

**The Origin of Communities in Authoritarian Cities:  
Theory and Evidence from China**

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**Abstract**

This study offers a unique mixed-method investigation of the origin of self-governed neighborhood communities in authoritarian China's megacities. We find a prevalent collective action problem with respect to neighborhood self-governance, but so too do we present evidence that the local government helps homeowners overcome this problem and govern themselves more effectively. Our data also reveal that democratized neighborhoods have better governing outcomes than do non-democratized ones, as evidenced by more effective homeowner control over neighborhood affairs, greater respect for democratic principles, and a higher degree of community identity. Owing to these positive outcomes, homeowner activists in democratized neighborhoods develop deeper trust in their local government than do their counterparts in non-democratized neighborhoods. Most pointedly, we find an authoritarian regime may genuinely support neighborhood self-governance in the interest of building political trust, thereby complicating the conventional view that such regimes either repress civic engagement or manipulate civic organizations for political control.

*Keywords:* Self-Governance; Community; Authoritarianism; China; Homeowners' Association

**Introduction**

Social scientists have long emphasized the importance of social norms and communities to development (Alexander & Peñalver 2010; Brooks & Rose 2013; Ellickson 1991; Immerwahr 2015; Qiao 2017; Rajan 2019; Richman 2017; Tsai 2007) and democracy (Fukuyama 1995; Kornai, Rothstein & Rose-Ackerman eds. 2004; Mansbridge 1980; Putnam 1993, 2000; Rose-Ackerman 2001), but these theories beg a prior question: where do communities come from? The classic examples in the literature all take communities as a given: New England settlers with the same religion (Ellickson 1993, pp.1335-8), merchants of the same ethnic groups (Bernstein 1992, 2019; Greif 2006; Landa 1981; Richman 2017), professionals of the same industries (Bernstein 2001, 2015; Ellickson 2016; Oliar & Sprigman 2008; Rai 1999), villages and towns with decades

of history and family relationships dating back several generations (Ostrom 1990, pp. 61-88; Richman 2017, pp. 120-5). It was in this spirit that Tocqueville commented, “it is man who establishes kingdoms and creates republics; the town seems to come directly from the hands of God (Tocqueville 2010, p. 101).” New England towns in Tocqueville’s writing were essentially self-governed local communities. Such communities, he went on, “escape human effort so to speak (Tocqueville 2010, p. 102),” are “rarely created (Tocqueville 2010, p. 102),” and “arise by itself (Tocqueville 2010, p. 102).” All of which is to say, he concluded, “The continuous action of laws and of mores, circumstances, and above all time succeed in its consolidation (Tocqueville 2010, p. 102).”

In the context of liberal democracy, particularly in America, scholars have challenged this inherited notion of civic engagement (Skocpol, Ganze, & Munson 2000), making the case for “bringing the state back in” and assessing its constitutive role in promoting civic engagement and forming civic communities through public welfare programs (Mettler 2002), by providing public and institutional infrastructure (Skocpol, Ganze, & Munson 2000), and even via training activists and nurturing civic spirits in the midst of state-sponsored political campaigns (Capozzola 2008; Skocpol, Ganze & Munson 2000;). Influences such as these have had both positive and negative consequences for democracy the latter of which were exemplified in the relationship between the Trump presidency and right-wing civic extremism (Skocpol 2020).

In the context of authoritarian regimes, however, we have yet to see commensurate attention to the state’s community-building potential or prospects. Autonomous local communities would appear least likely to develop and prosper in such an environment; indeed, authoritarian regimes are considered to be hostile to the development of self-governed and autonomous civic organizations and often play neighbors and groups against one another (Taub 2016; Applebaum 2012). What’s more, cross-country data bolster this notion of authoritarianism working against civic communities, revealing that “statism” constrains individual associational activity of all types, particularly social movement associations (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001). China seems to be no exception, in that its civic organizations are suppressed, eliminated, marginalized, or assimilated (Kang & Han 2005; Teets 2014). The only chance for their survival in China, if any, is said to be the fragmentation of the authoritarian state (Lieberthal 1992; Mertha 2009; Spiers 2011; Teets 2013).

This conventional wisdom, however, is challenged by the apparent durability and prevalence of homeowners’ associations (HoAs) in China, an authoritarian country that is instinctively suspicious of civic associations and whose government apparatus closely monitors and controls their development. HoAs in Chinese megacities have lasted for over two decades and presently involve approximately 400 million middle-class homeowners (Bai 2018; Credit Suisse Research Institute 2018).<sup>1</sup> Given that China has one of the highest rates of homeownership in the world (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2013; Kan 2013),<sup>2</sup> this class of individuals represents the most numerous and mainstream group in the country. Owing to this clout, HoAs have participated in the national legislative process, litigated in the Supreme People’s Court, and, most importantly, combated powerful government and real estate interests nationwide to take control of their own neighborhoods (Qiao 2021, forthcoming). This ongoing democratic revolution taking place in hundreds of thousands of neighborhoods across China is incomplete, but it is fair to say, the development of HoAs has, and will continue to, fundamentally change the governance of cities in an authoritarian regime.

Condominium ownership is the only form of urban housing ownership authorized by China’s Civil Code (2020).<sup>3</sup> The challenge to condominium neighborhoods in China’s

megacities is that their members share nothing but common property rights in the condominium complex. Most condominium complexes were built within the preceding two decades, and homeowners from around the country purchase condos without prior communication or coordination with one another--making them, for all intents and purposes, strangers in the neighborhood.

Condominium ownership in China consists of separate ownership of units and joint ownership of the common areas and facilities of the condominium complexes, including hallways, elevators, common ground, water towers, roads, parking lots, and so on, thereby creating hundreds of thousands of urban commons within each of China's megacities. Common property rights give residents not only the right to manage such common space and facilities but also the right to self-governance, including the rights to establish their own associations, elect their own committees, and decide common affairs by majority vote.<sup>4</sup>

This research examines the origin of such HoAs, investigating the factors contributing to their successful establishment and, as a consequence, exploring the origin of self-governed communities in China's urban neighborhoods. We chose three megacities to conduct our research on homeowner self-governance: Beijing with a population of 21.9 million (Chen 2021), Shanghai with a population of 24.9 million (Chen & Han 2021), and Shenzhen with a population of 17.6 million (Shenzhen Statistics Bureau 2021). These cities are economically developed cities, with a large population of migrants who have moved into commercialized neighborhoods and become homeowners, presenting a diverse background that allowed us to study community formation. By contrast, in less economically developed cities, homeowners within a neighborhood tend to be more homogenous and exhibit more established and less pliant community ties. We also chose these cities because they are more diverse in their geographical, sociopolitical, and economic presence. While Beijing is the capital and political center located in the northern China, Shanghai and Shenzhen are two economic powerhouses in the southern part of the country. Between the latter two, Shanghai is a historic city that has been the industrial and financial hub of China for over a century, whereas Shenzhen is a newly developed city, branded as "China's Silicon Valley" and, thereby, attractive to young skilled laborers. All of the three cities have experienced the rapid growth of the middle class in the past two decades. It is difficult for the government in these cities to marginalize homeowners or to brand them as radicals.

Our unique mixed-method investigation (Brannen 1992) of homeowner activists in authoritarian regimes, a hard-to-reach population for social science researchers, combines ethnographic research and a questionnaire on homeowner self-governance, including their political attitudes, conducted from 2018 to 2019. Based on qualitative data and the results of entropy balancing, our causal inferences detected the existence of a collective action problem with respect to neighborhood self-governance. Our empirical results revealed that democratized neighborhoods have enjoyed better governing outcomes than have their non-democratized counterparts, while also showing that the local government played a helping hand in establishing HoAs and thereby afforded neighborhoods mechanisms for self-governance. We found that homeowner activists in democratized neighborhoods developed greater trust in the local government and deemed local officials both more supportive of neighborhood self-governance and less likely to collude with real estate management companies than was the case within non-democratized neighborhoods.

