

# Political Persuasion in the Information Age: Results from a Field Experiment

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- **Persuasion channels have shifted online**

- Political leaders increasingly vie for citizen support via social media.
- Concerns over the influence of brief video clips on attitudes and beliefs.

- **Short-video platforms as a new force**

- Douyin/TikTok reach massive audiences with short, emotional content.
- Political and policy-related content appears seamlessly between leisure clips.

- **A real-world policy setting**

- China's National People's Congress (NPC) opens 30-day online comment windows for draft laws.
- Citizens can submit **anonymous** feedback on proposed revisions.

- **Our question:**

- Can one minute of real TikTok exposure shift real-world political behavior?
- If yes, through which mechanisms — information? fear? social norms?

- **Public participation in Chinese legislation**

- Since 2005, the NPC has published draft laws online for 30-day comment periods, collecting **anonymous feedback**.
- Public Security Law revision: **99,375 commenters, 125,962 comments** – most drafts receive only a few hundred comments.

- **The Public Security Law revision (Sept. 1–30, 2023)**

- Proposed Article 34 criminalizes actions “harming national sentiments.”
- Vague wording: “clothing or symbols detrimental to the spirit of the Chinese people.”
- Violations: detention for 5–10 days plus fines up to 5,000 RMB.

- **The short-video landscape**

- TikTok was flooded with pro-law nationalist videos during the comment window.
- Critics were labeled “unpatriotic.”

- **Platform & timing:** WenJuanXing survey, Sept 10–20, 2023 (during comment window).
- **Sample:**  $N = 2,122$  valid participants, all provinces, mobile-verified.
- **Random assignment** to watch:
  - ① **Nationalist videos** (emotional / calm): support the law, defend national sentiment;
  - ② **Critical videos** (emotional / calm): highlight vagueness, unchecked administrative power;
  - ③ **Mixed** (one nationalist + one critical, order randomized);
  - ④ **Control** (no video).
- **Videos:** real Douyin clips ( $\geq 300k$  likes), publisher identities masked.
- **Outcome:** whether participants wrote supportive/oppositional comments, submitted on their behalf to the official NPC portal.

- **Political persuasion:**
  - Classic studies focus on TV/campaign ads and voting behavior.
  - We examine **short online videos** and actual **willingness to speak up**.
- **Social media experiments:**
  - Large-scale studies on Facebook/Instagram find modest average effects.
  - Ours is more **targeted**: short specific clips; real-stakes political action; non-democratic context.
- **Contribution:** micro-level evidence on how short videos shape dissent via formal public-comment process.

- **Spiral of silence** (Noelle-Neumann, 1974):
  - People remain silent if they believe their opinion is socially disapproved.
  - We capture this under **anonymity** — norms operate even without identifiability.
- **Second-order beliefs** — misjudgments about others' attitudes:
  - People overestimate others' intolerance; correcting this boosts participation.
- **Our contribution:**
  - Measure both personal **and** perceived intolerance of others.
  - Short videos alter both; perceived social intolerance predicts who speaks up.
  - Supplementary experiment **directly manipulates** beliefs about others' intolerance.

- **Anonymity protections**

- No identifying information collected; survey company destroyed data post-experiment.
- Publisher identities masked to avoid government-affiliation perception.

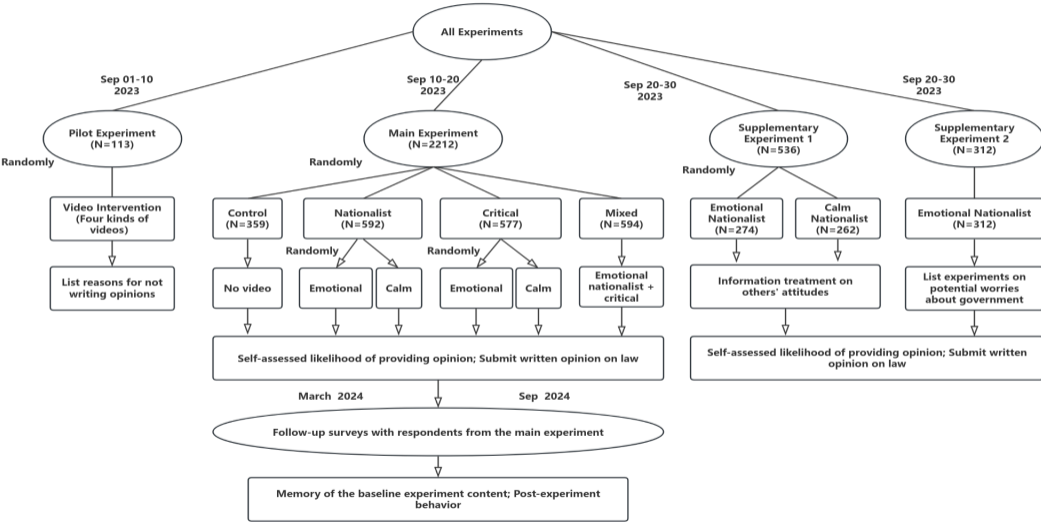
- **Ethical safeguards**

- Fast-tracked IRB approval from Renmin University.
- Videos already widely circulating online — exposure akin to everyday browsing.

