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Getting Tough on China: Are Campaign Ads a Signal of Future Policy or Just Cheap Talk?

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Abstract

Is tough-on-China campaign rhetoric cheap talk or a signal of policy attention? Analyzing China-related campaign advertisements during the 2010 midterm elections and subsequent cosponsorship of China-related bills, we find that campaign ads are a noisy predictor of legislative attention. Challengers who attacked on China were more likely to cosponsor China-related legislation, while incumbents who were attacked for being soft on China took tougher positions on China after reelection. By demonstrating the correspondence between anti-China campaign appeals and subsequent legislative attention, our findings add to a growing body of evidence linking campaign rhetoric to members' legislative agendas. This research note provides the first evidence demonstrating the connection between campaign appeals and legislative attention on a foreign policy issue like China.

Attacking China on the campaign trail has reached new heights in recent elections. Whereas less than 0.5% of congressional campaign ads aired between 2000 and 2008 referenced East Asia, China made the top-10 list of issues in 2010 Democratic ads, even exceeding appeals about the economy (Fowler and Ridout **2010**). While

fewer, Republican ads also attacked their opponents for increasing US debt to China and sending jobs overseas. In total, ads criticizing candidates for being “soft” on China aired in 43 of 50 seriously competitive House races in 2010. China also made the top list of issues during the 2012 congressional elections, mentioned more frequently than Social Security, education, or the military in Republican ads (Fowler and Ridout **2013**). And although health care was the overwhelming focus of the 2018 midterms, China still featured prominently in Indiana’s contested Senate race (Wesleyan Media Project **2018**). According to one analyst, China has been among the three leading issues in ads aired during the 2020 campaign (Riechmann and Lemire **2020**).

Is tough-on-China campaign rhetoric cheap talk or a harbinger of legislative attention? Some argue that scapegoating in political campaigns, while calculated to generate an emotional response among voters, may nonetheless be influential in shaping or revealing future policy. Evan Tracey of the Campaign Media Analysis Group argued that “political ads are the leading indicator of the next set of policies” (Pomfret **2010**). Yet others claim that tough campaign talk gives way to moderation after candidates take office (Horsley **2011**).

To evaluate the relationship between what candidates say and what they do once in office, this research note analyzes all China-related campaign advertisements during the 2010 midterm elections and the sponsorship and cosponsorship of China-related bills and resolutions in the following Congress. We find that when challengers attack on the campaign trail, both successful challengers and victorious incumbents are more likely to sponsor subsequent anti-China legislation. More than just cheap talk, campaign rhetoric can indeed be a “credible signal” of the direction in which legislators are likely to take policy (Sulkin **2009**, 1106). Yet incumbents who attack their challengers on China are not more legislatively active on US-China policy once reelected into office. Rather, it is the incumbents who were criticized for being soft on China who take more aggressive positions in the subsequent legislative session. Our results suggest that while the connection between rhetoric and policy is imperfect, China bashing on the campaign trail can have substantive consequences for legislative attention.

Promise Keeping or Cheap Shots?

Following Fenno’s observation that the campaign trail “takes us to the place where our representative form of government begins and ends” (**1998**, 9), Tracy Sulkin shows that campaigns “function effectively as a democratic institution, linking policy in the electoral and legislative arenas” (**2009**, 1105; see also Corazzini et al. **2014**; Druckman, Kifer, and Parker **2009**). Winning legislators frequently adjust their legislative agendas to respond to critiques leveled against them in the previous election (Schmitt, LaForge, and Brant **2019**; Sulkin **2005**). What candidates say on the campaign trail can provide a credible signal about the issues they will pursue once in office (Sulkin **2011**; Thomson et al. **2017**), and even the images candidates use in their campaign ads help communicate legislative priorities (Sulkin and Swigger **2008**).

