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Political Studies

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# Internal Migration, Political Efficacy, and Political Participation in Autocracies: Evidence from China

Political Studies

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## Abstract

How is internal migration related to political efficacy and participation in autocracies? Existing research emphasizes migration's socioeconomic impact, given the staggering internal migration volume in developing countries, but pays inadequate attention to its relationship with politics. We argue that migrants are more likely to interact with the government and possess greater political efficacy than non-migrants. When migrants return home, they are motivated by higher political efficacy to participate more in politics than non-migrants. We test the theory using four nationally representative surveys in China from 2006 to 2014 and find that returning migrants are more confident in understanding and influencing politics. However, they vote less in elections and avoid challenging the government collectively. Exploratory analysis shows that the counterintuitive results arise because returning migrants shift from traditional political participation, like voting, to new means, like lodging complaints online. The relationship between migration and politics is contingent on the authoritarian context.

## Keywords

internal migration, autocracy, political efficacy, political participation, China

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## Introduction

Many people migrate from rural to urban areas, and some return. In a rural region of Tanzania, Hirvonen and Lilleør (2015) found that 14% of 2603 survey respondents who migrated in 2004 returned to their villages in 2010. In three provinces of Vietnam, 25.8% of 1012 out-province migrants returned to their communities between 2008 and 2010; similarly, in three provinces of Thailand, 30.6% of 2419 out-province migrants returned

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over the same period (Junge et al., 2015). In China, 174.25 million people migrated out of their hometowns for work in 2019,<sup>1</sup> and 8.5 million—most of them migrant workers—returned in the same year.<sup>2</sup> Beyond subnational units or single countries, Cattaneo and Robinson (2020) analyzed 52 surveys covering 31 countries (not including China) and 217,796 respondents and found sizable migration and return, especially in developing countries. The authors further estimated that, in low- and middle-income countries, 80 million of 700 million migrants returned to rural areas in 2020.

The ubiquitous internal movement affects hundreds of millions of ordinary people's lives. Migration improves people's prospects of making money and accumulating social capital (Abramitzky et al., 2019; Wang and Fan, 2006; Zhao, 2002). As people secure survival, further socioeconomic improvements motivate them to prioritize personal values such as self-expression, diversity, and autonomy (Welzel and Inglehart, 2005). The shift in socioeconomic conditions and personal values suggests changes in political views and behavior. However, this line of literature has paid inadequate attention to the relationship between internal migration and mass politics. This lack of attention is regrettable in light of other literature that finds a positive relationship between political views and behavior in democracies. Specifically, political efficacy strongly predicts political participation (Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba et al., 1995), and political participation leads to greater political efficacy (Beaumont, 2011; Finkel, 1985; Valentino et al., 2009). Moreover, political participation in autocracies can be substantive as the authoritarian government responds to popular demands and grievances (Frye and Yakovlev, 2016; Jiang et al., 2019; Malesky and Schuler, 2010; Manion, 2014). Then, suppose migration in many autocracies is associated with changes in political efficacy and participation among many people. In that case, the politically diverse population can place varying demands on the authorities in autocracies in different ways, complicating the authoritarian rule.

How is internal migration related to political efficacy and participation in autocracies? This article argues that migration goes along with higher political efficacy and participation in autocracies. Migration is not merely an individual socioeconomic choice but also a government-controlled process in autocracies. The government regulates internal migration through policies that slow down or speed up movement in the original community and settlement in the host city. Migrants must thus navigate a complex web of bureaucratic hurdles, which exposes them to the workings of the government in ways that non-migrants do not experience. However tricky and disappointing such experiences are, migrants better understand how the bureaucracy and other political institutions work in autocracies and become more confident in dealing with them in the future. Enhanced political efficacy encourages more political participation through institutional or contentious means, especially when migrants return to their hometowns and become dissatisfied with local conditions.

We examine the relationship between internal migration and mass politics in China. Since the 1980s, China has witnessed large-scale rural-to-urban migration. The movement of labor fuels China's economic growth and allows hundreds of millions of people to escape poverty. In recent years, migrants increasingly return to their hometowns in rural areas (henceforth, returnees). This return migration provides an opportunity to compare returnees' political efficacy and participation with rural residents who never migrate (henceforth, non-migrants). The comparison between returnees and non-migrants in their original community helps us to control for contextual confounders and evaluate the difference in their political efficacy and participation.

We acknowledge that not everyone is equally likely to migrate or return. In addition to multivariate regression models, we thus employ two empirical strategies to address the concern that people who migrate and return differ from those who never leave home. First, we use a genetic search algorithm to match non-migrants with returnees on a large set of pre-migration covariates. Second, we use a panel data set and apply two-way fixed-effect models to control unit- and time-invariant unobservable confounders. All three methods yield consistent results, with the strongest evidence from the panel data that enables within-subject comparison. Since these methods adjust the difference between returnees and non-migrants from different angles, the consistent results strengthen our confidence in the relationship between internal migration and political efficacy and participation.

In four nationally representative surveys between 2006 and 2014, we find that returnees have higher political efficacy than non-migrants, but they are not more likely to vote in local elections, engage in village deliberations, or take collective action targeting the government. These findings confirm that migration is related to the sense of competence in understanding politics and accessing political institutions, but they contradict the positive relationship between political efficacy and participation as found in democracies. After many robustness checks, the coexistence of higher political efficacy and lower political participation remains intact. We show that the counterintuitive findings can result from a shift in returnees' participating strategies: returnees with higher political efficacy switch from traditional political participation, such as voting or protesting, to new means, such as lodging complaints online or contacting non-government organizations.

Our study makes three contributions. First, the findings that returnees have higher political efficacy extend research on internal migration from the socioeconomic to the political arena. This association with political efficacy can be consequential, given the massive internal migration in autocracies worldwide. Second, internal migration is not related to higher political participation in autocracies, which contradicts the positive relationship between political efficacy and participation in democracies. We cannot take for granted that internal migration and higher political efficacy would automatically encourage popular political participation and pressure authoritarian regimes toward democratization. Instead, the relationship between political efficacy and participation can be shaped by institutional constraints and alternative modes of engagement in autocracies. The findings enrich our understanding of comparative political behavior across regime types. Third, the study contributes to a growing literature on the understudied phenomenon of return migration. In our case, one in five Chinese rural residents had migration experiences in 2014. While establishing a causal link between returnees' migration experience and political efficacy or participation is challenging, the sheer size of this group suggests a politically diverse—rather than homogeneous, as often assumed—population with varied perspectives and approaches to politics in rural China. Understanding how returnees view and access local political institutions can offer insights into state-society relations, regime stability, and governance in contemporary China.

## Theoretical Expectations

Migrants must overcome many difficulties to settle in host cities and often need to help families in their original communities. The sense of independence and achievements from these experiences is related to migrants' general efficacy.<sup>3</sup> In particular, migrants must deal with the government throughout their journey because of common restrictions on internal

migration and public service access in autocracies. According to the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al., 2021), 31.7% and 53.7% of autocracies had restrictions on freedom of domestic movement for at least some men and women in 2012. Given the restrictions instituted to monitor and manage the population, migrants have to register with the government as they leave or arrive in a place. When migrants come into contact with government agencies and employees due to these restrictions, they learn how bureaucratic or political institutions work in autocracies and how to navigate and use them. Interactions with the government boost ordinary people's confidence in their ability to understand and influence politics (Finkel, 1985; Valentino et al., 2009). Thus, as migrants work through the bureaucratic or political process to solve their problems, they tend to exhibit higher political efficacy.

Besides the additional encounter during the relocation, migrants settled in host cities have more frequent interactions with the government than non-migrants staying in original communities. While non-migrants can handle many things in the countryside interpersonally, migrants must deal with the same things in urban areas through the government. For example, in host cities, migrants must obtain and renew identification documents, meet the requirements for their children to attend schools, and participate in social welfare programs, all of which require them to visit government offices and work with government employees. In comparison, although non-migrants must also do some of these things, they may be unaware of the government's involvement since, for instance, the government employee who comes to their door advocating social welfare programs is their neighbor who has lived next door for years. Consequently, migrants become more familiar with bureaucratic or political institutions than their non-migrant counterparts in the original communities.

Particularly, migrants in host cities face disputes that they must resolve through formal institutions such as the police or courts. Conflicts between multiple parties who are not acquainted are inevitable in cities, and it is difficult to resolve these disputes informally, as is the case with acquaintances in villages. However cumbersome the dispute resolution process is, migrants learn how formal institutions operate and how to use them, which non-migrants need not in their original community. Having positive experiences with formal institutions can boost migrants' confidence in using these institutions again in the future (Gallagher, 2006).

