

# Management of civil services and the supply of civil servants

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## Abstract

This study proposes an organization–person framework and examines whether management of public officials shapes capable young elites' preferences of government jobs. Using a conjoint experiment in China, we find that monetary and nonmonetary traits of governments jobs alter capable young elites' motivations to engage in public service. In particular, merit-based selection rule and high wages attract more capable young elites to serve in public services. In contrast, campaign-style corruption investigation may deter them from serving in government. Furthermore, the effects of civil service management are contingent upon individuals' attributes. Individuals with political connections are less likely to prefer merit-based selection rules and more likely care about the economic return on government jobs, but intensive corruption investigation is more likely to crowd out those with weak public service motivation.

## Chinese Abstract

摘要: 本研究提出了组织-个人框架, 探究对公职人员的管理是否影响了有能力的年轻精英对政府工作的偏好。通过在中国进行的一项联合实验, 我们发现政府工作的经济和非经济激励改变了有能力的年轻精英参与公共服务的动机。特别是, 优绩制和高工资吸引了更多有能力的年轻精英进入公共部门。相反, 运动式的腐败调查可能会阻止他们在政府任职。此外, 公职人员的管理对进入政府意愿的效果取决于个人的特征。有政治关联的个人更不可能偏好优绩制的选拔规则, 而更有可能在乎政府工作的经济回报; 反腐运动更有可能降低公共服务动机较弱的人进入政府的可能性。.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The management of civil service involves the daily operations of managing public employees in public organizations and has multiple dimensions, including selection, performance evaluations, monitoring, and recruitment (Berman, 2015; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2018). Emerging studies indicate that the management practices of public officials could shape the quality of public service delivery (Rasul & Rogger, 2018), affect corruption in governments (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2018), and alter the task completion of governments (Rasul et al., 2021). The literature provides valuable insights to facilitate an understanding of the consequences of the management of civil services. Yet we still have a limited understanding of whether the management of civil services shapes the supply of civil servants.

The quality of civil servants matters for the quality of government. Competent bureaucrats can reduce the level of corruption, improve the delivery of public service, and enhance economic growth (Besley & Reynal-Querol, 2011; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). The importance of attracting or choosing capable elites to serve the public interest is undeniable, but the government must compete with the private sector for the most capable among them. Numerous scholars have examined the attractiveness of governments using the person-organization fit framework, focusing on whether and how individuals' personal attributes shape their tendency to work in public organizations (e.g., Perry & Wise, 1990; Vandenebeele, 2008). Extending this line of research, we base the study on an organization–person framework to answer the following question: How can the management practices of public officials affect the tendency of capable young elites to work in government?

Individuals' motivation for seeking public office can be multidimensional and dynamic. They may rely on both the monetary and nonmonetary traits of public organizations to make career choices; for instance, material interests, especially wages, shape citizens' preferences when seeking public office (Dal Bó et al., 2013; Keane & Merlo, 2010). Nonmonetary factors like merit recruitment and corruption monitoring may alter incentives to pursue public office (Fisman et al., 2014; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021). Few researchers, however, have examined the effect of multiple factors on capable young elites' willingness to serve public interests in a uniform framework. Emerging studies employ conjoint experiments to explore whether management of civil services shape bureaucrats' preferences and motivations (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021; Oliveros & Schuster, 2018). Following this line of research, we use a conjoint experiment to estimate the causal effects of multiple dimensions of management practice simultaneously. The experiment was conducted with 1024 undergraduates at a top elite university in China.

Our empirical analysis unveils several key findings. First, political selection rules matter. Capable young elites favor the merit-based rule over the seniority-based and connection-based selection rules in their preferences of government jobs. Second, formats of corruption monitoring may have heterogeneous effects on the supply of these young elites. Routine corruption inspection has no salient effect, but intensive corruption investigation may deter them from serving in government. Third, capable young elites prefer working in higher levels of governments, and high monthly income can increase their willingness to serve in public offices. Furthermore, we show that political connections and public service motivation (PSM) are important scope conditions of management of civil services. Individuals with political connections are less likely to prefer merit-based and seniority-based selection rules and more likely to choose government jobs with higher wages. The seniority-based rule may undermine the enthusiasm of individuals with strong PSM to pursue public jobs. Intensive corruption investigation is more likely to crowd out those with low PSM to serve in public office.

This study speaks to the literature on the role of civil service management. Prior studies on civil service management mainly rely on qualitative approaches or county-level datasets (e.g., Herron et al., 2017; Rauch & Evans, 2000; Rubin & Whitford, 2008). The influence of civil service management may be endogenous to a variety of observed and unobserved individual, cultural, and institutional traits. This study is among the first attempts to employ a conjoint experiment to identify multiple dimensions of civil service management and estimate their causal consequences. We explore how civil service management interacts with individuals' attributes to shape the supply of capable civil servants.

Our findings increase our understandings of corruption monitoring and the supply of bureaucrats. Scholars fiercely debate the role of corruption monitoring. On one hand, corruption monitoring can reduce corrupt behavior and help build a clean government (Ferraz & Finan, 2011; Olken, 2007), which may attract capable elites to serve public interests. On the other side, corruption monitoring reduces expected rent expropriation, raises risks of entering politics, and deters young elites to work in governments (Avis et al., 2018; Jiang et al., 2022; Yang, 2021). This study identifies two types of corruption monitoring: routine corruption inspection and campaign-style corruption investigation. We indicate that routine corruption inspection has no evident impact while campaign-style corruption investigation deters capable young elites to prefer government jobs. Campaign-style enforcements involve massive mobilization of resources, break the routine operation of politics, and may engender unintended negative consequences (Yang & Zhao, 2024). These repercussions can make capable young elites become risk averse, diminishing their willingness to serve in governments.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A large body of research examines individuals' inclination for government positions under the framework of person–organization fit. Individuals' attributes, such as PSM (Vandenabeele, 2008), work values (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008), and sociodemographic factors (e.g., Kjeldsen, 2014), play a vital role in shaping their inclination toward public employment. Public sectors compete with private sectors to attract and retain talented young elites. In order to win this "war for talent" (Michaels et al., 2001), governments need to improve civil service management and fortify state institutions.

