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“Local Officials' Incentives to Manipulate Air Quality Data in Urban China”

Abstract

Evidence of widespread manipulation of air quality data as well as public outcry over abysmal air quality has recently drawn attention to the problem of air pollution and concerns about data falsification by local officials in urban China. Yet emerging literature yet to sufficiently explore local officials' incentives to manipulate air quality data or explain what observed evidence of manipulation truly actually. This paper argues that instead of indicating widespread falsification of air quality data, this evidence is indicative of incentives for selective enforcement effort. The paper backs this argument by drawing on qualitative and quantitative evidence from a recent air quality improvement campaign in the province-ranked municipality of Chongqing. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of such selective enforcement effort for public trust in publicly reported environmental data.