Nevertheless, migrants' experiences with the government in host cities are not always positive. Migrants may encounter corrupt bureaucrats, inefficient agencies, or non-responsive institutions. These problems can worsen due to the lack of government accountability in autocracies (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005). However, we contend that migrants can still have higher political efficacy for two reasons. First, migrants must interact with the government to make a living in host cities. Even if they are disappointed by the government, unlike their socioeconomically better-off peers who can disengage if feeling frustrated by the government (Croke et al., 2016), migrants may not have other options than continually approaching the government to solve their problems (Gallagher, 2006). The cost of dealing with authoritarian governments is high for migrants, but the cost of disengaging can be higher. Second, migrants can learn from their experiences with authoritarian governments despite disappointment. For instance, they may realize that bureaucrats ignore some of their requests, but their other claims compel the bureaucracy to respond (Chen et al., 2015). Along with the need to deal with authoritarian governments, these lessons can help migrants better navigate the government in the future, increasing their sense of competence. Overall, migration experiences are likely to be associated with people's confidence in navigating the bureaucratic and political system. Therefore, we make the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (Internal Political Efficacy) *People with migration experiences have greater political efficacy than those without such experiences.*

With greater political efficacy, migrants are likelier to become politically active, especially after returning to their original communities. Ordinary people participate in politics more when they have greater political efficacy (Converse, 1972; Dalton, 1996; Lipset, 1959; Reichert, 2016). In autocracies, political participation not only serves a window-dressing purpose (Blaydes, 2010; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Magaloni, 2006), but also brings ordinary people some political representation and socioeconomic outcomes (Frye and Yakovlev, 2016; Malesky and Schuler, 2010; Manion, 2014). Sometimes, the government may actively seek out and respond to popular demands (Jiang et al., 2019). The authoritarian responsiveness can benefit migrants because, given their interactions with the government, they understand which agency to turn to for specific problems, saving them time and money by avoiding unnecessary steps. Compared with non-migrants, migrants can more accurately predict what the government will do or how responsive it will be. They also have better access to support from civic organizations and online information in host cities, which helps them assess the situation. After returning to their original communities, migrants can feel motivated to participate in local affairs because they have more opportunities and means than they have had in host cities and because the policies in original communities will directly affect their livelihoods. Therefore, returnees should be likelier than non-migrants to care about and participate in politics in their original communities.

Besides material considerations, emotions can motivate migrants with greater political efficacy to participate in local politics. Migrants witness regional disparities during their migration. Those from poor rural areas can feel their original communities are left behind and mistreated relative to growing host cities. When confronted with unequal, frustrating situations, people with higher efficacy choose to solve problems because they are confident in their ability to improve the circumstance (Roseman et al., 1986). The sense of efficacy can further foster anger, stimulating participation in politics (Valentino et al., 2009) and motivating the authoritarian government to respond (Chen et al., 2015). The vast inequality migrants experience and their growing political efficacy can thus drive them to seek changes through political means.

Migrants' desire to change can increase once they return to their original communities. In developing countries, living standards and economic growth lag in rural areas (Macours and Swinnen, 2008; Sahn and Stifel, 2003). After returning from urban areas, returnees are constantly reminded of this rural-urban gap, which motivates them to seek improvement. Unlike those who never migrate, returnees may not readjust to the situation back at home; unlike those who are still migrating, returnees do not have an exit option but face an unsatisfactory situation every day. Since the government dominates governance in autocracies, returnees can turn to government-instituted political channels for voice, such as voting in local elections or attending consultative meetings. Therefore, we make the following proposition:

Hypothesis 2 (Institutional Political Participation) *People with migration experiences participate in local politics through institutional channels more than those without migration experiences.*

Participating through formal institutions is nonetheless restrictive in autocracies. Due to the lack of accountability, the authoritarian government strictly regulates political participation to favor regime insiders and suppress opposition (Blaydes, 2010; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Magaloni, 2006). The regulation undermines the role of formal institutions in reflecting public opinions and responding to popular demands (Wintrobe, 1998). However, ordinary people can still pressure the authoritarian government into addressing their grievances. Indeed, a large literature shows that the authoritarian government has incentives to discipline corrupt agents and respond to the masses because of the concern over mass mobilization (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005; de Mesquita et al., 2005; Huntington, 2006; Svobik, 2012), especially when mobilization breaks out of formal institutions (Chen et al., 2015; de Vogel, 2023; Lorentzen, 2013). The authoritarian government can prefer to address grievances and make concessions instead of using force since the latter risks fueling dissatisfaction and provoking further mobilization.

Thus, an alternative for returnees to participate in local politics is through contentious means such as taking collective action. With higher political efficacy, returnees can gather and protest to influence local governments. Moreover, some returnees could have experiences confronting authorities like employers or officials or even joining collective action in host cities (Østby, 2016). Confrontational incidents—experienced or overheard—can expand returnees’ repertoire of participation when they have problems back at home and when formal institutions are ineffective. Therefore, we also have the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3 (Contentious Political Participation) People with migration experiences participate in local politics through contentious means more than those without such experiences.*

## Migration and Return in China

We test these hypotheses in China. China stands out among other autocracies for large-scale rural-to-urban migration since the 1980s. In recent years, China has witnessed a growing urban-to-rural return. The two-way movement offers a unique opportunity to study how internal migration is related to political efficacy and participation. To mitigate confounders, we compare returnees and non-migrants in their original communities because they live in the same environment, face similar issues, and have equal political rights. However, to explore alternative explanations, we also compare returnees with migrants, as they share migration experiences but face different environments and challenges.

Many Chinese have migrated from villages to cities since the 1980s. China’s National Bureau of Statistics reports that migrants reached 288.36 million in 2018.<sup>4</sup> Recently, some migrants have returned to their original communities. Several studies estimate that about 30% of migrants returned (Miao et al., 2013; Wang and Fan, 2006; Zhao, 2002). Official statistics suggest that more than seven million migrants have returned and started businesses by 2018.<sup>5</sup> This return has roots in individual needs for caring for families in original communities and institutional barriers preventing migrants from settling in host cities. Consequently, the return trend in China is expected to continue, with the number of returnees likely to rise, reshaping the demographic landscape of China’s rural areas and posing new governance challenges.



Migrants earn a higher income in cities than they do in villages. As economic opportunities drive migration, migrants come into frequent contact with the government. Between the late 1980s and early 2000s, migrants must apply for temporary residence permits from China's Public Security Bureau within three days of arriving in host cities. Although the government has relaxed the regulation since the middle of the 2000s, migrants still need the documents to open a bank account, join the government's social insurance program, or send their children to local schools. The lived experience of government regulations is not unique in China but shared by many migrants in other autocracies (Deshingkar, 2006; Turaeva, 2022).

Migrants are often mistreated in host cities. They work long hours under harsh conditions, and even so, some do not receive payments, especially in the 1990s (Chan, 2012). Meng and Zhang (2001) finds that migrants are less likely to obtain white-collar jobs than urban residents despite the same qualifications and that migrants receive lower wages than urban residents on the same job. Unsurprisingly, migrants use whatever is available to protect their interests and rights. For instance, after China enacted the Labor Contract Law in 2008, the number of arbitrated and adjudicated cases surged (Gallagher et al., 2015). Some scholars also note that migrants return home and compete in local elections (Murphy, 2002: chap. 5–7; Zhou, 2003), a formal institution not uncommon in autocracies (Svolik, 2012: 2). Others even argue that migrants form the new working class; their deprivations generate anger, resentment, and collective action; and returning migrants bring militancy into the countryside (Chan and Pun, 2009).

## Data, Measurement, and Design

We test our hypotheses with four nationally representative surveys in China from 2006 to 2014. For each survey, we focus on respondents with agricultural *Hukou* in rural areas (henceforth rural residents) because our study concerns differences between returnees and non-migrants in their original communities.<sup>6</sup> The 2006 and 2010 cross-sectional surveys come from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). Only these CGSS waves ask respondents questions that are necessary to code returnees. The 2012 and 2014 longitudinal surveys come from the China Labor Dynamic Survey (CLDS). These are the only publicly available, nationally representative CLDS waves. The CLDS panel data is especially valuable, as it allows us to compare outcome variables before migration and after return within the same individuals.