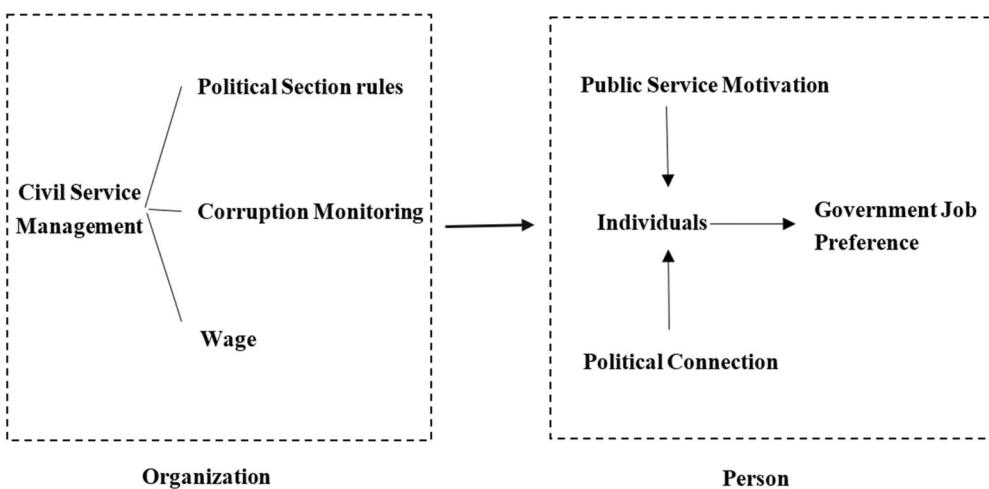
This study is anchored in the organization–person framework and focuses on the effect of public organizations' attributes on individuals' preference of government jobs at a pre-entry level. Individuals possess prior information about public organizations before entering governments; this information may shape their expectations of career development, economic return, and working environments of government jobs. Job positions within governments exhibit substantial variations across various branches and locations, allowing us to discern the extent to which civil service management influences individuals' preferences for government jobs. In addition, we seek to explore the interplay between civil service management and individual attributes, illuminating how this interaction shapes individuals' willingness to serve in public interests.

In Figure 1, we present the organization–person framework. The organization side encompasses multiple dimensions of civil service management. Following Berman (2015) and Meyer-Sahling et al. (2018), we identify both monetary and nonmonetary dimension of the civil service management: political selection rules, corruption monitoring, and wages. Political selection rules and corruption monitoring represent nonmonetary dimension of civil service management, serving as crucial institutional characteristics of government jobs. Wages signify the financial returns of public office and are key to attracting capable young elites to serve public services. Moreover, the consequences of civil service management on government job preferences may be contingent on individuals' attributes. We consider individuals' PSM and political connection in weak institutional contexts. The subsequent section elaborates on the theoretical framework.

### 2.1 | Civil service management

#### 2.1.1 | Political selection rules

Political selection rules matter for the human capital of the state because they incentivize bureaucrats' performance. A successful political institution ensures the selection of competent, honest, and motivated politicians to serve the public interest (Acemoglu et al., 2010); and that selection is hardly random. In fact, three rules govern political selection: merit-based, seniority-based, and connection-based.<sup>1</sup>



**FIGURE 1** Organization–person framework.

Merit-based selection, which relies on ability, performance, or examination, can enhance an ethic of professionalism in public service (Rauch & Evans, 2000), facilitate the selection of capable and honest officials socialized into professional norms (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016), reduce the level of corruption (Dahlström et al., 2012), and promote government performance (Lü & Landry, 2014).

Seniority-based selection, which favors prior experience in office, ensures job security; and officials usually retire at a fixed age. It helps build more disciplined and stable parties (Cirone et al., 2021) and constrains leaders' ability to engage in patronage and corruption by providing clear and objective standards for career advancement in contexts where measuring and comparing performance is difficult (Bertrand et al., 2020).

Personal ties and loyalty are prioritized in connection-based selection. Furthermore, connections with political leaders, who have broad discretionary powers in the career advancement of bureaucrats, replace competence or seniority in determining such advancement. Connection-based selection may distort the allocation of public sector positions (Xu, 2018), breed corruption (Chen & Kung, 2019), produce less competent officials (Colonnelli et al., 2020), and undermine political accountability mechanisms (Stokes, 2005).

Most studies focus on whether and how political selection rules shape the incentives of bureaucrats within governments; however, little is known about whether political selection rules attract political candidates to public office or deter them. The causal effects of each selection rule on the supply of political candidates remain unclear.

In this study, we argue that the merit-based and seniority-based rules are more likely to attract capable young elites to government work than the connection-based rule. Selection based on merit or seniority is a key component of the Weberian model of bureaucracy and marks the professionalism of bureaucrats (Weber, 1978). Both rules rely on objective criteria to select competent officials as opposed to the subjective and discretionary connection-based rule. Capable young elites tend to have broad horizons and care about career prospects. Objective selection rules provide clear and predictable standards, which can be achieved with hard work. Capable elites have strong innate ability and gain advantage in merit-based systems. Compared with the discretionary rule, merit competition can result in public servants with higher PSM (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021). In contrast, the connection-based rule relies on political criteria and personal—but opaque and unpredictable—ties with leaders. Individuals with kinship or hometown ties have better prospects to come out ahead in competition (Dal Bó et al., 2009). Under this rule, individuals with political ambition must engage in influence activities to build connections, please or collude with leaders and involve themselves in interest transfers (Milgrom, 1988). Capable young elites may be unwilling to seek public office

after perceiving uncertain and risky career prospects, especially if they lose the advantage in competition with those better connected to leaders.