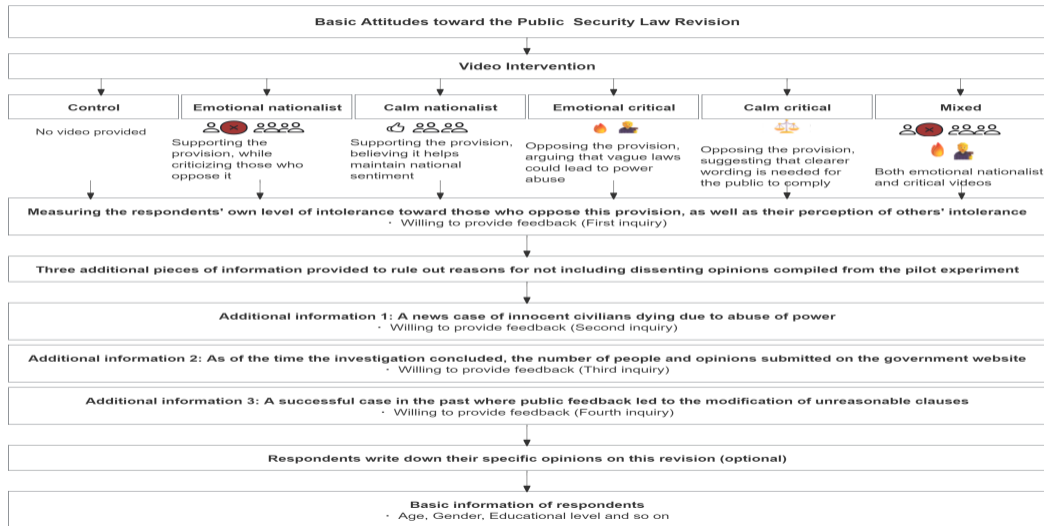
- **Response quality**

- Attention checks (e.g., “Please enter 43”; “ $12 + 21 = ?$ ”).
- Excluded responses completed in  $< 3$  min or with straight-lining.
- 2,122 valid of 2,206 initial respondents (96.2% retention).

# Experimental flow



# Experimental flow



- **Comment classification**

- Three RAs coded each comment as supportive, oppositional, or neutral.
- 99.25% agreement; 494 valid comments.

- **Mechanism variables: Two intolerance measures (1–10 Likert)**

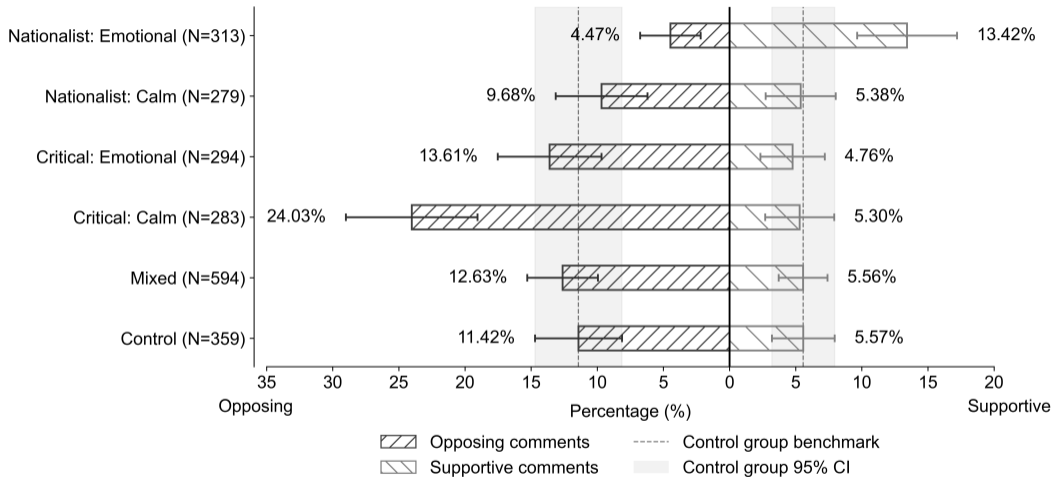
- *Self*: “Do you think amendment-proposers are unpatriotic?” (baseline = 5.1)-information updation channel
- *Social*: “Do others see amendment-proposers as unpatriotic?” (baseline = 5.6)-social norm channel

- **Covariates**: demographics, prior knowledge, province FE.

