

From poverty to trust: Political implications of the anti-poverty campaign in China

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Abstract

Despite the rapid decrease in poverty across the developing world, there have been few attempts to analyze the implication of poverty alleviation on regime legitimacy. Bridging the literature on poverty alleviation and political trust, this analysis examines the mechanisms through which poverty reduction affects trust in local elected and appointed officials. Using an original survey on the Target Poverty Alleviation campaign in China and causal mediation analyses, we find that beneficiary status is positively associated with political trust. The perception of anti-poverty governance quality, rather than economic evaluation, is the mediator through which beneficiary status affects political trust. Moreover, the intensified non-formalistic elite-mass linkage developed in the poverty alleviation campaign enhances political trust through the improvement of perception of governance quality. These findings have implications for mechanisms through which poverty reduction affects political trust and the type of political linkage that sustains regime legitimacy.

Keywords

Poverty alleviation, political trust, China, elite-mass linkage, governance perception

Introduction

While the progress in global poverty reduction over the past decades has received much attention, empirical analyses examining the impact of poverty reduction on political support remain scant. Researchers have long recognized the potential political importance of poverty reduction. The

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modernization theory implies that a significant number of people need to make the transition from poverty into the middle class before democratization or democratic consolidation can be achieved; the social movement literature posits that the most deprived, once mobilized, will lead to rebellion; and means-tested aid to impoverished families can increase voter turnout and help incumbent executives maintain or build electoral support (Zucco, 2013). As the largest contributor to the decline in poverty reduction worldwide, China has lifted an average of 13.7 million people out of poverty every year since 2012.¹ Does poverty reduction contribute to regime legitimacy, as intended by national policymakers? Through what mechanism does poverty reduction affect political support in a context without meaningful elections? Bridging the literature on poverty reduction and political trust, this analysis considers these questions by examining the dynamics of trust in local elected and appointed officials generated by the locally managed Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA) program in China.

One strand of literature posits that policy benefits unequivocally enhance recipients' political support. In democracies, political parties more often target poor voters for electoral gains because 'the incremental dollar matters more to them and thus they switch more readily in response to economic benefits' (Dixit and Londregan, 1996: 1137, 1143); autocratic leaders likewise distribute social welfare selectively to gain the support or obedience of certain groups. For example, the world's largest means-tested welfare program, Minimum Livelihood Guarantee, or Dibao program, in China (Gao, 2017), serves the function of targeting potential activists and controlling society (Pan, 2020). By directly linking recipients' well-being to local state actors, poverty alleviation programs have the obvious potential to enhance political support among their beneficiaries, as calculations of the material gains are a major source of political trust (Miller, 1974). In Mexico, the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) used the poverty relief program PRONASOL to perpetuate its electoral monopoly. In distributing program benefits to municipalities, the PRI diverted more funds to areas vulnerable to opposition entry and withdrew funds from localities controlled by the opposition (Magaloni, 2006).

However, empirical studies in Latin America, Africa and Asia have yielded mixed evidence regarding the impact of means-tested programs on political support. For example, Bruhn (1996) argued that National Solidarity Program spending did not account for changes in political support between 1988 and 1991 in Mexico. Camacho (2014) found that Peru's Juntos program increased trust in institutions related to program conditions among the beneficiaries, but decreased trust in the institutions that channel grievances arising from exclusion from the program among non-beneficiaries.

Recent research has stressed the role of on-the-ground delivery of policy benefits and the perception of governance quality in moderating popular attitudes toward the poverty alleviation programs. Evans et al. (2019) showed that a conditional cash transfer program in Tanzania enhanced trust in local elected officials, especially in settings when more village meetings are convened to share information about policy implementation. Programs based on needs testing, compared with universal programs, imply a greater scope for bureaucratic discretion and thereby 'more readily give rise to suspicions concerning poor procedural justice and arbitrary treatment' (Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005: 349). Locally managed poverty alleviation programs may be further subject to corruption and elite capture (Han and Gao, 2019), thus leading citizens to perceive the process for allocating benefits as politicized and unfair, which could lower political support. As shown in the Zapatista rebellion, the collapse of the anti-poverty PRONASOL program into clientelistic relief and rampant corruption drove protesters to the street.

This analysis contributes to the debate by explicitly testing the mechanisms through which means-tested poverty reduction programs affect political support. Combining interview data and analyses of an original survey, we find that beneficiaries of poverty reduction in China have a

higher level of trust in both elected and appointed officials than non-beneficiaries do. Furthermore, the positive effect of beneficiary status on political trust does not operate through more positive evaluation of financial status (economic evaluation), but through perception of better anti-poverty governance quality, including less unfairness and formalistic (*xingshizhuyi*) working style in poverty alleviation. We also test and rule out competing mechanisms of interpersonal trust, policy awareness and perception of inequality, as suggested in existing literature. We further demonstrate that the newly instituted elite-mass linkage in the TPA shapes the perception of anti-poverty governance. The trust gap between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries is primarily caused by their difference in the strength of linkage with frontline bureaucrats. The type of linkage also exerts an impact on anti-poverty governance perceptions and, ultimately, on trust in local leaders, with difficulty-solving interactions contributing the most to political trust.

We make several contributions in this paper. First, we advance the understanding of the political consequences of poverty alleviation under authoritarian rule by conducting the first empirical test of poverty reduction's effect on political trust in China. Previous studies indicated a null or positive effect of income on villagers' political trust in contemporary China (Cui et al., 2015; Han et al., 2019; Li, 2004). Our research finds that beneficiaries of poverty reduction, the poorer segment of villagers, have higher political trust than non-impooverished households. This suggests that the poverty alleviation campaign exerts at least different, if not opposite, impacts on political trust between policy beneficiaries and the non-beneficiaries.

Second, and more importantly, we identify the mechanisms through which government performance affects political trust and stress the consequences of citizen–bureaucratic interactions on legitimacy. Our results confirm that the perception of institutional quality, instead of economic evaluation, is the major contributor to the trust gap between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the means-tested anti-poverty program. Furthermore, we uncover elite-mass linkage as an important yet understudied mechanism through which poverty alleviation affects the perception of governance quality. Existing studies on the political consequences of citizen–bureaucrat interactions pay the most attention to the United States and Europe (Pepinsky et al., 2017). This analysis demonstrates that the intensity and nature of elite-mass linkage, measured at the behavioral level instead of opinion congruence, is a likewise crucial but neglected non-informational micro-level factor underlying the perception of government and political support in developing countries.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature and develops testable hypotheses. The section after that describes the TPA program in China. The penultimate section draws on an original survey to test the hypotheses and discusses the findings. The final section concludes by discussing the implications of our findings.

