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Services in Need are Services Indeed: The Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Chinese Welfare Policy Preferences

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ABSTRACT

Using an original survey conducted in China, this study examines Chinese citizens' attitudes toward various welfare programs in the COVID-19 era and how lockdowns affect citizens' preferences for government spending plans. We find that those affected by the lockdown are more likely to support welfare programs. Furthermore, those who have been most severely impacted by the lockdown are more supportive of government spending plans to fund welfare programs that help citizens ease concerns about food insecurity, job loss, and health risks than they are of funding welfare programs that are less likely to do so.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 lockdown; crisis management; public opinion; welfare policies; China

Introduction



How do people's attitudes and preferences toward various welfare services and government spending plans change as a result of unique experiences like the global pandemic? Existing research indicates that citizens' prior exposure to disasters or public crises influences their perception and expectation of general government performance at various levels (e.g., Darr et al., 2019). Recent studies reveal the impact of public health crises, such as COVID-19, on welfare state attitudes, with a particular focus on European countries (Busemeyer, 2023; Ebbinghaus et al., 2022; Enggist et al., 2022; Reeskens et al., 2021). However, few studies investigate how citizens' experience of the COVID-19 crisis shapes their attitudes toward different types of social welfare services in other institutional contexts. This article highlights an underexamined dimension of welfare policy preferences in developing countries such as China: the urgency and high demand for welfare services. It emphasizes the role of the special context of COVID-19 lockdowns and lockdown-related conditions in shaping citizens' welfare attitudes and fiscal policy preferences.

Despite the extensive literature on the COVID-19 lockdown's economic impacts (Allen, 2022), sociopolitical impacts (Alam et al., 2024; Bol et al., 2021; Han et al., 2024), and environmental impacts (Bar, 2021; Mahato et al., 2020), a gap on lockdown-related welfare


attitudes remains to be addressed. For instance, does the COVID-19 lockdown strengthen or weaken public support for welfare policies? How does such a significant shock influence individuals' policy preferences regarding government spending on various types of welfare services? To address these questions, we conducted an original survey experiment in the summer of 2022 in Shanghai and Nanjing, two major cities in eastern China. The study explores how individuals' experiences and perceptions of the COVID-19 lockdown influence their overall support for welfare policies and their preferences for specific fiscal policies.

China is a unique case to study among all the countries imposing stringent state measures in COVID-19 response, given its role as the first country to identify the pandemic, the most well-known "Zero-COVID" policy implementation, and extensive citywide or district-wide lockdowns regardless of social and economic costs. The then-constant stringency of lockdowns in China, as demonstrated by daily screening, nucleic acid amplification tests, stringent travel restrictions, and, most significantly, self-quarantine, presents a unique opportunity to examine the effects of COVID-19 lockdowns on citizens' attitudes toward various types of welfare services.¹

In terms of site selection, this study focuses on Shanghai and Nanjing, two major cities in eastern China. Despite their proximity and many similar socio-economic features, the citywide COVID-19 prevention

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and control measures in these two cities were at different levels of strictness. Shanghai was under a strict city-wide lockdown from March 28 to June 1, 2022,² whereas Nanjing had never had one, though streets, villages, or communities designated as “high-risk zones” in Nanjing were also under lockdown during the same period (Reuters, 2022). Moreover, the Chinese government had previously insisted on carrying out the “dynamic zero-case policy” and enacted lockdown procedures in cities where new COVID-19 cases occurred (Wakabayashi, 2022). Therefore, these two cities represented two typical lockdown patterns of major Chinese cities during the pandemic. Recruiting respondents from both cities could enhance the diversity of data sources and improve the external validity of our research findings.

In order to isolate the effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on citizens’ welfare attitudes, we ask respondents in both cities questions about their individual experiences with the lockdown. Our survey experiment results show that people who perceive the COVID-19 lockdown impacted them are more likely to show greater welfare support in terms of various individual welfare programs than citizens who don’t think they were affected by the lockdown. Moreover, individuals most severely affected by the lockdown expressed stronger support for increased government spending on welfare services that directly address the losses caused by COVID-19 and related strict control measures. Compared to fiscal proposals for increasing public spending on maternity insurance and work-related injury insurance, they showed greater support for welfare programs such as assistance for daily necessities, unemployment insurance, and health insurance.

