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# Politicised Enforcement in China: Evidence from the Enforcement of Land Laws and Regulations

## Abstract

Politically-motivated interference by politicians, or “politicised enforcement”, is a common cause of enforcement failure in many countries. Existing research on politicised enforcement has focused largely on incentives driven by electoral competition, while fewer studies analysed its mechanisms in an authoritarian context. Drawing on the case of China, this paper develops an argument that politicised enforcement can be a consequence of the strategies adopted by authoritarian ruling elites to maintain political survival. Using a panel data set of the enforcement of land laws and regulations, the empirical analysis suggests that the intensity of enforcement correlates with economic performance and patron-client ties between regime leaders and local officials, suggesting that political imperatives faced by regime elites to promote economic growth and carry out clientelistic exchanges affect government decisions on enforcement. Moreover, these correlations remain robust after the government’s reforms to promote administrative centralisation within the enforcement agency, suggesting that politicised enforcement reflects the strategic behaviour of the ruling elites of the Party. These findings contribute to the literature on enforcement in authoritarian regimes broadly and in China specifically.

## 1 Introduction

Effective enforcement of laws and regulations is a crucial component of governance and has important implications for the wellbeing of citizens. However, gaps between written rules and how they are enforced in practice are so evident in many contexts, especially in developing countries. An expanding literature examines the origins of inadequate enforcement by focusing on the interference behaviour by politicians (e.g. Calvert et al., 1989; Wood and Waterman, 1991; Collier, 1976; Holland, 2016; Goodfellow, 2015; Van Rooij, 2006b). The argument is that politicians exert influence on enforcement agencies to advance their own political interests at the expenses of enforcement effectiveness and fairness, giving rise to what scholars have called “politicised enforcement” (Amengual, 2016).

Existing research on politicised enforcement has largely focused on democracies. Facing the imperative of winning elections, politicians strategically manipulate enforcement to generate outcomes favoured by their key constituencies or other types of political supporters. Fewer studies, by contrast, examine authoritarian regimes where politicians are not concerned about electoral competition so much as their counterparts in democracies.<sup>1</sup> The absence of representative institutional mechanisms means that authoritarian politicians’ interference in enforcement may follow different political logic. This article seeks to address this issue and thus fill in a gap in the literature.

In this research, I argue that similar to their counterparts in democracies, authoritarian politicians are also motivated to intervene in enforcement to serve their political interests. Moreover, political interference under authoritarianism serves the purpose of maintaining political survival at both regime and individual levels. Drawing on the case of China, I develop an analysis detailing the mechanisms through which Chinese leaders’ concerns about political survival and the specific strategies they adopt to address these concerns affect the enforcement behaviour of the government. At the regime level, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long viewed economic performance as a key pillar to

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<sup>1</sup>Notable exceptions include Dorman (2009)’s research on informal settlements in Egypt and Haber et al. (2003)’s research on property rights in Mexico.

the regime's legitimacy and long-term survival (Zhao, 2009). To maintain an acceptable record of economic performance, Party leaders as well as their local agents are motivated to adjust enforcement according to economic ebb and flow. At the individual level, Party leaders also face distributive pressure from their clientelistic followers in the local government, whose political support is crucial for individual leaders' personal political survival (Shih, 2008). Since stringent enforcement in policy areas such as the environment and land use could have negative impacts on local officials' political and economic interests, the latter have strong incentives to rely on their patron-client ties with powerful Party leaders to lobby for lax enforcement.

The enforcement of land laws and regulations provides an ideal case for testing my argument. Radical urbanisation and industrialisation have turned land into an extremely contentious area, with land-related disputes accounting for the majority of "mass incidents" (*quntixing shijian*), including collective protests and petitions, that occurred over the past two decades. Many of these incidents are triggered directly or indirectly by illegal use of land. In 2007 alone, the scale of illegal use of land has reached 990 *km*<sup>2</sup>, equivalent to over 1.5 times of the size of Chicago, and this is only based on official statistics (Ministry of Land and Resources, 2009). Undetected or unreported violations are likely to be in massive scales as well, if not even more. Despite the government's repeated efforts to strengthen enforcement, non-compliance remains widespread.

Drawing on a panel data set on the enforcement of land laws and regulations for 30 provinces between 1999 and 2013, I test the theoretical argument about politicised enforcement in China. Measuring enforcement is a notoriously difficult empirical challenge (Holland, 2016). Taking advantage of the unique structure of the data set, I adopt a novel measurement strategy that traces the temporal variation in the intensity of land enforcement within a locality and, by leveraging this variation, conduct hypothesis testing. Details about the strategy will be discussed in the research design section.

Three major findings emerge from the empirical analysis. First, the intensity of enforcement in a province is negatively correlated with the latter's economic growth rates. When economic growth slows down, the government becomes more tolerant of illegal land-

use activities by reducing the intensity of enforcement. Second, enforcement is weaker when a province is governed by officials who have stronger patron-client ties with central leaders of the Party. Third, both of the above relationships still exist even after the government's administrative reform that promoted centralisation in the land enforcement agency, suggesting that politicised enforcement reflects the strategic behaviour of the Party and its ruling elites rather than being simply a local phenomenon.

Besides the literature on politicised enforcement, this research also contributes to the literature on policy implementation in China's multi-level governance environment. Much of the existing discussion in this vein focuses on the incentives and behaviour of local governments to explain why China's decentralised environmental governance system fails to produce satisfactory implementation outcomes.<sup>2</sup> In light of this failure, recentralisation is often prescribed as an effective policy recommendation to overcome the institutional fragmentation and weak incentives faced by local officials (Ran, 2017). By contrast, how the behaviour of the central government and the resulting central-local dynamics affect enforcement receives less systematic research, let alone being examined empirically (Kostka and Nahm, 2017). Therefore, an analysis of the motivations behind the political interference behaviour by the central government and its ruling elites complements to the existing literature on policy implementation in China.

While the findings of the research are derived from the case of the enforcement of land laws and regulations, they are well applicable to other policy areas such as environmental enforcement. For example, facing the pressure of economic downturn caused by the trade war between China and the US, the central government reportedly relaxed the enforcement of many harsh measures previously adopted in fighting pollution, including the forced shutdown of industrial production in heavily polluted regions (Shen, 2019). This is despite the fact that environmental governance has become a top priority of the Xi Jinping administration.

This article proceeds as follows: Section two draws on the existing literature to develop a theoretical argument that relates politicised enforcement in authoritarian regimes to the

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<sup>2</sup>For a comprehensive review of the literature in the area of environmental policy, see van Rooij and Lo (2010).

strategies adopted by ruling elites to maintain regime and individual political survival. Section three fits this theoretical argument into the context of enforcement in China to propose the theoretical hypotheses. Section four and five introduce the research design and tests the hypotheses using panel data on land enforcement, followed by a conclusion.