## Theory

There are two prevailing views regarding the relationship between communities and the state. The first view holds that communities are an alternative to the state and can either check the abuse of state power (Tocqueville 2010) or supplement the state in terms of governance or provision of services (Tsai 2007). This view often assumes communities are exogenous-- a kind of gift from history and culture--or it, considers them to be formed through frequent and repeated interactions. Raghuram Rajan (2019), former IMF chief economist and former head of India's central bank, recently devoted an entire book to examining how markets and the state leave the community behind and arguing that "a real community pulls itself up (Rajan 2019, p. )." Tocqueville commented that the continuous action of laws and of mores, circumstances, and above all time succeed in the consolidation of local self-governed communities (Tocqueville 2010, p. 102). Robert Putnam's study of civic communities in Italy tracing their roots to the medieval period (Putnam 1993), as well as his study of the collapse and revival of American community, consider frequent and repeated civic interactions the key to community formation (Putnam 2001). But how are communities to be reinvigorated if only communities can pull themselves up? International development agencies such as the World Bank have engaged in community building worldwide, with an unsatisfactory if not disastrous record (Immerwahr 2015).

The second view rejects the notion that communities are natural (Levy 2016) and argues that communities can be an instrument of political control, particularly in non-democratic states. The intimate relationship between mass organizations and the state in the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany (Riley 2005) and in today's authoritarian regimes, sustains the notion that states can engineer community formation and thus exercise additional indirect political control through such communities. In this vein, David Laitin (1986, 1992) in his study of African communities, emphasized the impact of the state in forging ethnic identities through coercion and cooptation of local elites. Daniel Mattingly (2019), for his part, found that Chinese local governments expropriated land and implemented the one-child policy by co-opting village community elites. But while these studies reveal the pernicious potential of the state, they do not address whether there is a general role the government can play in a bottom-up effort to form communities—an effort that does not implicate cultivating civic organizations as a pretext for infiltration and containment of democratic practices.

The above instrumentalist view of communities fails to differentiate civic organizations according to their internal governance mechanisms, particularly with regard to whether the internal governance of a civic organization is democratic or authoritarian. This emphasis on the internal governance of civic organizations is essential, in that Tocqueville takes democratically governed associations based on equal citizenship to be a kind of free school of democracy whereby the habit and mind of democracy are nurtured. Considering this original function of civic associations in light of contemporary theoretical suppositions, we might argue that democratically governed civic associations promote democracy, whereas hierarchically structured civic associations, whether due to their reliance on external funding or authority or because of their embeddedness in traditional hierarchical society, can be a convenient tool of an

authoritarian state's political control. And thus, our study of HoAs in China, a subject that deserves more attention than it has received. As one of our interviewees put the issue,

“One person, one vote” is really implemented in only two situations [in China]: villagers' committees and homeowners' associations ..., in rural China, conventional authority and [clan-like] organizations ... are still powerful and might control villages. The best hope to develop a civil society is through homeowners' associations of the urban middle class (BJ-HO-080318-3 2018).”

To clarify, bringing the state back in is not a new idea (Evans, Rueschemeyer & Skocpol 1985; Skocpol 2008); our study merely builds on this established notion by focusing on the origin of communities in authoritarian regimes, an important but neglected realm within the literature on civic engagement. More specifically, we wonder how the state can be—and has been—involved in transforming a neighborhood of strangers into a self-governed community. To our knowledge, work of this sort has not yet been pursued, as scholars have largely failed to consider the implications of extant theories within an authoritarian context.

Based on our study of HoAs, we argue that authoritarian regimes' efforts to foster communities go beyond simple social and political control, narrowly defined in the existing literature as reducing or eliminating potential challenges to the authoritarian rule. Instead, we find such efforts can be motivated by a broad concern about effective governance, which is a basis of legitimacy for any regime, democratic or authoritarian.

More specifically, we ask whether authoritarian regimes may genuinely support the establishment of self-governed neighborhood communities in exchange for enhanced political trust. Self-governed communities pose a dilemma for an authoritarian regime. On the one hand, these regimes have traditionally opposed mediating institutions that rival them; on the other hand, self-governed communities can relieve the regime of the burden of governance, which, if handled poorly, could undermine regime legitimacy (Qiao 2021, forthcoming). The need for social control in daily and grassroots politics can be less salient than satisfying citizens' demand for effective governance and a certain degree of voice in such governance. An authoritarian regime seeking public approval and broader legitimacy might enable and even encourage the development of civic associations-- building institutional infrastructure, including a capable and clean bureaucracy, to help individual citizens overcome the collective action problem encountered while forming such communities. In return, individual citizens may develop a greater degree of political trust owing to the community autonomy and effective governance they have realized and on which they now rely.

## **Methods**

This research presents a unique mixed-method study on the homeowner self-governance movement in three Chinese megacities, based on both in-depth ethnographic research and questionnaire survey conducted from 2018 to 2019.

### ***(1) Ethnographic research***

We identified major citywide organizations and platforms of homeowner activists in three megacities (three in Beijing, one in Shanghai, and three in Shenzhen) and carried out in-

depth interviews with their leaders and activists affiliated with these citywide organizations and platforms. We also interviewed homeowner activists who were not affiliated with these organizations and platforms. For the latter group, we arranged interviews in a variety of ways, including referrals from scholars in the field and occasional cold calls. These interviews, including at least one interview with each of the homeowner organization and platform leaders, lasted from one to four hours.

In terms of recruitment, we asked interviewees, scholars and government officials working in the homeowner and neighborhood governance arena for a list of names of other potentially significant interviewees and continued to update our list until we identified no new names. So, too, did we compare our list with the lists of leading neighborhood governance experts/homeowner activists, which had been published in the mass media and which confirmed that we had interviewed most of the leading homeowner activists with nationwide or citywide impact. In total, these efforts resulted in 114 in-depth interviews.

Our research team also visited multiple urban neighborhoods, conducting interviews in some and attending group meetings of homeowner activists, while also attending conferences on neighborhood governance organized by the three city governments. These instances of participant observation afforded us opportunities to verify the information gleaned from individual interviews, to deepen our understanding of the diversity of activist groups in the three cities, and to observe activists' interactions with ordinary homeowners, real estate managers, and government officials.

Finally, we pored over the archives of both individual HoAs and citywide homeowner organizations and, as a result, verified the information obtained in the interviews with documentary evidence, including meeting minutes and photos collected by those organizations as well as leading homeowner activists over the preceding two decades.

## ***(2) Survey design***

Our target population was homeowner activists in neighborhoods undergoing or having been recently democratized. Within each of the three megacities, it is difficult (and expensive) to find a significant number of activists by drawing a random sample from the urban population. Even if neighborhoods with an HoA were identifiable based on government information which is often quite decentralized and fragmented, it would be nearly impossible to find all the neighborhoods in the process of establishing such an association. That said, activists in the same city often communicate with one another via private groups in social media, mainly WeChat, the most popular social app in China with over one billion users. Thus, we deployed these groups of homeowner activists to contact respondents. To reach influential homeowner activists and encourage less active homeowners to participate, we disseminated the link for the web-based survey questionnaire in the WeChat groups and encouraged activists to forward it to their own neighborhood's group. Such a respondent-driven sampling technique based on social media enabled us to evaluate homeowner activists' perceptions of the institutions related to homeownership with a larger dataset than that afforded by interviews alone (Heckathorn 1997).

Compared to traditional chain-referral sampling, our method mitigated biases by reducing dependence on respondents. Snowball sampling has been used commonly to survey hard-to-reach populations, such as undocumented workers and post-disaster service workers (Lindstrom 2016; Alexander Kroll *et al.* 2021); the risk of this technique, however, is that only a cluster within a targeted population might end up being sampled due to the limited range of respondents' social networks. The WeChat group of a neighborhood can contain members with either strong or weak ties, but our approach meant that a homeowner in such a group could access our survey

questionnaire through the link posted in the online group's chatting room, even if the two of them happened to be complete strangers in reality. Since the penetration rate of WeChat is close to 95% in the three megacities, we were able to reach a diverse sample of the target population. Still, to maximize the diversity within our sample, we interviewed extensively and started with a dozen initial seeds in the sampling process.

Another major advantage of our method is that a web survey can guarantee respondents' anonymity and privacy. When not in the presence of interviewers, respondents may be less inclined to fear retaliation, may reduce preference falsification, and may increase the response rate regarding sensitive items, especially those touching on topics related to political trust, government-business collusion, and so on.