This article makes threefold contributions. First, it focuses on welfare attitudes in a unique context—the COVID-19 lockdown—and has global implications beyond a single country. Numerous studies have already investigated various determinants of welfare attitudes, such as socioeconomic conditions and economic crises (e.g., Blekesaune, 2007; Durr, 1993; Margalit, 2013), risk exposure and economic vulnerability (Baldwin, 1990; Hacker et al., 2013; Häusermann et al., 2015; Iversen & Soskice, 2001; Kitschelt & Rehm, 2006; Rehm, 2009, 2011; Rehm et al., 2012; Schwander & Häusermann, 2013), and ideologies (Gevers et al., 2000; Qi & Haselswerdt, 2024). Recent studies have also examined how the global public health crisis, COVID-19, has affected citizens’ welfare attitudes; however, they have not found similar effects of the pandemic on welfare attitudes and ideological change (Ares et al., 2021; Blumenau et al., 2021). This article contributes to the existing knowledge of welfare policy preferences by

examining the complex effects of special public health circumstances on citizens’ welfare attitudes in different institutional contexts. Although it focuses on China’s relatively severe lockdown cases, lockdowns have been widely employed in many other countries. By the end of March 2020, over 100 countries had imposed either a full or partial lockdown, affecting billions of people (BBC News, 2020). According to a recent study, during the pandemic, more stringent lockdowns were linked to both lower life satisfaction and higher loneliness (Grimes, 2022).

Furthermore, failure to respond to welfare demands may result in widespread public complaints and concerns during the crisis, though the relationship between welfare attitudes and public grievances can vary depending on a variety of factors, including the country, political climate, and the specific issue being protested (Twala, 2014). Lockdown-related disruptions may cause an increased sense of fear, which has been described as one of the main reaction emotions linked to the emergence of a variety of protests and collective behaviors (Snow, 2022). Thus, the findings of this study have global implications that extend beyond China. In today’s uncertain and unequal world, understanding the effects of extreme occurrences, such as global epidemics, on individuals’ support for welfare programs and their political behaviors may have significant implications for global governance, strategic response, and policy innovations in times of emergency (Dorlach, 2023; Quaglia & Verdun, 2023; Sinclair, 2022; Zaki, 2023).

Second, this article investigates how the lockdown affects citizens’ attitudes toward welfare policies and confirms the policy feedback effect, which states that experience with the lockdown policy may influence public opinion toward different welfare programs and welfare policy preferences. We look into the welfare policies to increase government spending on five different kinds of welfare services, including assistance in daily necessities, unemployment insurance, and health insurance as Type I welfare programs, as well as maternity insurance and work-related injury insurance as Type II welfare policies. In this way, this article captures the micro-level variations in welfare support, providing valuable insights into citizens’ welfare support priorities following an emergency.

Third, this study employs a combination of a regular survey component and an experimental design to examine the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on citizens’ welfare attitudes toward different welfare programs and their preferences for government welfare spending plans, respectively. One part of the survey design is simply a list of survey questions to test the first

hypothesis that subjects who have experienced lockdowns are more likely to show greater general welfare support toward various welfare programs. Another part of the survey is the experimental design to test the second hypothesis that subjects who have been affected by lockdowns are more likely to support increased government spending on Type I welfare policies. Given that the intensity of the COVID-19 lockdown cannot be manipulated, the experimental manipulation focuses on the type of welfare spending, with the assumption that Type I welfare policies are more related to crisis management than Type II policies. We look at whether this effect differs depending on the scale of citizens' perceived lockdown impact. In this way, we can examine the impacts of lockdowns on both citizens' general welfare support and their preferences for particular welfare policies.

The article proceeds as follows. Following a review of various theoretical explanations for welfare policy preferences and the link between welfare demands and public complaints, we propose a theory of welfare attitudes under emergency that emphasizes the underappreciated dimension—the urgency and high demand for welfare services during a public crisis. Based on the theory, we develop some related hypotheses concerning different aspects of welfare attitudes during an emergency, including perceptions of being affected by the COVID-19 lockdown and potential preferences for different types of welfare services. The section that follows describes the method and data source used in this study. This study employs the ordered logit models to test our key hypotheses using data from an original survey experiment conducted in Shanghai and Nanjing in eastern China. The following section will present the main findings. Finally, this article provides a summary of the main findings, their implications for a wider range of contexts, and future research directions.