## 2 Politicised Enforcement in Democratic and Authoritarian Regimes

While the conventional wisdom attributes poor enforcement performance to weak state capacity or agency-level misconduct, an expanding literature has focused on political influence on enforcement. Politicians often meddle with regulatory agencies, undermining the latter's neutrality and independence and affecting enforcement outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Along this line of thinking, Holland (2016) conceptualises politicians' politically-motivated choices of reducing enforcement and/or withholding sanctions as "forbearance". Non-enforcement, she argues, is not necessarily due to insufficient resources or the government's failure to control street-level bureaucrats, but rather a result of politicians' reluctance to carry out strict enforcement out of political considerations. Amengual (2016) defines enforcement influenced by such politically-motivated intervention as "politicised enforcement".

Two features differentiate politicised enforcement from other concepts, such as state or regulatory capture (e.g. Hellman et al., 2003), that may also be useful for characterising the relationships between regulators and the regulated. First, while capture refers to the informal influence of business interests on both politician and bureaucrats, politicised enforcement focuses on politicians rather than agency-level bureaucrats. Second, as opposed to state/regulatory capture in which officials are arguably motivated by rent seeking, the motivations driving politicised enforcement are mainly political.<sup>4</sup>

The existing research on politicised enforcement focuses primary on democratic contexts and highlights incentives induced by electoral pressure. Politicians manipulate enforcement to generate outcomes favourable to their key constituencies or organised interests that have influence over election outcomes. As a result, weak enforcement is

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<sup>3</sup>In democratic contexts, this issue is often discussed under the broader literature on political control and agency discretion (e.g. Calvert et al., 1989; Wood and Waterman, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed discussion about the distinctions between the concepts of state capture and politicised regulation, see Gordon and Hafer (2014).

adopted as a strategy of electoral mobilisation. In Latin America, politicians whose core support come from the urban poor are motivated to weaken enforcement against informal urban economic activities or residency, especially when they face stiffer electoral competition (Holland, 2015; Goodfellow, 2015). Politicised weak enforcement is not unique to developing countries. For example, Young et al. (2001) find that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in the United States is also susceptible to the political pressures of the executive branch—they show that audit rates for income tax returns are significantly lower in districts that are important to the president electorally and that have representation on key congressional committees.

Politically-motivated interference can strengthen as well as undermine enforcement. For example, politicians in leftist parties tend to enforce labor standards more rigorously to cater to working-class voters as their core constituencies (Mosley, 2008; Ronconi, 2012), especially during elections years (Ronconi, 2010) or under corporatist arrangements that allow labor unions to generate greater political influence (Amengual, 2016).

Fewer studies examine the political factors that shape enforcement outcomes in non-democratic regimes where electoral pressure is weak or absent (Van Rooij et al., 2014). Political influence on enforcement in authoritarian regimes might follow different political logic. On the one hand, in the absence of elections and other representative institutions, authoritarian politicians and agencies are arguably less responsive to the interests of labor unions, environmental groups or voters. In other words, authoritarian governments arguably enjoy a higher degree of autonomy and are better insulated from societal pressure (Evans, 1995). On the other hand, without either electoral accountability or other institutionalised checks and balances, such as an independent judicial system, bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes are more vulnerable to the informal influence of regime elites and those who have informal connections with them. In light of these differences, an analysis of politically-motivated interference behaviour in authoritarian contexts could enrich our understanding of enforcement.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>This simplified contrast between democratic and authoritarian regimes is adopted for analytical purposes only. In practice, there also exist illiberal democracies with weak rule of law and non-meaningful public participation as well as authoritarian regimes that become more rule-based and competitive.

I argue that authoritarian politicians are motivated to intervene in enforcement to serve their collective and individual political interests, and such interests reflect the logic of political survival under authoritarianism. While rarely facing real challenges on the ballot, authoritarian ruling elites do have concerns about potential threats from two major sources: mass uprising and elite defection (Wintrobe, 1998; Svobik, 2012). To prevent these threats from ruining their own holding on power, authoritarian ruling elites typically adopt a portfolio of survival strategies. These strategies exert strong influence on enforcement.

The limited existing research on how political interference affects enforcement in authoritarian regimes provides evidence to the impacts of political survival strategies on enforcement. For example, Dorman (2009) finds that Egyptian government tolerated informal settlements in Cairo not because of the lack of enforcement resources or capacity, but due to the ruling elites' political imperative of adopting exclusive welfare policies while maintaining social stability—a survival strategy essential to Egypt's post-1952 political order. Similarly, the property rights regime in Mexico, constructed during the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship (1876–1911) and persisted throughout later periods, enforced property rights selectively to allow the ruling elites to share rents with the group of asset holders who are integrated into the government (Haber et al., 2003).

Instead of relying on a single survival strategy, most authoritarian regimes adopt a combination of different strategies, and the choices of these strategies can be highly contextualised, depending on the types of authoritarian regimes (e.g. single-party versus personalist regime) and the specific political environment. In this research, I will focus on two such strategies that are most applicable to China, the case to be analysed. It should be noted that these specific strategies and their impacts on enforcement may or may not be as salient in other authoritarian regimes as in the case of China.

To prevent regime-wide mass uprising, it is critically important for authoritarian governments, especially those in single-party regimes, to keep a close eye on economic performance. Poor economic performance and high unemployment ruin regime legitimacy and undermine government fiscal capacity, causing regime collapse (Haggard and Kaufman,

1995; Pepinsky, 2009). Unemployment during recessions fuels massive protests, as most recently demonstrated by the political turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa that have toppled many longstanding authoritarian regimes in the region. Compared with other types of authoritarian regimes, single-party regimes often have longer time horizon and are therefore more committed to investment and economic growth (Bizzarro et al., 2018; Wright, 2008).

Poor economic performance and the resulting concerns about regime survival are likely to prompt authoritarian ruling elites to prioritise economic performance to stringent enforcement against growth-promoting but illegal economic activities. The practice of adjusting enforcement according to economic conditions is not unique to authoritarian regimes – democratic politicians do the same (Kagan, 1989; Rouse and Wright, 1996). However, poor economic performance entails a greater political risk for authoritarian regimes. On the one hand, economic performance is a more important source of legitimacy for authoritarian regimes than their democratic counterparts (Zhao, 2009). On the other hand, economic prosperity and fiscal affluence are also essential for sufficient patronage resources that can be used by authoritarian regimes to construct political loyalty, especially among public employees and political elites (Bates, 2008). Moreover, opposition to lax enforcement by organised interest groups, such as environmental organisations, is generally weaker in authoritarian regimes, which further magnifies the impacts of economic conditions on enforcement (Kagan, 1989).

Besides mass uprising, authoritarian leaders also face challenges from their most powerful colleagues within the ruling circle. Svoboda (2009) shows that being removed by regime insiders, such as other central elites or members of the military and the security forces, accounts for two-thirds of the non-constitutional exits of post-WWII dictators.<sup>6</sup> To prevent defection and maintain personal political survival, it is important for individual politicians to construct patron-client networks as informal power bases. Through these networks, they share state resources and economic rents with colleagues and sub-

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<sup>6</sup>According to Svoboda (2009), non-constitutional exits mean any exits from office that did not follow a natural death or a constitutionally mandated process, such as an election, a vote by a ruling body, or a hereditary succession.

ordinates whose loyalty and political support are crucial for keeping their own rule intact (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2005; Bates, 2008). Empirical studies have found that authoritarian leaders distribute various kinds of office spoils, including lucrative jobs, financial and fiscal resources, policy benefits and even legal immunity, to politically important regime insiders and those who are connected to them (Arriola, 2009; Gomez and Jomo, 1999; Blaydes, 2010; Truex, 2013).