### Returnees and Non-migrants

We define returnees as rural residents who migrated from their original communities to host cities but have permanently returned to the original communities. In CGSS 2010, we code as returnees respondents who “once migrated for work” but “have stayed at home for quite some time” and “do not intend to migrate in the future.”<sup>7</sup> Coding returnees in CGSS 2006 is similar but less strict because the survey asks if respondents migrated without specifying how long they have lived at home. In CLDS 2012 and 2014, we code as returnees respondents who “have cross-county work experience for more than six months” and “come back for permanent settlement.”

We define non-migrants as rural residents who have been living in their original community and did not migrate. Specifically, we code as non-migrants respondents who did not “migrate for jobs or business” in CGSS 2006, respondents who “never migrated for



jobs and have been living in the original community” in CGSS 2010, and respondents who did not “have cross-county work experience for more than six months” in CLDS 2012 and 2014. In the robustness section, we strengthen the coding with additional CGSS and CLDS questions.

### *Political Efficacy*

To measure political efficacy, we use survey statements that describe respondents’ confidence in understanding politics in general and accessing specific political processes in rural China. For example, a statement in CGSS 2006 says, “Politics is too complicated, and people like me don’t understand.” A statement in CGSS 2010 says, “I can let the leading cadre know my suggestions to the government.”<sup>8</sup> Each statement asks whether respondents “strongly disagree, disagree, indifferent, agree, or strongly agree.” For statements like the first one above, we reverse the order of survey options so that the more a respondent agrees with a statement, the higher the respondent’s political efficacy. Besides individual statements, we calculate a respondent’s average response to all statements, creating an additive index of political efficacy. In addition, to safeguard against multimodal responses and prioritize variation in responses, we demean and scale responses to each statement and then calculate the first principal component (PC) as a second aggregate measure of political efficacy.

### *Institutional Participation*

We measure respondents’ institutional participation by voting in local elections and engaging in village deliberations. CGSS 2010, CLDS 2012, and CLDS 2014 ask whether respondents voted in the latest village committee (VC) election. CGSS 2010 also asks whether respondents voted in the VC election in the last 3 years. In addition, CGSS 2006 asks whether respondents voted in the latest direct election of local People’s Congress (LPC) representatives. CGSS surveys frame the voting question as a binary choice, i.e. vote or not, but CLDS surveys consider how respondents voted, e.g. asking families to vote on their behalf. In the main analysis, we code voting if and only if respondents voted themselves. In the robustness section, we modify the CLDS coding to include other ways of voting. As for village deliberation, CGSS 2006 asks whether respondents recommended candidates or attended LPC meetings. CGSS 2010 asks whether respondents participated in the work of or wrote joint letters to village committees in the last year. We include the variables of institutional participation individually in our analysis.

### *Contentious Participation*

To measure contentious participation, we use CGSS questions about collective action in the past 3 years.<sup>9</sup> CGSS 2006 and 2010 first ask respondents “whether any incidents of collective action happened around you” and if so, how many times. In order to elicit responses, this question frames collective action as a common phenomenon in society: it asks if respondents are aware of—rather than part of—any incidents. After respondents confirm any incidents, CGSS 2006 and 2010 ask respondents, “in those collective activities or actions, did you assume the following roles?” Roles include organizers, participants, supporters, and others. We code respondents as joining collective action if they played any roles in the incidents. Finally, CGSS 2006 and 2010 ask “who were the

primary targets of these collective activities or actions?” We use the question and construct a variable that suggests the incident targeted government agencies.

## Design

We acknowledge that rural residents who migrate and return may differ from those who do not, even before migration and return occur. These differences can confound the comparison between returnees and non-migrants regarding political efficacy and participation. To reduce potential confounders, we employ three methods in the analysis. First, we regress respondents' political efficacy and participation measures on their return status in 2006 and 2010, respectively. In the regression, we include covariates such as respondents' age, gender, education, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) membership, marriage, and income to control the difference between returnees and non-migrants. For completeness, we fit the same regression model with each CLDS wave. This baseline method compares returnees and non-migrants regarding political efficacy and participation while holding their observed characteristics the same through extrapolation.

Second, we leverage a bigger pool of non-migrants in CGSS and match non-migrants to returnees on a large set of covariates. We include most of the covariates in the regression but exclude respondents' marriage and income because these can be influenced by their migration and return experience. Instead, we supplement the covariates of respondents with the education, CCP membership, and managerial responsibility at work of their parents.<sup>10</sup> Unlikely influenced by respondents' migration and return experience, the additional matching variables can nevertheless predict respondents' income and family status in the original community. We use a genetic search algorithm to determine weights for each matching covariate (Sekhon, 2011). The algorithm maximizes the balance of covariates and creates a matched sample of all returnees and weighted non-migrants.<sup>11</sup> Using the matched sample, we estimate the average treatment effect on the treated (ATT) of internal migration on political efficacy and participation. Compared with the regression model that linearly adjusts observable characteristics, this matching method balances the distribution of observable characteristics, cross-checking the regression results.

Third, we fit two-way fixed effect (TWFE) models with the CLDS panel data. We include the same covariates with the regression in the TWFE model to ensure comparability. In addition, we cluster standard errors of the TWFE model at the unit level for robustness against heteroskedasticity and serial correlation. The TWFE model strengthens the matching method. Despite balancing the distribution of observable characteristics, matching does not address unobservable differences between returnees and non-migrants. Unobservable differences underlie some main counterarguments to our theory. For example, returnees might have stronger or weaker feelings of political efficacy than non-migrants, not because of their migration and return experiences but because of their innate abilities. The TWFE model mitigates this concern by eliminating unit-invariant confounders, observable or not. Specifically, the TWFE model estimates how changes in a respondent's migration status (e.g. a non-migrant in 2012 became a returnee in 2014) are related to the same person's political efficacy and participation, controlling the influence of the person's ability. We also apply the TWFE model to a subsample that excludes respondents with erratic migration histories for robustness.

Combined with the design that restricts the sample to those living in the same original community, these methods improve the comparison between returnees and non-migrants. They make different modeling assumptions and take different approaches to addressing

confounding differences between returnees and non-migrants. In particular, the TWFE models allow us to make within-subject comparisons. Therefore, consistent results from these methods should boost our confidence in a strong relationship between return migration and political efficacy and participation. We also examine alternative explanations following the main analysis. Given the research question and data, we cannot completely rule out confounders but triangulate our results by zooming in on the population of interest in the same environment, testing hypotheses with multiple methods, and considering alternative explanations.

## Descriptive Differences between Returnees and Non-migrants

We first describe how returnees differ from non-migrants in four nationally representative surveys between 2006 and 2014.<sup>12</sup> As shown in Table 1 Panel A and B, returnees were several years younger than non-migrants. About 40% of returnees were female, whereas more than half of non-migrants were female. Returnees were, on average, more educated because of higher middle-school attendance. They were slightly more likely to be married, and their annual income was about 20-30% higher. However, returnees did not differ from non-migrants regarding CCP membership.

While the first two panels show how returnees and non-migrants differ after the former migrated and returned, Panel C draws on the CLDS panel data to show how they differ before migration, including their pre-migration voting behavior. Specifically, we first identified those who were non-migrants in 2012 but returnees in 2014 and then compared their 2012 data. Would-be returnees were still more likely to be young, male, educated, married, and making money than non-migrants, although the differences were smaller in the pre-migration comparison, notably regarding age and income. Interestingly, would-be returnees and non-migrants were similar in CCP membership and voting behavior before migration. The similarity is reassuring, as we will take advantage of the CLDS panel data to mitigate potential confounders.