Theory and hypotheses

Individual-level explanations for welfare attitudes or welfare policy preferences can be divided into two categories. The first one is the self-interest thesis, which holds that people with socioeconomic vulnerability or who benefit directly from the welfare system are more likely to show greater support for the welfare system (Blekesaune, 2007; Svallfors, 1997). The second one is the ideology thesis, which contends that welfare attitudes stem from general ideological orientations or value systems concerning equality, social justice, and the proper relationship between individuals and the state (Bean & Papadakis, 1998; Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Gevers et al., 2000; Sears et al., 1980). According

to this approach, people with egalitarian and humanitarian values and left-wing ideology are more likely to support welfare programs than citizens with individualism and right-wing ideology (Feldman & Zaller, 1992; Qi & Haselswerdt, 2024).

In addition, a wealth of literature demonstrates that a variety of personal, institutional, and policy-related factors explain variations in welfare program participation or support for welfare policies (Huang & Cheng, 2014). First, personal characteristics such as age, gender, education, and length of stay (migrant or non-migrant) are considered. Second, individuals' welfare attitudes, such as attitudes toward inequality and the role of governments in redistribution or trust in governments, are examined (Hetherington, 2005). Third, institutions matter. People in the welfare state system in Scandinavian countries, for example, are more likely to favor welfare policies than people in conservative or liberal countries (Svallfors, 1997). Fourth, beyond individual and institutional factors, existing policies shape public opinion on social welfare programs through policy-opinion links, which is especially important in non-democracies that lack an election system to reflect mass opinion (Im & Meng, 2016). According to the policy-feedback theory, the implementation of social policies and the design of welfare programs can influence individual-level preferences through a feedback loop between public opinion and policy, sometimes also called “spill-over” effects or “path dependency” (Dalen, 2022; Mettler & SoRelle, 2018).

Furthermore, special contexts, particularly economically difficult contexts, such as prior experience with social welfare programs (Im & Meng, 2016), economic cycles, and labor market conditions, may influence welfare support and participation (Huang & Cheng, 2014). For example, when it is difficult to get employed in the labor market, migrants are more likely to apply for welfare (Hu, 1998; Huang & Cheng, 2014, p. 187). Meanwhile, some existing studies also focus on specific groups of people as different categories of welfare service recipients or welfare program participants, particularly some special social groups such as migrant workers (rural migrants or migrants from other urban areas), with subgroups such as included, partially included, and transition groups falling under this same category (Huang & Cheng, 2014). In addition, recent efforts were made to explore the trade-offs between different policy programs and social policy priorities (Häusermann et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, few of the aforementioned studies focus on how the public health crisis, such as a global pandemic and its associated prevention and control measures affecting all aspects of life, shape individuals'

welfare support for different types of welfare services or programs. Since the first cases of COVID-19 were discovered in China in December 2019, the number of confirmed cases and affected people have been rapidly increasing worldwide. With the rise of different variants, the constantly changing dynamics of the global pandemic have led to a series of stringent state measures. Lockdown at various scales (citywide, district-wide, community, and building lockdown), “Zero-COVID” policy, “static management,” and “Find, Test, Trace, Isolate, and Support” (FTTIS) are examples of state control and prevention measures used in countries with a highly centralized institutional environment, such as China.

Recent studies reveal the effects of COVID-19 lockdown on the economy (Allen, 2022), the environment (Bar, 2021; Mahato et al., 2020), physical and mental health (Atalan, 2020; Saqib et al., 2020), education (Kapasia et al., 2020), coping strategies (Oum & Wang, 2020; Salin et al., 2020), purchasing and consumption behaviors (Li et al., 2022), social trust (Daniele et al., 2020), and political support (Bol et al., 2021). These studies all agree that COVID-19 lockdowns caused a slew of socioeconomic, environmental, and psychological changes, including economic insecurity and health concerns. Moreover, considering the link between welfare attitudes and public complaints, unsatisfied welfare demands may lead to widespread public grievances during the crisis. For example, individuals who have positive attitudes toward welfare programs may be more likely to support and participate in protests related to social justice and equity issues, including those related to access to healthcare, affordable housing, and education, especially when their welfare needs cannot be met. They may see these protests as a way to advocate for the needs and rights of vulnerable or marginalized communities (Gonzalez & Le Foulon, 2020; Onivehu, 2021). It is worth noting, however, that the relationship between welfare attitudes and public complaints is complex and nuanced and may be influenced by many factors beyond just an individual’s beliefs about government support programs. Other factors such as political ideology, social class, and personal experiences with poverty or inequality may also play a role in shaping public grievances and attitudes toward welfare policies.

