

Under authoritarian regimes, public pollution ratings boost local compliance

Across China, city governments significantly improved transparency and compliance with central pollution standards when NGOs monitored and publicized their performance.

Based on S.E. Anderson, M.T. Buntaine, M. Liu and B. Zhang. "Non-Governmental Monitoring of Local Governments Increases Compliance with Central Mandates: A National-Scale Field Experiment in China," [AJPS](#) (2019).

The Policy Problem

In China, the central government depends on local governments to implement all kinds of environmental policies, from regulating industrial emissions to cleaning up surface water bodies. However, local governments often have competing incentives to promote economic growth and fail to implement environmental policies well. It is illegal for nonstate actors in China to openly pressure the government to change policy, but non-governmental organizations have started to monitor and disclose the performance of local environmental policy implementation. We do not know whether this kind of citizen participation actually prompts local governments to improve implementation, and thus whether it should be encouraged and expanded.

Key findings and proposed solutions

- Public disclosure of cities' performance led to significant improvement in transparency and compliance with central standards.
- Improving transparency is a potentially important step toward regulating pollution and industrial emissions, so NGOs should explore ways to pressure local governments for greater transparency
- NGOs should actively publicize the performance of local governments, especially if it helps higher levels of government oversee local governments more effectively
- The central government of China can utilize the efforts of NGOs to close the implementation gap when regulating pollution and enhance the impact of directives

What We Found

We worked with the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs in China to randomly apply their Pollution Information Transparency Index (PITI) rating to a set of 50 smaller cities. The PITI index publicly rates cities on whether they comply with central standards for disclosing information about local pollution. Twenty-five cities had their rating publicly disclosed over a two-year period, with a public report, media coverage, and a launch event. Following the ratings, we studied whether the cities randomly assigned to the disclosure improved their performance. We observed noncompliance for one year before and two years after the treatment.

Our findings reveal that NGO’s public disclosure of monitoring significantly improved compliance by city governments with central mandates to release information about the management of pollution. Across two years of observations, cities with publicly disclosed ratings exhibited lower noncompliance than control cities. Based on interviews, we find evidence that PITI rating disclosure caused local governments to worry about being seen as out of compliance by the central government.

These results highlight how civil society groups can boost public sector transparency and address noncompliance by local governments through information disclosure. Under authoritarian regimes, revealing information about compliance that is costly for the center to collect may be an effective measure to help higher levels of government.

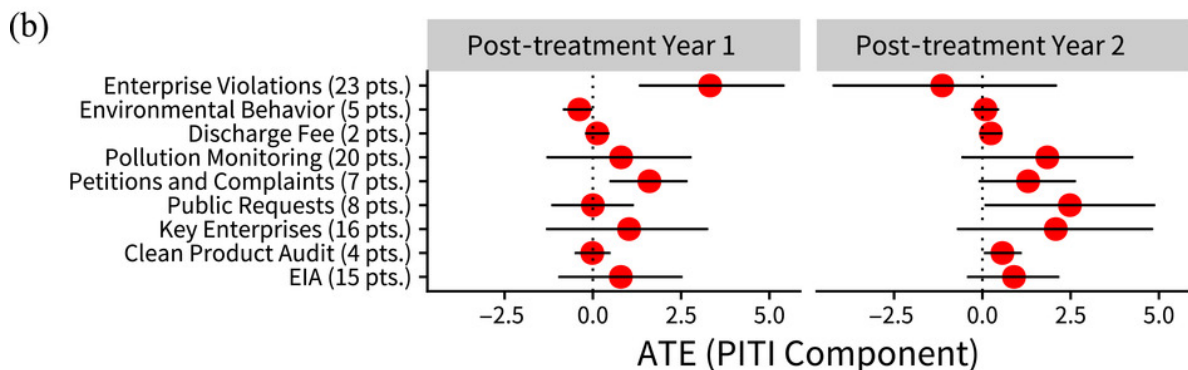
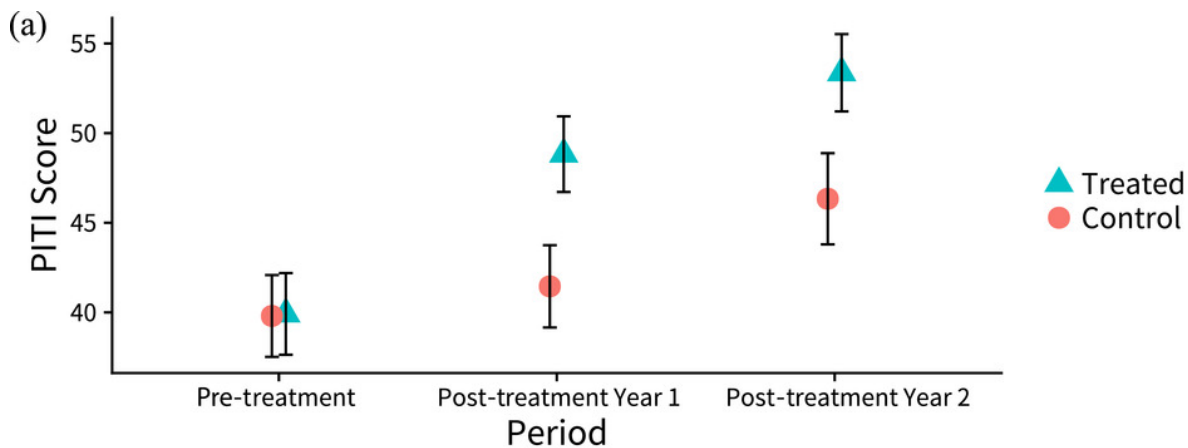


Fig. 2, Treatment Effect on PITI Aggregate and Component Scores, shows the effect of treatment on both the aggregate and component PITI scores for both post-treatment Year 1 and post-treatment Year 2. Per our blocking strategy, the mean PITI scores of the treatment and control groups are almost equal before treatment. One year following treatment, PITI scores increased in both the treatment group (from 39.9 to 48.8) and control group (from 39.8 to 41.5), likely due to the increasing stringency of disclosure requirements by China's central government. Most importantly, the gap between the treatment group and control group is 7.3 points on the 0–100 transparency score range ($p < .01$), indicating a large increase in transparency for the treatment group above the background increase in the control group.

Note: Panel a shows the average aggregate scores by experimental condition in each year of the study, with standard errors derived from bootstrap sampling within experimental conditions; Panel b shows observed differences-in-differences from baseline between the experimental conditions, with 90% confidence intervals derived from blockwise bootstrap sampling.