Furthermore, we claim that the merit-based rule is better than the seniority-based rule in attracting capable young elites. Seniority-based selection follows rigid and clear progression rules, such as age and work experience, to reduce patronage and clientelism. Under the seniority-based rule, individuals may have strong commitments to serve the public interest (Suzuki & Hur, 2020); however, seniority-based selection yields limited rewards and punishments for outstanding and poor performance, respectively. Capable young elites need to maintain a steady pace to achieve career advancement. Under a seniority-based bureaucratic structure, tenured bureaucrats have weaker work motivation and decrease political service (Oliveros & Schuster, 2018). In particular, those who cannot reach the most senior positions before retirement are less effective (Bertrand et al., 2020). Because the good performance or competence of capable young elites may not be rewarded, they may prefer the merit-based rule over the seniority-based rule and be more likely to achieve rapid career advancement under the merit-based rule.

### 2.1.2 | Corruption monitoring

Another important institutional practice is corruption monitoring. Rampant in developing countries and weak institutional contexts, corruption imposes substantial costs upon firms, governments, and individuals (Olken & Pande, 2012); so countries have adopted serious policy initiatives to combat it. The positive role of corruption monitoring is widely documented. In fact, corruption monitoring institutions play an important role in reducing corruption (Olken, 2007), constraining politicians' corrupt behavior (Ferraz & Finan, 2011), improving government responsiveness (Raffler, 2022), and increasing the provision of public goods (Banerjee et al., 2022).

In weak institutional contexts, however, corruption monitoring may result in unintended negative consequences, deterring capable elites from seeking public office. Institutions with poor accountability have lower opportunity cost of corruption, fueling rampant corruption and shirking (Platteau & Gaspart, 2003). Leaders regulate opportunities for corruption and use lucrative official posts to reward loyal bureaucrats (Hollyer & Wantchekon, 2015). In contrast, the enforcement of monitoring institutions raises the perceived threat of engaging in corruption (Avis et al., 2018) and reduces expected rent expropriation; furthermore, corruption monitoring restricts potential economic benefits from public office and undermines young elites' willingness to enter government.

In addition, corruption monitoring may signal the uncertainties and risks of holding public office. For example, in authoritarian regimes leaders may employ anti-corruption campaigns to purge rivals' power networks and consolidate power (Zhu & Zhang, 2017). Bureaucrats with better performance may be more likely to be the subject of investigation (Xi et al., 2021). Corruption monitoring engenders a chilling effect and leads to adverse selection; in particular, intensive top-down corruption monitoring frightens local bureaucrats away from informal practices (Wang, 2022), gives rise to the resignation of civil servants (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014), and lowers incumbents' probability of reelection (Ferraz & Finan, 2008). Corruption monitoring also weakens citizens' prior beliefs about government officials' integrity (Wang & Dickson, 2022).

Job security is the key attraction of government jobs (Lewis & Frank, 2002), but because capable young elites may associate unpredictable risks and uncertainties with entering government, intensive corruption monitoring may reduce their perception of job security. Consequently, corruption monitoring may lower their willingness to enter government, reducing the average ability among newly recruited bureaucrats (Jiang et al., 2022; Yang, 2021).

We argue that intensive corruption investigation may reduce capable young elites' likelihood of preferring government jobs in weak institutional environments, where power constraint is weak, corruption monitoring may be manipulated and escalate.

### 2.1.3 | Wage

A substantial strand of literature empirically and theoretically covers the link between salary and willingness to enter politics. Raises in salary increase the probability of politicians running for reelection and holding political office (Fisman et al., 2015). A higher wage attracts better educated citizens to run for office and improves the quality of legislators (Ferraz & Finan, 2009) while reduction in wages disproportionately induces skilled politicians to exit public office (Keane & Merlo, 2010). Higher wages promote the supply of political candidates of better quality and PSM (Dal Bó et al., 2013).

The literature provides important insights into the pecuniary motivation of people entering politics in democracies. Most researchers focus on the motivations of politicians for running election, yet those in nondemocracies have no pressure for reelection. To become a politician, individuals must enter governments at a young age and climb the administrative ladder from the bottom. Limited research has been conducted to explore the motivation of individuals to enter public office at the entry level.

In this study, we argue that capable young elites are more likely to prefer government positions with higher wages. Capable political candidates expect and demand higher compensation in the job market, so when individuals face career choices between private and public sectors, the wage differences between the two may act as a sorting mechanism. With wages relatively lower in the public sector, attracting and retaining competent individuals become more difficult (Borjas, 2002). By contrast, higher wages can ensure better representation of women and minorities in the public sector (Llorens et al., 2008) and attract bureaucrats of higher quality (Rajibul & Kijima, 2021).

## 2.2 | Scope conditions

### 2.2.1 | Political connections

Political connections may play a pivotal role in conditioning the influence of civil service management on individuals' inclination to engage in politics. In civil service management, connected-based rule hinge on ties with political leaders for bureaucrats' career advancement of bureaucrats. Individuals with political connections may enjoy considerable advantages to come out ahead in competition, making them less inclined to favor merit-based or seniority-based rules compared with those without political connections. Furthermore, the consequence of corruption monitoring may be contingent on political connections. In weak institutional contexts, political leaders may employ selective anti-corruption campaigns (Zhu & Zhang, 2017). Those with political connections may be more likely to either enjoy protection from strong patrons or face purging by political rivals. At the entry level, corruption investigation increases the chances of connected individuals entering governments (Jiang et al., 2022). Political connection can alter individuals' perception and response to corruption monitoring.

Specifically, political connections play a critical role in the career advancement of officials in the Chinese political system (Shih et al., 2012). *Guanxi*, the Chinese term for social connections, serve as a valuable resource in securing employment and facilitating exchanges of power and money (Bian, 2018). Civil servants view *Guanxi* as an indispensable part in the cadre promotion process (Ma et al., 2015). Before entering politics, parental backgrounds are usually the main sources of political ties for individual. Political candidates with cadre parents have more chances of being selected into government positions at the entry-level (Jiang et al., 2022; Liu, 2019).

### 2.2.2 | Public service motivation

PSM may constitute another crucial condition, affecting how civil service management influences individuals' preference of government jobs. PSM refers to "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or

uniquely in public institutions and organizations" (Perry & Wise, 1990). Those with strong PSM may be more inclined to seek membership in public organizations (Vandenabeele, 2008). They prioritize serving public interests and are more likely to opt for government service (Lewis & Frank, 2002). PSM is a useful tool for identifying individuals best suited for government jobs (Wright & Christensen, 2010).

