

Locked Down, Voices Amplified:

Nationalist Discourse in the Era of COVID-19

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Background

- Rise of nationalism in China [Zhang et al., 2018]
- Causes of rising nationalism
 - Top-down government campaign, leading to "wu mao dang" [Weiss, 2014, King et al., 2017]
 - Bottom-up spontaneous engagement, leading to "zi gan wu", "xiao fen hong" [Fang and Repnikova, 2018]
- Can nationalism be reduced?

Shanghai's lockdown

Time: from March 28 to June 1, 2022

Population affected: around 25 million

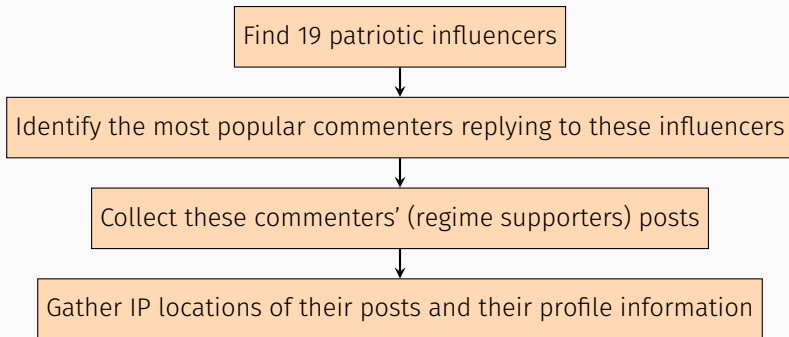


Research Question

For regime supporters, if they were locked down at home, would they change their nationalistic sentiments?

Data source: Weibo (Twitter of China).

Data collection:

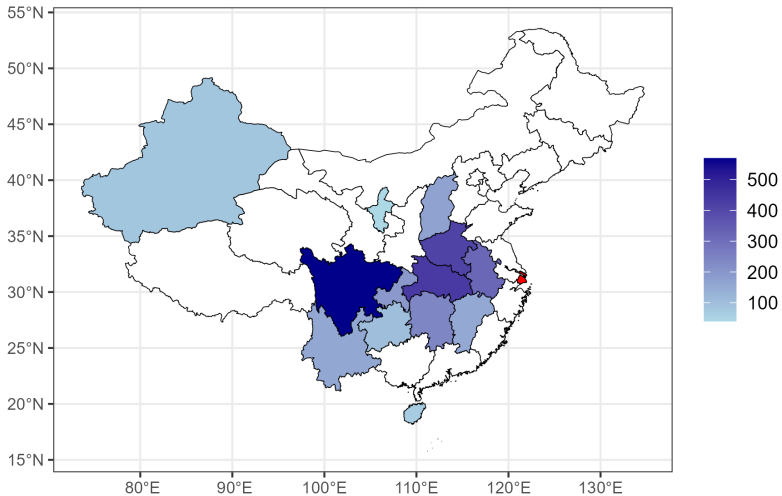


Data source: Weibo (Twitter of China).

- 3,818 users from 14 provinces
 - 863 Shanghai users
 - 2,955 users in other provinces
 - user residence determined by consistent IP location
- 141,355 posts
- from Feb 1 to June 1, 2022 (March 28 in the middle)

Data: Selected Province

User numbers in selected provinces of mainland China



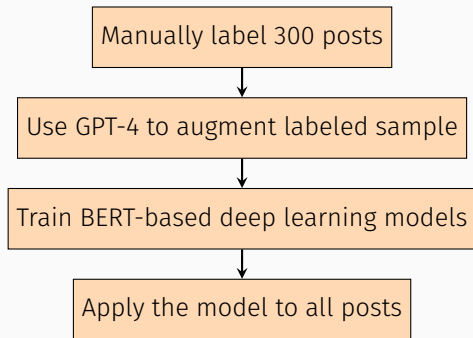
Difference-in-Differences:

- treated: users in Shanghai
- control: users in other 13 provinces
- treatment: Shanghai's lockdown

Topic Modeling:

- Structural Topic Model (STM)