This article proposes a theory of welfare attitudes under emergency by emphasizing an underexamined dimension of welfare policy preferences: the urgency and neediness of welfare services or programs. It bridges the two strands of literature on welfare attitudes and lockdown effects. Although existing studies provide a typology of welfare policies show a series of fixed features such as widespread, targeted, contributory,

and means-tested welfare services (Edlund, 2006; Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1989; He et al., 2021), few investigate how the urgency and neediness of certain welfare services affect citizens’ welfare attitudes in special contexts. For example, particular social programs such as food stamps, unemployment insurance, and health insurance can assist the affected citizens in reducing their concerns about the potential food shortages, income losses, and psychological stress and panic caused by the COVID-19 lockdown. Therefore, for citizens who have been severely affected by COVID-19 lockdowns, these welfare programs should be high on the government’s list of priorities when it comes to allocating fiscal funding.

Based on the theory of welfare attitudes in times of emergency, we develop the following hypotheses by linking welfare policies to their respective lockdown-related concerns, particularly socioeconomic vulnerability, emotional insecurity, and health concerns. There are several potential influence mechanisms by which the COVID-19 lockdown could raise concerns about specific welfare programs. For example, the lockdown may have caused inconvenience in the transportation of daily goods and necessities, as well as increased fear of scarcity of daily necessities, making people who experienced or are experiencing the lockdown more likely to support the increase of government welfare spending on assistance for daily necessities. Meanwhile, the lockdown may have resulted in company shutdowns, semi-shutdowns, and bankruptcies, increasing the affected citizens’ chances of unemployment or concerns about being jobless, and thus their welfare support for unemployment insurance and other work-related welfare services.

Furthermore, as an influential and widespread public health crisis, the COVID-19 lockdown may have harmed citizens’ physical and mental health when they could not have access to adequate medical resources in hospitals and therapy services at counseling centers as those in normal times, therefore resulting in a stronger welfare preference for increased government spending on health insurance. As a result of the pandemic and related stringent control measures, we anticipate that Chinese citizens affected by lockdowns could show greater general support for many welfare programs. However, we do not anticipate that the COVID-19 lockdown will have the same effect on citizens’ support for different types of welfare policies. Fiscal policy to increase government spending on a certain type of welfare programs, such as assistance for daily necessities (ADN), unemployment insurance (UI), and health insurance (HI) (**Type I welfare programs**), can reduce citizens’ concerns about the possible food shortage, income losses, and psychological stress and panic caused by the COVID-19 lockdown. On the contrary, other major welfare policies

in China, such as maternity insurance (MI) and work-related injury insurance (WII) (**Type II welfare programs**), often fail to provide comprehensive compensation to people for their lockdown-related losses and anxiety during the pandemic due to these programs' limited coverage scope and narrow target population. Given such disparities, it is critical to investigate the effect of residents' perceptions of the COVID-19 lockdown on their support for different types of welfare programs.

Pandemics and natural disasters typically have multiple consequences for human beings (Kousky, 2016; Singh & Singh, 2020). COVID-19 and specific government pandemic policies, for example, may have a negative impact on citizens' mental health in addition to their physical health. As Singh and Singh (2020, p. 168) demonstrate, by reducing social connections between citizens, COVID-19 led to stressful states of loneliness, anxiety, depression, mental disorders, health hazards, and many other issues that impacted the life of the individual and the collective society as a whole. Moreover, as time passes, these negative effects are likely to be fermented and diffused under stringent control measures that restrict or prohibit activities of daily living such as going grocery shopping or traveling. Therefore, we anticipate that the continuation of the COVID-19 lockdown (whether through personal experience, news reports, or other people's descriptions) would raise awareness and perception of the negative impacts of the lockdown and COVID-19 on daily life and health. Such awareness and perception may lead to increased anxiety caused by restrictions on normal activities (e.g., self-quarantine) and increased demand for benefits provided by welfare programs, particularly those that could guarantee citizens' health and basic living needs.