Theory and hypothesis

While institutional and regime trust is high in China, specific trust in its agents and policies is lower, averaging 50%–60% (Chen, 2004). Distrust in incumbent village leaders enhances the demand for leadership change and has induced a demand for systemic changes (Li, 2011). This analysis focuses on the effect of TPA on trust in local leaders. The TPA provides numerous policy benefits to help lift the poorest households out of poverty. We argue that beneficiaries of poverty alleviation policies tend to display higher levels of political trust than the rest of the population. In the Chinese context, the TPA creates a clear separation between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, reified by a red doorplate hanging in front of households that have received the poverty title. In light of existing theories on the origins of political trust, there are two possible mechanisms through which policy beneficiaries of TPA can develop greater political trust.

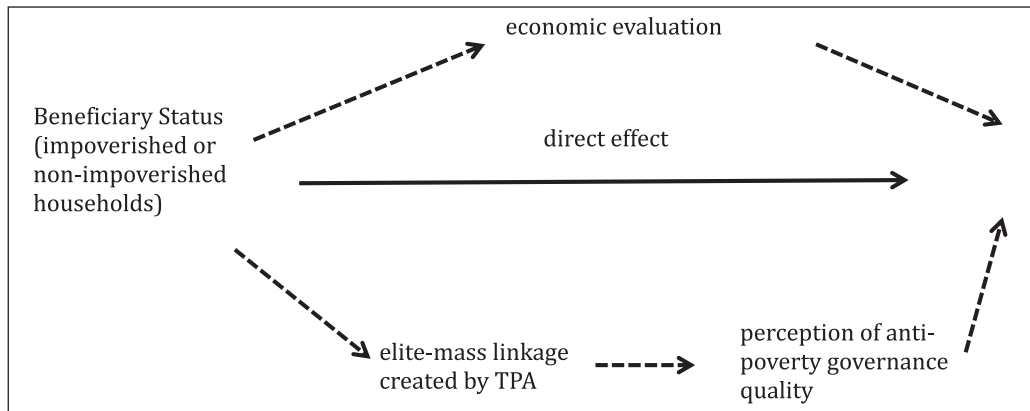
Firstly, beneficiaries may show higher political trust because their financial conditions greatly improved due to a series of poverty alleviation policies ranging from direct payments to health care subsidies. Their participation in different kinds of anti-poverty industries (*fuping chanye*) is also likely to generate more positive economic evaluation in both retrospective and prospective aspects. Both cross-national and China-specific evidence corroborate the positive effect of individuals' evaluation of economic performance on political trust (Chen, 2017; Mishler and Richard, 2001). In China, direct benefits from the New Rural Pension Scheme enhanced villagers' trust in local government (Li and Wu, 2018), while the dispossession of land eroded trust in local authorities (Cui et al., 2015). Building on these literatures, we formulate our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *Compared with non-beneficiaries, beneficiaries have a higher level of trust in village officials due to more positive economic evaluation.*

Secondly, policy beneficiaries may trust local leaders more because they perceive better governance than non-beneficiaries do. Their positive perception of governance is likely due to intensified interactions with frontline bureaucrats in the process of poverty alleviation. Scholars have found that citizens' experience and encounters with government agencies exert a significant impact on their attitude toward the governments (Goodsell, 2004; Serra, 1995). The rational-choice tradition in the study of political trust has also long emphasized the 'indispensability of concrete personal experience in generating necessary information for trust building' (Lu, 2014: 481). Repeated and positive interactions between service providers and beneficiaries help reduce the transaction costs for information sharing, convince beneficiaries of the usefulness of the policy program (Ricks, 2016), and are likely to generate views of the providers as trustworthy (Pepinsky et al., 2017). Fairness, bureaucratic efficiency, and responsiveness are considered critical dimensions of quality in citizen contact with bureaucracy, which affect their attitudes toward service providers (Serra, 1995). Evidence in China also demonstrates that the quality of bureaucratic contact with police (Wang et al., 2021) changes citizens' attitude toward the government. Individuals' experience with unfair treatment from the government plays the strongest role in promoting collective action participation in China (Tang, 2016: 115)

Elite-mass interaction in China has its deep roots in the party's 'Mass Line' (*qunzhong luxian*) ideology. Mao's famous statement 'from the masses, to the masses' stresses a close and direct relationship between the elites and the masses – officials must go to the grassroots and even stay with the masses to better understand their interests and needs (Korolev, 2017). It has served as a powerful organizational principle for political mobilization by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the revolutionary period and has continued to dominate the CCP's governing style in public campaigns that aim to boost popular support in contemporary China (Heilmann and Perry, 2011). Contemporary accounts of the Mass Line emphasize engaging lower social strata through institutionalized channels of information exchange to generate more equal government responsiveness (Korolev, 2017). The TPA program continues to follow the Mass Line tactics and helps restore the linkage between local officials and villagers, which has been greatly weakened due to the abolition of agricultural taxes in 2007 (Chen, 2014).

We propose at least three ways that intensified interactions with frontline bureaucrats in the process of poverty alleviation can improve individuals' perception of anti-poverty governance quality. First, more information and clarification – regarding the selection of beneficiaries, allocation of funds, and policy purpose – should be provided to villagers to reduce their suspicions that resources are granted for clientelistic or personal rather than poverty-related reasons. This would reduce their suspicions of government malfeasance, including corruption or unfairness in poverty alleviation. Second, villagers' perception of government responsiveness may be enhanced when

Figure 1. Hypothesized Pathways.

TPA: Targeted Poverty Alleviation.

their demands are heard and problems are solved in these interactions, thereby allaying their concerns that local governments adopt a formalistic working style by simply manipulating statistics to achieve the anti-poverty goals. Finally, the heightened policy awareness and information of the policy implementation should, in theory, increase villagers' expectations of government. This, coupled with regularized face-to-face contact with villagers, may in turn put pressure on grassroots officials to live up to these higher expectations. In practice, the occurrence of government misconduct should decrease overtime.

People's perception of governance quality, in turn, affects political trust, especially in developing countries where fairness and corruption are serious issues (Mishler and Richard, 2001). For example, Whyte (2010) argues that, as long as the Chinese view current inequalities as fair, the burst of the social volcano will remain a myth.

Based on these reasons, we formulate two related hypotheses about the second mechanism through which poverty reduction creates different effects on political trust between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries:

Hypothesis 2: *The higher level of political trust among beneficiaries is due to their higher level of perceived anti-poverty governance quality.*

Hypothesis 2.1: *The more positive perception of anti-poverty governance among beneficiaries is due to their stronger linkage with village officials installed by the TPA.*

In summary, we first predict that non-impoverished households have a lower level of political trust than impoverished households do. As shown in Figure 1, this negative effect can be parsed into direct effect and indirect effect that run through two mediators: economic evaluation and perception of anti-poverty governance quality. Furthermore, we hypothesize elite-mass linkage created by the TPA shapes anti-poverty governance perceptions.