## Returnees' Higher Levels of Political Efficacy

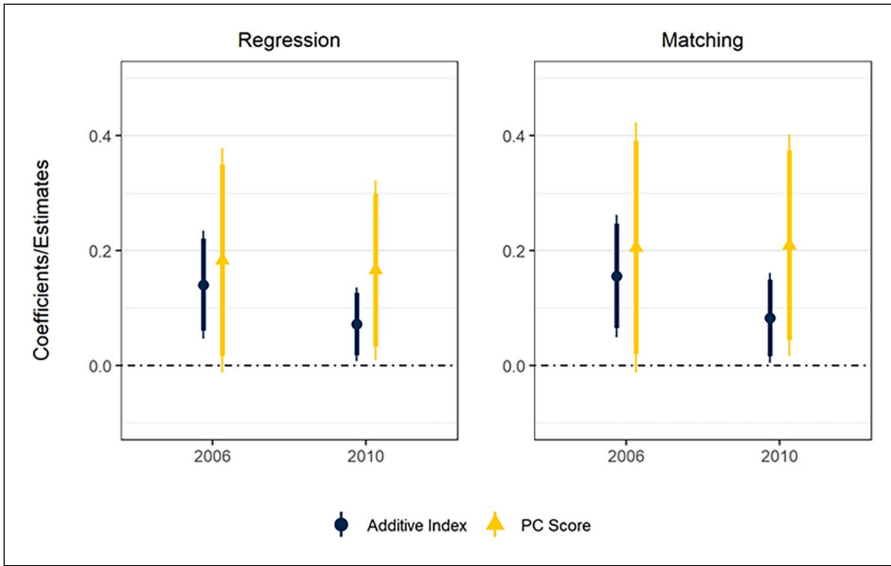
Do returnees have stronger feelings of political efficacy than non-migrants? We begin with the CGSS regression and matching results since the CLDS panel focuses on respondents' general efficacy—which, according to the TWFE models, is indeed higher for returnees—rather than specifically on political efficacy. We plot estimated regression coefficients for the returnee indicator and matching estimates for the difference in political efficacy between returnees and non-migrants in Figure 1. In the left panel, we find that returnees' estimated coefficients for both political efficacy indices are positive in both CGSS surveys, and except for the PC score in CGSS 2006, the estimated coefficients are statistically significant at the 95% level. The results mean that, compared with non-migrants, returnees feel more confident about understanding politics and influencing outcomes through political processes.

To gauge the magnitude of the difference, we compare the estimated coefficients with non-migrants' average political efficacy indices. In 2006, non-migrants' average additive political efficacy index was 2.64; the estimated coefficient means that, everything else being equal, return migration was related to a 5.32% increase in the additive index. Non-migrants' PC score was, on average, lower than the sample mean by 0.037 times the

**Table 1.** Descriptive Differences between Returnees and Non-migrants.

	Panel A: CGSS				Panel B: CLDS				Panel C: CLDS Panel			
	2006		2010		2012		2014		2012			
	NM	R	NM	R	NM	R	NM	R	NM 2012	NM 2014	NM 2012	R 2014
Age	44.77 (12.14)	41.35 (13.42)	52.27 (13.88)	46.37 (12.88)	44.28 (15.05)	42.48 (12.45)	46.18 (15.11)	43.07 (12.31)	46.66 (13.13)	45.01 (11.73)		
Female	0.56 (0.50)	0.40 (0.49)	0.57 (0.50)	0.38 (0.49)	0.56 (0.50)	0.40 (0.49)	0.54 (0.50)	0.40 (0.49)	0.60 (0.49)	0.40 (0.49)		
Education, no	0.20 (0.40)	0.06 (0.23)	0.30 (0.46)	0.10 (0.30)	0.33 (0.47)	0.25 (0.43)	0.21 (0.41)	0.07 (0.25)	0.37 (0.48)	0.28 (0.45)		
Education, primary school	0.40 (0.49)	0.40 (0.49)	0.38 (0.48)	0.41 (0.49)	0.29 (0.46)	0.35 (0.48)	0.32 (0.47)	0.35 (0.48)	0.29 (0.45)	0.34 (0.47)		
Education, middle school	0.32 (0.47)	0.47 (0.50)	0.26 (0.44)	0.40 (0.49)	0.28 (0.45)	0.30 (0.46)	0.32 (0.47)	0.45 (0.50)	0.25 (0.43)	0.31 (0.46)		
Education, high school	0.08 (0.27)	0.07 (0.26)	0.06 (0.23)	0.08 (0.27)	0.09 (0.29)	0.08 (0.28)	0.11 (0.32)	0.11 (0.32)	0.08 (0.27)	0.08 (0.27)		
Education, college +	0.01 (0.08)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.07)	0.01 (0.08)	0.01 (0.12)	0.01 (0.10)	0.03 (0.18)	0.02 (0.13)	0.01 (0.10)	0.00 (0.06)		
CCP	0.06 (0.24)	0.07 (0.25)	0.05 (0.21)	0.06 (0.23)	0.04 (0.21)	0.05 (0.22)	0.04 (0.20)	0.05 (0.22)	0.05 (0.21)	0.05 (0.22)		
Marriage	0.89 (0.31)	0.87 (0.34)	0.85 (0.35)	0.88 (0.32)	0.81 (0.39)	0.91 (0.29)	0.83 (0.38)	0.90 (0.30)	0.87 (0.34)	0.92 (0.27)		
Income	3701.28 (6885.51)	5685.76 (7486.89)	6407.54 (10304.69)	8368.85 (12339.30)	11462.23 (78769.82)	14530.45 (24893.25)	13453.93 (66562.01)	18606.03 (29476.08)	12382.14 (102885.70)	12469.93 (17057.50)		
Voting	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.56 (0.50)	0.57 (0.50)		
Observations	3162	277	2622	466	7917	1401	11421	1493	4535	290		

NM and R stand for non-migrants and returnees respectively. For each covariate, the first row represents means and the second standard deviations. The means of Female, CCP membership, Marriage, and Education represents the proportion of respondents who are female, CCP members, married or having a partner, and have certain levels of education, respectively. The unit of Income is yuan.



**Figure 1.** Returnees' Internal Political Efficacy (indices).

sample standard deviation; in comparison, return migration was related to an increase of 0.183 times the sample standard deviation in the PC score. In 2010, non-migrants' average additive index and PC score were 2.48 and -0.174, respectively. Return migration was associated with an increase of 2.89% in the additive index and 0.166 times the sample standard deviation in the PC score.

In the right panel of Figure 1, we find that matching estimates are close to estimated regression coefficients. The confidence intervals for matching estimates are wider than those for regression coefficients because of additional uncertainty in the matching procedure. However, the matching estimates are statistically significant at the conventional level, showing the same pattern as the regression models. Since the matching method involves a richer set of covariates and entails stricter criteria for covariate balance than the regression model, the results confirm that returnees have stronger feelings of political efficacy than non-migrants.

Moreover, we analyze individual political efficacy statements to understand the source of returnees' higher political efficacy. We report estimated regression coefficients and matching estimates for each political efficacy statement in Table 2. In Panel A, we find that every estimated coefficient of the returnee indicator is positive, and some are significantly larger than zero. For example, in 2006, returnees were more likely than non-migrants to disagree that "politics is too complicated, and people like me don't understand" (Column (1)). Since non-migrants' average response to that statement is 2.53, the estimate means that return migration was related to a 10.2% increase in disagreement with the statement. In 2010, returnees were more likely than non-migrants to agree that "I can let the leading cadre know my suggestions to the government" (Column (6)). The estimate means a 4.3% increase in agreement with that statement relative to non-migrants' average response of 2.62.

In Panel B, we find that every matching estimate for the difference in responses to statements between returnees and non-migrants is positive. In addition, the matching

**Table 2.** Returnees' Internal Political Efficacy (individual statements).

Panel A: Regression	Individual statements about internal political efficacy											
	CGSS 2006						CGSS 2010					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Returnee	0.258*** (0.072)	0.217*** (0.079)	0.134 (0.083)	0.065 (0.073)	0.029 (0.073)	0.112* (0.060)	0.073 (0.053)	0.072 (0.056)	0.062 (0.058)	0.05 (0.059)	0.043 (0.056)	0.043 (0.060)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs.	3214	3214	3214	3214	3214	2744	2733	2768	2749	2771	2760	2764
Panel B: Matching	Individual statements about internal political efficacy											
	CGSS 2006						CGSS 2010					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Returnee	0.282*** (0.094)	0.231*** (0.092)	0.151 (0.093)	0.056 (0.090)	0.057 (0.087)	0.052 (0.074)	0.033 (0.063)	0.13* (0.068)	0.036 (0.073)	0.117 (0.075)	0.052 (0.066)	0.109 (0.074)
Treated Obs.	277	277	277	277	277	458	456	462	460	462	460	461
Matched Obs. (unweighted)	969	969	969	969	969	1368	1347	1386	1388	1386	1390	1380

Columns (1)–(5) and (6)–(12) report results about individual political efficacy statements in CGSS 2006 and 2010, respectively. Regression covariates include age, gender, education, party membership, marriage, and income (log). Matching reports Abadie-Inbens standard errors.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

The CGSS 2006 statements are

- (1) Politics is too complicated, and people like me don't understand;
- (2) Do you agree or disagree that some people or organizations express opinion regarding their own interests through rally?
- (3) Do you agree or disagree that some people or organizations express opinion regarding their own interests through petition?
- (4) Do you agree or disagree that some people or organizations express opinion regarding their own interests through strike?
- (5) Do you agree or disagree that some people or organizations express opinion regarding their own interests through march?