The loss of American jobs to outsourcing and foreign competition has become an important election theme, yet no study to date has focused specifically on whether campaign ads on foreign or trade policy correspond to post-election changes in legislative activity. Scholars have documented the influence of ethnocentric sentiment (Kam and Kinder **2007**) and outgroup bias in driving fears about job insecurity (Mansfield and Mutz **2009**), offshoring (Margalit **2011**), and immigration (Banks **2016**; Valentino, Brader, and Jardina **2013**). Others have found an association between job losses or import competition attributable to trade with China (Kleinberg and Fordham **2013**; Kuk, Seligsohn, and Zhang **2018**) and congressional support for tough-on-China legislation. These studies provide important evidence of both constituents’ anxieties and legislative behavior, yet we still know relatively little about the connection between the two.

Such a connection between campaign appeals and policy activity would suggest that voters are able to influence policy through the prospective selection of candidates (e.g., Fearon **1999**) or retrospective sanction (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan **2002**). Even incumbents who hold onto office may be pressured to take a tougher

stance on China. An opponent's attacks on the campaign trail may reveal political vulnerabilities and constituent concerns that legislators must address to defuse the threat from future challengers (Arnold **1992**).

Despite skepticism of public opinion's influence on foreign policy, scholars have found that elites pay attention to shifting public opinion on international affairs, particularly on foreign policies that cut closer to home such as trade (Jacobs and Page **2005**; Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson **2009**). Thus, even if the public does not vote on the basis of a candidate's policy record or stance on China, candidates are often concerned enough about their constituents' preferences to act as if public opinion matters. Indeed, between 2006 and 2010, members of Congress mentioned China in 3,807 press releases.¹

On the other hand, many campaign attacks mentioning China appear to be little more than opportunistic fear mongering, designed to increase voter interest by eliciting an emotional response (Brader **2006**; Isenstadt **2020**). Believing that voters harbor deep suspicion and animosity toward China (Page and Xie **2010**), political elites may link domestic issues such as unemployment and the environment to China. Sulkin (**2009**) finds that legislators are less likely to follow through with campaign promises made in attack ads. As such, we might expect opportunistic campaign attacks on China to bear little relationship to legislative action on China.²

Data and Methods

We follow Sulkin (**2009, 2011**) in examining the linkages between China-specific campaign appeals in the 2010 midterm elections and China-specific legislative activity in the 112th Congress. Specifically, we ask whether these attack ads were good predictors of whether members actively pursued legislation critical of China once they were elected or reelected. Answering this question requires no more than a bivariate analysis of the correspondence between campaign appeals and legislative activity. As Sulkin notes: "demonstrating that a high level of correspondence exists between the issues candidates prioritize in campaigns and those they pursue in office is enough to answer the normative question about whether promise keeping occurs. It is not necessary to establish that appeals are somehow exogenous, *causing* this behavior" (**2009, 1096**). We also investigate whether members responded to challengers' attacks after the election.

We focus on the 2010 congressional elections in which get tough on China rhetoric was prevalent on the campaign trail among both Republican and Democratic candidates. Data on campaign ads come from Kantar Media's Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG). We cross-checked these data with a list collected by the US-China Institute at the University of Southern California (USC US-China Institute **2010**) and added the few spots missing from the CMAG list. In 2010, 14 House incumbents and 20 challengers ran ads attacking their opponents for being soft on China. Democratic candidates sponsored slightly more ads (19) than Republican candidates (15). However, both the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Republican National Committee (RNC) sponsored attack ads on behalf of their candidates, with the DNC funding more spots (11) than the RNC (9). Overall, China-related ads aired in 43 districts in the 2010 midterm elections – a year where only 40 congressional races were "toss-ups." (Cook Political Report **2010**)

We measure legislative activity by the number of China-related bills a member sponsored or cosponsored. Scholars have shown that members see bill sponsorship as a valuable position-taking opportunity (Box-Steffensmeier and Grant **1999**; Box-Steffensmeier, Arnold, and Zorn **1997**; Esterling **2007**; Rocca and Gordon **2010**; Wawro **2001**; Weissert **1991**). However, sponsorship is not costless (Schiller **1995**); freshman and more vulnerable members tend to sponsor fewer bills (Garand and Burke **2006**; Lazarus **2010**), and sponsorship on many issues tends to be low (Sulkin **2009**). As such, we also include cosponsorship, which requires little more than responding to a "Dear Colleague" letter. Although cosponsorship is less costly, it is not costless, as shown by the substantial variation in cosponsorship rates across members and issues (Harward and Moffett **2010**;

Koger 2003).³ Indeed, legislators cosponsor quite selectively and suffer negative consequences for violating their cosponsorship agreements (Bernhard and Sulkin 2013).