Alternative hypotheses

Existing studies have argued that policy awareness is another mechanism through which public policy affects political trust (Lü, 2014), especially when citizens know which level of government the anti-poverty program should be attributed and given credit to (Zucco, 2013). In addition, such

programs help individuals develop or strengthen social relationships and enhance recipients' social capital stocks (Camacho, 2014). All of these factors may boost trust in local leaders. Furthermore, the impact of anti-poverty policies, such as the Benazir Income Support Programme in Pakistan, on recipients' support for government is conditioned on their perception of inequality, with support increasing most among those who feel relatively deprived (Kosec and Cecilia, 2019).

Based on these empirical findings, we propose three alternative hypotheses: *The higher level of political trust among beneficiaries is due to their higher level of awareness of the TPA policy (Hypothesis A1), of interpersonal trust (Hypothesis A2), or of perceived inequality (Hypothesis A3).*

The targeted poverty alleviation campaign

Prior to the TPA, China's anti-poverty efforts were development-oriented and mainly targeted geographical units, such as counties and townships. In 2014, more than 80 million people in the countryside lived below China's official poverty line. Poverty alleviation policies that directly target individual poor households, especially those outside the geographical units designated in previous anti-poverty initiatives, are considered more effective to reach the goal of eliminating poverty. As the centerpiece of the CCP's agenda and promise to build a 'moderately prosperous' society (*xiaokang shehui*), the TPA program was launched in 2014 with an ambitious plan to eradicate rural poverty by 2020. It is the 'largest project to win people's hearts' and also reflects the top leader's intention of selecting outstanding cadres and strengthening grassroots governance (Tsai and Liao, 2020).² Measures such as the development of competitive industries to rejuvenate rural economy and relocation of the poor who live in geologically hazardous area have been adopted to achieve this goal. The CCP has mobilized all types of public organizations, including state-owned enterprises and universities, in alleviating poverty. Organizations and government departments at different levels selected and supported a poverty alleviation work team of three to five people who led and managed the day-to-day implementation of poverty alleviation policies. By the end of 2017, an estimated 195,000 first secretaries and 770,000 work team members were sent to rural villages, around 128,000 of which were poverty-stricken villages.³

Precise targeting through various means

The TPA program emphasizes precision in identifying the poor. While the national government sets the lowest poverty line out of the provincial levels and outlines general poverty identification procedures, each province decides on its poverty line and concrete identification measures, so as to fit local conditions.⁴ To overcome elite capture, as found in previous Dibao programs (Han and Gao, 2019), local governments employed various measures to ensure an accurate estimation of household income. Since 2014, many sent-down cadres and village cadres have visited rural households to conduct on-site screening of potential beneficiaries.⁵ In addition, village representatives deliberate (*pingyi*) on each candidate household's eligibility for the title of impoverished household during village meetings, and the results are made public and further validated by village officials or township governments. Local government departments have also employed big data, such as records on real estate transactions, motor vehicles, education, and commercial registration, to identify ineligible households.⁶ Since 2016, the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development has launched six waves of dynamic adjustments to remove ineligible households and incorporate newly impoverished ones.

Furthermore, inaccuracy in previous Dibao benefits have been corrected. One official described:

Before 2018, part of the Dibao recipients in our county were former employees of enterprises that are shut down due to the land requisition for immigrants from Three Gorges area. After 20 years, they have long become ineligible for Dibao benefits. This year (2018), to achieve the precision in poverty identification (since all Dibao recipients are automatically granted impoverished households), the government reassessed their eligibility and removed half of them, out of a total number of over 28,000, from the Dibao program.

The creation of two groups

Households granted the poverty title receive a red doorplate that lists the information on the household, causes of poverty, name, work unit, position and phone number of their paired helping official. They also receive a detailed poverty alleviation plan (*tuoping fangan*) with various benefits, including agricultural subsidies, relocation compensation, privilege to join in co-operatives, easier access to microfinance, and a higher reimbursement rate for medical treatment. In our sample, out of the 425 households granted the poverty title, only four households reported not receiving any poverty relief benefits or any visits from local officials.

The welfare gap between impoverished and non-impoverished households generates discontent among the latter. As a township head from Hubei province states:

The policy gap is expanding. If you get the poverty title, the government provides a 100 m² house to you for free. The housing price is 1,500 yuan (210 USD) per square meter here. For the medical program, the impoverished household pays 90 yuan (13 USD), whereas the non-impoverished household pays 180 yuan (26 USD). In all, impoverished households can gain extra 5,000 yuan (700 USD) per person every year . . . In 2017, the poverty line in our county is 3,449 yuan (493 USD) per capita income, and even one yuan more will disqualify someone from getting the title. For a small proportion of non-impoverished household, they feel very unfair: Why I don't get the title but my neighbor gets it, despite that my house is about the same or just a little better than that of my neighbor. They will go petitioning (*shangfang*). Some even went to Beijing.⁷

A large part of the unfairness perception among non-beneficiaries comes from the perverse incentives built into the anti-poverty policies. A shared sentiment found during interviews with non-beneficiaries is reflected as such: 'Those who are poor because of laziness are getting help and recognition (*zhongshi*) whereas people like us who work hard and become richer are not supported. Laziness becomes glorious!' Since 2018, the national and local governments have made policy adjustments, including earning by laboring and establishing a moral model through cultural activities, to strengthen poor households' inner drive to get out of poverty. To reduce the envy and discontent of non-impoverished households, local governments have also expanded some anti-poverty policy benefits to them, especially those with a high risk of impoverishment in the near future.⁸

The impoverished households differ from their non-impoverished counterparts in their evaluation of local anti-poverty governance quality. As indicated by our survey results, a lower proportion of impoverished households perceive the unfairness in poverty alleviation as severe problems in their village than non-impoverished households, and these differences are statistically significant (see Table 1). Beneficiaries also have more frequent contact with grassroots-level officials than non-beneficiaries do. We do not deny the existence of official misconduct in identifying poor households, such as prioritizing relatives and friends. As shown in Table 1, however, impoverished households do not systematically possess more political resources, running contrary to the elite capture argument. They also did not engage in collective actions more often than non-impoverished households, which contradicts the argument that social welfare is selectively provided to individuals with greater potential to disrupt social order or with lower political trust. The difference between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries primarily lies in their household income, policy

Table 1. Differences between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries (*t*-test results).