Patron-client networks among political elites and the informal exchanges of political support and preferential treatments within these networks often exert strong influence on enforcement. For authoritarian leaders, manipulated enforcement can generate politically desirable distributive outcomes and therefore can be treated as patronage. In comparison with other types of patronage, non-enforcement has the advantage of being revocable, which means patrons can “reserve the right to enforce the law and offenders believe that the rules can carry a sanction” (Holland, 2016: p.234). Such revocability strengthens the political dependency of violators on their patrons to sustain the legal and regulatory exemptions they enjoy, and thus turns weak or selective enforcement a useful tool for authoritarian politicians to consolidate their informal power bases.

While the majority of recent empirical studies focus on the effect of patron-client relationships between government officials and firms on enforcement outcomes (Maung et al., 2016; Correia, 2014; Varkkey, 2013; Sun, 2015; Jia and Nie, 2015), the same logic can be extended to situations when local officials themselves benefit from violations in their own jurisdictions. In China, local officials often lobby the central government for lenient treatment in various regulatory areas. Central support is particularly important when local officials do not enjoy strong formal control over enforcement agencies or their enforcement behaviour are subject to central government supervision. Such central-local dynamics leave plenty of room for patron-client relationships between central leaders and local officials to play a significant role in shaping enforcement.

### 3 Politicised Enforcement in China: Theory and Hypotheses

With decades of rapid economic development, China faces massive enforcement deficits. Gaps between written rules and their implementation in practice exist in a wide range of policy areas including environmental protection (Economy, 2011; Van Rooij, 2006a), production and food safety (Wright, 2004; Jia and Nie, 2015; Tam and Yang, 2005; Yasuda, 2015), intellectual property rights (Dimitrov, 2009; Mertha, 2005), labor rights (Friedman and Lee, 2010; Chan, 2001), and land use (Van Rooij, 2006b).

Weak state capacity contributes to these enforcement deficits. Enforcement agencies often lack the funding, expertise and other necessary resources to effectively do their jobs, especially when the violators are small and violations are difficult to detect (Tilt, 2007). Even in relatively rich cities such as Guangzhou, funding and staff available to EPBs are still insufficient to support all its operational needs (Wing-Hung Lo and Tang, 2006). Drawing on a comparison among 10 provinces, Schwartz (2003) finds that localities with stronger state capacity in terms of human capital, fiscal strength, and administrative reach/responsiveness produce better environmental enforcement outcomes.

Local governments' parochial interests constitute another major hurdle to effective enforcement. Local regulatory agencies in most policy areas are administratively subordinate to local governments, with the latter controlling funding allocation and personnel appointments. This decentralised regulatory system allows for flexible local interpretations of laws and regulations and considerable local discretion in enforcement. For local officials, one motivation for lax enforcement is the pursuit of economic growth, fiscal revenue and local employment, all of which are key performance indicators in the Party's cadre evaluation system and therefore crucial for their political prospects (Whiting, 2004). Hence, they are reluctant to carry out stringent enforcement against violations committed by sectors and firms that contribute significantly to the local economy (Wright, 2004; Lorentzen et al., 2014). Moreover, ubiquitous formal and informal connections between local officials and violators also discourage the former to conduct effective enforcement (Wing-Hung Lo and Tang, 2006; Jia and Nie, 2015; Van Rooij, 2006b; Wang, 2015).

These problems are further exacerbated by the relatively short time horizon of local officials (Eaton and Kostka, 2014) and the sheer size of the country that leads to unique difficulties in building a coherent and effective regulatory framework (Yasuda, 2015).

Despite the extensive discussion as to how local officials' interests and behaviour shapes enforcement outcomes, research on the influence of the central government and its ruling elites on enforcement has been rather limited. Existing literature generally holds that the central government is strongly committed to rigorous enforcement but their efforts are compromised by the conflict of interests with local governments. Indeed, over the past decade the central government has consistently promoted administrative centralisation among enforcement agencies and frequently adopted national enforcement campaigns to impose top-down political pressure on local bureaucrats. However, the effectiveness of these central efforts in addressing enforcement inadequacy is at best limited (Kostka and Nahm, 2017). More importantly, as van Rooij et al. (2017) have pointed out, centralisation has not eliminated the regional variations in enforcement among different localities.

I argue that the strategies adopted by China's ruling elites to maintain political survival give rise to politicised enforcement. First, the Party's ruling elites in the post-Mao era share the common belief that economic growth is critical for sustaining the single-party rule, and as a result, they tend to view promoting economic growth as an overriding political priority. This view is reflected not only in the Party's general governing philosophy, such as "development is the iron law" (*fazhan shi yingdaoli*), but also in the government's periodical emphasis on achieving specific growth objectives. Enforcement often swings between stringent and loose ends, depending on the balance between enforcement and growth imperatives. For example, during the 2008 global financial crisis, the government directed its regulatory agencies to be more tolerant of violations of labor laws and regulations in the hope of making investors happy. As a result, investigations and sanctions against many labor standard violations were deliberately postponed, if not completely ignored (Friedman and Lee, 2010). Therefore, I propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1** *The intensity of enforcement is negatively associated with economic performance.*

Second, patron-client ties between the Party's central leaders and local officials also weaken the central government's willingness and capacity to order more stringent enforcement. Existing research on Chinese politics shows that patron-client networks are prevalent within the Party and the informal ties between officials positioned at different levels of the political hierarchy could affect the allocation of political favours and state resources (Hillman, 2014; Shih, 2008). Local officials often take advantage of their informal ties with central leaders to lobby for more lenient regulatory requirements for their jurisdictions. Provincial and city officials frequently visit Beijing to negotiate about land violations in their jurisdictions. These negotiations often lead to the softened or ignored land violations and increased land quotas (permitted development rights).<sup>7</sup> When being asked why some localities are able to conduct more land-use violations, having well-connected leaders is a most common answer.<sup>8</sup> Based on this discussion, I hypothesise that:

**Hypothesis 2** *Stronger patron-client ties between Party leaders and local officials are associated with weaker enforcement in the localities governed by the latter.*

Finally, from a political point of view, the central government couldn't completely overlook the potential destabilising effects of the lack of enforcement, especially in policy areas such as land and the environment where large-scale violations and the lack of enforcement have triggered social discontent and public cries and posed serious threats to regime legitimacy and survival. Recent empirical research on the decision-making mechanisms in China finds that social discontent and the threats it poses to regime stability play an important role in shaping government choices and policy priorities (Chen

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<sup>7</sup>Interview with a land bureaucrat in Beijing, July 2012. Also see *China Times*, 2011. "loushi tiaokong jinru guanjian qi, quanguo gesheng shengzhang lunfan jinjing [governors rush to Beijing at critical periods of real-estate regulation]", <http://sh.leju.com/news/2011-11-05/0937134502.shtml>, accessed on July 2 2017.