The CGSS 2010 statements are

- (6) I can let the leading cadre know my suggestions to the government;
- (7) I have no confidence in myself when discussing the government's performance with other people;
- (8) The government's work is too complicated for people like me to understand;
- (9) The party would like people like me to join;
- (10) I think that I could do it if I were a cadre;
- (11) People like me cannot influence the government's decision;
- (12) I think that I have the ability to participate in politics.



estimates are close to corresponding regression coefficients, and statistical tests for the matching estimates show similar results to those for the regression models. For example, both methods show that, in 2006, returnees were more confident in understanding politics (Column (1)) and supported expressing opinions through rallies (Column (2)). In 2010, returnees were likelier to agree that they could understand the government's work (Column (8)). These results suggest that returnees' higher political efficacy manifested in aggregate indices is not driven by particular statements, but stems from many aspects of their confidence in understanding politics and accessing political processes.

Finally, we examine our proposed mechanism, i.e. returnees gain political efficacy relative to non-migrants through interacting with the government more and understanding the political system better. We measure returnees' interaction with and understanding of the government using CGSS 2010 questions assessing returnees' knowledge and familiarity with China's political and legal institutions.<sup>13</sup> In Panel A of Table 3, we find that returnees are 4.7 percentage points more likely than non-migrants to name the chairman of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress correctly (Column (1)). They are more knowledgeable about laws and "how to file a lawsuit" (Columns (2) and (7)) and have a better understanding of the functions of China's Public Security Bureau, Procuratorate, and Court (Columns (3)–(5)).

In Panel B of Table 3, using mediation analysis (Tingley et al., 2014), we find that returnees' political know-how strongly mediates their political efficacy. The mediation of returnees' political know-how is statistically significant at the 95% level except in the case regarding "how to hire a lawyer" (significant at the 90% level) and "how to appeal to the Letter and Visit Bureau" (insignificant at the conventional level). The mediation accounts for about 20% of the total relationship between returnees' migration experience and political efficacy. In sum, the mediation analysis yields evidence for our proposed mechanism, and together, the findings in this section support our first hypothesis that returnees have stronger feelings of political efficacy than non-migrants.

## Returnees' Lower Levels of Political Participation

With stronger feelings of political efficacy, are returnees more active in local politics? We first present the TWFE results using the CLDS panel data in Table 4. These results provide the strongest evidence in our study of how the same individuals' likelihood of voting changes as they transition from non-migrants to returnees. In Column (1), our TWFE model estimates that return migration is related to a 4.3 percentage point drop in the same individuals' likelihood of voting. In other words, a rural resident who returned from migration in 2014 was, on average, 4.3 percentage points less likely to vote than the same rural resident if he or she had not migrated in 2012. In Column (2), after excluding erroneous observations (cases where respondents were reported as returnees in 2012 but non-migrants in 2014), the panel data retains 290 respondents whose return status changed between 2012 and 2014. In this refined sample, the TWFE model indicates a stronger correlation: a rural resident who changed from being a non-migrant in 2012 to a returnee in 2014 was less likely to vote in the VC election by 6.8 percentage points. For comparison with the CGSS results discussed below, we also include regression results using each CLDS wave in Columns (3) and (4). Returnees were less likely to vote in the latest VC election than non-migrants by 5.8 and 9.6 percentage points in 2012 and 2014, respectively. Compared with non-migrants' voting rates, 52.4% in 2012 and 60.5% in 2014, returnees' voting rates were 11.1% and 15.9% lower, respectively. Contrary to our second

Table 3. Mechanism of Returnees' Internal Political Efficacy.

Returnees' interaction with and understanding of the political system							
Panel A: Regression	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7) (8)
Returnee	0.047*** (0.018)	0.133*** (0.058)	0.142*** (0.062)	0.109* (0.059)	0.141*** (0.061)	0.087 (0.053)	0.093* (0.052)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs.	2767	2793	2792	2791	2788	2789	2792
Returnees' political efficacy through interaction with and understanding of the political system							
Panel B: Mediation	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7) (8)
Average Causal Mediation Effect							
Estimate	0.029***	0.038***	0.027***	0.034***	0.032***	0.027*	0.031***
95% CI (upper)	0.061	0.076	0.059	0.071	0.066	0.061	0.068
95% CI (lower)	0.005	0.007	0.007	0.006	0.008	-0.001	-0.018
Average Direct Effect							
Estimate	0.138*	0.130	0.141*	0.134*	0.136*	0.141*	0.136*
95% CI (upper)	0.313	0.297	0.306	0.302	0.306	0.309	0.306
95% CI (lower)	-0.014	-0.032	-0.019	-0.026	-0.021	-0.025	-0.015
Total Effect							
Estimate	0.168***	0.168***	0.168***	0.168***	0.168***	0.168***	0.168***
95% CI (upper)	0.340	0.340	0.340	0.340	0.340	0.340	0.340
95% CI (lower)	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.004	0.004
Proportion Mediated Estimate	0.175*	0.226*	0.162*	0.203*	0.189*	0.162*	0.188*

(Continued)

**Table 3.** (Continued)

Panel B: Mediation	Returnees' political efficacy through interaction with and understanding of the political system							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
95% CI (upper)	1.532	2.725	9.146	5.170	6.437	13.639	19.994	58.821
95% CI (lower)	0.045	0.063	0.079	0.087	0.084	0.068	0.092	0.065
Obs.	2638	2638	2638	2638	2638	2638	2638	2638
Sims.	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000

Panel A shows regression results where the independent variable is the returnee status and the dependent variables are measures of interaction with and understanding of the political system. Regression covariates include age, gender, education, party membership, marriage, and income (log). Panel B shows results of mediation analysis that estimates migration's political impact through the channel of interaction with and understanding of the political system, i.e. Average Causal Mediation Effect. The mediation analysis uses bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) nonparametric bootstrap confidence interval for robustness.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

The question in Column (1) is "do you know who is the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress?" The options are "Yes and the answer is correct" and "No or the answer is incorrect."

The questions in Columns (2)–(8) are "how much do you understand

(2) basic legal knowledge;

(3) the function of the Public Security Bureau;

(4) the function of the Procuratorate;

(5) the function of the Court;

(6) how to hire a lawyer;

(7) how to file a lawsuit;

(8) how to appeal to the Letter and Visit Bureau." The options are "do not understand at all," "do not understand much," "about average," "understand well," and "fully understand."

**Table 4.** Returnees' Participation in Voting (CLDS).

	Voting in the Village Committee Election			
	CLDS Panel	CLDS Panel	CLDS 2012	CLDS 2014
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Returnee	-0.043** (0.022)			
Non-migrant in 2012 & Returnee in 2014		-0.068* (0.037)		
Returnee in 2012			-0.058*** (0.015)	
Returnee in 2014				-0.096*** (0.014)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	10,443	8842	8155	11,407

Covariates include age, gender, education, marriage, party membership, and income (log). In Column (1), Returnee is coded as in cross-sectional analyses; in Column (2), the coding is strengthened by including only respondents who are Non-migrants in CLDS 2012 and Returnees in CLDS 2014. Robust standard errors are used in panel models.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

hypothesis, these results suggest that, despite higher political efficacy, returnees participate less than non-migrants in local politics through formal electoral institutions.

The decline in voting in VC elections is also evident in the CGSS data. In the left panel of Figure 2, we find that returnees' estimated regression coefficients are close to zero for voting in the latest direct election of LPC representatives in CGSS 2006 and negative for voting in the VC elections in CGSS 2010. The results indicate that returnees are either not likelier than non-migrants to vote for LPC candidates, who oversee village committees, or less likely than non-migrants to vote for VC candidates, who directly influence village affairs and rural residents' livelihoods. Specifically, in 2006, while 29.6% of non-migrants voted in the latest direct election of LPC representatives, return migration was related to only a 1.78 percentage points increase in voting. In 2010, 72.0% and 74.3% of non-migrants voted in the latest VC election and the last 3 years; however, returnees' voting rates were 9.60 and 10.5 percentage points lower.

The right panel of Figure 2 shows that the matching estimate for the difference in voting in the LPC election between returnees and non-migrants is positive and statistically significant at the 90% level. The estimate deviates from the regression result, casting doubt on whether returnees and non-migrants were equally likely to vote in the LPC election. It highlights the difference between the LPC and VC elections, as the former is less relevant to rural residents' everyday lives and mobilizes fewer rural residents to vote. As for the VC elections, the matching estimates are close to the regression coefficients, confirming that returnees were significantly less likely than non-migrants to vote in either the latest election or the past 3 years in 2010.