PSM may mediate the role of civil service management. First, PSM serve as a predictor of less corruption and more honesty and altruism (Gans-Morse et al., 2022). Individuals with strong PSM may exhibit higher integrity and be less inclined to engage in rent-seeking activities. They may be less apprehensive about corruption monitoring. Conversely, individuals with weak PSM may care more about lucrative return of public employment, making corruption monitoring more effective in deterring rent-seeking behavior and potentially crowding out them from public sectors.

Furthermore, higher wages can attract high-quality officials better motivated to contribute to public services (Rajibul & Kijima, 2021). The role of wages on government job preference may be conditional on individuals' PSM. Merit-based recruitment may enhance civil servants' PSM and motivate them to perform better (Alonso & Lewis, 2001; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021). Building on these insights, we may expect that individuals with strong PSM may allocate more weight to merit-based rules over connection-based rules.

### 3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

#### 3.1 | Case selection

This study examines how civil service management attracts capable elites to public office at the entry level. China provides a proper case to do so. The Chinese government combines three selection rules to choose and promote officials. In its long history of meritocracy, China has used civil service exams and merit-based selection to recruit officials (Elman, 2013). In contemporary China, the government has sought to improve civil service performance by introducing a more competitive selection process (Burns & Wang, 2010). Both the central and local governments have adopted the civil service exam to recruit bureaucrats (Ko & Han, 2013). Meanwhile, political connection and patronage play a key role in selecting officials (Landry et al., 2018; Shih et al., 2012), and seniority factors like age and previous experience are also important for the career advancement of officials (Wang & Vangeli, 2016). Because China suffers from serious corruption, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated the anti-corruption campaign in 2012 to curb dishonesty and purify the party. The most massive and protracted in decades (Manion, 2016), this campaign may alter individuals' incentives to enter public office and deliver public service (Jiang et al., 2022; Wang, 2022).

In particular, China has adopted a hierarchic bureaucratic system. To become a politician, bureaucrats must climb the administrative ladder from the bottom, thus the quality of bureaucrats matters for the quality of future politicians. College students are the main force competing for government positions at the entry level. The Chinese bureaucracy has recruited from elite colleges disproportionate numbers of graduates, who enjoy a significant selection advantage and are also more likely to choose a political career (Liu & Wang, 2017). Exploring their motivation and preference may shine a light on what drives capable young elites toward government jobs.

#### 3.2 | Experiment design

To examine what motivates capable young elites to prefer government jobs, we use conjoint analysis, which enables researchers to estimate multidimensional causal effects simultaneously, enhances realism relative to the direct elicitation of preferences, and reduces social desirability biases (Hainmueller et al., 2014). Conjoint experiment is increasingly used in the study of public administration in China's contexts (e.g., Yang & Zhao, 2023; Zhang & Shao, 2022; Zhu & Du, 2023).

**TABLE 1** Attributes and attribute values for profiles in conjoint experiment.

Attributes	Values
Selection rule	Connected-based Merit-based Seniority-based
Corruption inspections	Almost none Rare Frequently Very frequently
Corruption investigations	None Few Many A great many
Government rank	County Prefecture Province National
Monthly wage (yuan)	8000 10,000 15,000 20,000

Note: The unit of monthly wage is yuan. 1 yuan is equal to around 0.14 USD.

In the conjoint experiment, we asked respondents to choose between two profiles of hypothetical government job offers, both of which include randomly assigned attributes. The introduction describes a hypothetical scenario in which an individual has received two job offers from government departments at the same time and faces an important decision. Respondents were asked to select the government job offer they prefer. We thus use respondents' preferences for government job profiles and their willingness to accept a government job to capture their willingness to serve public interests.

Figure A1 in the Appendix shows an example of a government offer profiles and Figure A2 contains the original example offer profiles in Chinese. The order of attributes is randomly assigned and fixed across several rounds for each respondent to reduce information overload and minimize the primary effect on respondents. The value for each attribute is randomly assigned, and each respondent is presented with three rounds of job offer profiles and choices.

Table 1 presents the five attributes and related options. We use four attributes to capture institutional attributes of government jobs: selection rules, corruption inspection, corruption investigation, and government level. We use monthly wages to capture the monetary benefits of government jobs.

The first attribute identifies the role of political selection rules. To capture these rules, we use the following text in the conjoint experiment: "the main criteria for the promotion of cadres." Political selection rules are of three types: the merit-based rule refers to selection based on ability and work performance; the seniority-based rule indicates selection based on age and prior experience, and the connection-based rule indicates selection based on connections with leaders.

We use two attributes to capture corruption monitoring—corruption inspection and corruption investigation—which capture formats and stages of corruption monitoring. Corruption inspection is a routine form of monitoring, and corruption investigation captures the campaign-style enforcement of corruption monitoring. In particular,

corruption inspection, a typical tool of top-down monitoring used to discover corruption, exerts a chilling effect on local bureaucrats (Wang, 2022). The CCP's Discipline Inspection Commissions dispatch ad hoc discipline inspection groups to control corruption. These groups were institutionalized following the establishment of the anti-corruption campaign in 2012. The frequency of discipline inspection reflects the strength of monitoring institutions. Corruption monitoring exhibits evident spatial and temporal variation at all levels of governments in China. We use the frequency of discipline inspection by upper-level inspection groups to measure the level of corruption inspection, varying from "almost none" to "very frequently."

Corruption investigation reveals the actual effect of top-down corruption monitoring. The anti-corruption campaign initiated in late 2012 evidently differs from prior efforts and involves intensive anti-corruption activities (Manion, 2016). To render the realness of corruption investigation, we use the following text: "the number of cadres under corruption investigation in the department since the 18th CCP National Congress." The number of corruption investigations varies from "none" to "a great many."