H1: The perception of being affected by the COVID-19 lockdown has a positive effect on citizens' general welfare support toward various individual welfare programs.

H2: The perception of being affected by the COVID-19 lockdown makes citizens more likely to support increased government spending on Type I welfare services than on Type II welfare services.

Method and data

To test these hypotheses, we conducted an original survey experiment (June 29 – July 24, 2022) in Shanghai and Nanjing via an online survey company in China—Reemix Online Technologies Co., Ltd.³ It is a native online survey company in China and runs a crowd-sourcing website that helps researchers recruit respondents to conduct survey experiments. We

recruited 1300 respondents from each city, giving us a total sample of 2,600 participants. We used demographic quotas to create a sample of subjects who, in terms of age, occupation, income structure, and other basic demographic characteristics, are representative of the population in each city. We randomly divided the sample of 1300 respondents in each city into two groups. Respondents in each group received one treatment—either type I welfare spending treatment or type II welfare spending treatment. The following is the wording used to describe the welfare spending plan and information treatments:

Suppose the government has a new spending plan. Under this spending plan, the government will provide a grant to **subsidize citizens' daily necessities, unemployment insurance, and health insurance/subsidize citizens' maternity insurance and work-related injury insurance**. This spending plan would cost the Chinese Treasury about 10 billion yuan per year.

In the description, we also added information about the total government budget for these welfare programs. Mentioning this information could: first, standardize the fiscal information across conditions to avoid situations in which respondents in one condition believe that welfare programs are more costly than those in other conditions; second, remind respondents that the government spending on these welfare programs is not unlimited. After each description, subjects were invited to provide their opinions of the welfare spending plan using a five-point scale ranging from 1 (oppose strongly) to 5 (support strongly), with “neither support nor oppose” as the midpoint option. After that, respondents received a series of questions to capture their attitudes toward particular welfare programs.⁴ These questions were phrased as “Would you like the government to increase social spending in ?” Each question mentioned one welfare program (e.g., assistance for daily necessities, unemployment insurance, and health insurance) and detailed information about the goals of such a welfare program. To construct dependent variables, subjects were prompted to provide their perspectives on these welfare programs using a five-point scale spanning from 1 (oppose strongly) to 5 (support strongly), with “neither support nor oppose” positioned as the midpoint. The full wording of descriptions, questions, and response options can be found in the Supplementary Materials Appendix.

The main rationale for selecting Shanghai and Nanjing is that these two major cities are close to each other and share many similar socioeconomic characteristics, but the former was under strict citywide lockdown between March 28, 2022, and June 1, 2022,

whereas the latter has never experienced the stringent citywide lockdown, although streets, villages, or communities classified as “high-risk zones” were in lockdown in Nanjing during the same period as well.⁵ As of November 10, 2022, China had been continuously enforcing stringent COVID-19 lockdowns in various regions, including Xinjiang, Hainan, Henan, and Guangdong (O’Brien & Hong, 2022). Therefore, Shanghai and Nanjing could be used as two typical examples of major Chinese cities affected by the COVID-19 lockdown, which may have significant and timely global implications. Recruiting respondents from both cities could enhance the diversity of data sources and improve the external validity of our research findings.

To measure the effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on citizens’ welfare attitudes, we asked respondents in both cities questions to examine their individual experiences about the lockdown and perceptions about how the lockdown affects their own lives. For example, all respondents were asked, “To what extent do you think the COVID-19 lockdown has affected your life?” Options ranging from 1 (have not been affected at all) to 4 (have been affected a lot) constructed the key independent variable of interest, *Lockdown impact*. This variable is used to test H1, and the interaction between this variable and *Type I welfare treatment* is applied to test H2. Because we recruited respondents from districts in Shanghai and Nanjing, we applied district-fixed effects in our model specifications to control for any unobserved heterogeneity across districts.

In addition, we include a series of variables measuring respondents’ demographic characteristics, such as *Welfare ideology* (= 1 if respondents perceive that the root cause of poverty in the society is the personal failure or laziness and = 0 otherwise), *Social rights* (= 1 if respondents strongly disapprove of the statement that “people with nonlocal *hukou*⁶ should be given the same access to social welfare and public services as local people” and = 5 if respondents strongly approve this statement), *CCP party identification* (= 1 if yes and = 0 if no), *Local hukou* (= 1 if yes and = 0 if no), *Urban hukou* (= 1 if yes and = 0 if no), *Unemployed* (= 1 if yes and = 0 if no), *Age* (five-point scale), *Gender* (Male = 1 and Female = 0), *Family income* (six-point scale), *Education* (six-point scale), and a series of occupation indicators.