<sup>8</sup>Interview with local officials in Henan, July 2012 and in Shaanxi, August 2015.

et al., 2015; Truex, 2018). In the policy area of land, protests triggered by land conflicts have prompted the central government to adopt wide-ranging policy changes that seek to address protesters' grievances (Heurlin, 2016). Case studies on land and environmental enforcement have also suggested that as a response to serious and rampant violations, the central government strengthened its enforcement efforts by intensive campaigns. Therefore, I expect the intensity of enforcement to also reflect the scale of seriousness of violations.

**Hypothesis 3** *The intensity of enforcement is positively associated with the scale and seriousness of violations.*

#### 4 Research Design

I draw on the case of the enforcement of land laws and regulations to test the above hypotheses. Radical industrialisation and urbanisation in the past two decades have dramatically increased the demand for land in China, turning massive farmland into industrial construction and commercial development. Before the late 1990s, land was managed in a highly decentralised and fragmented manner, allowing local governments and other state entities, such as urban units (*danwei*) and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), to exercise great discretion over the use of land under their control (Rithmire, 2015). Concerned about unregulated land-use activities and their social consequences, the central government amended the Land Administration Law in 1998 to significantly strengthen the regulation of the use of land. In the following decade, the central government issued hundreds of laws and regulations, and adopted a series of administrative reforms to streamline the land regulatory agency and strengthen its authority vis-à-vis local governments and SOEs. These reforms include the establishment of the Ministry of Land and Resources (MLR) in 1998, which essentially transformed the national land regulatory agency from a vice-ministerial level Bureau to a Ministry. A comprehensive land regulatory system gradually emerged.

The amended Land Administration Law and the subsequent decrees aim to place land-use activities by local governments, firms and individuals under tight regulatory

scrutiny. Because local governments are often deeply involved in the land-use activities in their jurisdictions, the new regulatory system includes detailed and stringent legal restrictions and administrative approval requirements to reduce local discretion. First, a crucial component of the system is the so-called quota system, which sets upper limits on how much farmland can be converted into construction purposes for each locality in a given period.<sup>9</sup> Local governments are not allowed to approve land conversion beyond the scales specified by the quotas assigned to them by their upper-level governments. Moreover, the system also stipulated numerous administrative approval procedures for land conversion, expropriation and development. For example, the expropriation of any designated “basic land (*jiben nongtian*)”, regular farmland above 35 hectares, or any land above 70 hectares requires the approval by the central government. Third, the system also includes many regulations pertaining to the purposes of land use, including those that ban land from being used for certain types of construction projects, such as polluting industries or luxury villas.

It turns out that the enforcement of these rules and regulations poses a serious challenge for the central government. Table 1 reports the official statistics of land-use violations detected and sanctioned by land regulatory agencies between 2009 and 2013. Nationwide, the total area of illegally-used land has grown from 28,675 hectares in 1999 to a record-breaking level of 99,069 hectares in 2007. It should be noted that these official figures haven’t taken into account those undetected or unreported cases of illegal land use.

In both mass media and scholarly work, a widely targeted culprit of the prevalent land-use violations is the local government. It is argued that local officials, with motivations of career advancement and rent-seeking, are reluctant to carry out rigorous enforcement of land laws and regulations (e.g. Skinner et al., 2001; Van Rooij, 2006b). To overcome local

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<sup>9</sup>Quotas were initially imposed on the conversion of farmland (*nongyongdi*) and arable land (*gengdi*) and subsequently added to the total scale of new construction land as well as other land conversion practices including the consolidation of urban-rural construction land *chengxiang jianshe yongdi zengjian guagou* and reclamation of abandoned industrial and mining land *gongkuan feiqi di fukun*. For details, see *tudi liyong niandu jihua guanli banfa (1999)* [Measures for the Administration of Annual Plans on the Utilisation of Land (1999)] (amended 2004, 2006, 2016), available at [http://www.mlr.gov.cn/zwgk/flfg/gtzybl/200504/t20050426\\_637325.htm](http://www.mlr.gov.cn/zwgk/flfg/gtzybl/200504/t20050426_637325.htm), accessed on September 13 2016.

Table 1: National Statistics of Land-use Violations

Year	No. of Cases	Total Scale ( <i>ha.</i> )	Average ( <i>ha.</i> )
1999	166042	28674.8	0.17
2000	188072	31687.2	0.17
2001	130903	27756.1	0.21
2002	138383	31562.1	0.23
2003	178654	68373.9	0.38
2004	114526	80759	0.71
2005	111723	52192.8	0.47
2006	131077	92237.4	0.70
2007	123343	99069	0.80
2008	100266	57659.9	0.58
2009	72940	37972.6	0.52
2010	66373	45124.3	0.68
2011	70212	50073.6	0.71
2012	61821	32026.2	0.52
2013	83978	41197.4	0.49

Data source: China Land and Resources Yearbooks

resistance, the central government adopted several reforms in the mid-2000s to promote administrative centralisation in the land enforcement agency. First, it reformed the land enforcement agency in 2004 by adopting a new system of so-called “vertical management under the provincial level (*sheng yixia chuizhi guanli*)”. Under the new system, agencies at city and county levels are no longer administratively or financially subordinate to local governments at county and city levels, but rather become the local branches of agencies at the provincial level. This aims to reduce the influence of city- and county-level officials on land enforcement in their own jurisdictions. Moreover, two years later in 2006, the central government established the administration of State Land Supervision, which includes a headquarter in Beijing and nine regional bureaus across the country that are charged with overseeing local governments’ land approval, expropriation and other types of land-use activities. Because State Land Supervision and its regional bureaus report directly to the MLR in the central government, their supervision and enforcement behaviour are arguably less susceptible to the influence of local governments. These reforms gave rise to the partially centralised land regulatory system that is at work today. The overall effects of these reforms on enforcement outcomes remain to be systematically examined. However, as the empirical analysis below will show, they haven’t effectively eliminated

politicised enforcement in part because some of the interventions come from politicians at the top of the regime rather than merely local officials.

Besides serving the political and material interests of local governments and local officials, land also plays a key role in both the central government's strategy of macroeconomic management and the patronage networks of regime elites. Through an analysis of key episodes of macroeconomic policymaking, Rithmire (2017) finds that the Party relied on the manipulation and distribution of the national land supply either to stimulate economic growth or to rein in an overheating economy. Using a fine-grained data set of land transactions, Chen and Kung (2018) find that real-estate firms linked to members of the Politburo obtained a price discount when bidding for land parcels for development, and local provincial leaders who facilitated such deals were more likely to receive a promotion subsequently. Sun (2015) also finds that firms connected with central elites of the Party are more likely to engage in large-scale illegal land development projects and evade or survive enforcement actions, despite the central government's capability of using satellite remote sensing to detect such blunt violations. Given the importance of land in macroeconomic management and patronage politics, the central government and its ruling elites have strong incentives to manipulate land enforcement to achieve their economic and political objectives.