The fourth attribute captures the level of government. A bureaucracy is a hierarchical organization, central to the operation of a government system (Weber, 2009). Government structures define the range of government roles and condition the capacity of the bureaucratic system (Evans, 1995). Higher level governments have more power and resources, and exert stronger influence in policy decision-making. In a centralized political system like China, officials at higher-levels of governments may have more policy influences and are close to superior executive power. By contrast, grassroots officials have dim prospects for promotion (Gao, 2017). So capable young elites may prefer to work in higher levels of government. China has a five-tier government structure: central, province, prefecture, county, and town. The attributes include four levels of government: central, province, prefecture, and county.

Finally, the last attribute captures monetary returns of public office. High income can attract capable elites to government (Ferraz & Finan, 2009; Lewis & Frank, 2002). In 2020, the national average public sector monthly wages were around 8700 yuan (about 1200 USD) in China,<sup>2</sup> but the wages of public employees vary considerably by region. We use monthly income (including basic salary, bonus, performance pay, and other income) to capture public employees' overall income. To render the reality of government income, we set four levels of monthly income in government job profiles: 8000 yuan (1120 USD); 10,000 yuan (1400 USD); 15,000 yuan (2100 USD); and 20,000 yuan (2800 USD).

After reading two hypothetical job profiles, respondents were asked to choose their preferred government job offer and rate their willingness to accept each job profile. The job choice variable is a binary variable, measuring whether individuals prefer a specific government job. The choice-based question forces respondents to reveal preferences, allowing us to estimate the relative importance of each attribute. The job rating variable is a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (strong unwillingness) to 5 (strong willingness) and identifying respondents' willingness to accept certain government jobs. In addition, respondents were asked to rate each government job profile for career prospects. Capable young elites care about long-term career development. The variable ranges from "very pessimistic" to "very optimistic." Each respondent was asked to complete three rounds of the conjoint experiment.

### 3.3 | Sample

In this study, our experiment respondents were drawn from undergraduates at a top-ranked university in China that recruits high-quality students nationwide and has cultivated numerous Chinese political leaders. Every year many of its graduates choose to enter government. In addition, elite college students are more likely to prefer public office and enjoy preferential treatment in entering government (Liu, 2019; Tsai & Liao, 2019). This group of students may be proper for us to test our arguments. Their preferences for government jobs are likely to affect the quality of future politicians in China.

We designed and conducted an online survey through Qualtrics between March and April 2022, applying quota sampling to schools and departments to ensure sample representation. Respondents were recruited via Wechat

groups in each department and on school forums. Each respondent was paid 15 yuan (around 2.1 USD) to ensure quality of survey participation. We used IP restrictions and designed two knowledge questions about the university to filter out unqualified respondents. Those finishing the survey within 2 min were dropped. A total of 1341 respondents took the survey. After eliminating invalid respondents, our sample includes 1024 respondents. The median completion time is 6.88 min.

Our sample is representative of the undergraduate population at this university. Figures A3 and A4 show the sample distribution of majors and classes are close to that of the undergraduate population. The proportion of Communist party members in our sample is 26.98%, and the proportion of party members among all students in the university is 30.87%, indicating that the sample reflects the overall population in terms of political identity. Table A1 in the Appendix shows summary statistics of individuals' personal characteristics.

## 4 | MAIN RESULTS

Our unit of analysis is government job profiles, encompassing a total of 6144 cases. Following Hainmueller et al. (2014), we employ an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to estimate the average marginal component effect. The estimated coefficients can be interpreted as the average effect of a specific value relative to the reference category. Standard errors are clustered at the individual level.

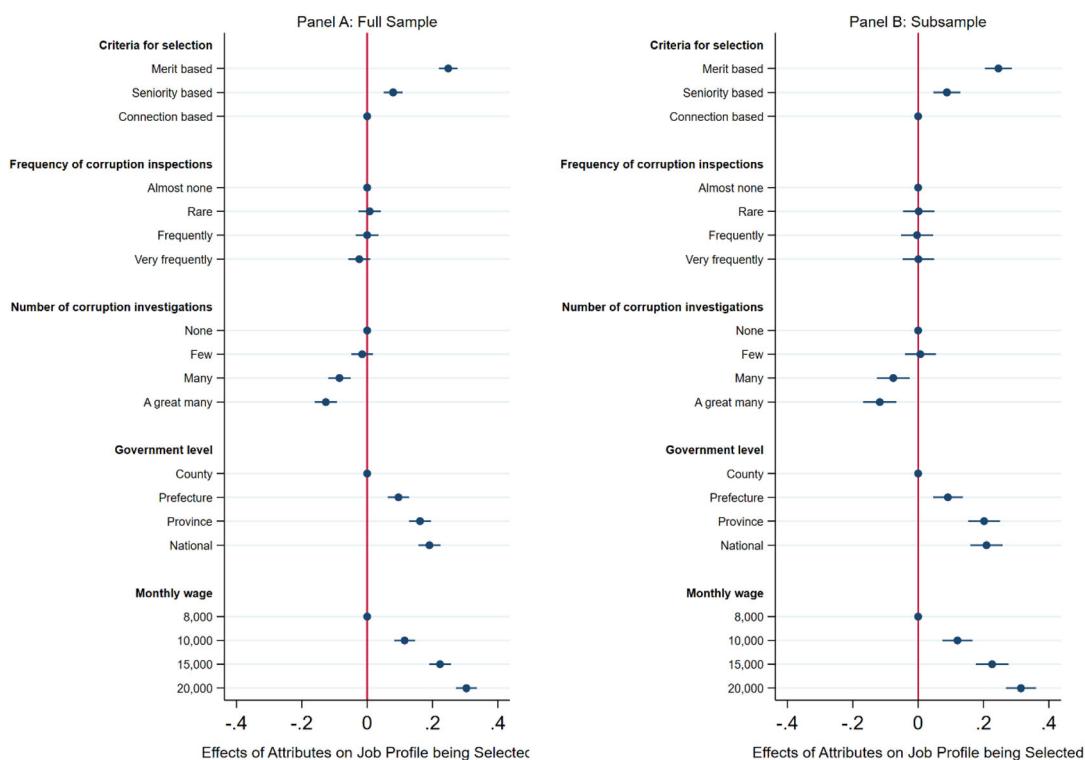
Figure 2 depicts the baseline-estimated coefficients. We focus on interpreting Panel (a) on the left, where the dichotomous government job choice is used as the outcome variable. Compared with the connection-based rule, the seniority-based rule increases preference for government jobs by 8 percentage points; and individuals are 24.8 percentage points more likely to select government jobs when the political selection rule is merit-based. The results demonstrate a spectrum of political selection rules relative to individuals' self-selection into public service. Capable young elites prefer the merit-based rule over the seniority-based rule with the connection-based rule least preferred.

