

Ingroup Bias in Official Behavior: A National Field Experiment in China*

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Abstract

Do ingroup biases distort the behavior of public officials? Recent studies detect large ethnic biases in elite political behavior, but their case selection leaves open the possibility that bias obtains under relatively narrow historical and institutional conditions. We clarify these scope conditions by studying ingroup bias in the radically different political, historical, and ethnic environment of contemporary China. In a national field experiment, local officials were 33% less likely to provide assistance to citizens with ethnic Muslim names than to ethnically-unmarked peers. We find evidence consistent with the ingroup bias interpretation of this finding and detect little role for strategic incentives mediating this effect. This result demonstrates that neither legacies of institutionalized racism nor electoral politics are necessary to produce large ingroup biases in official behavior. It also suggests that ethnically motivated distortions to governance are more prevalent than previously documented.