Results

To test our hypotheses, we use ordered logit models of policy support, with *Lockdown impact* (H1) and its interaction with the welfare treatment indicator

(H2).⁷ The positive sign of *Lockdown impact* in each model in Table 1 is as expected, meaning that the COVID-19 lockdown has a positive effect on citizens’ support for welfare programs. Although we only received suggestive support for H1 in the model of assistance for daily necessities with controls ($p = .166$), the coefficients of *Lockdown impact* in the other models of welfare programs (e.g., $p = .053$ in the UI model with controls, $p = .041$ in the HI model with controls, $p = .034$ in the MI model with controls, and $p = .007$ in the WII model with controls) are all significant. Therefore, H1 received empirical support. In addition, Supplementary Materials Appendix Figure C.1. graphically displays the effects of *Lockdown impact* on policy support for welfare programs. As this figure presents, citizens affected more severely by the COVID-19 lockdown are more supportive of welfare programs. For example, all other things being equal, the probability of strong support for health insurance for respondents who were not affected at all by the COVID-19 lockdown is 52%, while the probability of strong support for health insurance if respondents were affected a lot by the lockdown is 61%.

In our welfare spending plan experiment, different participants were exposed to information on different types of welfare programs that would receive new government funding. During the lockdown period, respondents displayed strong and undifferentiated support for increasing funding for both types of welfare programs. As Table 2 presents, support for the welfare spending plan is 4.13 (standard deviation .82) out of 5 under Type I welfare programs treatment and is also 4.13 (standard deviation .83) out of 5 under Type II welfare programs treatment. That is, there is no evidence to suggest treatment differences across treatment groups, though we do not have formal hypotheses regarding unconditional treatment group differences.

However, the surface similarity across treatment groups likely obscures disparities in citizens’ lockdown experience in response to distinct types of information. To explore this possibility, we employ ordered logit models of welfare spending support and Figure 1, as recommended by Brambor et al. (2006), to graphically display the effects of *Type I welfare treatment* and *Type II welfare treatment* on support for the government welfare spending plan across the range of *Lockdown impact*.⁸ As this figure shows, although the effects of the two treatments are indistinguishable among less prominent lockdown impacts, for those most affected by the lockdown, increasing funding for Type I welfare programs is significantly more appealing to them than providing more spending on Type II welfare programs. Therefore, H2, which anticipates that the impacts of lockdown on citizens’ attitudes toward different welfare

