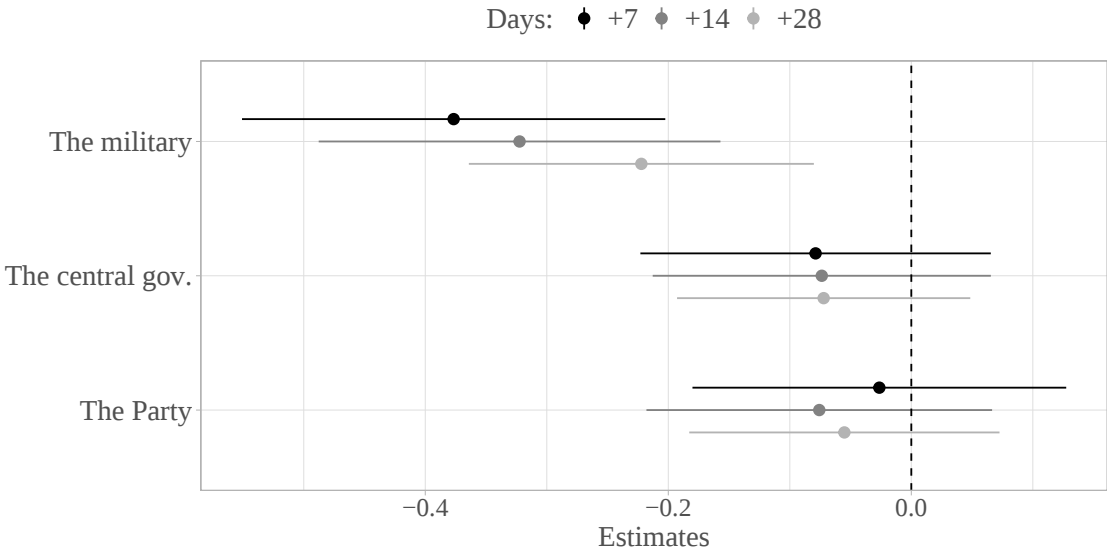
Notes: National defense priority is coded as first or second choice (1) and otherwise (0). Unchecked executive power is coded as very good or good (1) and bad or very bad (0). The error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure B.4: Effect on Trust in State Institutions (Without Province Fixed Effects)



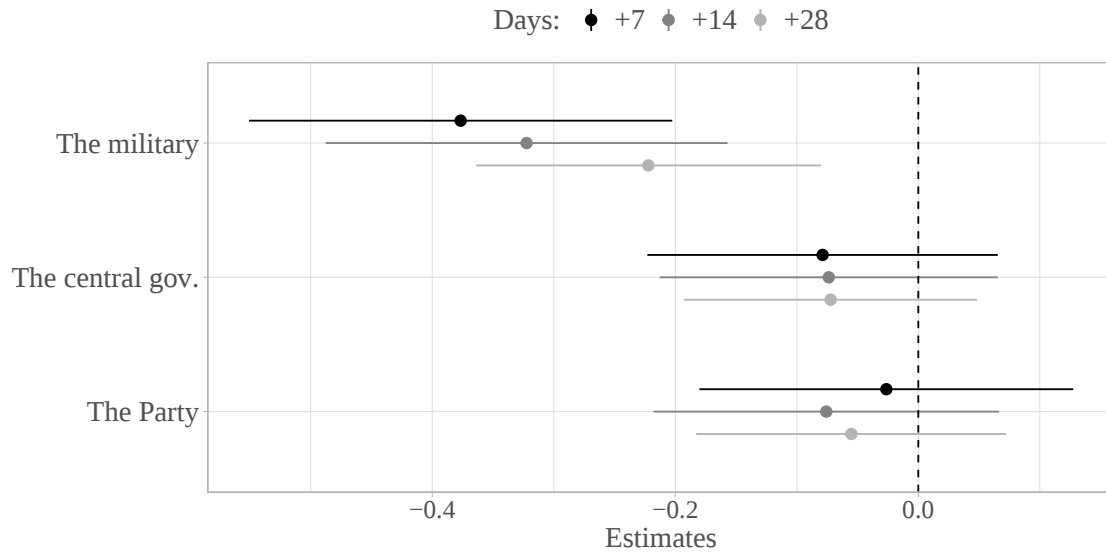
Note: Lines are 95% confidence interval.

Figure B.5: Effect on Trust in State Institutions (Alternative Baseline)



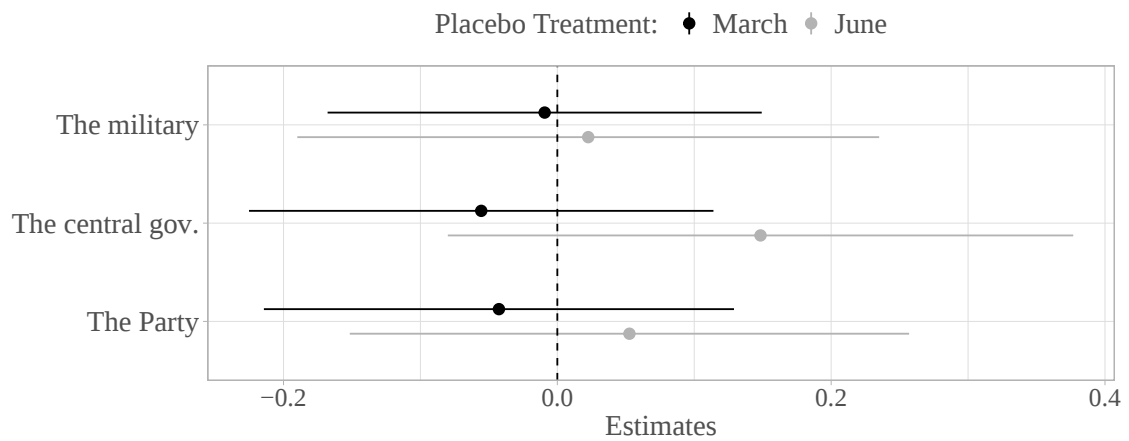
Note: The control group con Lines are 95% confidence interval.

Figure B.6: Effect on Trust in State Institutions (With Linear Time Trend)



Note: Lines are 95% confidence interval.

Figure B.7: Placebo Estimates for Trust in State Institutions



Note: The placebo dates March 26 and June 22 splits the March and June samples into two groups with roughly equal numbers of observations. Lines are 95% confidence interval.