# Main findings (comment performance)

- **Control:** 11.4% oppositional, 5.6% supportive.
- **Nationalist videos:**
  - Oppositional ↓ **4.8 pp** (42% decline);
  - Supportive ↑ **4.0 pp** (71% increase);
  - Driven by **emotional** nationalist clip.
- **Critical videos:**
  - Oppositional ↑ **6.6 pp** (58% increase), mainly **calm** clip.
  - No effect on supportive comments.
  - *Counter to priors:* calm “facts-only” clip outperforms emotional rhetoric for critical content.
- **Mixed exposure:** effects cancel out.
- Strong but short-lived effects.

# Main results visualization



Bars show share of supportive vs. opposing comments by treatment group (95% CI).

# Regression results (Baseline)

	1[Oppose]			1[Support]		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<b>Nationalist</b>	-0.045** (-2.27)	-0.048** (-2.38)		0.041** (2.37)	0.040** (2.28)	
Nat_Emoational			-0.071*** (-3.30)			0.081*** (3.53)
Nat_Calm			-0.023 (-0.95)			-0.005 (-0.26)
<b>Critical</b>	0.073*** (3.12)	0.066*** (2.84)		-0.005 (-0.36)	-0.004 (-0.29)	
Crit_Emoational			0.020 (0.75)			-0.006 (-0.33)
Crit_Calm			0.114*** (3.79)			-0.002 (-0.10)
<b>Mixed</b>	0.012 (0.56)	0.003 (0.15)	0.003 (0.16)	-0.000 (-0.01)	0.002 (0.11)	0.002 (0.15)
Control mean	11.4%	11.4%	11.4%	5.6%	5.6%	5.6%
Controls	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Province FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Obs	2,122	2,121	2,121	2,122	2,121	2,121
R <sup>2</sup>	0.058	0.065	0.072	0.019	0.026	0.034

**Notes:** Columns (1)/(4): aggregate treatment dummies, no controls. Columns (2)/(5): add demographic controls + province FE. Columns (3)/(6): disaggregated by emotional vs. calm tone. Robust t-statistics in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ .

# Mechanism evidence: intolerance beliefs

- **Two potential channels:**

- Own-beliefs (information): videos change views on the law's merits.
- Second-order beliefs (social norms): videos change perceived social intolerance.

- **Treatment effects on beliefs:**

- Nationalist clips raise self-intolerance (+0.6 pts) and social-intolerance (+1.1 pts).
- Critical clips reduce both.
- Both self- and social-intolerance strongly predict silence versus dissent.

- **An asymmetry: emotional vs. calm**

- Nationalist: emotional  $\gg$  calm (social pressure works through arousal).
- Critical: calm  $\gg$  emotional — calm content more credible, less easily dismissed.

# Mediation: adding belief variables

	1[Oppose]			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Self_Intolerance	-0.023*** (-8.07)		-0.014*** (-4.34)	-0.013*** (-4.10)
Social_Intolerance		-0.024*** (-9.45)	-0.019*** (-6.67)	-0.017*** (-6.25)
Nat_Emotional				-0.040* (-1.86)
Nat_Calm				-0.018 (-0.76)
Crit_Emotional				0.009 (0.34)
Crit_Calm				0.109*** (3.70)
Mixed				0.013 (0.59)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Obs	2,121	2,121	2,121	2,121
R <sup>2</sup>	0.078	0.090	0.098	0.113

**Notes:** Col. (4): adding self- and social-intolerance reduces Nat\_Emotional effect from -0.071 to -0.040 ( $\approx 40\%$  decline).

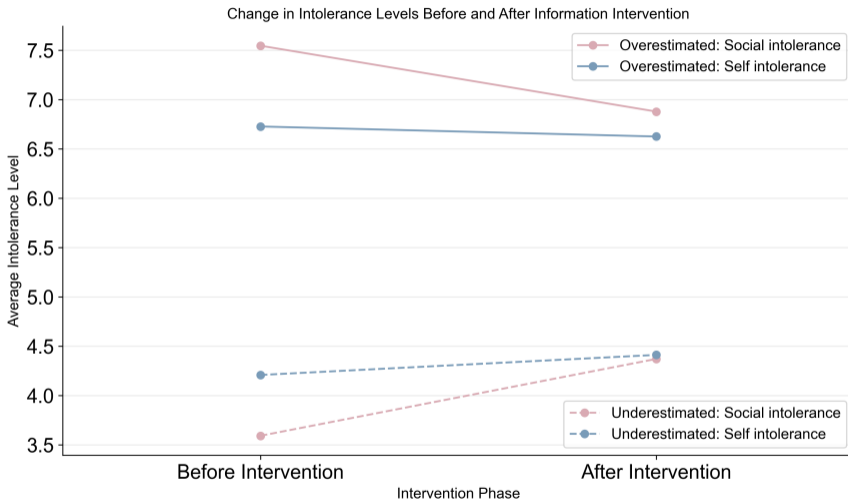
## Supplementary experiment: correcting second-order beliefs

- **Design:** New sample ( $N = 536$ ), same nationalist clips.
  - After viewing: “Average patriotism intolerance = 5.14/10” (below midpoint 5.5).
- **Result:** nationalist video effect on commenting **disappears** completely.