Table 1. Effects of lockdown impact on support for welfare programs.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	ADN	ADN	UI	UI	HI	HI	MI	MI	WII	WII
Lockdown impact	0.11** (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.12** (0.05)	0.10* (0.05)	0.14*** (0.05)	0.11** (0.06)	0.14** (0.05)	0.12** (0.06)	0.16*** (0.05)	0.15*** (0.06)
Welfare ideology		-0.18** (0.08)		-0.21*** (0.08)		-0.29*** (0.08)		-0.22*** (0.08)		-0.06 (0.08)
Social rights		0.18*** (0.04)		0.23*** (0.04)		0.26*** (0.04)		0.31*** (0.04)		0.30*** (0.04)
CCP party ID		-0.07 (0.11)		-0.05 (0.11)		-0.31*** (0.11)		-0.22** (0.11)		-0.19* (0.11)
Local hukou		0.15* (0.09)		0.13 (0.09)		0.08 (0.09)		0.01 (0.09)		0.03 (0.09)
Urban hukou		-0.09 (0.10)		-0.15 (0.10)		-0.16 (0.10)		-0.25** (0.10)		-0.13 (0.10)
Unemployed		0.61*** (0.22)		0.75*** (0.22)		0.53** (0.24)		0.64*** (0.24)		0.58** (0.24)
Age		0.00 (0.03)		0.06* (0.03)		0.06 (0.04)		0.00 (0.04)		-0.03 (0.04)
Female		-0.06 (0.08)		-0.06 (0.08)		0.04 (0.08)		0.18** (0.08)		0.10 (0.08)
Education		0.09* (0.05)		0.05 (0.05)		-0.00 (0.05)		0.06 (0.05)		0.03 (0.05)
Family Income		-0.05 (0.03)		-0.03 (0.03)		0.03 (0.04)		0.06* (0.04)		-0.06* (0.04)
Service personnel		0.16 (0.29)		-0.03 (0.28)		0.07 (0.31)		-0.11 (0.30)		-0.14 (0.30)
Self-employed personnel		0.13 (0.18)		0.04 (0.17)		-0.03 (0.18)		-0.13 (0.18)		-0.16 (0.19)
Workers		0.09 (0.26)		0.14 (0.25)		0.13 (0.26)		0.08 (0.26)		-0.17 (0.27)
Private or foreign company staff		0.12 (0.18)		0.21 (0.18)		0.42** (0.19)		0.08 (0.19)		-0.11 (0.19)
Public agency staff		0.14 (0.20)		0.03 (0.19)		0.18 (0.20)		0.01 (0.21)		0.00 (0.21)
Homemaker		-0.76* (0.39)		-0.32 (0.41)		-0.16 (0.41)		-0.08 (0.43)		-0.51 (0.42)
Student		-0.05 (0.18)		-0.15 (0.18)		-0.26 (0.19)		-0.39** (0.19)		-0.49** (0.19)
Other occupations		0.39 (0.33)		0.14 (0.32)		0.24 (0.35)		-0.16 (0.33)		-0.04 (0.35)
District fixed effects	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	2600	2600	2600	2600	2600	2600	2600	2600	2600	2600
Pseudo R-squared	0.001	0.014	0.001	0.021	0.001	0.034	0.001	0.031	0.002	0.025

Estimates are ordered logistic regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

ADN: assistance for daily necessities, UI: unemployment insurance, HI: health insurance, MI: maternity insurance, WII: work-related injury insurance.

Table 2. Mean support for welfare spending plan across treatment conditions.

Policy	Type I welfare spending treatment	Type II welfare spending treatment	<i>p</i>
Welfare spending plan	4.13 (.02)	4.13 (.02)	.87

Standard errors in parentheses. -values are two-tailed.

programs are not identical, received empirical support, though it is limited in scope.

Conclusion and discussion

The survey results from China show that some of the key hypotheses on welfare attitudes under the emergency are supported. Citizens' perceptions of being affected by the COVID-19 lockdown led to their stronger general welfare support to distribute various welfare benefits. Moreover, this study provides important

empirical evidence of the moderating effect of lockdown impact on citizens' policy preferences regarding different types of welfare programs—among people most severely affected by the lockdown, support for government spending increases on the most needed welfare services, such as assistance in daily necessities, unemployment insurance, and health insurance, is significantly greater than support for other types of welfare programs, such as maternity insurance and work-related injury insurance. However, there is no clear

