Does Ideology Influence Hiring in China?


In recent years, China has seen a rise in the salience of ideology. The Communist Party of China (CCP) has launched numerous ideological campaigns, explicitly rejecting “Western” ideology as antithetical to China’s official ideology. For the first time since the 1970s, employees of public and private enterprises are regularly required to study political ideology. What, if any, effect does this resurgence in ideology have on economic opportunity? New research explores whether displaying ideological conformity to the CCP and expressing ideas that deviate from CCP ideology influence the employability of job seekers in China.

The data. To explore the role of ideology in hiring practices, researchers created and submitted three resumes, each signaling a different political orientation, to each of 6,407 job vacancies found on one nation-wide job posting site between November 2016 and February 2017. A total of 19,221 unique resumes were submitted. Resumes signaled political orientation through extracurricular activities: participation in a “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics Study Group” was used to signal conformity to China’s ruling ideology, participation in a “Western Political Philosophy Study Group” was used to signal non-conformity, and participation in a “Comic Book Club” acted as a neutral control. Researchers measured employability by way of a callback from a firm, which included any personalized phone or email contact by a potential employer requesting that the applicant advances to the next stage of the hiring process.

Next, researchers asked 506 hiring managers across China to evaluate resumes with the same three political signals between December 2018 and January 2019. After reviewing each resume, hiring managers were asked whether they would advance the applicant to the next stage of the hiring process and how the extracurricular study group in the resume affected their decision.

No reward for ideological conformity, penalty for non-conformity. Callbacks varied in expected ways: all other characteristics being equal, applicants from top-tier universities got more callbacks than applicants from lower-tier universities; applicants who were geographically more proximate to the job received more callbacks than those who lived further away; and men received more callbacks than women, which is characteristic of gender discrimination established in previous research of China’s labor market. However, while expressing conformity to CCP ideology had no positive or significant effect on callbacks when compared to resumes that did not signal any political orientation, the data indicate that expressing views that deviate from CCP ideology decreased callback rates by 9%.

Non-conformity viewed as politically risky. Hiring managers indicated that they did not prioritize politically-conformist candidates, as they found little value in political loyalty to their firms’ operations. However, they were 7% less likely to report that they would call back politically non-conformist candidates than politically-conformist ones, noting that they associated political non-conformity with risk.
One manager noted, “in the current political system of China, [a candidate who] expresses political thoughts that contradict those of the regime makes us worry that [the candidate] could easily cause our firm to be seen as making a political mistake.” Taken together, evidence suggests that managers penalize political non-conformity because they worry that hiring those who support Western democracy may invite penalties or investigations that negatively impact firm operations and profits.

**Non-conformity penalties vary by industry sector.** While the incentives, and hence, behavior, of SOEs and government-affiliated public institutions are often thought to be different from those of private and foreign firms, researchers found that the penalty for ideological non-conformity is not significantly different across firm ownership types.

However, after clustering the job vacancies into 12 industry groupings using machine learning, researchers found that the penalties imposed on expressing politically non-conformist views do vary by industry sector. Specifically, firms in innovative industries, such as artificial intelligence and nanotechnology, prioritized by the Chinese government as strategically important in the 13th Five-Year Plan are 2.7 percentage points more likely to penalize applicants supporting Western democracy compared to other firms. Breaking down this difference, while other firms penalize support for Western democracy by only 0.8 percentage points compared to support for CCP ideology, firms in innovative industries prioritized by the government penalize support for Western democracy by 3.5 percentage points.

Researchers posit that because firms in innovative industries prioritized by the government are competing for market position and access to government resources while being subjected to higher levels of oversight, they have little bargaining power vis-a-vis the state. As such, hiring managers might view the political risk of hiring job applicants with non-conformist views as outweighing the productivity gains such employees might bring.

**Research establishes causal link between political ideology and labor market outcomes.** The penalty for supporting Western democracy indicates that China’s recent ideological efforts are indeed manifesting in labor market outcomes. Moreover, the differences across industry sectors suggest that firms designated by the regime as strategically important for innovation may not be hiring talent in ways that maximize the firms’ innovative potential by prioritizing job seekers’ ideology over their qualifications. However, while job seekers do diminish their job opportunities by expressing support for Western political institutions, it is not the case that they can never be employed, at least in the early stages of recruitment, and ideology is not so important that demonstrating ideological conformity will improve a person’s chance of being hired in China’s labor market.