In addition, the estimated results yield little supporting evidence that top-down corruption inspection shapes capable young elites' preference for government jobs. The estimated coefficients of the frequency of corruption inspection is insignificant; however, the estimated coefficients of intensive corruption investigation (many and a great many) are negative and significant at 1% level. The results show that campaign-style corruption investigation reduces individuals' likelihood to select government jobs. Public organizations with more corruption investigation since the anti-corruption campaign in 2012 were less likely to win the hearts of young elites.

We also find that higher levels of government are more likely to attract capable young elites. National government jobs, which have the largest facilitation effect on respondents' willingness to enter government, are 19.1 percentage points more likely to be selected than county government jobs. Consistent with our expectations, higher income can increase individuals' willingness to select government jobs. Compared with the reference group (8000 yuan), government jobs with 20,000 yuan monthly incomes increase respondents' preference for government jobs by 30.4%.

Taken together, the results offer clear evidence in support of the main arguments. Young elites are more likely to prefer government jobs when the selection rule is merit-based, and they can work in higher levels of government and enjoy high monthly income. In contrast, campaign-style corruption investigation can deter them from serving in government. We fail to find supporting evidence that routine corruption inspection can shape individuals' motivation.

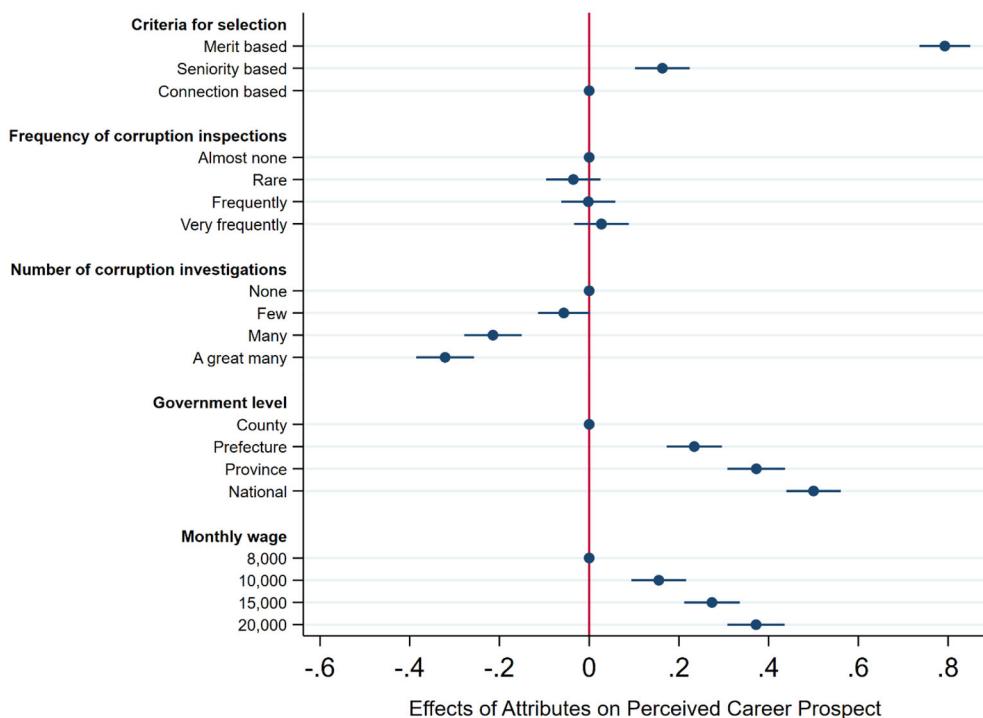
Our findings presented above are drawn from the full sample. However, not all students aspire to work in government jobs. In our survey, we asked respondents to rate their willingness to work in government on a scale ranging from 1 (strong unwillingness) to 5 (strong willingness). A total of 47.75% of respondents expressed strong willingness.<sup>3</sup> To further validate our results, we conduct a subgroup analysis consisting of respondents who have a strong preference for government jobs. Panel (b) in Figure 2 shows the estimated results, which indicate that the attributes of government jobs have a similar influence on the job choices of respondents who strongly prefer government jobs.



**FIGURE 2** The effects of attributes on government job preference. The bars around point estimates indicate 95% confidence intervals. Panel (a) includes full sample. Panel (b) restricts those with strong government job preferences. Column (1) in Table A2 shows the full estimation results for the left figure. Column (1) in Table A3 shows the full estimation results for the right figure. All results are based on the ordinary least squares method with clustered standard errors at the respondents level. Those points without bars represent the reference groups. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

In addition, we conduct several robustness checks. First, we use a 5-point discrete rating scale as another outcome variable to capture individuals' willingness to accept government job offers. Figure A5 in the Appendix plots estimated coefficients. The results are consistent with those in Figure 2. In addition, individuals' characteristics, including gender, age, major, ability, and CCP membership, may shape their preference for government jobs. We control these individuals' characteristics in Columns (2) and (4) in Table A2, and draw consistent conclusions. Furthermore, the conjoint experiment operates under two basic assumptions: stability and no carryover effects. According to the stability assumption, estimated results are stable across choice tasks. The assumption of no carryover effects states that the order of profiles has no impact on individual responses. Table A4 indicates estimated results and confirm the validity of both assumptions.

Furthermore, we use career prospects as another outcome variable and examine whether job attributes shape respondents' perceived career prospects. Figure 3 plots the estimated coefficients on a respondent's rating of career prospects for a specific government job profile. The merit-based rule promotes the perception of better career prospects among capable young elites. By contrast, more intensive corruption investigation makes these young elites more pessimistic about career prospects. They also perceive better career prospects if they can work in the central government and earn a higher income. These results are consistent with the choice outcome and reveal that career prospects may be a key consideration for capable young elites to select government jobs. The management of civil service alters their perception of career prospects and change their government job preferences.



