

# The Anxiety of Embedded Officials: Local Connections and Bureaucratic Responsiveness during a Centrally-Mandated Campaign in China

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## **Abstract**

Conventional wisdom assumes that an official's local ties could weaken their loyalty to upper-level authorities and reduce their compliance with central policies. In this article, we challenge this view and argue that in a highly centralized bureaucracy, local ties could sometimes increase an official's compliance and responsiveness in the implementation of high-priority policies. In particular, when the policy both has high priority and conflicts with local vested interests, locally embedded officials would face stronger pressure to display loyalty to their superior and dispel suspicions of colluding with local elites targeted by the policy. To test our theory, we use an original dataset from China's National Crackdown on Gang Crimes, a three-year campaign (2018- 2020) aimed at combating organized crimes and reducing collusion between local bureaucrats and gang members at the grassroots level. Our findings provide evidence that prefecture-city leaders with stronger connections to their assigned locality made greater efforts to prosecute organized crime members, driven by a stronger incentive to prove their loyalty and distance themselves from questionable social groups in the locality. Our research offers new insights into how local embeddedness impacts bureaucrats' behavioral patterns and responsiveness in high-priority policy implementation, particularly in authoritarian regimes.