Data on China-specific bills introduced in the 112th Congress come from the US-China Business Council, which tracks legislation that would in any way affect US-China relations (The US-China Business Council 2012). We use this list as a starting point but code a bill as “China-specific” if it or the sponsoring member of Congress mentions China in conjunction with the bill in a press release.⁴ In cases where China is not mentioned specifically, we count it as “China-specific” if it proposes retaliation against foreign companies for practices that are often associated with China in the press, such as dumping. We do not count it as “China-specific” if it proposes penalties on American companies for outsourcing jobs or laying off American workers generically or creates incentives for American companies to create jobs domestically. We also include the number of “China-specific” amendments sponsored and cosponsored by members, drawn from a keyword search on the Library of Congress’s THOMAS website. In the 112th Congress, House members sponsored or cosponsored an average of two pieces of anti-China legislation ($SD = 1.4$, $min = 0$, $max = 12$).

We also coded bills by issue area. In general, China-specific legislation can be grouped into four categories: (1) economic (mean = 1.41, $SD = 1.50$); (2) national security (mean = .27, $SD = .61$); (3) human rights (mean = .08, $SD = .46$); and (4) other (mean = .01, $SD = .07$). Economic-related bills range from strengthening US governmental authority to more aggressively enforce trade laws against Chinese imports to withdrawing normal trade relations treatment for products coming from China. National security-related bills include several aimed to strengthen US-Taiwan relations, such as H.R. 2992, which would provide US-built fighter aircraft to strengthen Taiwan’s “self-defense capability against the increasing military threat from China.” Human rights-related bills include legislation that would prohibit US companies from helping China use the Internet as a “tool of censorship and surveillance.” The final category is the smallest in number and captures miscellaneous bills such as those that prohibit campaign contributions by political committees controlled by foreign-owned companies.

Who Airs Anti-China Ads?

We begin by examining the districts where an anti-China ad aired during the 2010 midterm elections (Table 1). We consider several measures of constituency characteristics that might explain patterns of anti-China position taking on the campaign trail. First, because many of the ads focused on the loss of US jobs to China, we include the *share of the district’s labor force employed in manufacturing*.⁵ Given the diversity within the manufacturing sector, we also consider *the number of jobs lost or displaced (per congressional district) due to the US trade deficit with China* (Scott 2012). Conversely, we might expect fewer anti-China ads in districts with higher *rates of college attainment*, as these districts tend to rely less upon labor-intensive industries. We also consider the *one-year change in the district’s unemployment rate* to control for the possibility that candidates were more likely to scapegoat China in places hit hardest by the economic recession. Finally, we control for the *share of the district population that is of Chinese descent*, as constituents with ethnic ties to China may be less responsive or receptive to appeals that call for tough action on China.⁶ We also include the incumbent’s *membership in the House Taiwan Caucus* to account for the incumbent’s interest in strengthening US-Taiwan relations as a hedge against China.

TABLE 1. Predicting Anti-China Attack Ads in 2010 Midterm Elections

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	All Districts	All Districts	Incumbents	Incumbents
Prev. legislative interest			-0.41	-0.21
			(0.28)	(0.31)
% Manufacturing	8.74**			13.10*
	(4.27)			(7.19)

% Jobs Lost to China		-.032		
		(0.28)		
Change in unemployment	0.07	0.03		0.02
	(0.18)	(0.18)		(0.32)
% College	4.04	3.28		8.23
	(3.50)	(3.42)		(6.70)
% Chinese	-1.51*	-1.62**		-1.74
	(0.80)	(0.81)		(1.61)
Exports to China (mil. \$)	0.00	0.00		0.00
	(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.001)
Cook Rating of competitiveness	0.70***	0.74***		0.79***
	(0.16)	(0.15)		(0.29)
Republican MC	-1.31**	-1.21**		-1.07
	(0.56)	(0.55)		(1.14)
Member Taiwan caucus	-0.33	-.40		-1.32
	(0.48)	(.48)		(1.19)
Constant	-3.88***	-2.05***	-2.87***	-6.84***
	(1.11)	(0.83)	(0.38)	(2.20)
Observations	435	435	392	392
Pseudo R^2	.27	.26	0.03	.29

Note: Logistic regression where dependent variable is whether an anti-China ad aired (by any sponsor) in the 2010 midterm election. Columns (3) and (4) include incumbent-contested races only.