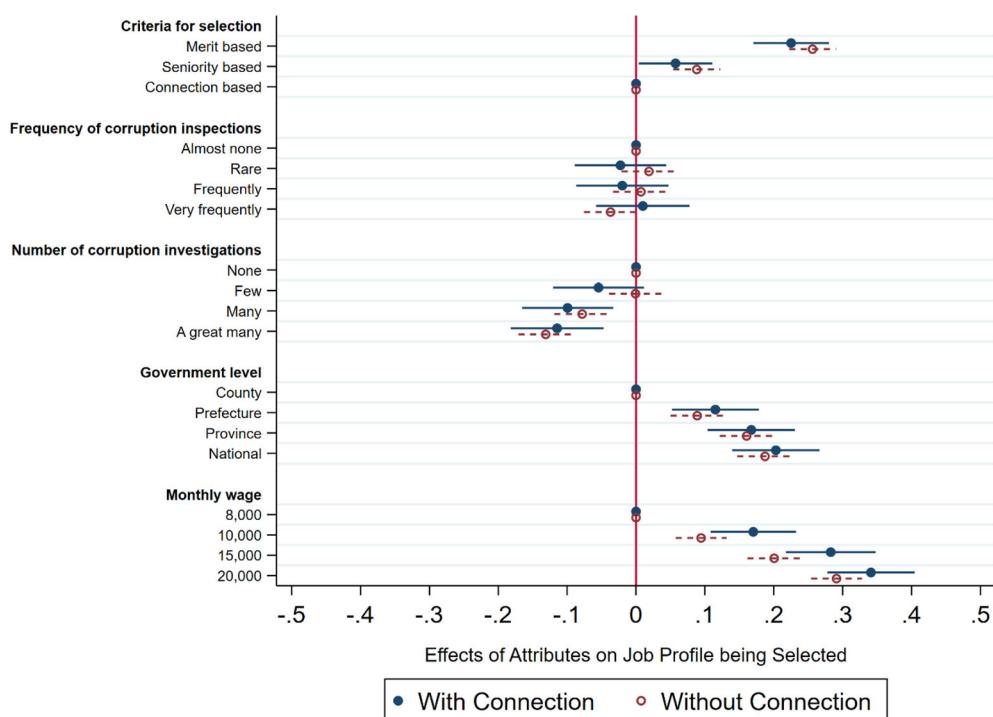
**FIGURE 3** The effects of attributes on perceived career prospect of government jobs. The bars around point estimates indicate 95% confidence intervals. Column (5) in Table A2 shows the full estimation results for this figure. All results are based on the ordinary least squares method with clustered standard errors at the respondents level. Those points without bars represent the reference groups. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

How does the monetary factor interact with nonmonetary factors in shaping government job preferences? To answer this question, we divide our sample into two groups: high wage and low wage. Table A5 in the Appendix indicates that high wage amplifies the positive effect of merit-based and seniority-based rules, while mitigating the negative effect of corruption investigations.

## 5 | SCOPE CONDITIONS

### 5.1 | Political connection

Our results imply that capable young elites dislike the connection-based selection rule. We further explore whether the effect of civil service management is conditional on individuals' political connections. Our survey asked respondents about the types of their parents' occupations. We rely on the information to construct a political connection dummy. This variable takes a value of 1 if at least one parent works in governments or party organizations, and 0 otherwise. We conduct a subgroup analysis to compare the effects of government attributes between students with and without political connections. Table A6 shows estimated coefficients. To enhance interpretation, we plot estimated coefficients in Figure 4. The results indicate that both selection rules and wage have positive and significant impact on respondents' job preferences at 1% level. Merit-based and seniority-based rules have a greater facilitating effect on students without political connections. Compared with those with cadre parents, they are less likely to enjoy preferential treatment in entering the government

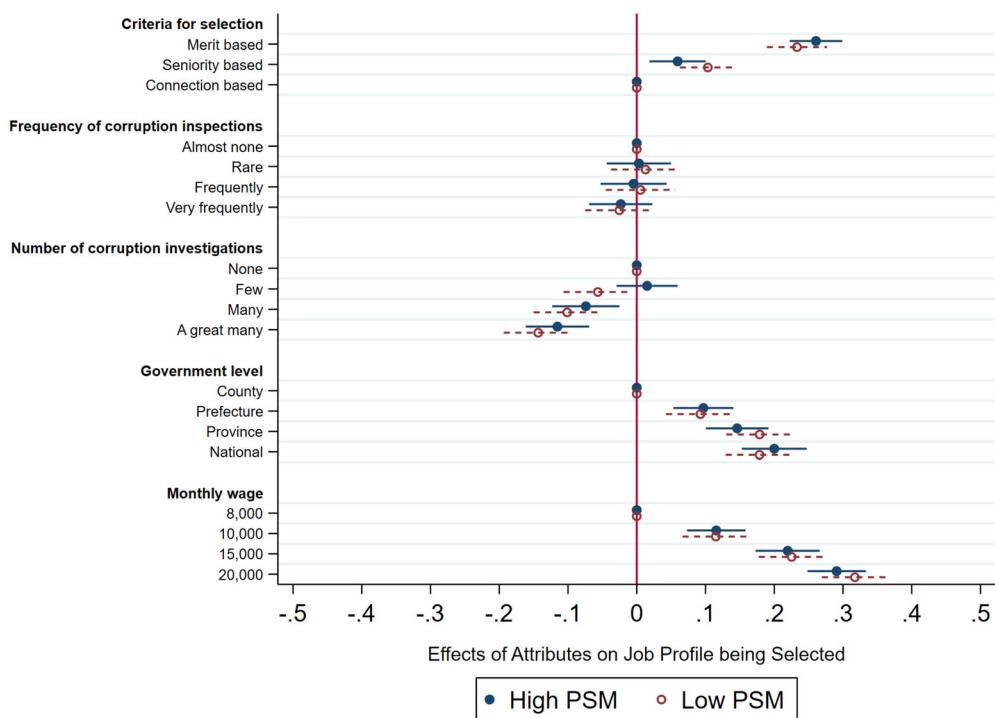


**FIGURE 4** The Conditional Effect of Political Connection. The bars around point estimates indicate 95% confidence intervals. Column (1) in Table A6 shows the full estimation results for this figure. All results are based on the OLS method with clustered standard errors at the respondents level. Those points without bars represent the reference groups. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

and seeking promotions. Those without cadre parents tend to allocate more weight to merit-based and seniority-based rules. Conversely, students with political connections tend to favor government jobs with higher wages, caring more about the monetary returns of such jobs.