Besides voting, rural residents can participate in local politics through formal deliberative institutions. In Panel A of Table 5, we find that returnees' estimated regression coefficients are close to zero for attending LPC meetings (Column (1)), recommending LPC representatives (Column (2)), and writing joint letters to village committees (Column

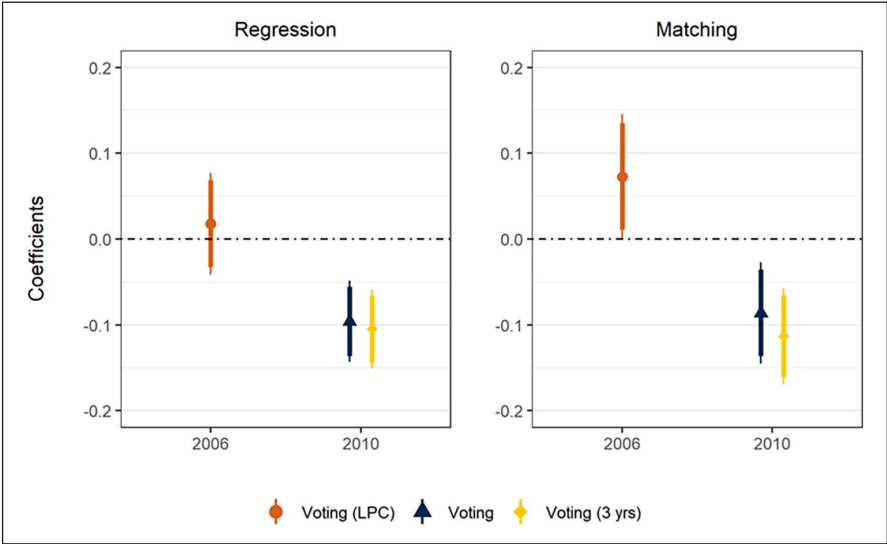


Figure 2. Returnees' Participation in Voting (CGSS).

Table 5. Returnees' Participation in Village Deliberation.

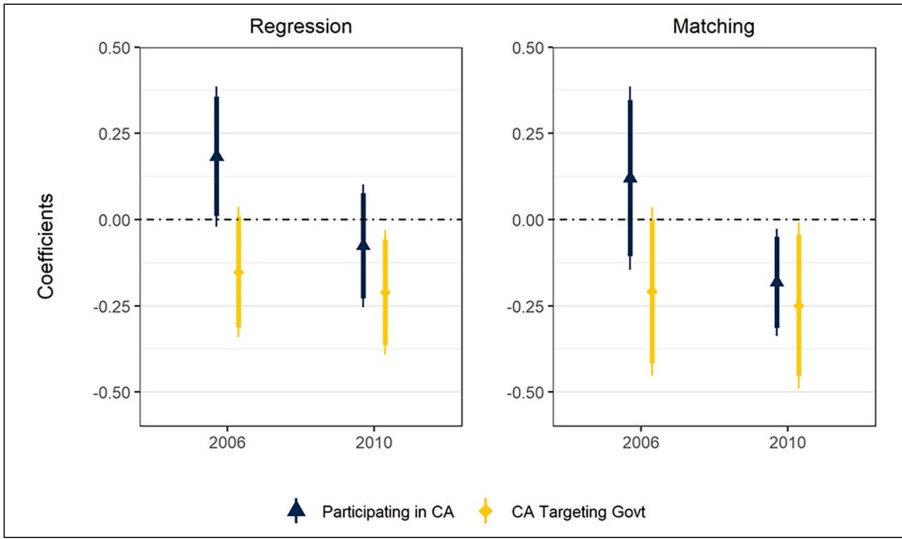
Village deliberation				
Panel A: Regression	CGSS 2006		CGSS 2010	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Returnee	0.006 (0.011)	0.002 (0.015)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.024 (0.016)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs.	3214	3214	2789	2791

Village deliberation				
Panel B: Matching	CGSS 2006		CGSS 2010	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Returnee	0.008 (0.013)	0.022 (0.020)	-0.006 (0.005)	-0.049** (0.020)
Treated Obs.	277	277	465	466
Matched Obs. (unweighted)	969	969	1390	1399

Questions in Columns (1)–(2) ask in the latest direct election of LPC representatives, did you (1) attend the LPC meetings including these at the township/town/district level? or (2) recommend candidates? Questions in Columns (3)–(4) ask in the past year, did you (3) write joint letters? or (2) join the work of village committee? Regression covariates include age, gender, education, party membership, marriage, and income (log). Matching reports Abadie-Imbens standard errors.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .



**Figure 3.** Returnees' Participation in Collective Action.

(3)), and negative for joining the work of village committees (Column (4)). None of these estimated coefficients are statistically significant, suggesting that returnees are not likelier than non-migrants to participate in village deliberation. Specifically, in 2006, while 2.9% and 5.6% of non-migrants attended LPC meetings and recommended LPC representatives, respectively, only 0.6 and 0.2 percentage points more returnees participated in these ways. In 2010, 0.5% and 10.4% of non-migrants wrote joint letters to and joined the work of village committees, respectively; in comparison, returnees' participation rates were lower by 0.3 and 2.4 percentage points. In Panel B, the matching estimates are similar to the corresponding regression coefficients. Notably, the matching estimate for the difference in joining village committees' work between returnees and non-migrants is significantly negative at the 95% level. The results suggest that rural residents participate much less in village deliberation than in elections, and returnees are no more engaged than non-migrants, if not less.

Finally, regarding contentious participation, Figure 3 shows that returnees' estimated regression coefficient for participating in collective action is positive and significant at the 90% level in CGSS 2006, suggesting returnees were more likely than non-migrants to play a role in past collective action that happened around them. The corresponding matching estimate is also positive but becomes smaller and insignificant. The positive relationship between returnees and collective action had disappeared by 2010: the estimated regression coefficient for participating in past collective action is negative and insignificant in CGSS 2010, and the corresponding matching estimate is significantly smaller than zero. Moreover, regression and matching estimates show that returnees are less likely than non-migrants to target the government in collective action in both surveys, particularly CGSS 2010.

Specifically, in 2006, 27.4% of non-migrants with the opportunity to participate in collective action played a role in the incident, and 24.7% of them reported that the incident targeted the government. In comparison, the regression coefficients mean that 18.3 percentage points more returnees with similar opportunities participated, but 15.2 percentage



points fewer of them targeted the government. In 2010, 39.7% of non-migrants who had a chance to participate in collective action played a role, and 47.2% reported that the incident targeted the government. The regression coefficients mean that returnees with similar opportunities were less likely to participate or aim at the government by 7.63 and 21.1 percentage points, respectively. The matching estimates suggest an even smaller likelihood that returnees acted collectively or targeted the government. Therefore, contrary to our third hypothesis, returnees are not likelier than non-migrants to participate in local politics through contentious means and particularly avoid opposing the government.

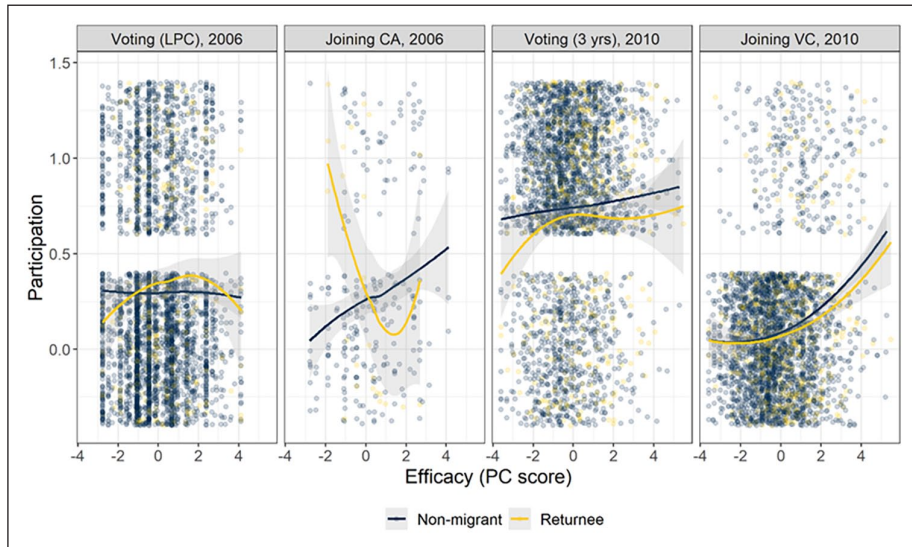
## **Do Returnees Really Avoid Local Politics?**

The higher political efficacy and lower political participation of returnees relative to non-migrants contradict the literature that suggests a positive relationship between political efficacy and participation. In this section, we double-check our results, especially about returnees' political participation.