But a web survey also presents certain methodological problems, one of which is the lack of control over recruitment. Self-selected respondents may submit their answers multiple times, by mistake, or with the intention of skewing results. To discourage respondents from submitting multiple observations, we offered no financial compensation for their participation. In addition, and based on the IP address for the response, we dropped duplicate observations (a total of 36) from our database.

Since our sampling method was neither probabilistic nor random, there can be systemic, unobserved differences between homeowners in neighborhoods trying to establish a HoA and those not engaged in such an effort. We recognize these potential differences, but the purpose of our study was to evaluate the local government's role in the process of neighborhood democratization. If a neighborhood had not been active in this regard, having no problem with the management company (MC), then the homeowners would not have enough experience to government's performance. Another potential coverage error owes to the variation within a neighborhood. Some homeowners, of course, may not belong to the WeChat group of their neighborhoods; still, however, there is a good reason to believe such individuals would also be less interested in self-governance and thus not much different from ordinary homeowners in our sample.

## **Qualitative Evidences**

### ***(1) Collective action in neighborhood democratization***

China scholars have taken villagers' committees in rural China (Mattingly 2020) and residents' committees in urban China (Read 2003) as typical mechanism of political control; they have also addressed the symbiotic relationship between non-government organizations (NGOs) and local government agencies in China (Teets 2013, 2014; Spires 2011). Homeowners in China have been studied, with most research focusing on urban activism in the context of contentious politics (Cai & Sheng 2013; Wang et al. 2013; Yip 2019). None of the above research have examined the internal governance of HoAs in China. Read (2003) recognized the democratic potential of Chinese HoAs nearly two decades ago, and, more recently, Tomba's (2014) award-winning book emphasized how the growth of a property-owning middle class resulted from social engineering and challenged the normative assumption that the middle class could push China toward democratization. Tomba's book touches upon but does not focus on HoAs. Both Read (2003) and Tomba (2014) were prescient in pointing to the lasting shadow of the state in China's modern urban residential neighborhoods, but now is the time for an updated and systematic investigation of HoAs to deepen our understanding of the relationship between the local

government and HoAs in urban China, particularly regarding the role of the government in urban China's ongoing neighborhood democratization.

Neighborhood democratization refers to homeowners wresting control over their neighborhoods from MCs and developers (Reed 2003). The lack of control over their living space angers many individual homeowners; what's more, MCs refuse to deal with them because "a single homeowner cannot represent all of them (BJ-HO-042318-1 2018; SZ-HO-091118-11 2018)," meaning they cannot claim their communal property rights as individuals. According to the law, however, MCs must respond to HoAs (Real Estate Management Regulations 2018), meaning such associations are the only way for homeowners to take control of their neighborhoods. Chinese homeowners establish HoAs through majority resolutions, which also adopt a covenant, decision-making rules, and a Homeowners' Committee (HoC)--the executive body of a HoA (Civil Code 2020; Real Estate Management Regulations 2018). Each housing unit has one vote, and passage of a resolution required the approval of more than 50% of all housing units, with the representative span of those votes expected to exceed 50% of the total housing area (Property Law 2007) before the promulgation of the Civil Code in 2020, which requires more than 50% of all housing units to participate and more than 50% of the participating units to pass a resolution (Civil Code 2020).

Before a HoA is established, the developer controls the neighborhood and appoints a so-called "preliminary MC," which is often affiliated with the developer. Once the total area of delivered apartments exceeds 50% of the total housing area in the neighborhood, the developer is required by law to submit a roster of homeowners and other relevant information on the neighborhood to the street-level government in preparation for the first homeowners' assembly (Guiding Rules of Homeowners' Associations and Homeowners' Committees 2009). If they represent more than 5% of the total number in the neighborhood, a group of homeowners can also apply to the street-level government to establish a HoA. In practice, this process is tangled: developers generally oppose the establishment of a HoA.

Neighborhood democratization faces a classic collective action problem: Who will volunteer to endure the tedious, sometimes painful, and often costly process to establish a HoA when they realize others around them can "free ride" on their efforts? Put differently, one might wonder, as Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom did in Beijing, in 2004, why so many Chinese homeowners have participated in a movement to democratize their neighborhoods despite the significant monetary and nonmonetary costs associated with such efforts—while wondering, just as much, how any condominium neighborhood could have successfully formed such an association (Chen 2009).

Although subsidies of up to RMB 500 per month are available in some cases (SH-HO-062818-6 2018), members of HoCs, are generally unpaid. It is also quite common for HoC members to refuse any available subsidies, no matter how small, because they do not want others to think that they are working for money (SH-HO-062818-7 2018). Even more, many homeowners work as volunteers or even lead the neighborhood democratization without being an official HoC member.

Some homeowner activists have connected with peers in other neighborhoods within their city and even nationwide and have formed homeowners' forums online and WeChat groups where they debate one another, provide one another with emotional support, and share knowledge, information, and expertise. These outlets and offerings of mutual support afford homeowner activists—who often refer to themselves as "lonely heroes"—the strength to carry on serving the community without pay, and sometimes without any perceived understanding, appreciation, or support from their neighbors (Mass Ants 2019). This notwithstanding, we must



stress that most homeowners remain a passive audience, or what their activist neighbors deem “keyboard revolutionaries” who rarely show up for rallies or take real action.

Overall, the free rider problem still frustrates the growing homeowner self-governance movement in China. On average, less than 10% of homeowners in a given neighborhood are activists; about 30% are their followers and cheerleaders (Shi 2008, p. 31). The remaining 60% include the silent majority and, sometimes even worse, homeowners who are connected to or bought out by the MC (Shi 2008, p. 31). The significance of these percentages is that, as with most decisions in a democratic system, establishing a HoA requires majority approval among a neighborhood's homeowners.

## ***(2) The Government's Helping Hand***

Local governments in the three Chinese megacities, including at the street-level, vary in their attitudes and approaches to neighborhood democratization. As the conventional wisdom on authoritarianism goes, its government can repress civic and democratic communities, creating obstacles at each stage of neighborhood democratization, out of both concern for the “trouble” or shock to the status quo brought by homeowner activists and collusion with real estate management companies. In the words of one street-level government official: “Our society became much more chaotic after there were HoAs; it was quiet and peaceful before that (Chen 2009, p. 84).” As a result, this official observed, his office has many “restrictive measures” for dealing with HoAs (Chen 2009, p. 84). One district-level housing administration official added more in this vein, stressing, “After all, MCs are entities and they have bottom lines in doing bad things. Homeowners have no bottom line at all because they can vote with their feet, selling their apartments and moving out (BJ-GO-053118-1 2018)!” Both institutional rationales and individual interests behind could sustain local governments' collusion with real estate management companies.

Cutting the other way, repeated interactions between local officials and homeowner activists may result in some degree of trust and a reciprocal relationship whereby local officials support self-governance in exchange for homeowners' support for the party-state and adherence to legal strictures. If frontline party cadres can develop a long-term reciprocal relationship with homeowners, these officials can effect a cooperative relationship equilibrium with frontline officials helping homeowner activists overcome the collective action problem and supporting neighborhood self-governance in exchange for homeowners acting as “good citizens (Silbey 2011),” who adhere to legal boundaries, do not make trouble by street protests, and accept the party's authority (Qiao 2021, forthcoming).

As discussed above, homeowners' participation in community governance is voluntary and generally unpaid, eliciting a collective action problem. Mobilization by street-level party-state officials addresses this problem; yet because the implementation power is in the hands of local bureaucrats, it is important to emphasize the variations across neighborhoods even within the same city. With a supportive and capable street-level government, homeowners can establish and operate HoAs. When homeowners face difficulties, a call to the mayor's hotline or an orderly petition to the upper-level government usually resolves the matter; that said, the ineffectiveness or failure of the local state often worsens the conflict and divide within urban neighborhoods.