	Main experiment ( $N = 591$ )	Supplementary ( $N = 534$ )
Nat_Emotional	-0.046** (-2.04)	-0.012 (-0.35)
Controls	Yes	Yes
Province FE	Yes	Yes

**Notes:** DV = 1[Oppose]. Robust t-statistics in parentheses. \*\*  $p < 0.05$ .

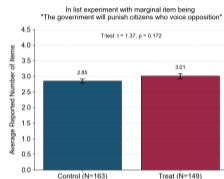
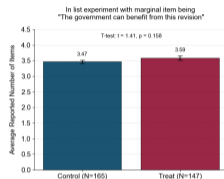
# Supplementary experiment (belief correction)



**Notes:** After seeing “others’ real tolerance,” emotional nationalist effect vanishes. Social intolerance corrected downward for overestimators, upward for underestimators

# Robustness: fear of government retaliation?

- **Concern:** Nationalist videos might signal government opinion, inducing fear.
- **Design mitigations:**
  - Complete anonymity; no identifying information retained.
  - Publisher identities masked.
- **List experiment** ( $N = 312$ )
  - Control: 4 neutral statements.
  - Treatment: +2 sensitive items (e.g., “Government will punish dissenters”).
  - Mean diff.  $< 0.15$ ;  $t$ -tests n.s.
  - Can reject  $>20\%$  agreement at 5% level.



**Notes:** Treatment vs. control mean differences are small and statistically insignificant.

# Ruling out alternative channels

- **Concern 1: Heterogeneity in prior beliefs**

- Do effects reflect pre-existing differences in who finds nationalism persuasive?
- **Response:** Correcting second-order beliefs eliminates the effect — driven by *social* intolerance, not fixed priors.

- **Concern 2: Demand effects / experimenter bias**

- Are participants guessing the “right answer”?
- **Response:** Surveys after experiments show most did not guess purpose; cash rewards independent of answers; NPC submission promise reinforced sincerity.

- **Other alternatives: offer 3 more text information in the main experiment**

- *Free-riding?*. Tell them that the number of people giving feedback so far is still very small compared with China’s population.
- *Efficacy beliefs?*. Tell them about a successful case where public feedback led to the deletion or revision of a legal provision.
- *“I don’t care”*. Tell them about a news story in which an innocent citizen died due to the abuse of power by grassroots law enforcement officers.

- **Follow-up surveys:** 6 and 12 months post-baseline ( $N = 173$  and  $N = 160$ ,  $\sim 15\%$  response rate).
- **Recall fades quickly:**
  - 90% forgot specific content of the new legal provisions.
  - 82% forgot the videos they watched.
- **No residual treatment effects**
  - Tolerance beliefs converge toward control-group levels.
  - No detectable effect on stated willingness to provide feedback.
- **Interpretation:**
  - Effects are short-run but precisely timed to the 30-day comment window.
  - “Fleeting persuasion” is sufficient to mute dissent at the crucial moment.

# Real-world scale and impact

- **Top 50 TikTok/Kuaishou videos** (Sept 2023):
  - $\approx$ 27 million views; 90% pro-law, 80% emotional.
  - Nationalist outnumbered critical 5-to-1 in views.
- **Legislative outcome:**
  - By mid-2024, few substantive changes to the controversial article.
  - Final law passed June 2025; vague language largely retained.

Video type	TikTok (Douyin)		Kuaishou	
	Emotional	Calm	Emotional	Calm
Nationalist	18,885	4,709	900	105
Critical	1,459	936	342	28

**Notes:** Total video views (thousands), Sept 1–30, 2023. Estimated from likes using a 5% like-to-view ratio.

- **Findings:**

- One minute of video exposure significantly shifts real political participation.
- Emotional nationalist content reduces dissent by 42%; calm critical content increases it by 58%.
- Mixed exposure cancels out, suggesting balanced information restores autonomy.

- **Mechanism:**

- Operates primarily via **perceived social norms** and misbeliefs about others' intolerance.
- Correcting these beliefs fully removes the effect; fear and free-riding play minimal roles.

- **Implications:**

- Short videos can influence civic discourse at scale during narrow legislative windows.
- Transparency on actual public beliefs may sustain open dialogue and counter manipulation.

# Thank you!

*Political Persuasion in the Information Age*

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