Classifying Nationalistic Posts



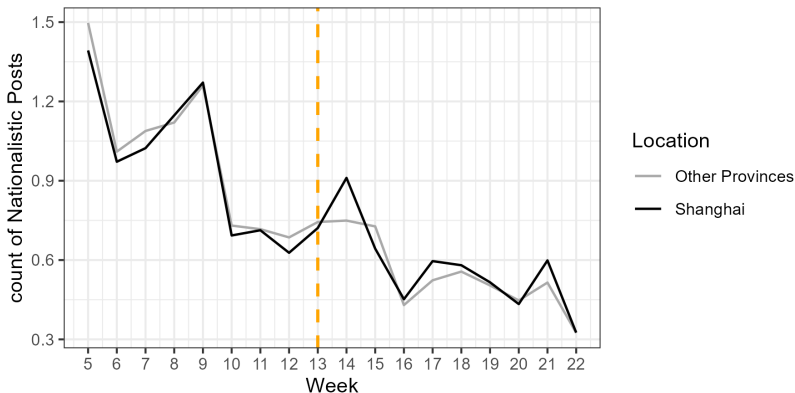
chinese-roberta-wwm-ext

- Robustly Optimized BERT-Pretraining Approach with the Whole Word Masking
- F1 score = 0.7136
- Outperforms XGBoost and FastText

Outcome Variable: Cyber-Nationalism

Measurement: number of nationalistic posts by user

Descriptive plot: After the lockdown(Week 13), Shanghai has a higher count of nationalistic posts compared to other provinces.

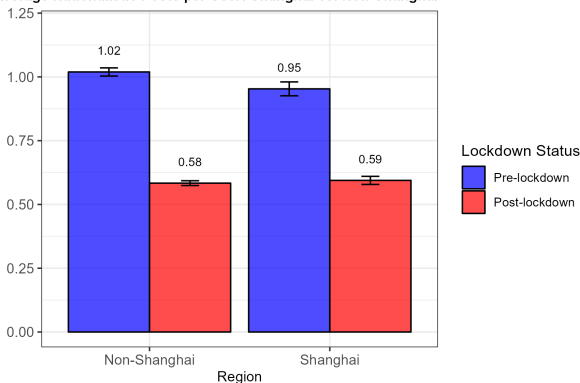


Canonical Difference-in-Differences (DID)

Estimate the impact of Shanghai's lockdown on Shanghai's regime supporters using standard DiD:

$$\hat{\tau}_{DID} = (\bar{Y}_{SH,post} - \bar{Y}_{SH,pre}) - (\bar{Y}_{control,post} - \bar{Y}_{control,pre})$$

Average Nationalistic Posts per User: Shanghai vs. Non-Shanghai



Canonical Difference-in-Differences (DID)

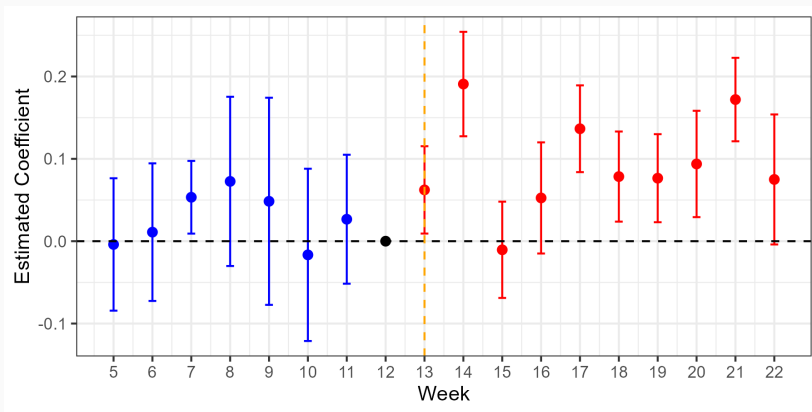
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$$\hat{\tau}_{DID} = (\bar{Y}_{SH,post} - \bar{Y}_{SH,pre}) - (\bar{Y}_{control,post} - \bar{Y}_{control,pre})$$

The estimate is **0.077** (8% of the pre-lockdown average) with a standard error of 0.0013 (statistically significant).