In our fieldwork, we found that some homeowner activists had become involved in community governance at the invitation of the party secretaries of the residents' committee (RCs) of their neighborhoods, which is the lowest end of the party-state bureaucracy and governs

one to several neighborhoods. In some cases, frontline party cadres consciously nurture “backbone (Shanghai Three-Year-Action-Plan 2018)” and “warm-hearted men (Shanghai Three-Year-Action-Plan 2018)” in residential neighborhoods; in other cases, frontline party cadres worked with homeowner activists whom they did not initially accept, wary as they were that the popular support of these activists might make these individuals difficult to control, although eventually determining their support would be essential to resolving neighborhood governance problems. In return, such “prickly” activists also realized they needed government support in neighborhood self-governance and trusted the government more than they had at the beginning, following repeated interactions and cooperation that encouraged enhancement of neighborhood management and services.

“Old Bull” is a private entrepreneur and was initially excluded from the HoC despite earning the highest number of votes among candidates in a preliminary election. Under pressure from homeowners, the street-level government put him on the list of substitutes. Once the election results were publicized, a formal candidate resigned voluntarily and Old Bull ended up on the HoC, to the surprise of the street-level government, which accepted the result reluctantly and eventually cooperated with this new committee member. By standing on the side of the HoC in a situation rife with physical conflict, the street-level government helped enforce parking rules promulgated by the HoA by standing on the side of the HoC, and arrested residents who engaged in usury, a practice that Old Bull and his HoC had tried without success to eliminate from their neighborhood. With the support of the government, Old Bull replaced the preliminary MC with a new one, and since that point the neighborhood has held regular gatherings during festivals to promote communication among neighbors. A symbol of this achievement of neighborhood governance was that the fountain in the central place of the neighborhood finally started working, much to the delight of Old Bull and his neighbors. (SH-HO-062818-7 2018)

Old Bull now believes firmly in cooperating with the government. In his view, “they really wanted to solve the problems for us and were willing to put in the effort.” And as he added,

“We need to see that government officials wanted to have some governance achievements (政绩) and we [needed to know we] can cooperate with them on such things. In many cases, their purpose of having some achievements is overlapping with the enhancement of neighborhood management and provides opportunities for us to defend our interests. If we can make ourselves better in a positive way, I believe that many government agencies are willing to support us.” (SH-HO-062818-7 2018)

Enforcement of HoA rules also implicates preventing encroachment on common space in the neighborhood (SH-HO-081919-36 2019) and maintaining election procedures (SH-HO-040219-21 2019). In some cases, the government must intervene, such as when an old HoC resigned to prevent the replacement of the preliminary MC and refused to cooperate in electing a new HoC (SH-HO-040219-21 2019). In such cases where the government played a supporting role, homeowner activists who had initially distrusted the government began trusting it more and demonstrated greater willingness to cooperate.

Consider, for example, the case of “Bean’s mom,” who led a group of twenty activists to protest the poor management services in their neighborhood, who sent a petition letter to the RC party secretary depicting activists’ finger-prints in blood, and who even planned to go on a demonstration beyond their neighborhood. In response, the party secretary contacted the MC to

discuss a plan to address the activists' concerns and to improve neighborhood services. With the RC's support, homeowners subsequently elected a HoC and replaced the original MC with a new one. To resolve the many problems within the neighborhood, including building maintenance, the newly elected HoC, of which Bean's mom was a deputy chairperson, with the support of the RC, obtained funding from the city government (SH-HO-062818-6 2018), funding that enhanced the credibility of the HoC among homeowners. Through long-term communications and repeated interactions, Bean's mom now believes that the party secretary shared the same goal of improving neighborhood services and solving problems in neighborhood governance.

How do homeowners view this framework in which the government plays a proactive role? Our research suggests they consider it an opportunity to govern themselves and engage with the government to achieve their agenda. In the words of one HoC chairman we interviewed:

"If you cannot handle individual violations, there [will] be no rules in the community. Of course you need cooperation with the RC and the MC. As I told the party secretary of the RC, we homeowners' committee [members] can handle any dispute at this stage [if we have your support]. But if conflicts explode [in] the end, it [will] be the residents' committee's [responsibility] to clean up the mess.... The RC needs to believe that our two parties can cooperate to solve the problems. It's his [the party secretary's] responsibility as the party secretary of the residents' committee: If he wants to do his job well, then we need to work together.... The point is to tell him that if we get to enforce our rules and govern our community well, it is good for his job evaluation; [it's] good for everybody (SH-HWM-062418-2 2018, pp. 42-43).

## Quantitative Analysis

To test our theory more rigorously, we designed a survey to examine the impact of HoAs on neighborhood governance and homeowner activists' political trust, and the relationship between government behaviors and homeowner activists' political trust. Specifically, we looked to survey data to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Homeowner activists in neighborhoods that have established HoAs are more likely to report effective governance, *ceteris paribus*.

H2: Homeowner activists in neighborhoods that have established HoAs have more trust in the local government than do activists in neighborhoods that have not, *ceteris paribus*.

H3a: Political trust is positively correlated with the government's presumptive support for the HoA, as perceived by homeowner activists, *ceteris paribus*;

H3b: Political trust is negatively correlated with the government's presumptive collusion with MCs, as perceived by homeowner activists, *ceteris paribus*.

## Key Variables

We designed several variables related to the outcomes of self-governance at both neighborhood and individual level. The first variable, *Developer-affiliated Management*, distinguishes developer-affiliated companies from others dominated by homeowners. The second variable, *Community Activity*, measures the frequency of community activities such as recreational events or holiday parties. For the third variable *Democratic Value*, we measured the extent to which homeowners accepted collective decisions that worked against their own

preferences.<sup>5</sup> Our final variable, *Community Identity*, is a scale variable that reflected the degree to which respondents see themselves as members of the community.

We measured the presence of HoA with a dummy variable, *Association*, which takes the value of 1 if a respondent's neighborhood has established the HoA and elected the HoC. In the questionnaire, we asked respondents to report the specific stage of their HoA establishment,<sup>6</sup> so we could evaluate the relative robustness of the associations.

We assessed homeowners' activism by asking respondents about their self-identified role within the neighbourhood, with options such as *ordinary homeowner*, *enthusiastic homeowner*, *rights-protection activists*, *member of preparatory committee*, *member of HoC*, or chairperson of HoC.<sup>7</sup> Based on the response to this question, we constructed a dummy variable, *Activist*, that took the value of 0 if the respondent reported participating in no neighborhood governance activity (ordinary homeowners) and 1 otherwise.

Participating homeowners were surveyed on their degree of trust in various government agencies, from the central level to the street level, although our primary focus was on the street level because it is here where homeowners have the greatest degree of interaction.

To gauge robustness, we also measured political trust by using an index—calculating an average score, individually—oriented toward local government agencies, including street-level offices, police departments, district housing departments, district petition offices, and district governments. Our rationale for this alternative approach was that homeowner activists may petition to the district government and police when the street office failed to resolve their problems.

Descriptive analysis revealed that homeowner activists in China differ from nonactivists in many respects.<sup>8</sup> In our sample, 61% self-identified as homeowner activists, with roughly 62% of these activists reporting 10–20 hours or more per week invested in neighborhood affairs. By contrast, nearly all nonactivists reported between zero and 10 hours of community work per week.<sup>9</sup> Most notably, we found homeowner activists have lower levels of trust toward the street government (not the central government) than do nonactivists, while also holding a stronger belief in democratic decision-making, and having more leisure time to volunteer in neighborhood governance when compared to nonactivists. Based on these data, we contend that activists are the middle class and have not been coopted by local authorities.

To adjust for coverage and response error in our non-probabilistic sample, and to reduce sample imbalance on covariates and avoid model dependency, we employed the entropy balancing method, which balances the marginal distribution of covariates between the treated group and the control counterfactual after weighting. Individual-level variables include *activist*, *age*, *gender*, *vocation* (e.g., working in the public sector or not), *working hours*, *level of education*, and *duration of residence in the neighborhood*.<sup>10</sup> Neighborhood-level characteristics included *neighborhood size* (number of households), *age of buildings*, *average housing price*, *percentage of rental units*,<sup>11</sup> and three dummy variables indicating whether there were any petitions, physical conflicts, or administrative litigation that occurred during the process of HoA establishment, HoC re-election, or MC replacement.<sup>12</sup> Individual-level variables, neighborhood-level variables, and city dummies were fully balanced across respondents living in the neighborhood with HoAs and without them.<sup>13</sup> The analysis below relies on the balanced samples.

