

Why People Don't Protest? Work Units, Selective Paternalism, and Social Ties in China*

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Abstract

Using national survey data collected in 2010, this article explores how affiliation with a work unit (*danwei*, a public or state-owned institution) discourages people from taking part in popular protest in China. Empirical analysis shows that individuals employed in a work unit or with strong social ties (such as a spouse) to a work unit are less likely to protest. The negative effect of work-unit affiliation on protest participation is so effective that it remains significant even when personal interests are at stake. Further analysis indicates that affiliation with a work unit depresses protest participation both directly and indirectly, which suggests that affiliation status is empowering as well as constraining. In addition to quieting people directly, work-unit affiliation is also associated with a higher social status that empowers people to address their grievances before a protest is called for. Despite the dwindling number of people working in work units, the continuing effectiveness of protest control and the amplifying effect of social ties of those who remain in work units still provide a reliable mechanism for limiting popular protest in China.

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