Variables	Count	Total	Beneficiaries	Non-beneficiaries	Difference
Household income	1242	37999.64	22680.67	45170.22	-22489.56**
Political resource	1340	.184	.096	.225	-.129***
Petition experience	1340	.040	.033	.043	-.010
Life satisfaction	1340	7.378	7.466	7.338	.128
Economic evaluation	1324	2.305	2.379	2.271	.108
Future income increase	1048	2.259	2.323	2.228	.095
Interpersonal trust	1340	2.174	2.134	2.192	-.058
Elite-mass linkage created by anti-poverty related visits	1338	2.002	2.766	1.648	1.118***
Policy awareness	1340	.378	.551	.297	.253***

Source: Authors' survey (non-imputed data).

Note: Political resource is a binary variable with '1' denoting whether the respondent or any of their relatives is an official at the village level or above. Petition experience is a binary variable with '1' indicating having petitioned (*shangfang*) recently or a longtime ago, and '0' for otherwise. Future income increase is a binary variable with '1' denoting household income is expected to increase in three years. See the description of other variables in the Appendix.

***0.001.

**0.01.

*0.05.

awareness, and frequency of encounters with frontline bureaucrats, not in their petition experience, economic evaluation or interpersonal trust.

Intensification of mass-elite linkage

First secretaries and village cadres hold collective responsibility for poverty alleviation performance. In general, village cadres take a leading role in deciding which industries to develop, allocating funds, identifying poverty households, and resolving conflicts in poverty alleviation, whereas the first secretaries are primarily in charge of outlining the general plan and bringing in resources to their assigned villages (see Table 4A in the Appendix). Both first secretaries and village cadres spend most of their working hours visiting and contacting impoverished households on a regular basis (see Table 5A in the Appendix). Over a third of surveyed officials' working hours are dedicated to visiting impoverished households, and nearly 30% of villager respondents reported receiving more than five home visits by local officials for poverty alleviation issues over the past year.

A distinct feature of the TPA, compared with previous anti-poverty initiatives, is the establishment of a precise pairing between almost every individual impoverished household and a helper, most of whom are officials, and a regular face-to-face contact mechanism. Similar to the Mass Line tactics of the Hu-Wen period (2002–2012), such as the 'three enters and three together' (Korolev, 2017: 16), all poverty alleviation work team members must suspend their work in their original units and live in the assigned poverty-stricken village for at least 20 days per month.⁹ An internal document issued by a county of S province stipulated that first secretaries shall visit at least five impoverished households every day during their stay in the village, and all officials are required to make a phone call to their paired impoverished households at least once every week and visit these households' homes at least once every month.¹⁰ A county in G province established the '6 assistance' and '5 must-visit' policies, and stipulated that every official must do three to five practical things (*ban-shishi*) for their paired poor households each year.¹¹ Meanwhile, the impoverished households have

a role in assessing cadres' work performance in poverty alleviation by rating the service they have received and providing their fingerprints to certify that village officials have actually visited their home (Tsai and Liao, 2020: 56). Records of these visits constitute a major component in the evaluation of poverty-reduction performance, and the evaluation results affect officials' career prospects. During their visits, officials primarily introduce and explain policies, resolve conflicts, learn about households' conditions, understand their needs and help them accordingly.¹² The pair-up mechanism provides clear, routinized and easy-to-access channels for poor households to bring their problems and demands to the attention of local officials. Furthermore, its role in determining cadre performance evaluation increases officials' responsiveness to villagers' needs (Tsai and Liao, 2020).

The anti-poverty campaign and political trust in rural China

To test the above hypotheses, the following analyses rely on an original, and the first, systematic survey on the TPA program. We implemented the survey between July and August, 2019, in 50 villages of 17 counties in nine provinces, and the survey team interviewed a total of 1340 villagers and 273 village cadres (see detailed description of survey in the Appendix). In what follows, we first employ an ordered probit regression to test whether political trust is different between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. We use the following survey question to measure the dependent variable, political trust:

For each of the following actors (village cadre/first secretary in your village), please tell me how much trust you have in them? Is it a great deal of trust (coded '4'), quite a lot of trust (coded '3'), some distrust (coded '2'), or a great deal of distrust (coded '1')?

The independent variable is a binary measure indicating whether the respondents' household is or has been granted the impoverished household title since 2014.¹³ Based on existing literature, we include a set of control variables, such as demographic attributes, life satisfaction, media use, political interest and interpersonal trust.¹⁴ The presence of village officials during interviews may introduce social desirability bias in answering questions on political trust. Therefore, we also include whether village officials are present during the interview in regression analyses with village fixed effects to control the impact of village-level attributes on political trust. Table 1A in the Appendix presents the definition and summary statistics of all variables.

The missing value for trust in village cadre is 3%, while that of trust in sent-down first secretaries is 21%. Out of the 50 surveyed villages, four villages do not have sent-down first secretaries. Therefore, in our sample, 103 villagers' missing value for trust in first secretaries is due to the inapplicability of the survey question. To explore the reason for the remaining missing value for trust in first secretaries, the rating of first secretary relative to other village officials – a question that captures attitudes toward first secretary but has a lower non-response rate – is regressed on the binary measure of whether the interviewee responded to the 'trust-in-first-secretary' question. After controlling for the observed variables, including demographic attributes, the rating of first secretary is not correlated with the likelihood of response to the trust question at conventional levels of significance (see Table 8A in Appendix). Therefore, the missing value for the trust in first secretaries shall be treated as 'missing-at-random'. We impute missing values using technique implemented in Amelia (Honaker et al., 2011). The Amelia program imputes observations for the missing data from the observed data and generates five new and complete datasets, from which the coefficients and standard errors are derived and combined using the procedure explained in Honaker et al. (2011: 10–15). Table 3A in the Appendix displays regression results based on non-imputed data.

As shown in Table 2, beneficiaries are more likely than non-beneficiaries to trust indigenous village leaders and sent-down first secretaries.¹⁵ In particular, after controlling for the perception of anti-poverty governance quality, such as unfairness and formalistic working style, the impact of beneficiary status on trust in village cadre becomes statistically insignificant, which suggests that the effect of beneficiary status on political trust operates primarily through the perception of anti-poverty governance quality.

Economic evaluation or anti-poverty governance perception: The intermediate variable

To examine the underlying mechanism, causal mediation analysis (Imai et al., 2011; Tingley et al., 2014), which computes the average total effect of treatment (ATE) and quantifies the average indirect or mediation effect (ACME), is appropriate. The ACME reveals the magnitude of the effect of the beneficiary status on political trust, which can be attributed to the change of mediators as a result of the beneficiary status. It also quantifies the average direct effect (ADE), which measures the effect attributed to mechanisms other than acting through the hypothesized mediators.