* $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

The results are consistent with our expectations. Voters living in districts with a larger manufacturing sector were more likely to see an ad that used China as a scapegoat, as candidates sought to appeal to economic anxieties among blue-collar workers (column 1). Those living in competitive districts (where campaign ads are almost exclusively targeted) were also more likely to see an attack ad that mentioned China, as were districts with Democratic incumbents. Candidates also appear to have been sensitive to the ethnic composition of their electorates: China ads were *less* likely to air in districts with a larger share of constituents of Chinese descent.⁷

However, we find no evidence that anti-China ads were more likely to air in districts that were estimated to have lost a greater share of their jobs to China (column 2). Nor do we find evidence that incumbents' previous legislative activity on US-China policy in the first session of the 111th Congress predicted sponsorship of an attack ad featuring China in the 2010 midterm campaign season (shown in columns 3 and 4). Thus, it appears that the decision to attack one's opponent on China was largely motivated by electoral insecurity. With a weak economy and political rancor over rising budget deficits, China was an easy scapegoat in the 2010 midterm elections, particularly in blue-collar districts.

From the Campaign Trail to the Halls of Congress

Even if China bashing during the campaign was cheap talk, motivated more by opportunistic electioneering than sincere policy preferences, such attacks may still be credible signals of future action if winning candidates became more likely to sponsor and/or cosponsor legislation critical of China. We turn to a bivariate analysis, examining the relationship between China bashing on the campaign trail in the 2010 midterm elections and China-specific legislative activity in the 112th Congress. As Sulkin argues: "controls obscure the basic question—whether a voter, observing the campaign and knowing little else about the candidate's predispositions, can

make an inference about the likely content of his or her activities in office” (2009, 1096). We then distinguish between victorious incumbents and successful challengers and by whether the candidate had sponsored the ad or whether she was attacked by her opponent.

Overall, we find a negligible difference between China bashing on the campaign trail and legislative activity on US-China policy in the subsequent session of Congress ($\Delta = 0.4, p = .13$).

The correspondence between rhetoric and action, however, looks different when we separate victorious incumbents from successful challengers. Although several incumbents sponsored an attack ad mentioning China, such campaign appeals appear unrelated to their support for China-specific legislation after the election. In contrast, incumbents who were attacked by their opponents (or their surrogates) for being “pro-China” supported, on average, nearly one additional piece of legislation critical of China after the election ($p < 0.10$).⁸

The reverse holds for challengers. New members who sponsored an attack ad mentioning China were more likely to cosponsor anti-China legislation (no freshman sponsored legislation) once elected into office ($\Delta = 0.78, p < .10$); however, being attacked on China bore no relationship to their position taking on China policy after the election. Thus, our results for challengers are closest to Sulkin’s notion of “promise keeping.” Challengers who used the specter of a rising China in their campaigns were more likely to follow up those campaign appeals with a more critical legislative position.

Our results suggest that campaign rhetoric on China in the 2010 midterms provided a partially credible signal of how actively a member would pursue China-specific legislation after the election. Those incumbents who were attacked for being “pro-China” during the campaign appear to have responded to such criticisms after escaping electoral defeat. In contrast, we find evidence of “promise keeping” among successful challengers, perhaps suggesting that new representatives (who lack strong reputations with their constituents) have a greater incentive to show consistency between campaign appeals and legislative action.

Although it appears that campaign appeals often translate into greater legislative attention after the election, such correspondence might reflect other factors that explain both anti-China rhetoric on the campaign trail and anti-China position taking in Congress. Thus, we replicated this analysis using nonparametric matching to balance background conditions, such as the share of the district employed in manufacturing and the pre-election ratings of the competitiveness of the race, to better estimate the relationship between anti-China campaign appeals and anti-China legislative action in absence of random assignment of an anti-China attack ad. The results using the matched data remain largely the same (see the online supporting information).