## Results

Is community self-governance effective? In the first three columns of Table 1, we regress the presence of HoA on governance outcomes at the neighborhood level. A negative correlation

in Column 1 is a strong evidence for the enabling effect of HoA: democratized neighborhoods have a greater chance to replace the early MC affiliated to the developer. That is to say, homeowners organized under the HoA are more likely to overcome collective action problem and to protect their property rights against fraudulent or incompetent developers and MCs than the disorganized. In Column 2, we find that respondents in neighborhoods with HoA are more likely to have community activities.

At the individual level, we find in Column 3 that organized residents are more likely to comply with democratic decisions than their counterparts in neighborhoods without HoA. In addition, activists have greater respect for democratic principles than ordinary homeowners.<sup>14</sup> Column 4 shows that respondents in neighborhoods with established HoA report a higher degree of community identity than those without. These results combined suggest that governance in neighborhood has effectively foster collaboration, harmony, democratic belief, and community belongingness among residents.

**Table 1 Homeowners Association and Community Governance**

	Developer-affiliated Management (1)	Community Activities (2)	Democratic Value (3)	Community Identity (4)
Association	-0.80*** (0.14)	0.12** (0.04)	0.55*** (0.14)	0.07* (0.03)
Activist			0.88*** (0.15)	0.09** (0.03)
Observation	834	786	813	813

**Note.** The model 1 and 2 report the coefficients from logistic regression. The model 3 to 4 report the coefficients from OLS regression.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

To test the hypothesis H2, we regress trust to the street government on HoA. Table 2 displays the results of ordinary least square analysis. As our theory predicts, Column 1 shows that as a neighborhood becomes democratized, homeowners' trust to the street-level government increases by 0.65 unit, which is about 24% of the standard deviation. The result is statistically significant at .01 level. In Column 2, The model with additional controls of homeowners' activism and trust to the central and city government generates a more statistically significant coefficient estimate of HoA. In Column 3, we include the interaction term of HoA and activism in regression. The coefficient estimate of the interaction term is positive and statistically significant at .05 level. It means that, after a neighborhood establishes its HoA (or becomes democratized), activists' trust to the street office increases by 0.76 unit on average. The result is consistent with our hypothesis that activists in democratized neighborhoods trust the local government more than their counterparts in neighborhoods without HoAs.

The marginal effect of HoA is illustrated in Figure 1, with covariates held at the means. In neighborhoods without HoA, activists have significantly lower trust to the street government than nonactivists. But as we move from neighborhoods without HoAs to democratized neighborhoods with HoAs, activists' trust to the street government almost matches nonactivists'.

The finding suggests activists build stronger trust in the local government from their experience of working with supportive local officials.

**Table 2 Homeowners Association, Activism, and Political Trust**

	DEV: Trust to street-level government		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Homeowners association	0.65*** (0.19)	0.65*** (0.15)	0.13 (0.26)
Activist		-0.53*** (0.16)	-0.91*** (0.22)
Association X Activist			0.76* (0.31)
Trust to central government		-0.24*** (0.05)	-0.24*** (0.05)
Trust to city government		0.91*** (0.05)	0.92*** (0.05)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.44	0.45
Observation	813	813	813

Note. The models report the coefficients from OLS regression.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

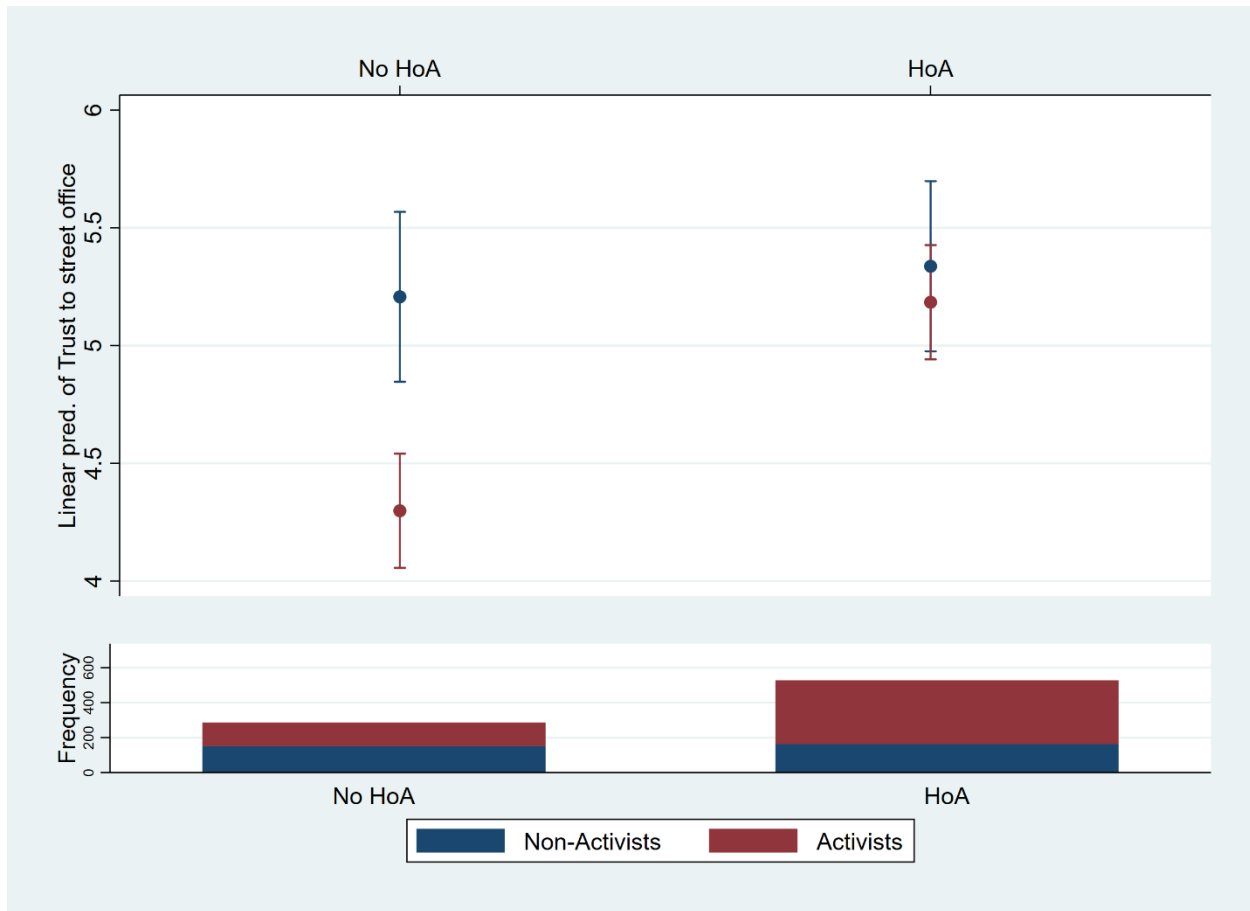


Figure 1 Marginal Effect of Homeowners Association on Political Trust

To test Hypotheses 3a and 3b (or the mechanism of political trust), we asked homeowners to evaluate the street-level government's support for the HoA (*Government support*) and its collusion with real estate business (*Government collusion*) on a scale from 1 to 10. We then regress the two variables on HoA in separate models. In the first two columns of Table 3, we find that homeowners in democratized neighborhoods are more likely to agree that the street-level government supports the establishment of HoA and less likely to agree that it colludes with real estate business than homeowners in non-democratized neighborhoods. The results are not only statistically significant, but also substantively meaningful: When an HoA is established, the predicted value of perceived government support increases by 0.71 unit (about 21% of the standard deviation), and the predicted value of perceived government collusion decreases by 0.86 unit (about 31% of the standard deviation). This evidence suggests the local government plays an important role in the establishment of HoA.

The next question is: Does this positive perception of local government translate into higher political trust? In the last two columns of Table 3, we report the results of mediation analyses. In Column 3, we add the variable *Government Support* to the main model (Model 3 in Table 2). The coefficient of interaction term between HoA and activism drop in value, and even lose its statistical significance. Such reduction is absorbed by the coefficient of *Government Support* (.32), which is statistically significant at .001 level. Similar pattern can be found in Column 4, where the coefficient estimate of *Government Collusion* (-.33) is significant as well.