We employ the following survey questions to measure the two sets of hypothesized mediators, economic evaluation, and perceptions of anti-poverty governance quality:

Economic evaluation: *Over the past three years, would you say your household income has increased (coded '3'), stayed about the same (coded '2'), or decreased (coded '1')?*

Perception of unfairness: *What problems do you see in your village? Is unfairness in poverty alleviation (fuping bangfu bugongping) very serious (coded '1'), somewhat serious (coded '2'), not that serious (coded '3'), or not a problem at all (coded '4')?*

Perception of formalism (xingshi zhuyi): *Do you think there is a phenomenon of formalism (zouguochang, zouxingshi) in the process of poverty alleviation? Exists and is very serious (coded '1'), exists and is somewhat serious (coded '2'), exists but is not serious (coded '3'), non-existent (coded '4')?*

We also create an additive index of anti-poverty governance perceptions by the unweighted summing of the responses to the questions on perception of unfairness and formalism.

Consistent with existing literature, economic evaluation remains a significant contributor to trust in first secretaries (see model 6 in Table 3.1). However, results indicate that the beneficiary status has no statistically significant effect on villagers' economic evaluation, after controlling for the perception of anti-poverty governance quality. The policy benefits gained from poverty alleviation do not directly translate into a more positive evaluation of individual economic situation. In other words, beneficiaries do not evaluate their economic progress more positively than non-beneficiaries. This, however, does not imply that policy benefits received by beneficiaries have not significantly improved their livelihoods. Considering that impoverished households started from a lower economic base due to the lack of labor force, skills or capital, they would probably have a more negative economic evaluation than the rest, had it not been for the intervention of the relief program. Therefore, it is an indication of the TPA's success that beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries are leveled in their economic evaluation.¹⁶ Moreover, many of the anti-poverty measures, such as improving rural infrastructure and business opportunities, were aimed at the overall development of villages, which might also benefit non-beneficiaries economically. This may have further reduced the evaluation gap between the two groups in the economic aspect. In any case, regression results with multiple mediators that are assumed to be causally unrelated (Tingley et al., 2014), as

Table 2. Determinants of political trust (ordered probit models).

DV: political trust (four-level measure)	Village cadre	First secretary			
Impoverished household	.370*** (.082)	.103 (.086)	.628*** (.082)	.615*** (.082)	.437*** (.085)
Economic evaluation	-	.077 (.051)	-	.189*** (.049)	.111** (.050)
Perception of anti-poverty governance (unfairness)	-	.351*** (.041)	-	-	.271*** (.040)
Perception of anti-poverty governance (formalism)	-	.338*** (.041)	-	-	.303*** (.040)
Age	.008 (.019)	.017 (.019)	.036+ (.018)	.038* (.018)	.048* (.019)
Age squared	.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000* (.000)
Gender (male)	-.114 (.071)	-.018 (.073)	-.113 (.069)	-.117+ (.070)	-.028 (.071)
Education	-.165* (.078)	-.098 (.080)	-.208** (.076)	-.200** (.076)	-.161* (.078)
Chinese Communist Party member	.406** (.136)	.196 (.141)	.483*** (.131)	.439** (.132)	.321* (.135)
Life satisfaction	.164*** (.016)	.098*** (.017)	.136*** (.016)	.119*** (.017)	.072*** (.017)
Interest in politics	.050 (.073)	.037 (.074)	.074 (.072)	.059 (.072)	.085 (.073)
Internet use	.021 (.084)	.026 (.084)	.095 (.082)	.100 (.082)	.113 (.083)
Interpersonal trust	.137*** (.028)	.137*** (.028)	.135*** (.027)	.135*** (.027)	.092** (.028)
Village officials present in interviews	.456*** (.099)	.441*** (.099)	.142 (.093)	.128 (.093)	.086 (.094)
Village fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cut 1	.672	2.174	1.182	1.538	2.611
Cut 2	1.464	3.124	2.356	2.720	3.932
Cut 3	2.622	4.459	3.295	3.665	4.963
-2LL	2556.66	2315.932	2741.986	2726.79	2554.654
N	1336	1335	1336	1336	1335

Source: Authors' survey.

***0.001.

**0.01.

*0.05.

+0.1.

DV: dependent variable.

Table 3.1.1. Regression results of mediator and outcome models.

	Mediator model		Outcome model (ordered probit)			
	DV: economic evaluation (ordered probit) (1) (2)	DV: anti-poverty governance perception index (OLS) (3) (4)	DV: trust in village cadre (5)	DV: trust in secretary (6)		
Impoverished household	.169* (.080)	.091 (.082)	.752*** (.100)	.724*** (.099)	.122 (.085)	.443*** (.084)
Economic evaluation	—	—	—	.297*** (.066)	.080 (.051)	.114* (.050)
Anti-poverty governance perception index	—	.103*** (.022)	—	—	.339*** (.023)	.290*** (.022)
Age	-.021 (.019)	-.018 (.019)	-.017 (.023)	-.013 (.023)	.017 (.019)	.047* (.019)
Age squared	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000* (.000)
Male	.036 (.070)	.071 (.071)	-.305** (.089)	-.310** (.089)	-.019 (.073)	-.030 (.071)
Education	-.044 (.077)	-.023 (.078)	-.186+ (.101)	-.177+ (.100)	-.114 (.080)	-.170* (.078)
Chinese Communist Party member	.495*** (.132)	.439** (.133)	.575*** (.127)	.506*** (.125)	.183 (.152)	.296* (.134)
Life satisfaction	.173*** (.016)	.152*** (.017)	.216*** (.023)	.187*** (.023)	.100*** (.018)	.073*** (.017)
Interest in politics	.147* (.073)	.158* (.073)	-.083 (.095)	-.107 (.093)	.086 (.075)	.095 (.073)
Internet use	-.023 (.081)	-.025 (.082)	.020 (.103)	.023 (.102)	.027 (.086)	.108 (.083)
Interpersonal trust	.011 (.027)	-.005 (.028)	.155*** (.034)	.153*** (.033)	.093 (.029)	.096** (.028)
Village officials present in interviews	.160 ⁺ (.094)	.140 (.094)	.178 (.104)	.153 (.102)	.403*** (.101)	.074 (.094)
Intercept	—	—	4.278*** (.654)	3.738*** (.664)	—	—
Village fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cut 1	-.346	.097	—	—	2.264	2.712
Cut 2	.981	1.439	—	—	3.209	4.031
Cut 3	—	—	—	—	4.539	5.063
R-squared	—	—	.335	.347	—	—
-2LL	2414.246	2391.908	—	—	2323.652	2556.342
N	1336	1336	1336	1336	1336	1336

Source: Authors' survey.