First, because we compare returnees with non-migrants, our results may arise if the positive relationship between political efficacy and participation among returnees is weaker than that among non-migrants. That is, a relative increase in returnees' political efficacy may not occur with a relative increase in their political participation. To consider this explanation, we examine the relationship between political efficacy and participation for returnees and non-migrants separately. In Figure 4, we show scatter plots and LOESS lines between the PC score and four measures of political participation. We find that the relationship between political efficacy and participation among returnees differs from that among non-migrants. Although non-migrants' political participation measures increase with the PC score except for voting in the LPC election, a positive political efficacy-participation relationship does not fit the data of returnees, perhaps except for joining the work of village committees. Indeed, there seems to be no simple political efficacy-participation relationship among returnees: for voting in the LPC election, joining collective action, or voting in the past 3 years, returnees' political participation measures fluctuate with the PC score. The plots reject the explanation that our results are due to how we analyze the data, suggesting that the political efficacy-participation relationship differs between returnees and non-migrants.

Second, another alternative explanation involves preference falsification in autocracies. Rural residents may not answer questions about collective action truthfully, and returnees may have more incentives to underreport taking part in collective action, despite higher political efficacy, because they witnessed the state's repressive behavior during migration. We do not think that preference falsification drives our results. We find considerable variation in responses to questions involving the government, sometimes explicitly referring to a conflict with the government. The variation suggests that respondents do not necessarily view questions implying criticism of the government as sensitive, and they may want to express their opinions. Moreover, if this explanation is correct, we would expect returnees to deny that collective action took place around them to avoid answering any follow-up questions, such as their role in the incident or the target of the incident. However, as shown in Table 6, returnees were not likelier than non-migrants to deny collective action in either 2006 or 2010, regardless of whether we coded the responses as binary or counts.

Third, one may worry that the results are driven by returnees' relationship with their original communities. If returnees choose to reside in nearby townships rather than in



**Figure 4.** Relationship between Political Efficacy and Participation for Non-migrants and Returnees.

From the left to the right, the four political participation measures are voting in the LPC election in CGSS 2006, joining collective action in CGSS 2006, voting in the VC election in the past 3 years in CGSS 2010, and joining the work of the VC in CGSS 2010. Points are vertically perturbed to display binary variables. Lines are the prediction of LOESS.

**Table 6.** Returnees' Responses to Collective Action Questions.

	Did collective action happen around you?			
	CGSS 2006		CGSS 2010	
	Binary	Count	Binary	Count
Returnee	0.019 (0.018)	0.017 (0.051)	0.031** (0.013)	0.017 (0.039)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs.	3214	3211	2789	2784

"Binary" means respondents confirm or deny that collective action happened around them; "Count" means that respondents report how many such incidents happened around them. Regression covariates include age, gender, education, party membership, marriage, and individual income.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

their original communities, they may participate less in local politics because of higher traveling costs. Moreover, if returnees have difficulty reconnecting with their original communities, they may feel reluctant to participate in local politics. To investigate these possibilities, we run the same regression but compare returnees with non-migrants in sub-samples. In Panel A of Table 7, we distinguish rural residents who do not plan to move to townships in the next 5 years (Column Villages) from those who do or have moved (Column Towns). In both sub-samples, compared with non-migrants, returnees were less likely to vote in the latest VC election in 2010, especially for the sub-sample living in the

**Table 7. Returnees' Place of Residence and Social Interaction.**

	Panel A		Panel B			
	Voting in the VC Election		Voting in the LPC or VC Elections			
	CGSS 2010		CGSS 2006		CGSS 2010	
Where to live in 5 years?	Towns		Interact w/ Fellow Villagers		Get together w/ Friends	
Villages	<sometimes	>sometimes	<sometimes	>sometimes	<weekly	>weekly
Returnee	-0.102*** (0.026)	-0.064 (0.074)	0.053 (0.108)	0.017 (0.032)	-0.089*** (0.025)	-0.161* (0.088)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs.	2526	210	196	3018	2543	199
					2104	6738
					<familiar	>familiar
					0.053 (0.104)	-0.054 (0.049)
					✓	✓

In Panel A, we split CGSS 2010 using the question "in the next 5 years, do you plan to move to townships?" Options include "Yes, No, or Have built or bought houses in townships." We distinguish respondents who answered "No" as those who lived in the "Villages." In Panel B, we split CGSS 2006 using the question "how frequently do your family interact with fellows in the same village?" Options include "never, rarely, sometimes, or often." Responses of "never" or "rarely" are coded as "<sometimes." We split CGSS 2010 using the question "in the past year, do you often get together with friends?" Options include "never, a few times every year, a few times every month, a few times every week, or everyday." Responses of "never" or "a few times every year" are coded as "<weekly." We split the CLDS panel using the question "are you familiar with your neighbors and other residents living in this village?" Options include "completely unfamiliar, unfamiliar, between unfamiliar and familiar, familiar, or completely familiar." Responses of "completely unfamiliar," "unfamiliar," or "between unfamiliar and familiar" are coded as "<familiar." Regression covariates include age, gender, education, party membership, marriage, and individual income. Robust standard errors are used in panel models.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

original communities. In Panel B of Table 7, we split the sample of rural residents by how frequently they interact with fellow villagers and friends and how familiar they are with neighbors in their original community.<sup>14</sup> Again, we find no systematic difference in sub-sample voting behavior—if anything, compared with non-migrants, less-social returnees are likelier to vote than more-social returnees. These results do not support the explanation based on returnees' residence or reintegration.

Fourth, returnees might be absent when the last VC election happened in their original communities. They might thus vote less even though, with higher political efficacy, they were eager to vote had they present. Given this alternative explanation, we would expect absent returnees to ask families to vote on their behalf. However, returnees' voting deficits remain after we broaden the voting options and re-code the dependent voting variable using the CLDS panel data, as shown in Table SI.1 of the Supplementary Information.

To assess this alternative explanation further, we can analyze the timing of returnees' last migration and restrict the full sample to those who ended migration before the last VC election. The subset of returnees is as likely to be present during the election as non-migrants. If the results for this subsample align with those of the main analysis, it would mitigate concerns that returnees had not yet returned and were absent from voting. To implement this strategy, we need data on the timing of individual returnees' last migration and the schedule of every village election. The latter is unfortunately unavailable due to varied election dates across villages and anonymized village identifiers in the data. However, we know that the two cycles of VC elections most relevant to our study occurred from 2008 to 2010 and from 2014 to 2016, respectively, and that the majority of elections took place early in the cycle.<sup>15</sup> We thus focus on returnees who ended their last migration before March 2008 (i.e. before the 2008 Lunar Spring Festival) in CGSS 2010 and returnees who began migration in or after 2012 and ended it before 2013 in the CLDS panel.<sup>16</sup> The first subset of returnees returned before the 2008 election cycle began, while the second returned before the 2014 election cycle was fully underway.<sup>17</sup> Although we cannot confirm that every returnee in these subsets was at home during the VC election of their original communities, they were more likely to be present than the full sample. Therefore, if the alternative explanation holds, we would expect the subset of returnees to vote no less than non-migrants, thereby closing the voting deficits observed in the full sample. However, Table 8 shows that the deficits remain in the sub-sample analysis and are consistent with the main analysis. The results contradict the alternative explanation and alleviate the concern about returnees' absence during the VC election.

Finally, we re-code our dependent variable of voting and independent variable of returnees, and our results remain robust. We also code additional survey questions measuring returnees' external political efficacy, and we find returnees have higher external political efficacy than non-migrants. In addition, like the sub-sample analysis above, we use the timing of returnees' last migration and re-run regression on collective action, focusing on the subset of returnees who returned to their original communities before the period referenced in the collective action question. We find results consistent with the main analysis: these returnees are less likely to take collective action or target the government. Relatedly, we re-run regression using data that excludes returnees but retains migrants. We find that migrants are much more likely than non-migrants to report collective action, whereas returnees align closely with non-migrants in the responses. These results alleviate the concern that returnees' responses reflect experiences in the host cities

**Table 8.** Returnees’ Participation in Voting (conditional on migration timing).

	Voting in the VC Election			
	CGSS 2010		CLDS Panel	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Returnee	-0.051* (0.031)	-0.050* (0.030)	-0.042* (0.023)	-0.070* (0.041)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2562	2593	10,277	8749

Covariates include age, gender, education, marriage, party membership, and income (log). In Columns (1) and (2), the dependent variable is voting in the latest VC election and in the past 3 years, respectively. In Column (3), Returnee is coded as in cross-sectional analyses. In Column (4), the coding is strengthened by including only respondents who are Non-migrants in CLDS 2012 and Returnees in CLDS 2014. Robust standard errors are used in panel models.  
\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

rather than their original communities. We report these robustness checks in the Supplementary Information.