That is to say, the positive impact of HoA on political trust among activists can be partially attributed to the homeowners' positive perception of the street-level government. We further estimate that 35% of activists' trust to the street-level government can be explained by their perception of government support to HoA.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 3 Mechanism of Political Trust**

	Government Support (1)	Government Collusion (2)	Trust to Street Gov	
			(3)	(4)
Homeowners association	0.64** (0.21)	-0.88*** (0.18)	0.14 (0.23)	-0.04 (0.24)
Activist	-1.06*** (0.23)	0.27 (0.20)	-0.41* (0.20)	-0.73*** (0.20)
Association X Activist			0.44 (0.28)	0.57* (0.29)
Government support			0.32*** (0.02)	
Government collusion				-0.33*** (0.03)
Trust to central government	-0.24** (0.08)	0.21** (0.07)	-0.16*** (0.05)	-0.17*** (0.05)
Trust to city government	0.74*** (0.08)	-0.51*** (0.07)	0.67*** (0.05)	0.75*** (0.05)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.19	0.13	0.57	0.54
Observation	813	813	813	813

Note. The models report the coefficients from OLS regression.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

### Robustness and alternative explanations

We rerun the main model using alternative measure of political trust,<sup>16</sup> homeowners' activism,<sup>17</sup> and homeowners' association (registered at the street government only),<sup>18</sup> respectively. It turns out that our main finding does not change much.

We also consider important alternative explanations for the result. If social trust were the basis of community, we would expect to find that activists in democratized neighborhoods have a stronger belief in their neighbors' participation in self-governance and higher trust to their neighbors than activists in non-democratized neighborhoods. In the survey, we asked respondents how many neighbors they believe would be willing to serve the neighborhood (i.e., *Attitude to neighbors*). About 35 percent of respondents said most neighbors would be willing to do so. Then, we asked explicitly how much they trust their neighbors on a scale ranging from 0 to 10. This is a measure of community-wide *generalized trust* that does not depend on whether



one knows one's neighbors (Zmerli & Newton 2008). The average value is a little over 7. Finally, to measure the prevalence of strong social ties, we asked the participants how many friends with whom they were in regular contact they had in the community.<sup>19</sup> This can be considered as a measure of *particularized trust*, referring to trust in those whom one knows personally (Zmerli & Newton 2008).

**Table 4 Homeowners Association, Activism, and Social Trust**

	Attitude to neighbors (1)	Trust to neighbors (2)	Number of Friends (3)
Homeowners association	0.28* (0.13)	0.47 (0.24)	-0.13 (0.14)
Activist	-0.23* (0.11)	0.66** (0.21)	0.90*** (0.12)
Association X Activist	-0.20 (0.16)	-0.60* (0.29)	0.25 (0.17)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.01	0.15
Observation	812	813	812

Note. The models report the coefficients from OLS regression.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

As shown in Column 1 of above table, the interaction term of homeowners association and activism does not have a statistically significant coefficient, meaning activists in democratized neighborhoods do not have a stronger belief in their neighbors than those in non-democratized neighborhoods.

When regressing generalized trust on HoA and activism in Column 2, we find that activists in democratized neighborhoods have an even lower trust to their neighbors than activists in neighborhoods without HoAs, with a statistical significance at the 0.05 level. Activists may be discouraged by the passive or self-interested neighbors in the process of forming the HoA, thereby having a more negative view on them. As for nonactivists, the establishment of HoA does not have any impact on their generalized trust to neighbors. This finding is consistent with our theoretical expectation. In Column 3, we don't find any correlation between particularized trust to neighbors and the establishment of HoA. Therefore, the establishment of HoA is not linked to strengthened social trust among homeowner activists. Instead, they seem to develop a more negative view towards their neighbors than ordinary homeowners, who are likely to be free-riders.

Since activists are different from their inactive neighbors in many aspects mentioned above, one may be concerned that the observed effect of HoA on political trust is driven by systematic differences at the individual and neighborhood level. For example, activists tend to be elderly female, who have been living in the same neighborhood for years. They may simultaneously have more trust in the local government. To address this concern, we include in our regressions interaction terms between association and some key variables correlated with homeowners'

activism, including democratic value, age, gender, duration of residence, age of buildings, and three dummy variables indicating the neighborhood's conflict. As shown in Table 11 in Appendix, the inclusion of these additional interactions does not substantially change the main finding.

To examine the external validity of the main finding, we further surveyed about 800 homeowners from other cities using the same chain-referral sampling technique on social media groups. The result is consistent with the previous finding and reported in Table 14 in Appendix.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Putting everything together, our study presents a unique mixed-method investigation into homeowner activists in authoritarian regimes, a hard-to-reach population for social science researchers. With the innovative use of social media, we are able to collect survey data on their political attitude, which is still sensitive in authoritarian context. We further make causal inference based on extensive qualitative work and the results of entropy balancing. We find strong evidence supporting the local government plays a helping hand in the establishment of homeowners' association. Our data reveals that democratized neighborhoods have better governing outcomes than non-democratized ones, as evidenced by not only more effective homeowner control over their neighbourhood affairs but also more respect for democratic principles and higher degree of community identity in democratized neighborhoods than in non-democratized neighborhoods. Moreover, homeowner activists in democratized neighborhoods develop greater trust in the local government, having stronger perception of the local government in support of HoA and weaker perception that local officials collude with real estate developers, an observation consistent with Rose-Ackerman's (2001a, 2001b) study of trust and honesty in post-socialist societies.

A broader implication of our research is that an authoritarian regime may honestly nurture community self-governance for more effective governance and political legitimacy. Such argument contrasts with neo-Tocquevillian argument that local autonomy is in conflict with state authority. Instead, we contend the two things can be mutually reinforcing. This extends the "bringing the state back in to civic engagement" literature in the context of liberal democracy to an authoritarian context, and challenges the conventional view that authoritarian regimes either repress civic engagement or manipulate civic organizations for political control. Our study shows what else an authoritarian regime with a clean and capable bureaucracy can do regarding civic engagement. The state actively promotes civic engagement in exchange for political trust, which is a common logic for both authoritarian and democratic regimes.

It would be interesting to see if a similar pattern can be found in other contexts as well. We recognize the scope of condition for our theory may be only applied to authoritarian regimes that have consolidated power over the society. In many developing countries, with the low level of infrastructure power, such condition is not met. But the logic of governance is applicable in both authoritarian and democratic settings. Homeowners' associations or other voluntary groups may be able to generate public confidence in governing institutions if the state actors play a role larger than a passive arbitrator.

If the state can gain much from civic engagement, future work is needed to fully account for the variation of state's action in supporting neighborhood democratization. Due to limited space, we have not discussed the decision-making of local and city officials. The important question is yet to be answered elsewhere. This research serves as the starting point: there is much to gain for even an authoritarian state to support self-governed communities in its megacities

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<sup>1</sup> “Incomplete statistics showed that more than 400 million people of China’s nearly 1.4-billion population have become middle-income earners, said He Lifeng, director of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), adding that the figure is still on a fast rise (Bai 2018).” This number is close to the Global Wealth Report issued by Credit Suisse in December 2018, which says that 35 percent of the global middle class (1.1 billion) are Chinese. *See* Credit Suisse Research Institute (2018). For a definition and the percentage of middle class in China, *see* Zhang Yuan et al. 2011; CSIS 2017; ; Seales 2017 (“While young people around the world are struggling to get on the property ladder, an HSBC study found that 70% of Chinese millennials have achieved the milestone.”).

<sup>2</sup> Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (2013) showing China’s homeownership rate in 2013 was 93.5%.

<sup>3</sup> Section Six, Chapter Two, Book Two of Civil Code (民法典) (2020). In the U.S., residential associations have proliferated so much since the 1960s that “they may represent the dominant aspect of the late twentieth century contribution to American residential group life (Alexander 1989, p. 3).” In 2012, there were 323,600 associations in the U.S., together housing 63 million people. Two million Americans were then serving on association boards (Ellickson *et al.* 2013, p. 614). “Homeowners associations now outnumber all local governments by more than three to one, but the implications of this change have yet to be considered. Homeowners associations have been called private governments because they do many things that governments do. HoAs hold elections, provide services, tax residents, and regulate behaviour within their jurisdictions, but as legal entities, they are not governments (McCabe 2011, p. 535).”