#### **4.1 Measuring Enforcement**

Quantitative studies of enforcement typically face a serious measurement challenge. Systematic data of both enforcement and the universe of offences are rarely available, promoting scholars to adopt alternative measures of enforcement efforts such as the number or scale of *sanctioned offences* or *enforcement operations* (Holland, 2016). However, both measures have limitations. On the one hand, sanctioned offences are jointly determined by the tendency of violation and the effort of enforcement. In other words, observed changes in sanctioned offences can result from changes in either the tendency of violation, the intensity of enforcement or a combination of both. On the other hand, using the number or scale of enforcement operations as the alternative measure fails to consider the

fact that the same number or scale of operations may reflect different levels of enforcement efforts under different levels of offences. For example, one enforcement operation per five cases of violations does not represent the same strength of enforcement as one operation per one hundred cases.

Taking advantage of a unique structure of the official statistics on sanctioned land-use violations in China, this research develops a measurement strategy that makes it possible to compare the intensity of enforcement in the same locality across different time periods. In other words, this measure allows me to leverage the temporal variations of enforcement. More specifically, the data reports the total number and scale of violation cases that were sanctioned by enforcement agencies in each province at a given year.<sup>10</sup> Among the sanctioned violations, the data further differentiates between violations that occurred at year  $t$  and those that occurred in previous years. In mathematical terms, let  $s_{i,t}$  denote the total scale of land-use violations that were sanctioned at year  $t$  in province  $i$ . Then  $s_{i,t}$  is the sum of two parts: the first part is the scale of contemporaneous violations that occurred at year  $t$  (denoted as  $s_{i,t,t}$ ) and the second part is the scale of violations that occurred in previous years but were retrospectively detected and sanctioned at year  $t$  (denoted as  $s_{i,t,-t}$ ).<sup>11</sup>

Using the data, I develop the following three indicators to measure the relative intensity of enforcement in each province at a given year compared with the previous up to three years. In each measure, the numerator is the scale of past offences that were retrospectively detected and sanctioned in the current year, while the denominator is the average scale of offences that were detected and sanctioned contemporaneously over the previous up to three years.

$$I_{it}^1 = s_{i,t,-t} / s_{i,t-1,t-1} \quad (1)$$

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<sup>10</sup>Land enforcement agencies are required to investigate and impose sanctions on all violations that were officially detected, although the level of punishment may vary across cases.

<sup>11</sup>In the third dimension of the subscription,  $-t$  indicates all years before  $t$ . In other words,  $-t = t - 1, t - 2, t - 3 \dots$

$$I_{it}^2 = 2s_{i,t,-t}/(s_{i,t-1,t-1} + s_{i,t-2,t-2}) \quad (2)$$

$$I_{it}^3 = 3s_{i,t,-t}/(s_{i,t-1,t-1} + s_{i,t-2,t-2} + s_{i,t-3,t-3}) \quad (3)$$

The first measure,  $I_{it}^1$ , is the ratio of the scale of past violations (i.e. those that occurred before year  $t$ ) that were detected and sanctioned retrospectively at year  $t$  to the scale of contemporaneous violations that both occurred at year  $t-1$  and were detected and sanctioned in the same year. Assuming that all past violations retrospectively detected and sanctioned in year  $t$  actually occurred in year  $t-1$ , this ratio reflects the relative intensity of enforcement in year  $t$  relative to in year  $t-1$  in province  $i$ .

One may challenge the assumption adopted in the first measure as oversimplified and too strong. It is indeed unlikely that all past violations that were retrospectively detected at year  $t$  occurred in the single year of  $t-1$ . To alleviate this concern, the second and third measures instead adopt weaker assumptions by allowing past violations to occur not only in the year before but within up to the past three years. More specifically, the second measure,  $I_{it}^2$ , is the ratio of the scale of past violations detected and sanctioned retrospectively in year  $t$  to the average scale of violations detected and sanctioned contemporaneously in the years of  $t-1$  and  $t-2$ . This new measure is based on the weaker assumption that past violations detected in year  $t$  actually occurred mostly in the past two years. This ratio therefore measures the intensity of enforcement at year  $t$  relative to the average intensity of enforcement in the past two years. Similarly, the third measure,  $I_{it}^3$ , reflects the intensity of enforcement at year  $t$  relative to the average intensity of enforcement in the past three years.<sup>12</sup>

Figure 1 plots the trends of the three measures between 2000 and 2013. Overall, they demonstrate nearly identical patterns and are largely consistent to known episodes of enforcement changes at the national level, which confirm the measurement validity of these measures. For example, the first few years of the 2000s witnessed a relatively low level

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<sup>12</sup>It should be emphasised that these ratios do not have straightforward numerical meanings. Rather, they are relative measures of the intensity of enforcement compared with in the past one to three years.

of enforcement. This is because the relatively poor economic performance following the Asian Financial Crisis prompted the government to prioritise economic growth over rigorous enforcement of land laws and regulations. A surge in enforcement occurred in 2003, when the national economy experienced a strong growth momentum and demonstrated signs of serious overheating. For example, compared with 2002, investment and bank credit in 2003 increased by 27% and 36% respectively. Construction projects in manufacture and real estate occupied a massive amount of land and many of them involved illegal use of land, promoting the central government to conduct several enforcement campaigns. For example, a national campaign was launched in July 2003 to investigate and rectify unapproved “development zones (*kaifaqu*)” and land-use violations involved in these projects. Then in 2004, the central government further strengthened its enforcement effort by implementing a so-called “the strictest land management institutions in history (*shishang zui yange de tudi guanli zhidu*)” and launched another national campaign against land-use violations. These enforcement campaigns led to the sanction of many violations that were undetected or tolerated before (Van Rooij, 2006b).