Robust standard errors in parentheses for OLS models.

***0.001.

**0.01.

*0.05.

+ 0.1.

DV: dependent variable.

OLS: ordinary least squares regression model.

Table 3.2. Causal mediation analyses (CMA) on (causally unrelated multiple) mediators through which beneficiary status affects political trust.

	Trust in village cadre		Trust in first secretary	
	Estimate	P-value	Estimate	P-value
Mediator (H1):				
ACME	.002	.430	.003	.310
Economic evaluation				
ADE	.059	.200	.250	.000
ATE	.061	.200	.253	.000
Prop. mediated	.018	.540	.010	.310
Mediator (H2):				
ACME	.168	.000	.149	.000
Anti-poverty governance				
ADE	.059	.210	.250	.000
Perception index				
ATE	.228	.000	.399	.000
Prop. mediated	.737	.000	.374	.000
Alternative hypotheses:				
Mediator:				
ACME	.017	.160	.047	.000
Policy awareness				
ADE	.220	.000	.360	.000
ATE	.237	.000	.408	.000
Prop. mediated	.070	.160	.115	.000
Mediator:				
ACME	-.010	.150	-.011	.140
Interpersonal trust				
ADE	.235	.000	.412	.000
ATE	.225	.002	.401	.000
Prop. mediated	-.042	.150	-.026	.140
Mediator:				
ACME	.006	.170	.006	.150
Perception of inequality				
ADE	.232	.000	.405	.000
ATE	.237	.000	.411	.000
Prop. mediated	.021	.170	.011	.150

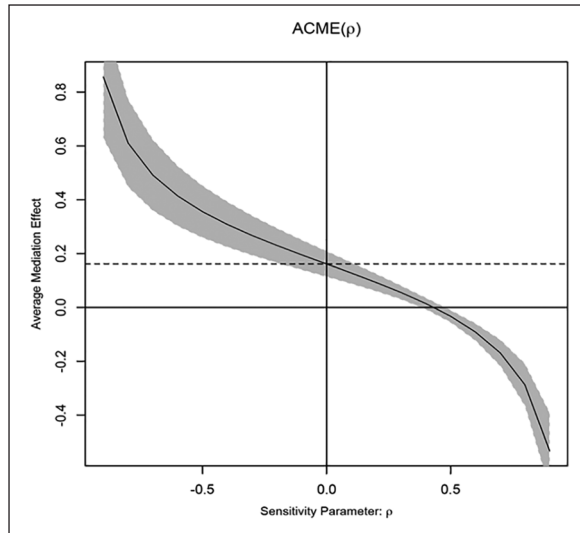
Source: Authors' survey.

Note: Using ordered probit models in CMA requires using the nonparametric bootstrap estimation (Tingley et al., 2014: 5). For the ease of interpretation and presentation, CMA analyses employ linear models for ordinal variables. In CMA on causally unrelated multiple mediators, for each mediator, the other mediators are treated as neither pre-treatment nor post-treatment confounders.

ADE: average direct effect; ACME: average indirect or mediation effect; ATE: average total effect of treatment.

shown in Table 3.2, reject hypothesis 1. The trust gap between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries is not due to their difference in economic evaluation.

Results support Hypothesis 2. Beneficiaries perceive a more positive governance quality, including unfairness and formalistic working style, in the execution of poverty reduction, and the

Figure 2. Sensitivity analysis (trust in village cadre).

The vertical solid line is average indirect or mediation effect (ACME), plotted against sensitivity parameter. The shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals. The dashed line is the estimated ACME when the sequential ignorability assumption is made.

perception of anti-poverty governance quality is positively associated with trust in village cadre and first secretaries. The results of causal mediation analysis in Table 3.2 show that the ACME of governance perception is substantial and significant: more positive governance perceptions in poverty reduction account for 74% and 37% of the positive effect of beneficiary status on trust in village cadre and first secretary, respectively.

Causal mediation analysis requires the sequential ignorability assumption for identification (Imai et al., 2011); that is, the observed anti-poverty governance perception value is independent of all potential outcomes (i.e. trust in local leaders) given the observed values for beneficiary status (and controls). This sequential ignorability assumption cannot be tested by the observed data, but Imai et al. (2011) proposed a sensitivity analysis to quantify the exact degree to which the key identification assumption must be violated for our original conclusion to be reversed. As presented in Figure 2, for the estimated ACME to be 0, there must be an unobserved confounding factor that makes the correlation (ρ) between the error for the mediation model and that of the outcome model greater than 0.40, which is large and thus indicates the robustness of our statistical findings.

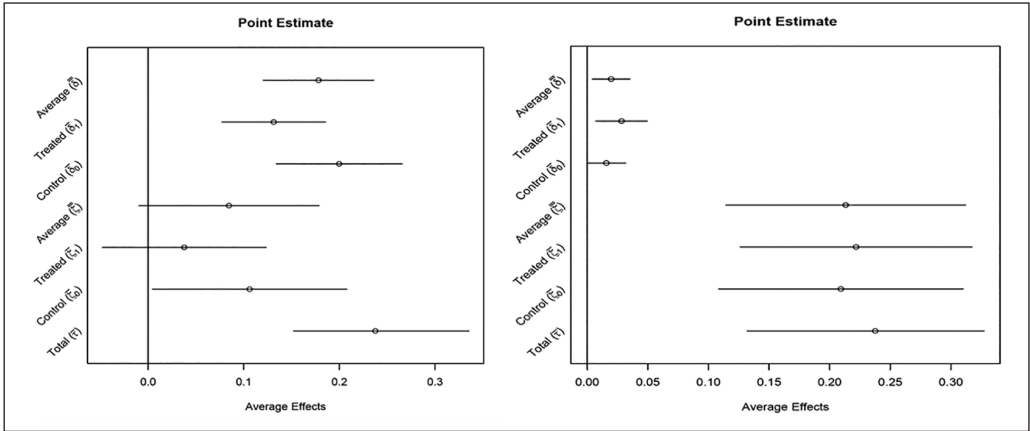
Although in-depth interview evidence supports that the assignment of TPA beneficiary status is largely independent of potential outcomes for the mediator variable (i.e. governance perception) and the dependent variable (i.e. trust in local leaders), complete exogeneity shall be achieved through future experimental research.

We also employ causally related multiple mediator models (Tingley et al., 2014: 27–30) and the substantive results remain similar (see Table 9A in the Appendix and Figure 3).