<sup>4</sup> Such as whether to allow neighbors to walk their dogs in the neighborhood with or without leash, temporary parking, whether homeowners should present their IDs to enter the neighbourhood, etc. The functions of HoAs in mainland of China are not fundamentally different from their counterparts in the U.S. and Hong Kong; the main difference is the institutional environment.

<sup>5</sup> See Question 15, Section 2 in Appendix. The question was designed to gauge the homeowner activists’ belief in democratic governance.

<sup>6</sup> See Question 31, Section **Error! Reference source not found.** in Appendix.

<sup>7</sup> See Question 12, Section **Error! Reference source not found.** in Appendix.

<sup>8</sup> See Table 6 in Appendix.

<sup>9</sup> We construct an alternative measure of homeowners’ activism based on the number of hours spent on neighborhood affairs per week. Respondents who work 0-10 hours are then coded as nonactivists and the rest who work over 10 hours as activists.

<sup>10</sup> Summary Statistics can be found in Table 5 in Appendix.

<sup>11</sup> Due to missing values in percentage of rental units, we do not include the variable in our main regression model. But we report the result of alternative entropy balancing separately in Table 13 in Appendix.

<sup>12</sup> As shown in Table 5 in Appendix, 70 percent of respondents live in the neighborhood built over 10 years ago. Nearly 80 percent of the respondents’ neighborhoods have the number of households from 500 to 5000. The average housing price is almost evenly distributed within the range from 30,000 RMB to 100,000 RMB per square meter. Only two respondents whose property is priced over 150,000 RMB per square meter and just 7 percent below 30,000 RMB. This provide additional evidence that respondents in our sample are urban middle class.

<sup>13</sup> See Table 7 in Appendix.

<sup>14</sup> Descriptive statistics show that 75 percent of the homeowner activists report that they would comply with a legally passed majority decision if they were on the losing side of the voting process, and then seek to change the decision through legal means. Nonetheless, only 67 percent of ordinary homeowners chose the option. The difference is statistically significant. Instead, 18 percent of nonactivists chose to respect their individual freedom and not comply with majority decision. 13 percent of them chose to challenge the decision by convening another meeting or through court.

<sup>15</sup> For the mediation analysis method we use, see Kosuke Imai et al. (2011). When *Government Collusion* is included in the model as the alternative measure of perception of government support to HoA, it explains 29.6% of activists’ political trust. Detailed results are reported in Table 12 in Appendix.

<sup>16</sup> See Table 8 in Appendix.

<sup>17</sup> See Table 9 in Appendix.

<sup>18</sup> See Table 10 in Appendix.

<sup>19</sup> See Question 11 in the Questionnaire in Appendix. The options were “0,” “1–5,” “5–10,” “10–20,” and “over 20.” For the definition of strong and weak social ties, *see* Granovetter (1973).

## Appendices

### 1 Summary Statistics

**Table 5 Summary Statistics**

	count	mean	sd	min	max
Homeowners association	841	0.65	0.48	0	1
Activist	841	0.61	0.49	0	1
Community hours	831	1.42	0.92	1	5
Developer-affiliated Management Company	841	0.42	0.49	0	1
Management fee raise	807	0.40	0.49	0	1
Community activity	791	2.01	0.62	1	3
Democratic value	841	0.72	0.45	0	1
Community identity	841	9.01	2.03	0	10
Trust to central government	841	7.56	2.50	1	10
Trust to local governments	841	5.54	2.34	1	10
Trust to street office	841	4.92	2.75	1	10
Government support	841	5.35	3.37	0	10
Government collusion	841	7.26	2.76	0	10
Neighbors participation	838	2.84	1.05	1	4
Number of friends	838	3.04	1.23	1	5
Trust to neighbors	841	7.30	1.96	0	10
City: Beijing	841	0.28	0.45	0	1
City: Shanghai	841	0.41	0.49	0	1
City: Shenzhen	841	0.32	0.47	0	1
Residence: < 1 yr	839	0.01	0.12	0	1
Residence: 1-3 yrs	839	0.11	0.31	0	1
Residence: 3-5 yrs	839	0.17	0.38	0	1
Residence: 5-10 yrs	839	0.24	0.43	0	1
Residence: 10-20 yrs	839	0.44	0.50	0	1
Residence: > 20 yrs	839	0.03	0.16	0	1
Age: <30	841	0.03	0.17	0	1
Age: 31-40	841	0.31	0.46	0	1
Age: 41-50	841	0.38	0.48	0	1
Age: 51-60	841	0.16	0.37	0	1
Age: >60	841	0.12	0.33	0	1
Female	841	0.51	0.50	0	1
Education: Junior High or lower	840	0.02	0.13	0	1
Education: Senior High	840	0.13	0.34	0	1
Education: Junior College	840	0.24	0.43	0	1
Education: Undergraduate	840	0.42	0.49	0	1
Education: Graduate	840	0.20	0.40	0	1
Working hours	826	3.51	1.47	1	5
Public sector	832	0.56	0.50	0	1
Building age: <3 yrs	840	0.01	0.12	0	1
Building age: 3-5 yrs	840	0.10	0.30	0	1
Building age: 5-10 yrs	840	0.18	0.39	0	1

Building age: 10-20 yrs	840	0.62	0.49	0	1
Building age: > 20yrs	840	0.08	0.27	0	1
Neighborhood size: <200	841	0.04	0.19	0	1
Neighborhood size: 200-500	841	0.17	0.38	0	1
Neighborhood size: 500-1000	841	0.29	0.45	0	1
Neighborhood size: 1000-2000	841	0.23	0.42	0	1
Neighborhood size: 2000-3000	841	0.11	0.31	0	1
Neighborhood size: 3000-5000	841	0.13	0.33	0	1
Neighborhood size: 5000-10000	841	0.03	0.16	0	1
Neighborhood size: >10000	841	0.01	0.09	0	1
Avg. housing price: <10000	841	0.00	0.07	0	1
Avg. housing price: 10000-20000	841	0.02	0.13	0	1
Avg. housing price: 20000-30000	841	0.02	0.15	0	1
Avg. housing price: 30000-40000	841	0.16	0.37	0	1
Avg. housing price: 40000-50000	841	0.15	0.36	0	1
Avg. housing price: 50000-60000	841	0.13	0.34	0	1
Avg. housing price: 60000-70000	841	0.12	0.33	0	1
Avg. housing price: 70000-80000	841	0.14	0.34	0	1
Avg. housing price: 80000-90000	841	0.12	0.32	0	1
Avg. housing price: 90000-100000	841	0.10	0.30	0	1
Avg. housing price: 100000-150000	841	0.04	0.19	0	1
Avg. housing price: >150000	841	0.00	0.05	0	1
Rental units: <10%	734	0.18	0.38	0	1
Rental units: 10-30%	734	0.60	0.49	0	1
Rental units: 30-50%	734	0.20	0.40	0	1
Rental units: 50-80%	734	0.03	0.16	0	1
Rental units: >80%	734	0.00	0.04	0	1
Petition	841	0.62	0.49	0	1
Litigation	841	0.17	0.38	0	1
Violence	834	0.38	0.48	0	1
Observations	841				

**Table 6 Unbalanced Sample between Activists and Nonactivists**

	Non-Activists		Activists		T-test
	mean	sd	mean	sd	p
Trust to central government	7.59	2.42	7.54	2.56	0.78
Trust to street office	5.27	2.67	4.71	2.78	0.00**
Democratic value	0.67	0.47	0.75	0.43	0.01**
Community hours	1.02	0.20	1.67	1.09	0.00***
Homeowners association	0.52	0.50	0.73	0.44	0.00***
City: Beijing	0.27	0.44	0.28	0.45	0.59
City: Shanghai	0.48	0.50	0.36	0.48	0.00***
City: Shenzhen	0.25	0.43	0.36	0.48	0.00***
Duration of residence	3.70	1.21	4.27	1.02	0.00***
Age	2.75	0.98	3.22	1.04	0.00***