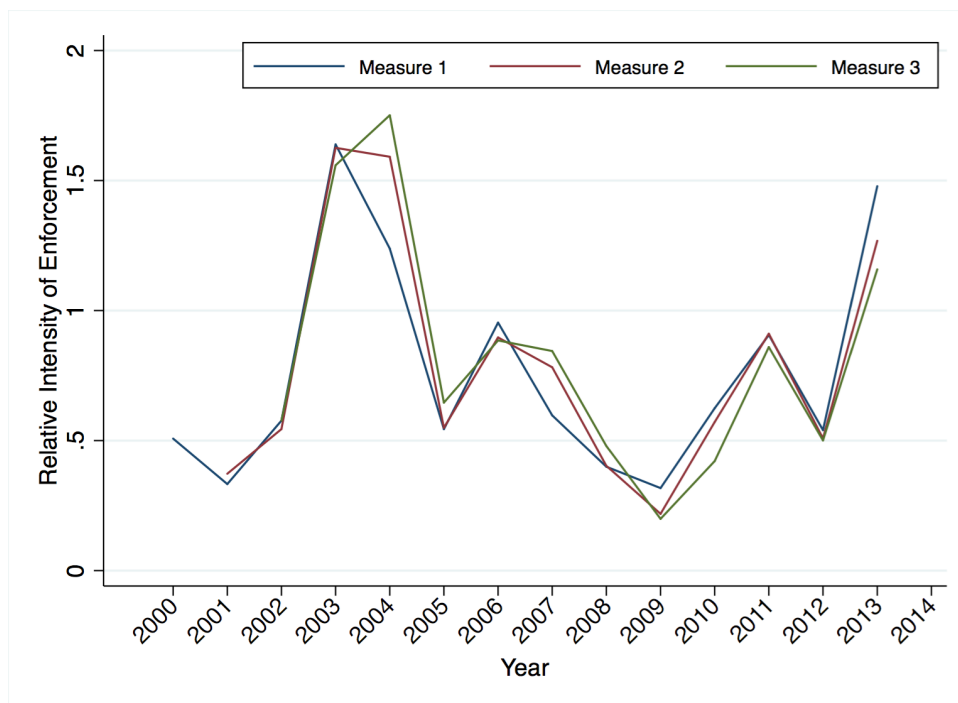


Figure 1: Relative Intensity of Enforcement at the National Level

Another high tide of enforcement occurred in 2006 and 2007. In June 2006, MLR

convened an emergency meeting, followed by the issuance of the “Circular of the State Council on Intensifying Land Control (*guowuyuan guanyu jiaqiang tudi tiaokong youguan wenti de tongzhi*)” in September, to call for more effective land enforcement. These actions marked the onset of a new round of “land enforcement storm (*tudi zhifa fengbao*)” aiming to contain rampant land-use violations. In 2007, MLR further launched the “Hundred-day Action on the Enforcement of Land Laws (*tudi zhifa bairi xingdong*)” aiming to strengthen enforcement against the use of land without approval (*yizu daizheng*), a major type of land-use violations. These trends are also captured in figure 1.

In contrast, land enforcement was significantly weakened during the global financial crisis in 2008-2009, by which the Chinese economy was hit hard. In response to the gloomy growth performance and record-high unemployment, the government launched a massive stimulus package worth four trillion yuan (\$586 billion) to boost investment. In the meantime, enforcement in the areas of land and environment was dramatically and deliberately loosened to serve the purpose of “protecting economic growth” (*baozengzhang*). As a result, many investment projects during this period, especially those so-called “key projects” (*zhongdian xiangmu*), involved serious violations.<sup>13</sup> These violations were left unaddressed or only sanctioned retrospectively in 2010 when economic performance became a less serious concern thanks to the stimulus plan. However, a period of lax enforcement reemerged subsequently in 2012, when economic growth began to decline again. The weak economic performance on the eve of the planned leadership transition at the end of the year prompted Party leaders to once again systematically prioritise growth over enforcement in the land sector.

## 4.2 Model and Variables

The empirical analysis draws on a panel data set of land enforcement in 30 provinces between 1999 and 2013.<sup>14</sup> The dependent variable is the intensity of enforcement against

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<sup>13</sup>“Guotu ziyuan bu: weibao jiyong xingzhi elie, yao jianjue yuyi ezhi” (MLR: Unapproved Use of Land is Hazardous and must be Contained), available at “[http://www.mlr.gov.cn/wszb/2010/20100420sbd1bs\\_1\\_2\\_1/zhibozhaiyao/201005/t20100524\\_720011.htm](http://www.mlr.gov.cn/wszb/2010/20100420sbd1bs_1_2_1/zhibozhaiyao/201005/t20100524_720011.htm)”, accessed on 22 December 2016.

<sup>14</sup>Data on Tibet is excluded due to missing values in several key indicators.

land-use violations, using the three measures constructed above. As discussed earlier, these measures capture the temporary changes in the intensity of land enforcement. The raw data used in the calculation of these measures come from various issues of the *China Land and Resources Statistical Yearbook*.

The analysis includes three key independent variables. To test the impact of economic performance on enforcement, the first independent variable is the GDP growth rate in a province at a given year. Following the first theoretical hypothesis, I expect poorer economic performance to be associated with lower intensity of enforcement.

The second key independent variable is the patron-client ties between central leaders of the Party and leading provincial officials. To measure patron-client ties, I follow the strategy adopted in Shih (2008) to use whether the career trajectory of a provincial official overlapped with any Politburo Standing Committee (PSC) member as an indicator.<sup>15</sup> I drew biographical information from the resumes of provincial officials and Politburo Standing Committee members. The resumes come from the database of central and local leaders on [www.people.com.cn](http://www.people.com.cn) (*renmin wang*), the website of the Party's most influential official media outlet People's Daily (*renmin ribao*). Overlapping career trajectories are defined as two people working in the same system (*xitong*), such as a central ministry, a Party department, a military division, or a province, for at least one year and provided that the gap between their administrative ranks does not exceed one level.<sup>16</sup> For central leaders of the Party, I focus on PSC members because the PSC is the most important policymaking body in the Chinese political system, and their members are the most important ruling elites of the regime (Malesky et al., 2011). I expect patron-client ties between central Party leaders and leading provincial officials to be positively associated with lower intensity of enforcement in the latter's jurisdictions.

Between the two leading provincial officials, the measurement of patron-client ties focuses on governors instead of Party secretaries. In the Chinese political system, it is

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<sup>15</sup>Shih (2008) also developed two additional indicators based on common birthplace and university education respectively. However, as Keller (2016) has argued, these indicators generate greater numbers of false ties and are thus at best unreliable proxies for patron-client ties.

<sup>16</sup>In China, administrative ranks vary by a minimum unit of half a level. For example, the gap between provincial-level (or ministerial-level) and prefectural-level (or department-level) officials is one level, while the gap between provincial-level and vice-provincial-level officials is half a level.

generally the case that local Party leaders take the primary responsibility for fulfilling Party priorities and sustaining Party rule, whereas government executives make economic and social policies and undertake direct daily governance (Landry, 2008; Zuo, 2015). Governors therefore play a more important role than provincial Party secretaries in regulatory enforcement within their jurisdictions. In the case of land enforcement, the central government explicitly requires governors to assume the primary responsibility for arable land protection and land-use violations (Wang et al., 2012). Failure to achieve these goals can incur negative consequences on the political prospects of governors.

The third hypothesis argues that more rampant and serious violations could cause social instability, and concerns of social instability prompt the government to strengthen enforcement. However, as discussed earlier, the actual level and seriousness of violations are difficult to measure, because official statistics on the number or scale of sanctioned offences reflect both the level of violations and the intensity of enforcement. To address this issue, I introduce two proxy measures. The first proxy measure, following the strategy adopted by Wedeman (2012) in measuring corruption, uses the average scale of sanctioned violation cases.<sup>17</sup> The second proxy measure is the number of media reports in national and local newspapers that include the key word of “land violations (*tudi weifa*)” in a province within a given year.<sup>18</sup> This measure seeks to capture the level of publicity given to land-use violations in a province within a year, based on the assumption that more serious situations of violations receive greater public and media attention. It should be noted that neither measure is perfect. For the first one, the average scale of sanctioned violation cases could be a biased estimate of the average scale of all violation cases, because larger violations are more likely to involve violators with higher-level political status or closer connections with political elites and therefore more likely to escape sanction by

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<sup>17</sup>The measure is calculated as the total area of sanctioned violations in a province within a given year divided by the number of sanctioned violations.