The intensity and nature of elite-mass linkage developed in poverty alleviation

To test whether the higher level of perceived anti-poverty governance quality among beneficiaries is due to their stronger linkage with village officials developed in the execution of poverty

Figure 3. Graphical summary of the results from the multiple mediator models on trust in village cadre with governance perception as the main mediator (left) and with economic evaluation as the main mediator (right).



alleviation policies (H2.1), we adopt the subsequent question to capture the intensity of elite-mass linkage:

Over the past year, the frequency of visits by village cadres or first secretaries to your home for anti-poverty issues is: never (coded '1'), less than five times (coded '2'), between 5 and 10 times (coded '3'), or over 10 times (coded '4')?

As shown in Table 4.1, the beneficiary status enhances the perception of anti-poverty governance quality through the elite-mass linkage; 47% of the positive effect of beneficiary status on governance perception is attributed to the stronger elite-mass linkage created by TPA. Further, the strong elite-mass linkage brought by the TPA among beneficiaries helps enhance political trust through improving their perception of anti-poverty governance quality: 49% of the positive effect of elite-mass linkage on trust in village cadre is attributed to more positive governance perceptions in poverty reduction (see Table 4.2). Their stronger linkage with local leaders helps generate the statistically significant difference in the perception of anti-poverty governance quality between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries (see also Table 3A-4 in the Appendix). Specifically, more frequent encounters with grassroots bureaucrats help lower villagers' perception of unfairness and government formalistic working styles in the execution of poverty alleviation (see Table 7A in the Appendix), ultimately enhancing their trust in local leaders.

As shown in Table 5, the majority of villager respondents who have been visited by officials for poverty alleviation issues reported that the two primary activities performed by officials – policy introduction and gathering of information on individual households – during their visits were informational. Nearly one-fourth reported solving concrete difficulties during officials' visits. Less than 6% reported purely formalistic linkage, such as taking photos or filling forms.

In addition to intensity, the nature of elite-mass linkage has a non-negligible impact on villagers' attitudes toward village cadres and first secretaries. Formalistic linkage enhances villagers' perception of government formalistic working styles, whereas informational and difficulty-solving linkage reduces perceptions of unfairness and of formalistic working style as well as enhancing trust in village cadres and first secretaries (see Table 6). In particular, interaction involving the solving of life difficulties for visited households exerts a greater contribution to perceptions of anti-poverty

Table 4.1. Results of causal mediation analysis on whether and how beneficiary status affects anti-poverty governance perception through elite-mass linkage (testing H2.1).

	Anti-poverty governance perception index	
	Estimate	P-value
Mediator:		
ACME	.352	.000
Elite-mass		
ADE	.402	.000
Linkage created by		
ATE	.754	.000
TPA		
Prop. mediated	.468	.000

ADE: average direct effect; ACME: average indirect or mediation effect; ATE: average total effect of treatment; TPE: Targeted Poverty Alleviation.

Table 4.2. Results of causal mediation analysis on whether and how the elite-mass linkage (created by Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA)) affects political trust through anti-poverty governance perception.

	Trust in village cadre		Trust in first secretary	
	Estimate	P-value	Estimate	P-value
Mediator:				
ACME	.074	.000	.064	.000
Anti-poverty				
ADE	.075	.000	.130	.000
Governance				
ATE	.150	.000	.194	.000
Perception				
Prop. mediated	.493	.000	.327	.000

Source: Authors' survey.
ADE: average direct effect; ACME: average indirect or mediation effect; ATE: average total effect of treatment.

governance quality and political trust. Here, we shall not equate solving difficulties with clientelistic ties (Oi, 1985),¹⁷ as interviews suggested that solving difficulties mostly followed well-defined policies and regulations.

Robustness check and rival hypotheses

We conduct three sets of robustness check. First, we try an alternative measure of the dependent variable. For trust in village cadres, we use another measure derived from the following question, and the results remain unchanged (see Table 2A-1 in the Appendix):

From 0 to 10, to what extent can the village committee represent the interests of villagers in your village?

Second, for the mediator, *economic evaluation*, using prospective measures such as expectations for future income increase generates similar null findings (see Table 2A-1 in the Appendix).

Table 5. Activities performed by officials during home visits for poverty alleviation issues

	Impoverished households (<i>n</i> = 372, <i>N</i> = 425)		Non-impoveryshed households (<i>n</i> = 371, <i>N</i> = 915)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Taking photos/filling forms (<i>paizhao/tianbiao</i>)	.352	.478	.313	.464
Introducing policy (<i>jieshao zhengce</i>)	.302	.460	.345	.476
Acquiring information about the household (<i>liaojie qingkuang</i>)	.725	.447	.687	.464
Solving difficulties (<i>jiejue kunnan</i>)	.262	.440	.213	.410
Purely formalistic: taking photos and filing forms	.054	.226	.059	.237
Purely informational: introducing policies and acquiring information	.594	.492	.612	.488

Source: Authors' survey.

Note: *n* excludes respondents who report no home visits from officials over the past year. *N* denotes the total number of households in the sample. All variables are binary. The respondents are asked to choose the two most often performed activities during officials' home visit regarding poverty alleviation over the last year.

Lastly, regression results of models dropping all control variables (see Table 2A-2 in the Appendix) remain similar to the findings presented above.

As indicated in Table 3.2, the causal mediation analysis results fail to support alternative mechanisms of policy awareness, social capita, and the perception of inequality.

To deal with the social desirability bias, we run all regression analyses in the subsample that village officials were not present during survey interviews. The substantive results remain unchanged (see Table 6A in Appendix).

Conclusion

Material benefits granted by the programmatic poverty alleviation policies do not necessarily translate into a more positive economic evaluation. Despite the policy benefit gap, impoverished and non-impoveryshed households do not differ in their evaluation of their economic situation. This result is less surprising if we consider the lower economic starting points for impoverished households and the overall developmental effects of the TPA program. Regardless of the cause, difference in economic evaluation is not the main mediator between impoverished status and trust in local officials.

Previous studies find a null or positive effect of income on political trust among villagers (Cui et al., 2015; Han et al., 2019; Li, 2004). In this analysis, however, we find that the poorer segment of villagers (beneficiaries of the anti-poverty policy) have a higher level of trust in grassroots-level leaders than richer non-beneficiaries do. Differences in their perceptions of governance quality, including fairness and the non-formalistic execution of the poverty-alleviation policies, explain this disparity. This finding is consistent with the thesis of 'critical citizens', which argues that public priorities are shifting from material security to the provision of political goods after decades of modernization (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Wang and You, 2016). Even for the poorest segment of the Chinese population, after three decades of economic development and market reform, the perceived quality of governance, rather than personal economic gains, stands as the primary contributor to the development of their political trust.

Table 6. Regression results on the effects of the nature of elite-mass linkage created by Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA) on anti-poverty governance perception and trust in local leaders.