Female	0.56	0.50	0.48	0.50	0.04*
Education	3.71	1.02	3.60	0.98	0.13
Working hours	3.63	1.48	3.44	1.47	0.06
Public sector	0.58	0.49	0.55	0.50	0.43
Building Age	3.54	0.88	3.73	0.77	0.00**
Neighborhood size	3.69	1.59	3.76	1.43	0.51
Housing price	6.49	2.34	6.81	2.23	0.05
Petition	0.48	0.50	0.71	0.46	0.00***
Litigation	0.08	0.27	0.23	0.42	0.00***
Violence	0.28	0.45	0.43	0.50	0.00***
Observations	324		517		841

**Note.** Table shows results of comparison between the homeowner activists and nonactivists.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

**Table 7 Balanced Sample between Neighborhoods with and without HoA**

	HoA (Treatment)		No HoA (control)		No HoA (weighted control)	
	mean	sd	mean	sd	mean	sd
Trust to central gov	7.71	2.39	7.27	2.69	7.70	2.56
Trust to city gov	7.08	2.49	6.50	2.62	7.07	2.47
Activist	0.69	0.46	0.47	0.50	0.69	0.46
City: Beijing	0.24	0.43	0.33	0.47	0.25	0.43
City: Shanghai	0.44	0.50	0.34	0.48	0.44	0.50
City: Shenzhen	0.31	0.46	0.32	0.47	0.31	0.46
Building Age	3.67	0.78	3.63	0.90	3.66	0.86
Neighborhood size	3.68	1.39	3.83	1.67	3.67	1.63
Housing price	6.72	2.31	6.62	2.23	6.70	2.11
Petition	0.66	0.47	0.54	0.50	0.65	0.48
Litigation	0.17	0.38	0.17	0.37	0.17	0.38
Violence	0.40	0.49	0.33	0.47	0.39	0.49
Duration of residence	4.14	1.08	3.88	1.21	4.13	1.11
Age	3.10	1.04	2.93	1.03	3.07	0.99
Female	0.49	0.50	0.55	0.50	0.48	0.50
Education	3.61	0.96	3.71	1.06	3.62	1.06
Working hours	3.53	1.47	3.48	1.48	3.55	1.47
Public sector	0.54	0.50	0.61	0.49	0.54	0.50
Observations	547		294		284	

**Note.** Table shows results of entropy balancing across the homeowners in the neighborhoods with HoA (Treatment) and without HoA (Control). Treatment group has 547 observations. The unweighted control group has 294, and the sum of the control weights is 284.

## 2 Additional Robustness

**Table 8 Alternative Measure of Political Trust**

	DEV: Trust to local government		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Homeowners association	0.35* (0.17)	0.35*** (0.11)	-0.00 (0.19)
Activist		-0.49*** (0.11)	-0.75*** (0.16)
Association X Activist			0.51* (0.23)
Trust to central government		-0.15*** (0.04)	-0.15*** (0.04)
Trust to city government		0.86*** (0.04)	0.87*** (0.04)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.61	0.61
Observation	811	811	811

**Note.** The models report the coefficients from OLS regression. The specification is based on Model 3 of Table 2.  
\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

**Table 9 Alternative Measure of Homeowner Activism**

	Trust to street government			Trust to local government		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Association	0.61** (0.20)	0.61*** (0.15)	0.27 (0.17)	0.33* (0.17)	0.33** (0.11)	0.14 (0.13)
Activist		-0.43* (0.17)	-1.06*** (0.24)		-0.45*** (0.12)	-0.80*** (0.17)
Association X Activist			1.27*** (0.33)			0.70** (0.25)
Trust to central gov		-0.22*** (0.05)	-0.23*** (0.05)		-0.14*** (0.04)	-0.15*** (0.04)
Trust to city gov		0.89*** (0.05)	0.91*** (0.05)		0.85*** (0.04)	0.85*** (0.04)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.43	0.44	0.00	0.59	0.59
Observation	812	812	812	812	812	812

**Note.** The models report the coefficients from OLS regression. The specification is based on Model 3 of Table 2.  
\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

**Table 10 Alternative Measure of Homeowners Association**

	Trust to street government			Trust to local government		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Association (registered)	0.63** (0.19)	0.63*** (0.15)	0.13 (0.27)	0.35* (0.17)	0.35** (0.11)	-0.02 (0.19)
Activist		-0.49** (0.16)	-0.85*** (0.23)		-0.46*** (0.12)	-0.73*** (0.16)
Association (reg) X Activist			0.72* (0.32)			0.54* (0.23)
Trust to central gov		-0.25*** (0.06)	-0.25*** (0.06)		-0.14*** (0.04)	-0.14*** (0.04)
Trust to city gov		0.91*** (0.06)	0.91*** (0.06)		0.84*** (0.04)	0.84*** (0.04)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.41	0.42	0.01	0.58	0.59
Observation	813	813	813	813	813	813

**Note.** The models report the coefficients from OLS regression. The specification is based on Model 3 of Table 2.  
\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

**Table 11 Controlling Confounders to Activist**

	DEV: Trust to street government			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Association	0.53 (0.35)	0.58 (0.63)	0.47 (0.49)	-0.11 (0.21)
Activist	-1.00*** (0.22)	-0.92*** (0.23)	-0.76*** (0.16)	-0.53*** (0.16)
Association X Activist	0.83** (0.31)	0.91** (0.32)	0.62** (0.23)	0.49* (0.22)
Association X Democratic	-0.65 (0.34)			
Association X Residence		-0.21 (0.15)		
Association X Age		0.08 (0.16)		



Association X Female		-0.03 (0.29)		
Association X Building Age			-0.16 (0.13)	
Association X Petition				0.18 (0.23)
Association X Litigation				-0.14 (0.29)
Association X Violence				0.00 (0.23)
Trust to central gov	-0.22*** (0.05)	-0.22*** (0.05)	-0.14*** (0.04)	-0.10** (0.04)
Trust to city gov	0.90*** (0.05)	0.89*** (0.05)	0.85*** (0.04)	0.78*** (0.04)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.45	0.46	0.61	0.64
Observation	813	813	813	813

**Note.** The models report the coefficients from OLS regression. All the main effects of the interaction terms are included in the regressions. The specification is based on Model 3 of Table 2.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

**Table 12 Mediation Analysis**

	DEV: Trust to street government	
	(1) Government Support as Mediator	(2) Government Collusion as Mediator
ACME	0.31*** (0.09)	0.25*** (0.07)
Total effect	0.84*** (0.18)	0.84*** (0.19)
% of total effect mediated	34.94%***	29.39%***

**Note.** The table reports the results from mediation analysis. ACME standards for average causal mediation effect. The mediation models control for respondents' city, age, gender, education, vocation, working hour, duration of residence, building's age, neighborhood size, average housing price as well as city whether there was any petition, physical conflict, and administrative litigation occurred in the neighborhood.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

**Table 13 Alternative Entropy Balancing**

	DEV: Trust to local government		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Homeowners association	0.71*** (0.21)	0.71*** (0.16)	0.11 (0.30)
Activist		-0.60*** (0.18)	-1.02*** (0.25)
Association X Activist			0.85* (0.35)
Trust to central government		-0.22*** (0.06)	-0.22*** (0.06)
Trust to city government		0.88*** (0.06)	0.89*** (0.06)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.43	0.44
Observation	710	710	710

**Note.** The models report the coefficients from OLS regression. Percentage of rental units is balanced across respondents in neighborhoods with and without HoA. The specification is based on Model 3 of Table 2.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

**Table 14 Extended Sample**

	DEV: Trust to street-level government		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Homeowners association (registered)	0.48*** (0.14)	0.48*** (0.11)	0.11 (0.21)
Activist		-0.55*** (0.12)	-0.80*** (0.17)
Association X Activist			0.51* (0.24)
Trust to central government		-0.17*** (0.03)	-0.17*** (0.03)
Trust to city government		0.80*** (0.03)	0.81*** (0.03)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01	0.42	0.42
Observation	1594	1594	1594

**Note.** The models report the coefficients from OLS regression. The specification is based on Model 3 of Table 2. The sample includes observations from the three megacities and other major cities in China.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).

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