**Does Public Participation Matter?**

**Evidence from a National-Scale Experiment on the Enforcement of Environmental Regulations in China**

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**Abstract**

Countries around the world rely on public disclosure programs to aid in the enforcement of environmental regulations, yet little is known about whether they are effective and if they are what makes them so. We layer a national-scale field experiment that randomly directs information on pollution violations to either regulators or the violating firms through public or private channels. Publicly appealing to the regulator of a firm’s violation through Weibo (a popular Chinese social media platform that is comparable to Twitter) increases both regulatory oversight and firm compliance, which reduce subsequent violations by 40% and air and water pollution emissions by 12% and 5%, respectively. In contrast, appealing to the regulator through private channels only causes a small and statistically insignificant improvement in environmental outcomes. Additionally, we randomly vary the proportion of firms subject to appeals at the prefecture-level and find that there is a positive general equilibrium impact as the control firms in high-intensity prefectures reduce violations more than control firms in low-intensity prefectures. Analysis of ambient pollution data and additional back-of-the-envelope calculations both suggest that encouraging public participation in environmental governance would lead to significant improvements in China’s aggregate environmental quality.

Keywords: citizen participation, environmental governance, pollution appeals

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