<sup>18</sup>The data on media reports on land-use violations was collected from the newspaper article database of China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database (*zhongguo zhiwang*). The database includes all articles published in more than 500 national and local newspapers since 2000. I conducted searches using “land violation (*tudi weifa*)” and the name of each province as key words to count the number of articles found for each province and each year between 2000 and 2013. For instance, the search for Henan province in 2007 revealed that a total number of 14 articles included both “land violation” and “Henan” between Jan 1 and December 31 of the year.

enforcement agencies (Sun, 2015). For the second proxy, media reports on land violations can also be subject to political interference, given that mass media in China is controlled by the state. Because of these shortcomings, I acknowledge that these variables can point to at best suggestive findings on how enforcement varies with the seriousness of actual violations.

The model also includes a number of control variables that may also affect enforcement. First, state capacity is essential for effective enforcement. Existing empirical research on environmental enforcement in China has found that local government's fiscal strength, human capital and administrative reach of the state are positively associated with better enforcement outcomes (Schwartz, 2003). Case studies on environmental enforcement also consistently find that local enforcement agencies, especially those in fiscally poorer localities, lack sufficient financial and human resources to carry out enforcement actions (Van Rooij, 2006b). Due to data availability, I control a province's fiscal expenditure per capita as the measure of state capacity.

The analysis also controls for GDP per capita and size of provincial population. In a study about environmental enforcement, van Rooij et al. (2017) argue that uneven enforcement with richer and more urbanised areas having much stronger and more frequent enforcement than inland areas. Their empirical analysis finds that per capita income has a positive relationship with the level of environment enforcement. In another work that compares environmental transparency across Chinese cities, Lorentzen et al. (2014) controlled for both GDP per capita and size of population, even though neither was found to be a significant predictor. I follow this common practice of existing research to control for both variables. As robustness checks I also consider additional control variables including the urbanisation rate and the share of industrial GDP. Finally, the model also includes a set of provincial and year dummies to control for unobserved provincial and temporal fixed effects. Lagged dependent variables are also included first, but later removed from the model because the results show that the first-order autoregressive effects are not significant.

## 5 Empirical Results

Table 2 reports the results of the regression analysis. Simply put, they provide strong evidence to Hypothesis 1 and 2 but not Hypothesis 3. GDP growth has a significantly positive impact on enforcement, suggesting that land regulatory agencies adjust the intensity of enforcement against violations according to economic performance. More specifically, agencies reduce the intensity of enforcement when growth rates are lower while tightening enforcement when growth rates are higher. This confirms the first hypothesis. Patron-client ties between central leaders of the Party and provincial officials have negative effects on enforcement—the intensity of enforcement tends to be lower when localities are governed by officials connected with top regime elites. This corroborates the second hypothesis. The two proxy measures on the seriousness of land violations, i.e. the average scale of the sanctioned violations and media coverage on violations, show positive impacts on the intensity of enforcement, although their coefficients do not reach statistical significance. This should be interpreted with caution given the fact that neither proxy is an ideal measure.

Substantively, because the dependent variables are relative indicators, it is more useful to interpret the regression coefficients using their corresponding standardised or beta coefficients. Standardised coefficients refer to how many standard deviations a dependent variable will change, per standard deviation increase in the independent variable. The standardised coefficients for GDP growth and patron-client ties are 0.2 and -0.1 respectively. They suggest that a one standard deviation increase in the GDP growth rate is associated with a 0.2 standard deviation increase in the relative intensity of enforcement, and a one standard deviation increase in patron-client ties leads to a 0.1 standard deviation decrease in the relative intensity of enforcement.

Among control variables, fiscal expenditure per capita has a significant positive impact on the intensity of enforcement, a result consistent with the existing studies' finding about the importance of local state capacity for effective enforcement. Neither GDP per capita nor the size of provincial population has a significant effect.

Table 2: Explaining the Intensity of Land Enforcement in Chinese Provinces (1999-2013)

	(1) Measure 1	(2) Measure 2	(3) Measure 3
GDP growth	9.92*** (3.38)	7.78*** (3.00)	6.78** (2.84)
Patron-client ties	-0.25* (0.13)	-0.23* (0.13)	-0.25** (0.13)
Average scale of violations	0.04 (0.09)	0.04 (0.09)	0.05 (0.10)
Media report on violations	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Fiscal expenditure per capita	1.87** (0.74)	2.43*** (0.71)	3.06*** (0.78)
GDP per capita	1.04 (0.90)	1.07 (0.94)	1.06 (1.05)
Population	1.36 (1.94)	2.05 (2.01)	3.56 (2.19)
Constant	-34.48* (19.56)	-45.07** (20.64)	-62.18*** (22.32)
R-squared	0.381	0.425	0.449
Observations	395	379	350

<sup>1</sup> \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ;

<sup>2</sup> standard errors clustered at the provincial level are in parentheses.

I provide three sets of robustness checks for the above results using alternative model specifications.<sup>19</sup> Both the first and second sets of robustness checks deal with what variables to control in the regressions. In the first set of robustness checks I retain only the key independent variables while excluding all control variables. In the second set of robustness checks, I follow van Rooij et al. (2017)'s quantitative research on environmental enforcement to include additional control variables, including urbanisation rate and share of industrial GDP. The results are presented in the online Appendix. As they show, the

<sup>19</sup>The observational nature of the study also raises concerns about potential endogeneity caused by reverse causality or omitted confounding variables. While I couldn't fully address these concerns, I believe that reverse causality is not a serious threat to the findings. On the one hand, economic performance in a locality is largely determined by economic activities such as trade, investment and manufacturing. Lax enforcement of land laws and regulations could indeed boost these economic activities. However, if such reverse causal relationship were dominant, observed a negative rather than positive correlation should be observed between the intensity of enforcement and economic growth. On the other hand, informal ties between central elites and provincial officials are mainly determined by interpersonal connections and the political calculations of Party leaders. It is therefore difficult to conceive a mechanism in which such ties could be reversely affected by the specific issue of land enforcement. Omitted confounding variables is a more threatening issue. The original regressions controlled for two-way fixed provincial and year effects, and the robustness checks seek to control additional variables that are included in other studies on enforcement in China. Still, these measures couldn't fully address the concern of endogeneity. I acknowledge the limitation of the research in this aspect.

main findings remain unchanged.

The third robustness check seeks to address the potential concern about the construct validity of the dependent variable by adopting an alternative measure of enforcement intensity. The measure is proportion of the scale of violations that occurred in previous years and sanctioned retrospectively (“past violations”) in all sanctioned violations. Using the mathematical terms consistent to those used earlier, the measure is constructed as follows:

$$I_{it}^{alt} = s_{i,t,-t} / s_{i,t} \quad (4)$$

The rationale behind this alternative measure is that while strengthened enforcement by the government deals with both contemporaneous violations, i.e. violations that occurred and got sanctioned in the same year, and past violations, it tends to uncover disproportionately more violations from the past than those occurred in the current year, causing the above measure to increase. By contrast, when the intensity of enforcement is relatively low, the outcome often includes a higher proportion of contemporaneous violations because enforcement agencies tend to evade those past and stubborn cases that are more difficult to uncover or address. The correlation coefficients between this alternative measure and the three measures used in the main analysis are 0.76, 0.72 and 0.71 respectively. Moreover, the correlation coefficient between the alternative measure and the scale of sanctioned violations is 0.24. Again, the results are reported in the online Appendix and the main findings remain robust.