Nature of linkage created by TPA:	DV: perception of anti-poverty governance quality (unfairness)	DV: perception of anti-poverty governance quality (formalism)	DV: trust in village cadre	DV: trust in first secretary
Formalistic	-.009 (.091)	-.205* (.098)	-.006 (.096)	-.008 (.093)
Informational	.253** (.079)	.356*** (.085)	.159+ (.084)	.172* (.081)
Solving difficulties	.307** (.115)	.518*** (.138)	.219+ (.120)	.193+ (.116)
Impoverished household	.603*** (.088)	.279** (.095)	.036 (.092)	.356*** (.091)
Economic evaluation	—	—	.071 (.051)	.107* (.050)
Anti-poverty governance perception index	—	—	.332*** (.023)	.282*** (.023)
Age	.005 (.019)	-.028 (.020)	.017 (.019)	.048* (.019)
Age squared	-.000 (.000)	.000 (.000)	-.000 (.000)	-.000* (.000)
Male	-.158* (.069)	-.315*** (.076)	-.022 (.073)	-.035 (.071)
Education	-.216** (.076)	-.012 (.083)	-.118 (.080)	-.176* (.078)
Chinese Communist Party member	.467*** (.129)	.436** (.151)	.151 (.140)	.269* (.135)
Life satisfaction	.154*** (.016)	.122*** (.017)	.098*** (.018)	.071*** (.017)
Interest in politics	-.024 (.072)	-.130 (.079)	.069 (.075)	.077 (.073)
Internet use	.026 (.082)	.006 (.089)	.031 (.086)	.110 (.083)
Interpersonal trust	.099*** (.027)	.111*** (.104)	.091** (.029)	.094** (.028)
Village officials present in interviews	.097 (.093)	.099 (.104)	.405*** (.101)	.073 (.094)
Village fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cut 1	.693	-1.029	2.241	2.695
Cut 2	1.434	-.430	3.189	4.017
Cut 3	2.435	.314	4.525	5.056
-2LL	2840.562	2442.686	2315.46	2547.908
N	1335	1335	1336	1336

Source: Authors' survey.

***0.001.

**0.01.

*0.05.

+0.1.

DV: dependent variable.

In particular, the perception of unfair anti-poverty governance undermines trust in local elected and appointed officials. Studies in political psychology have shown the negative effect of changes in the wealth of neighbors on individuals' psychological wellbeing (Haushofer et al., 2015). Dissatisfaction and feelings of injustice are common among non-eligible households, especially for means-tested poverty relief programs that are subject to greater bureaucratic discretion (Camacho, 2014; Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005). The findings in this analysis suggest that strengthening officials' positive interactions with non-eligible households, which provide clarification regarding policy implementation and assistance in solving concrete life difficulties, are particularly helpful to reduce their perception of unfairness in poverty alleviation.

Compared with poverty reduction measures in other developing countries, such as conditional cash transfer programs, the Chinese experience of TPA provides a distinctive mode of poverty reduction, with its heavily reliance on the Mass Line repertoire and elite-mass linkage through

face-to-face interactions. Such a linkage differs from the programmatic or clientelist political linkage in democratic politics (Kitschelt, 2000) in facilitating informational sharing and responsiveness through face-to-face interactions in the absence of direct exchange relations. Institutional designs, including the pair-up mechanism and the institutionalized interaction between local officials and villagers in the execution of TPA policies, are important for achieving the political goal of the program and have implications for understanding the political impact of poverty reduction in other contexts. Means-tested programs not accompanied by positive bureaucratic-citizen interactions may become counterproductive because villagers see them not serving their own needs. Developmental studies on other developing countries, such as Brazil (Tendler and Freeheim, 1994) and Indonesia (Ricks, 2016), find that more frequent higher-quality contact between street-level bureaucracy and the beneficiaries produces better policy outcomes. In line with these findings, effective poverty alleviation programs shall not only reallocate resources, but also improve the intensity and nature of the substantial linkage between the local state and the villagers, including both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, to win people's hearts and minds.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414d3541444d33457a6333566d54/index.html>, accessed in July 2019.
2. <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2015/1127/c1003-27861515.html>, accessed July 2019.
3. <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2017/07-05/8269508.shtml>, accessed July 2019.
4. The poverty line, set by the national government in 2013, is 2736 RMB (421USD) per person per year, and is adapted every year.
5. For example, 250,000 grassroots officials in Guangxi province have spent over 3 months to give each of 5,000,000 households a score using the proxy means testing methods.
6. <http://www.cncnews.cn/new/detail/100616.jhtml>, accessed in Dec, 2019.
7. Interview with a township deputy party secretary in Hubei province in Jan, 2018.
8. It is called 'marginal households' (*bianyuanhu*) in the official rhetoric.
9. The 'three enters and three togethers' implies that cadres must enter the grassroots, villages and rural poor households and eat, live and work together with them.
10. Internal documents gained during fieldwork in S province in 2019. Similar requirements are also found by other researchers (Tsai and Liao, 2020: 55).

11. Internal documents gained during fieldwork in G province in 2019. The ‘6-assistance’ includes offering assistance in policies, skills, projects, funds, sale of agricultural goods, and life; ‘5 must-visit’ policy requires that officials must visit their paired households during traditional festivals, busy farming season, and when the households have any difficulty, new birth, disease, death and dispute.
12. In the TPA campaign, local cadres also paid visits to non-impovertised households for reasons including providing clarification about policies to appease their unhappiness or jealousy and gathering information of their poor neighboring households in poverty identification, but this linkage was not as institutionalized or officially required as that with impoverished households.
13. Among them, 258 have been lifted out of poverty according to our interview, but continued to enjoy poverty alleviation benefits under the official rule (*tuoping butuo zhengce*).
14. Existing research finds that the internet consistently erodes both specific support for the government and diffuse support for the regime through the enhancement of the public’s democratic values (Huhe et al., 2018). Therefore, internet usage is also controlled in the model.
15. These two groups are not different in their level of trust toward national-level government (see Table 3A-2 in the Appendix). Since trust in central government is beyond the analytic scope of this article, we put the discussion of this finding in the note of Table 3A-2 in the Appendix.
16. It should also be noted that some alleviation programs aimed at promoting farm entrepreneurship might contain risks and lead to financial losses, lowering the economic evaluation of beneficiaries. For example, government encouragement to grow a particular farm product may lead to market saturation and reduce profits. Failure to provide timely technical assistance during the productive process can also damage the prospects of agribusiness. For more on this, see Naminse and Zhuang (2018).
17. Oi (1985) finds that when accompanying the concentration of authority in the village leader and peasants’ incentive to receive special favors in the distribution of resources through personal ties, clientelism functions as a type of elite-mass linkage.

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