Can China Sell the “China Model” to a Global Audience?


Global public opinion is an important force in international politics. China has been working proactively in recent years to build its soft power by increasing the appeal of its political and economic system among global audiences. Observers disagree on the extent to which these efforts have been successful. Researchers used a randomized survey experiment to measure how government-sponsored messaging by China and the U.S. affects global support for either country’s models in 19 countries around the world.

The data. Researchers first analyzed the core messaging from U.S. and China’s foreign-facing official media outlets. To do so, they created a comprehensive dataset of 19,791 video segments created by China Global Television (CGTN) between 2020 and 2021. They also created a corpus of 1,117 videos created and disseminated between 2008 and 2022 by Share America, a U.S. State Department platform.

Next, researchers conducted a randomized experiment to examine how U.S. and China’s state media influenced public opinion by surveying citizens in 19 countries across 6 continents. Researchers were careful to select a sample of 19 countries that represented a diverse range of contexts, encompassing variation in income levels, governance models, and receptivity towards China's leadership, ranging from favorable to unfavorable. Researchers recruited 6,276 respondents — an average of 330 respondents per country — who were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: 1) a China messaging group that viewed two government videos from China — one advancing China’s political system, and the other, its domestic economy; 2) a U.S. messaging group that viewed two American government videos, one highlighting the U.S. political system and the other focusing on its economic model; 3) a competition arm where the individuals viewed one government video from China and one U.S. government video; or 4) a control group where they viewed two nature videos unrelated to China, the U.S., or political economy.

INSIGHTS

- A survey across 19 countries indicates that China’s state media, which typically portrays its government as highly competent and responsive, boosted global favorability toward China’s political model by 41%, economic model by 30%, and global leadership by 26%.

- At baseline, 84% of respondents in the control group preferred the U.S. political model over China’s system. Exposure to American government messaging, which often promotes strong civil liberties and American entrepreneurship, however, increased support for its political system by a smaller margin of 8 percentage points.

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Varying characteristics of U.S. and China’s government messaging. Researchers organized relevant content from their dataset of U.S. and China’s state media, classifying them into political and economic categories. For China, stories in the political category tended to focus on China's competent leadership, responsive institutions, and Western political dysfunction. Stories in the economic category broadcast China's successes in poverty alleviation, trade and innovation, and infrastructure development. For the U.S., stories in the political category included videos promoting U.S. diversity and strong civil liberties. Within the economic category, videos promoting business dynamism, American entrepreneurship, and investment opportunities in the U.S. were the most common.

Global views change in response to state messaging. In the control group, 84% of respondents preferred the U.S. political system over China’s political system; 70% preferred the U.S. economic system over China’s economic system; and 78% preferred the U.S. over China as the world leader. Those who viewed China’s state-produced videos, however, increased their support for China’s political model by 41%, its economic model by 30%, and their preference for China as a world leader by 26%. Stated another way, while only 16% of respondents in the control group had preferred China’s political model over that of the U.S., 54% of individuals who watched China’s government footages ended up preferring China’s political model over those of the U.S., representing a threefold increase from the control group. China’s official media made especially striking gains among people in developing countries, especially in Africa and Latin America where, the researchers suggest, respondents may have found messaging touting China's economic successes, stability, and government responsiveness especially appealing.

Exposure to U.S. government messages, in isolation, grew support for the American political system by 8 percentage points. When a global audience was exposed to actual messaging from both governments, however, this study found that respondents, on average, preferred China's model over that of the U.S. In the competition arm, when respondents viewed one content from China’s government and one content from the U.S. government in tandem, the proportion preferring China’s system over that of the U.S. grew by 6 percentage points.

Global audiences prioritize effective governance. While global citizens may support civil liberties and democracy, this research suggests that audiences place considerable weight on competent government performance. According to the analysis, China’s media content did not persuade audiences so much in thinking that China's system was somehow democratic, but rather convinced audiences that its autocratic system was responsive and effective in delivering economic growth.

China effectively promotes its model. Despite skepticism about China's ability to sell the “China model” to a global audience, this study indicates that official messaging from China can be strikingly effective, even out-competing messaging from the U.S. These findings suggest that international perceptions of China, which are widely viewed as unfavorable, may not be permanent and may even be reversed given sufficient exposure to China’s government media messaging about the performance of its governance model.