One may also argue that the above findings are not sufficient to support the proposed logic of politicised enforcement, which relates the political interference in enforcement to the political incentives of high-level regime elites rather than merely those of lower-level officials. For example, one could argue that manipulating enforcement based on economic performance and patron-client ties are simply local officials’ behaviour rather than being directed by the Party’s central elites. After all, the majority of local enforcement agencies are administratively and financially subordinate to local governments, which gives local officials great discretion to intervene in the enforcement in their jurisdictions.

To address this concern, I run another set of regressions to see whether the above relationships experienced significant changes after the central government's reforms in the mid-2000s that have promoted centralisation in land enforcement administrative system. As discussed earlier, the central government adopted two major reforms in 2004 and 2006 respectively to strengthen central supervision over land enforcement agencies. In particular, the establishment of the administration of State Land Supervision, a vertically-managed enforcement agency independent of the jurisdictions of local governments, has arguably reduced the local government's discretion in land enforcement. If political interference comes mainly from the local government, we should expect the impacts of economic performance and patron-client on enforcement to become weaker after these centralisation reforms took effect.

Table 3: Explaining the Intensity of Land Enforcement in Chinese Provinces (1999-2013, with interaction terms)

	(1) Measure 1	(2) Measure 2	(3) Measure 3
GDP growth	6.41* (3.63)	3.22 (2.56)	3.27 (2.32)
Growth * Post2006	8.46 (5.49)	10.74** (4.95)	8.53* (4.77)
Patron-client ties	-0.30 (0.23)	-0.27 (0.25)	-0.18 (0.21)
Ties * Post2006	0.07 (0.29)	-0.00 (0.29)	-0.12 (0.25)
Average scale of violations	0.04 (0.06)	0.05 (0.12)	0.05 (0.11)
Media report on violations	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)
Fiscal expenditure per capita	1.83** (0.82)	2.40*** (0.74)	2.88*** (0.79)
GDP per capita	0.48 (1.12)	0.28 (1.01)	0.45 (1.15)
Population	0.69 (2.23)	1.27 (2.40)	2.78 (2.45)
Constant	-22.13 (19.27)	-30.44 (27.28)	-43.68* (22.54)
R-square	0.384	0.429	0.452
Observations	395	379	350

<sup>1</sup> \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ;

<sup>2</sup> standard errors clustered at the provincial level are in parentheses.

Table 3 reports the results of regressions that include interaction terms between economic performance and patron-client ties on the one hand and a dummy indicator of the post-2006 period on the other. These interaction terms aim to test whether the impacts of growth and ties on enforcement still exist or got weakened after the centralisation reforms in the mid-2000s. The results show that the impacts of neither economic performance nor patron ties have significantly declined in the post-2006 period compared with the period before. In fact, the estimated relationship between economic performance and enforcement became even stronger in the post-2006 period. This is most likely a result of the global economic recession that occurred in 2008 and the economic fluctuations it caused during the subsequent years. In other words, facing economic downturn, the Chinese government became more sensitive to economic performance and were more inclined to adjust enforcement to maintain its performance targets. For patron-client ties, their interaction terms with the indicator of the post-2006 period are insignificant. However, the estimated marginal effects of patron-client ties over the post-2006 periods are -0.23, -0.28 and -0.30 respectively and have reached statistical significance for regression (2) and (3).<sup>20</sup> In comparison with Table 1, there is little change in the effect of patron-client ties between before and after 2006. These results provide evidence that political interference in land enforcement originates from the strategic behaviour of the Party's central elites rather than that of local officials only.

## 6 Conclusion

The article examines politicised enforcement, namely politically-motivated interference in enforcement by politicians, in China. While the existing literature has provided ample evidence as to how political interests motivate politicians to manipulate enforcement in democracies, few studies explored the mechanisms behind politicised enforcement in authoritarian regimes. In this paper, I develop an argument that relates politicians' interference in enforcement to the strategies they adopt to maintain regime and individual political survival. More specifically, I argue that the central government and its

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<sup>20</sup>The standard errors of these marginal effects were calculated using information from the variance-covariance matrices obtained after running the regressions.

ruling elites adjust enforcement to promote economic growth and facilitate patron-client exchanges—two survival strategies essential to the political order of the Chinese regime.

Drawing on a panel data set on the enforcement of land laws and regulations in Chinese provinces between 1999 and 2013, I develop a novel indicator to measure the temporal variations in enforcement. In explaining such variations, the empirical analysis suggests that the intensity of land enforcement in Chinese provinces depends on both economic growth rates and governors' informal ties with PSC members. Moreover, both relationships remain strong after the reforms conducted by the central government in the mid-2000s that strengthened its own authority in land enforcement against the local government. These findings confirm that theoretical proposition that central elites intervene in the bureaucratic process of enforcement to achieve the political objectives related to political survival.

The findings of the research shed light on our understanding of enforcement in other authoritarian regimes. As explained earlier, the limited existing research on how the political interests of authoritarian ruling elites affect enforcement outcomes point to the important linkage between elites' strategies of acquiring political support and their enforcement behaviour (Dorman, 2009; Haber et al., 2003). Following the same logic, the Chinese case further suggests that the mechanisms behind politicised enforcement may depend on the different survival strategies adopted by different regimes. In China, and perhaps also in other single-party regimes, while patronage politics plays an important role in shaping regime elites' interference of enforcement, regime-level concerns such as economic performance stand out as another important motive behind politicised enforcement.

The research also contributes to our understanding of law and regulatory enforcement in China's multi-level governance environment—a prominent issue that has attracted increasing scholarly and public attention over the last two decades. The proliferation of enforcement problems, especially those high-profile scandals, with food and drug safety, air quality and water pollution, and land use have triggered widespread public discontent and exerted a strong pressure on the government to fix its defective regulatory system.

While inadequate enforcement in these policy areas are often attributed to the local government, this research suggests that the political concerns of high-level officials and especially the regime's central elites may also affect enforcement outcomes, a finding in line with the emphasis by some recent studies of the importance of "bringing the centre back" to fully understand the central-local dynamics in China's multi-level governance environment (e.g. Kostka and Nahm, 2017; Ran, 2017; van Rooij et al., 2017; Eaton and Kostka, 2017). In the presence of interference by the central government and its ruling elites, existing administrative reforms that seek to strengthen the central government's enforcement power against their local agents, such as those conducted between 2004 and 2006 in the land administration, are unlikely to effectively eliminate politicised interests in enforcement. As long as the Party and its leaders continue to treat enforcement as an important political tool useful for maintaining their rule, politicised enforcement will remain, no matter it is under a centralised or decentralised regulatory system. The removal of interference in enforcement by political interests, likely through strengthened rule of law and the establishment of more independent enforcement agencies, will be crucial to effective enforcement.

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