## 5.2 | Public service motivation

We empirically test whether the effect of civil service management is conditional on individuals' PSM. We adopt a four dimensional 16-item measure of PSM. Section E in the Appendix introduces a detailed explanation on how we measure PSM. We divide our sample into two groups based on whether respondents' PSM is above or below the mean PSM (3.80). The group with PSM scores above the mean is referred to as the High PSM group; the low PSM group includes those with PSM scores below the mean. Columns (1) and (2) in Table A8 present full estimation results. Figure 5 plots the estimated coefficients of two groups. The results reveal that merit-based selection and seniority-based selection have a significant effect on individuals' government job preferences in both groups. Merit-based rule is more likely to attract individuals with strong PSM, yet the seniority-based rule tends to deter individuals with strong PSM. In addition, intensive corruption investigation evidently reduces capable elites' motivation to work in governments. Corruption investigations are more likely to prevent those with low PSM pursuing government jobs. The baseline results in Figure 1 indicate that capable young elites are less likely to enter governments undergoing intensive corruption investigation. Strong PSM may reduce the subsident effect of corruption investigation. As a robustness check, Columns (3) and (4) in



**FIGURE 5** The conditional effect of public service motivation (PSM). The bars around point estimates indicate 95% confidence intervals. Column (1) in Table A8 shows the full estimation results for this figure. All results are based on the OLS method with clustered standard errors at the respondents level. Those points without bars represent the reference groups. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

Table A8 present estimated results using an alternative measure of PSM constructed by principal component analysis, the results remain consistent.

In sum, the analysis suggests that PSM is an important scope condition of government attributes in capable young elites' preferences for government jobs. The seniority-based rule may undermine the enthusiasm of those with strong PSM to pursue public jobs, merit-based rule attracts those with strong PSM. Students with low PSM are more sensitive to corruption investigation and lower their likelihood of choosing government jobs.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

Many researchers have examined whether and how government provides incentives to motivate bureaucrats (e.g., Perry & Wise, 1990; Zarychta et al., 2020). Deviating from prior studies, we explore whether the management of public officials can shape the supply of capable bureaucrats at the entry level. This study identifies four key attributes of government institutional design: the political selection rule, corruption monitoring, level of government, and wages. They capture monetary and nonmonetary dimensions of government incentive structures. The empirical results confirm that both dimensions are vital to shape individuals' incentives to enter government. We show that a spectrum of political selection rules affects individuals' self-selection into public service: the merit-based rule is most effective, and the seniority-based rule ranks second. Capable young elites are least likely to prefer the connection-based rule. Furthermore, various formats and stages of

corruption monitoring have distinct effects. Corruption inspection fails to shape individuals' preferences for government jobs, but corruption investigation reduces their willingness to enter government. We also show that higher levels of government and monthly wages can attract more capable young elites to enter government.

Our study highlights the importance of individuals' PSM. Although corruption investigation may weaken capable young elites' willingness to enter government and has adverse selection effects in weak institutional environments, it is more likely to deter individuals with weak PSM. The seniority-based rule may reduce the number of individuals with strong PSM entering governments. PSM may be a key criterion for governments to recruit and select qualified bureaucrats. Those with strong PSM may be more honest and altruistic and more willing to exert effort to improve government performance. They are civil servants qualified to serve the public interest.

Our findings resonate with studies on the motivations of civil servants. Capable young elites self-select themselves into governments, perceiving institutional attributes of government jobs and then making career choices. Merit-based rules are more likely to motivate them to work in governments. These political candidates likely share motivations akin to civil servants within governments. For instance, recent studies show that Chinese government officials tend to favor political candidates with both competence and political connections (Liu, 2019); Chinese civil servants assign greater importance to merit-based rules in actual promotion processes (Ma et al., 2015), favor colleagues with meritocratic attributes and appreciated by upper-level leaders (Zhu & Du, 2023), and report high meritocracy and individual autonomy (Boittin et al., 2016).

This study has broad implications beyond China's contexts. In countries with weak institutional contexts, governments encounter similar challenges in attracting capable and honest civil servants. For instance, in Russia, businessmen enter politics to advance their private interests (Gehlbach et al., 2010); in Brazil, political connections play a pivotal role in the selection of public officials (Colonnelli et al., 2020); in Bangladesh, raising wages attract bureaucrats with weak PSMs (Rajibul & Kijima, 2021); and civil service managerial practices in developing countries are linked with more severe bureaucratic corruption compared to OECD countries (Schuster et al., 2020). Our findings underscore the importance of civil service management in attracting capable elites to serve public interests. Governments in developing countries may consider initiating public sector reforms aimed at improving the management of civil service, encompassing the adoption of merit-based selection rules, wage adjustments, and the institutionalization of corruption monitoring.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Replication code and files are available in Harvard Dataverse at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DJ989N>.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Governments may adopt the combination of the three rules to select politicians in various institutional contexts. For instance, political connections and competence may be complementary in the career advancement of local leaders (Jia et al., 2015). Political competence matters at lower levels of government but political connections play a more important role in selecting senior leaders (Landry et al., 2018). Political nominations are meritocratic at the entry level but then become seniority-based when politicians move up in the hierarchy of offices (Cirone et al., 2021).
- <sup>2</sup> The data are calculated based on average annual wages in 2021 recorded in the *China Statistical Yearbook*.
- <sup>3</sup> We use a 5-point discrete scale to capture students' preference for working in government. If a student selected 4 (willingness) or 5 (strong willingness), we treat this student as the strong government preference group.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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