**What Explains Returnees’ Higher Political Efficacy but Lower Political Participation?**

We suggest that returnees participate less in local politics than non-migrants in *traditional* ways, such as voting or protesting. However, with higher political efficacy, returnees are likelier to influence local politics in *new* ways, such as lodging complaints online or turning to non-government organizations. We use *traditional* to mean prominent forms of political participation that the authoritarian government institutes or monitors closely; we use *new* to mean other forms of political participation associated with emerging technology or activism, which blur the line between political and non-political behavior and defy straightforward government regulations (Clément and Zhelnina, 2020; O’Brien and Li, 2006: chap. 3–4). The shift to new political participation is consistent with both returnees’ growing political efficacy and their withdrawal from traditional political participation. We must note that we developed this explanation after testing our original hypotheses, so the following analysis is exploratory.

Specifically, returnees are likelier than non-migrants to witness, experience, and adopt new ways of influencing local politics. In host cities, migrants cannot vote in local elections or join neighborhood committees, which can alienate them from traditional political participation. Instead, they have more opportunities to join online discussions and campaigns to shape public opinion and pressure the government. They also have better chances to come across civic organizations and join their activities serving local communities or influencing local officials. After returning, returnees can draw on these experiences and turn to new strategies when they intend to solve their problems or influence local affairs. Their lack of experience in local elections and the risk associated with protesting can further encourage them to shift from traditional to new forms of political participation.

**Table 9.** Returnees' Experience of and Reaction to Unfair Treatment by the Government.

	Unfair treatment by the government in the past year?	How did you react?			
		Let go	Pressure through private relationships	Traditional political participation	New political participation
Returnee	0.013 (0.016)	0.049 (0.068)	0.016 (0.020)	-0.016* (0.009)	0.023*** (0.008)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Obs.	2793	284	284	284	284

Regression covariates include age, gender, education, party membership, marriage, and individual income.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

If this explanation holds, we expect that returnees are likelier than non-migrants to choose new over traditional political participation, given a politically relevant goal. Survey questions about political participation analyzed above focus on specific forms rather than the range of forms; it is impossible to test this explanation with questions used to test original hypotheses. However, another CGSS 2010 question asks whether the government unfairly treated a respondent in the past year and, if so, how the respondent reacted. We code the option of “let go” and “exert pressure through private relationships” separately and group other options into either traditional or new forms of political participation.<sup>18</sup> We regress these variables on respondents' return status and the same covariates as the previous analysis and report results in Table 9.

We find that returnees are likelier than non-migrants to report unfair treatment by the government in the past year, although the difference is insignificant. Among those unfairly treated by the government in the past year, returnees are likelier to let go of the issue or exert pressure through private relationships. These results may be consistent with an explanation of opportunity costs: returnees with more economic and social capital find it not worth pursuing the matter, or they solve the problem through private channels. However, the estimates are imprecise and insignificant. More importantly, we find that returnees are significantly less likely to redress the unfair treatment in traditional ways, including many institutional channels and contentious means, and they are significantly more likely to adopt new ways of pressuring the government to resolve the issue. These results are consistent with our exploratory explanation.

## Conclusion

Leveraging large-scale migration and return in China, we find that returnees have higher political efficacy than non-migrants. However, they vote less in village elections, show no greater interest in village deliberations, and avoid challenging the government in collective action. Our exploratory analysis shows that the counterintuitive results can stem from returnees shifting to new forms of political participation in China, such as lodging complaints online. These results suggest that internal migration in autocracies is closely related to political efficacy and participation. However, they raise questions about the conventional wisdom in democracies, which takes the positive relationship between political efficacy and participation for granted. The authoritarian context can complicate the relationship between political efficacy and participation, shaping whether political



efficacy materializes or through what forms. The findings contribute to comparative political behavior by shedding light on emerging forms of political participation among a significant returnee population in autocracies. Moreover, the political differences between returnees and non-migrants underscore the governance challenges that internal migration pose for the authorities in autocracies.

The case of China illuminates the palette of the relationships between internal migration and mass politics in autocracies. China exemplifies the massive internal migration taking place in the world. The Chinese government's concern about population movement and involvement in its management exist in other autocracies. These commonalities suggest widespread interactions between internal migrants and returnees and the authoritarian government beyond the case of China. However, China is also distinct regarding how it approaches internal migration and regulates mass politics, which suggests that the specific relationship can vary. Since the 1980s, the Chinese government has facilitated internal migration by improving the infrastructure and streamlining bureaucratic processes. If another authoritarian government has less capacity to manage internal migration or impose more punitive measures against migration, people's lived experience of the government can be quite different and, thus, negatively related with their political efficacy. As for political participation, China is a single-party regime with restrictive political institutions. The decline in traditional participation (and rise in new participation), as found in this study, may not generalize to another competitive authoritarian regime, where higher political efficacy may encourage participation in both ways or generate innovative forms of participation.

Related to this discussion of generalizability, our study has limitations worth addressing in future work. First, due to data limitations, we cannot examine whether different internal migration experiences relate to different political efficacy or participation. For example, returnees could differ in political efficacy or participation depending on how long they migrated, where they migrated, or what jobs they worked. Such heterogeneous analysis will provide deeper insights into the relationship between internal migration and mass politics across various autocratic contexts, but such analysis will require detailed data on the vast population of returning migrants.

Second, informed by the counterintuitive findings, we realize that our political efficacy and participation measures capture only part of returnees' political life in China. Returnees perceive and participate in politics in ways that are often overlooked. Our fieldwork reveals that self-organized migrant and returnee groups donated money to fellow villagers when village cadres engaged with them and communicated local needs. The behavior falls outside conventional measures such as confidence in politics or voting in elections, but it directly influences local governance and state-society relations. Such seemingly non-political behavior can shape political outcomes in China and other autocracies. Future research on authoritarian politics can benefit from theorizing and measuring alternative forms of political efficacy and behavior.

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## Supplemental Material

Additional Supplementary Information may be found with the online version of this article.

Table SI.1: Alternative Coding of Dependent Variable

Table SI.2: Alternative Coding of Independent Variable

Table SI.3: External Political Efficacy

Table SI.4 Returnees' Participation in Collective Action (conditional on migration timing)

Table SI.5 Migrants' and Returnees' Participation in Collective Action

## Notes

1. National Bureau of Statistics (2020).
2. People's Daily (2021).
3. The concept of efficacy comprises two dimensions. Internal efficacy refers to the belief that one can influence outcomes, whereas external efficacy concerns the belief that institutions are responsive.
4. National Bureau of Statistics (2019).
5. Wang XD (2017).
6. *Hukou* is a system of registering households and managing population movement in China.
7. Quoted phrases are translations of survey question options.
8. We exclude CLDS questions on efficacy because they do not explicitly refer to politics. See the Supplementary Information for translations of survey questions.
9. CGSS 2006 asks the same question, but for "the past five years."
10. The questions about whether respondents' parents had managerial responsibility at work when the respondents were 18 are available only in CGSS 2006.
11. The algorithm significantly improves the balance of covariates. See the replication files for the distribution of covariates before and after matching.
12. We also check the demographics of migrants, who were either "migrating for jobs" at the time of the surveys or "temporarily returned home and would migrate again in the future. Migrants are very different from returnees or non-migrants, which supports the design comparing returnees with non-migrants in their original communities. The statistics are omitted from Table 1 for space but can be reproduced using the codes.
13. See notes in Table 3 for details.
14. See table notes for splitting criteria.
15. In 2008, 15 out of 32 province-level administrative units held VC elections ([https://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-01/09/content\\_853260.htm](https://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2008-01/09/content_853260.htm)). The VC elections took place every 3 years before 2020.
16. CGSS 2006 did not have data about respondents' migration timing.
17. The CLDS panel data only asked which year respondents began or ended migration.
18. Specifically, the traditional form includes the option of "sue," "apply for administrative ruling or reconsideration," "appeal to the superior government individually," "appeal to the superior government collectively," "complain to news media," "seek help from people's organizations such as trade unions or women's federations," "retaliate without direct conflict," and "directly conflict including using violence." The new form includes the option of "expose the issue online," "seek help from non-government organizations," and other means.

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