Figure 2 separates the results (presented in Figure 1) by issue area.⁹ For economic-related bills, we find that House members representing districts where an anti-China ad aired were more likely to sponsor and/or cosponsor such legislation compared to those House members representing districts where no such ads aired ($p < .10$).

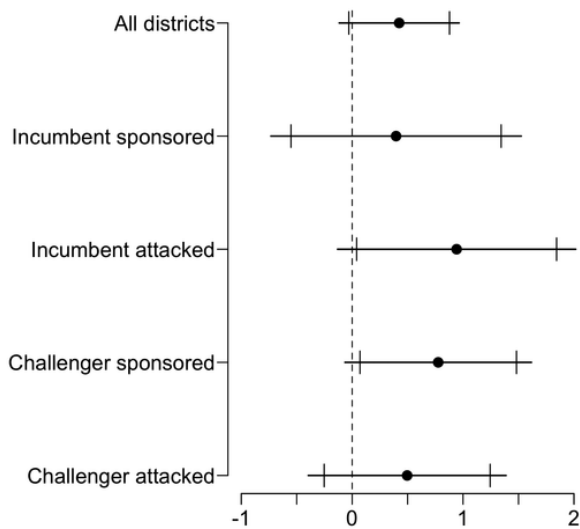


FIGURE 1 Were Candidates More Legislatively Active on China if Anti-China Ad Aired in 2010 Midterm Elections?
Note: Average number of China-specific bills sponsored and cosponsored. Whiskers and bars reflect 95% and 90% confidence intervals respectively.

The results are even more pronounced when we separate victorious incumbents from successful challengers. As shown in Figure 2, the main results are largely driven by the subsequent legislative behavior of incumbents who were attacked on the campaign trail for being soft on China ($\Delta = 1.14, p < .05$). Successful challengers who faced similar attack ads from their opponents, however, were more likely to cosponsor legislation condemning China for its human rights record ($\Delta = .31, p < .05$). We also find that successful challengers who sponsored anti-China attack ads were more likely to cosponsor national-security-related legislation than their newly elected colleagues who did not emphasize China during the campaign ($\Delta = .46, p < .05$).¹⁰

