The Impact of Anticorruption Enforcement on China’s Entry-Level Civil Servants


The sweeping anticorruption campaign launched in late 2013 by President Xi Jinping has fueled multiple conjectures regarding its impact on China’s governance. This research explores how China’s anticorruption drive may have affected the quality and socioeconomic diversity of bureaucrats in China.

**The data.** Obtaining a robust sample of government officials in China is challenging. To circumvent this problem, researchers surveyed low-ranking government officials who were pursuing part-time Masters of Public Administration (MPA) degrees in various parts of China between 2018 and 2019. According to the research findings, having a graduate degree is a key formal prerequisite for promotion in the Chinese bureaucracy, and MPA degrees are among the most popular choices for low- and mid-level civil servants. For this reason, researchers suggest, when there are major changes in the types of civil servants recruited, such changes are likely to be also reflected in the characteristics of the civil servants enrolled in MPA programs.

Researchers sought to approximate geographic representativeness in their sample by selecting one or two MPA programs from six key geographic regions in China to field their survey. Researchers then confirmed that the 791 survey respondents who were simultaneously incumbent government bureaucrats and pursuing part-time MPA degrees closely mirrored important demographic trends and characteristics of entry-level civil servants in China.

Researchers also gathered data on anticorruption enforcement from the China Political Elite Database, a comprehensive biographical database covering over 4,000 Chinese officials occupying prominent positions at the city, provincial, and central levels.

**Lower average ability of newly recruited bureaucrats.** Taking advantage of the spike in campaign intensity since 2013 and using analytical strategies to identify the effects of regional variations in enforcement uncorrelated with confounders, researchers found that heightened enforcement since 2013 had a negative and statistically significant effect on the quality of incoming civil servants. According to the analysis, civil servants recruited during the anticorruption campaign reported decreased involvement in student activities and notable achievements in college (e.g., prestigious scholarships, leadership role in student-run organizations, etc.) than those recruited before the campaign. More specifically, the analysis found that for one additional senior official investigated in a given province, civil servants recruited that year from that province reported 22% fewer college activities and 19–25% fewer significant achievements in college compared to the sample average.

Researchers suggest that by lowering perceived benefits from government service, anticorruption measures undercut the attractiveness of public sector jobs, especially in the eyes of high-ability candidates, who typically have many alternative employment options, resulting in the decline in the quality of candidates recruited into the government.

**Anticorruption crackdown has negatively affected the quality of incoming civil servants.**
Shifting socioeconomic composition of the bureaucracy. Researchers further found that the share of civil servants recruited from poor, rural families declined during heightened anticorruption enforcement. Researchers posit that candidates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may opt for higher-paying jobs outside of government if anticorruption campaigns lower expected returns from government service. As such, researchers found that one additional high-level investigation in a province in a given year decreased the likelihood of having entry-level civil servants from a lower socioeconomic class by about 5 to 9 percentage points from the sample average. Correspondingly, in provinces with high anticorruption enforcement, researchers observed an increase in the share of new recruits who came from economically affluent families. Researchers also found that civil servants recruited from a province in a year when anticorruption enforcement was high were less likely to report having economic hardships in the past and were less likely to have participated in work-study programs commonly geared towards the poor.

**INSIGHTS**

- Similarly, one additional high-level investigation in a province in a given year decreased the likelihood of having entry-level civil servants from a lower socioeconomic class from that province by about 5 to 9 percentage points.
- This research suggests that the crackdown on informal income among civil servants caused both high-ability and lower-income candidates to seek employment outside the civil service where salaries are higher.

**Impact of anticorruption enforcement on civil service hiring**

*Estimates based on one additional high-level investigation in a given province in a given year*

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<tr>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Socioeconomic status of parents</th>
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Children of government officials

Children of farmers

A more elitist, less egalitarian bureaucracy? The research also indicates that the new civil servants who joined the service during more intense enforcement periods tended to be less supportive of redistributive policies. When respondents were asked about property taxes for multiple-home owners and special medical services for the rich in public hospitals, for example, researchers found that civil servants recruited during periods of high enforcement expressed policy preferences more aligned with the preferences of the privileged. Specifically, they expressed reduced support for property taxes and increased support for the commercialization of medical services. Assuming that these preferences persist over time, researchers suggest that more elitist and less egalitarian policies may become increasingly enacted in the future when these new recruits rise to positions of power.

Unintended consequences of Xi’s anticorruption campaign. This study suggests that when corruption constitutes a crucial means for officials to supplement their income, efforts to build a cleaner government may have unintended consequences on both the quality and socioeconomic representativeness of the bureaucracy in developing countries. Indeed, evidence suggests a clear shift in the composition and quality of China’s civil servant recruits following heightened anticorruption enforcement under Xi Jinping. According to the researchers, effectively addressing corruption within a complex political-economic system may require more than apprehending a handful of corrupt officials and instead coordinating policy interventions on multiple fronts.