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"Juking the Stats? Authoritarian Information Problems in China"

Abstract

Social scientists question the veracity of the statements of politicians, yet officially released economic statistics are rarely treated with similar skepticism. Such statistics inform citizens on general conditions while central leaders also use them to evaluate local officials. Are economic data systematically manipulated? After establishing discrepancies in economic data-series across regime types cross-nationally, I dive into sub-national growth data in China. This paper leverages variation in the likelihood of manipulation over two dimensions, arguing that politically sensitive data are more likely to be manipulated at politically sensitive times. GDP releases generate headlines, while highly correlated electricity production and consumption data are less closely watched. At the sub-national level in China, the difference between GDP and electricity growth increases in years with leadership turnover, consistent with juking the stats for political reasons. The analysis points to the political role of information and the limits of non-electoral accountability mechanisms in dictatorships as well as suggesting caution in the use of politically sensitive official economic statistics.