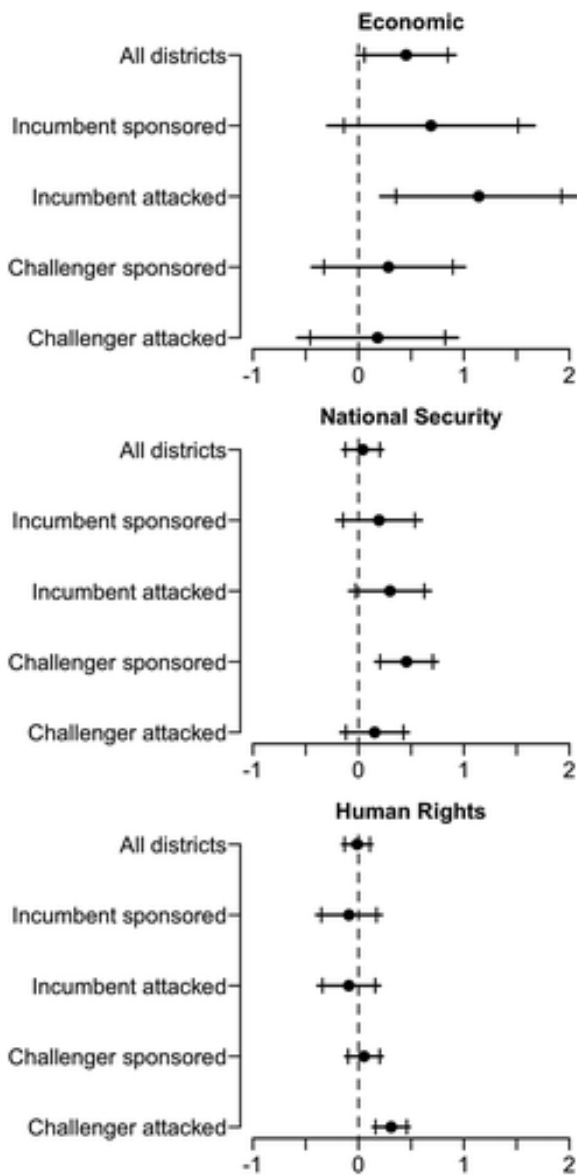


FIGURE 2 Estimated Differences in Legislative Activity by Issue

Note: Estimated difference in the number of bills sponsored and/or cosponsored depending on whether anti-China ads aired. Whiskers and bars reflect 90% and 95% confidence intervals respectively.

Although we are unable to test whether these patterns reflect differences in position-taking strategies between victorious incumbents and successful challengers or whether they are explained by differences in partisanship, the latter seems more likely than the former. Successful challengers in 2010 were almost uniformly Republicans. And whereas the Democratic House leadership in the 111th Congress passed a currency reform bill that would have imposed tariffs on Chinese imports, the Republican House leadership in the 112th Congress was much less open to such legislation. However, our results suggest that while the Republican leadership may have been less willing to pursue legislation labeling China a currency manipulator, its membership found other legislative opportunities to criticize China: successful challengers were more likely to follow up their tough talk on China by pursuing security-related legislation, and those attacked for being soft on China were more likely to cosponsor legislation criticizing China's human rights record.¹¹

Conclusion

What relationship (if any) does China bashing on the campaign trail have to legislative attention once candidates take office? Overall, tough-on-China campaign rhetoric appears to have had different meaning for reelected incumbents and successful challengers. Incumbents who aired China-related ads were no more likely to cosponsor anti-China legislation after the election, while challengers who aired China ads were more likely to cosponsor legislation on security issues, but not economic issues. In short, anti-China ads sponsored by challengers provided a credible signal of how critical they would be of China as legislators, although not necessarily on the economic issues raised in their campaign advertisements. These results are consistent with Sulkin's (2011) finding that junior members tend to devote more legislative attention to their campaign themes. One potential area of further research would be to follow these members over time to see how their legislative agenda and subsequent campaign strategies evolved.

At the same time, incumbents who were attacked for being "pro-China" during their bid for reelection sponsored and/or cosponsored more China-specific legislation after the election than their House colleagues who faced no such criticism. These results indicate that campaign rhetoric was a partially informative signal about future policy vulnerabilities that targeted incumbents would seek to address after the election. Our analysis is focused on the 2010 midterm elections in which get-tough-on-China rhetoric was frequently evoked by both Republicans and Democrats on the campaign trail. Future research could consider whether these results generalize to other elections in which domestic issues, such as health care, are center stage. Indeed, we expect the 2020 elections will provide yet another opportunity to examine the links between China-related campaign appeals and subsequent legislative attention.

Notes

1. Thanks to Justin Grimmer for this data. See Grimmer (2013).
2. Legislators may also defer to party elites and the president on trade policy more than on domestic issues (Milner and Tingley 2011).
3. Although we collapse sponsorship and cosponsorship into a single category, our substantive findings remain largely the same if we separate cosponsorships from introductions (see the online supporting information).
4. Including bills as well as resolutions.
5. Previous scholarship has found that campaign contributions from labor groups reduce support for free-trade legislation (Baldwin and Magee 2000; Box-Steffensmeier et al. 1997).
6. Analyzing US sanctions against South Africa and the Allied war effort in World War II, Berinsky (2009) finds that Americans with ethnic ties to foreign targets were less supportive of punitive action.
7. We also considered whether different district characteristics predicted ad airings in Republican versus Democratic districts, but found only minor differences, with suggestive evidence that ads were *less* likely to air in Republican districts that experienced greater job dislocation because of competition with China (see the online supporting information).
8. We also find similar results when we just look at patterns of bill sponsorship. Incumbents, but especially Democrats, attacked for being weak on China sponsor more China-specific legislation after the election (see the online supporting information).
9. We drop the "other" category due to the small number of bills.
10. Our "other" category included too few bills to draw any substantive or statistical inferences.
11. We present results by party in the online supporting information.

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