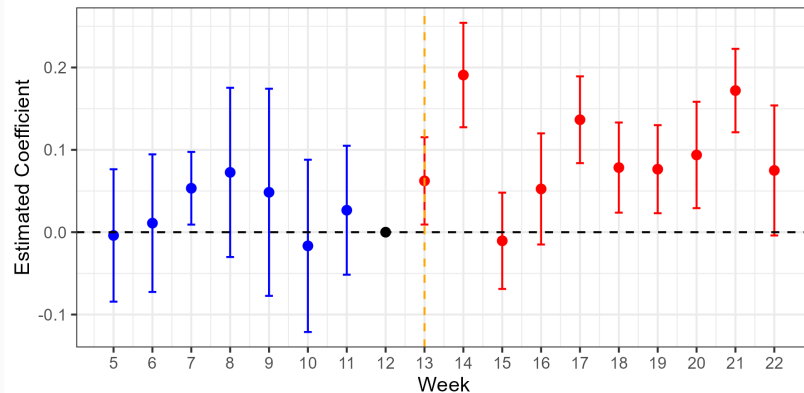
Event Studies: Before the Lockdown

The coefficients for weeks prior to lockdown are mostly not statistically significant, which is a formal test of the parallel trend assumption.



Event Studies: After the Lockdown

- The initial increase of nationalism is followed by a drop in the third week of the lockdown.
- The remaining post-lockdown coefficients are positive.

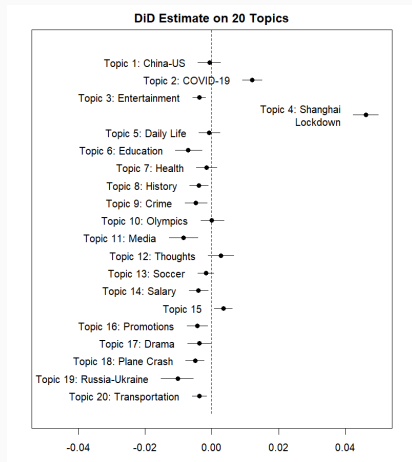


Why this Surprising Result?

- Censorship on Shanghai users?
(might not be the case)
 - **Research Design:** Regime supporters and their nationalistic discourses may be less censored.
 - **Descriptive results:** There is actually a larger decrease of nationalistic discourse in the non-Shanghai group.
 - **Empirical evidence:** When the nationalism is measured by proportion of nationalistic posts, the effects remain consistently positive.
- Shanghai users overstated nationalistic views to counter the criticism on Shanghai's lockdown?
- ...

Topic Modelling

The tension between supporting the Zero-COVID policies and expressing concern about (the shortage of) daily supplies.



— — Top words — —

Topic 2: Variant, Vaccination, Death, Medical, COVID-19 ...

Topic 4: Shanghai, Delivery, Community, Supplies, Seek Help, Vegetables ...

Conclusion

- **Nationalism initially increased.**

Regime supporters initially defended the party-state and its zero-COVID policies with nationalistic rhetoric.

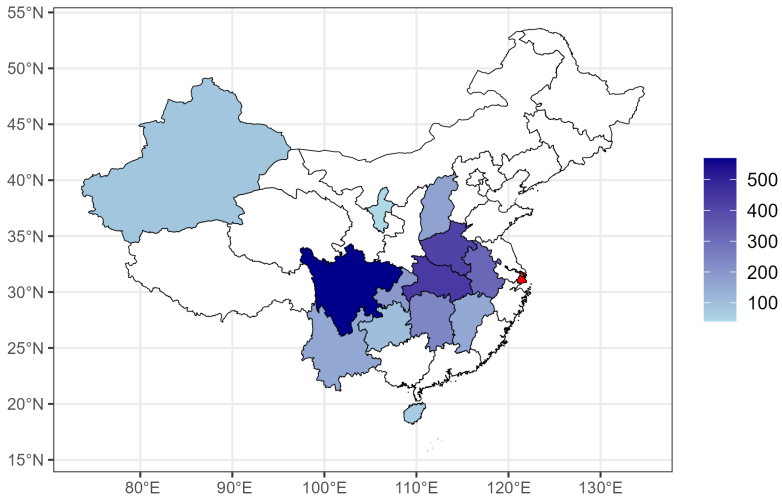
- **Nationalism decreased from the highest point after the two-week lockdown.**

After two weeks of lockdown, their nationalism might give way to the growing demand for daily supplies.

Thank you!

Data: Province Selection

User numbers in selected provinces of mainland China



References

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