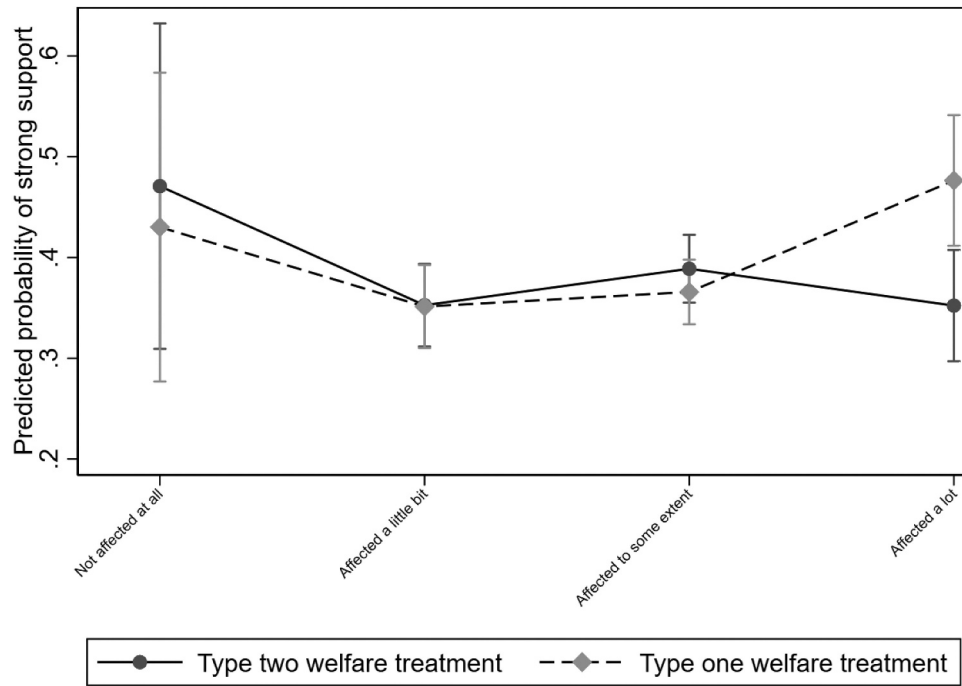


Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of strong support for government welfare spending plan across treatment groups and lockdown impacts (non-linear). Predictions and 95% confidence intervals generated from ordered logit models with control variables. Data are calculated according to Model 4 in Table C.2.

evidence that the lockdown has a more positive impact on welfare support for low-income citizens than for high-income citizens or for self-employed individuals than for employees of public agencies.

When it comes to influence mechanisms, there are a number of potential avenues through which the COVID lockdown may impact citizens' preferences for welfare policies. These include vulnerabilities related to financial interests, psychological perception, and structural constraints during the pandemic. One possible explanation for these findings could be that in times of emergency, particularly when economic conditions and the job market are under extreme uncertainty with lockdown and other stringent state measures during the pandemic, individual citizens are more likely to feel vulnerable in many ways. According to the self-interest thesis, citizens who are more vulnerable or more likely to be beneficiaries of welfare services, such as unemployment and health insurance during the COVID-19 lockdown, are more likely to have stronger welfare support. When we add another dimension to the analysis—the urgency and high demand for welfare services during the pandemic—this study yields some consistent results, as expected.

Most people experience multiple layers of vulnerability due to various types of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to other crises, such as natural disasters, in an infectious pandemic like this, individuals who

lack access to adequate medical care and social protection may endanger both their own and others' lives, meaning that as ordinary citizens, we are only as safe as the most vulnerable among us. In a similar vein, if one country is unable to contain the virus, other countries will become infected and re-infected on a larger scale. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the vast majority of workers do not have the economic security to take time off for illness or deal with unforeseen circumstances during the pandemic. Less than two-thirds of all countries have social insurance and/or social assistance programs in place that provide sickness or unemployment benefits. Thus, those who are ill frequently have to choose between paying their bills and jeopardizing their own and the public's health. Therefore, by investigating the extreme case of COVID-19 lockdowns in China, this study offers some clues and insights into how stringent state measures in coping with public health crises could impact citizens' welfare policy preferences. This could teach other countries some valuable lessons and have wider policy ramifications.

This study adds to the existing literature on the intersection of crisis management and welfare attitudes by investigating the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the affected population's attitudes toward specific types of welfare services. It also offers timely practical implications for global governance and welfare policy-making in times of crises, particularly on how to

manage limited resources in order to make cost-effective policy decisions that maximize public benefits and ensure social stability. While this study examines the case of China within the broader theoretical framework of welfare attitudes during crises, its findings may have significant implications for welfare support and policies across diverse citizen groups in various societies. For instance, during a public crisis, the government should prioritize delivering essential public services and welfare programs that are most urgently needed while also increasing investments to support vulnerable populations and those without stable employment. This becomes even more critical when responding to a crisis under budgetary constraints.

Admittedly, our study design has limitations. For example, while we examine the effects of citizens' past experiences with lockdowns on their support for welfare policies, their expectations about future lockdowns may also influence their policy preferences. Future research could explore this potential mechanism and examine whether there is a difference in effect size between individuals' past policy experiences and their expectations of future policy experiences. In addition, the inability to randomize citizens' lockdown experiences required us to rely on observational data to assess the impact of lockdowns. Also, the cross-sectional structure of our dataset limited our capacity to shed light on how the pandemic dynamically alters people's policy attitudes over time. We encourage scholars to draw insights from our work and develop more compelling studies that advance the understanding of the complex relationship between public health crises and social welfare. Moreover, while we use subjective measures to directly assess Chinese citizens' perceptions of lockdown impacts, this approach may not fully align with objective reality and could introduce response biases (e.g., Eick & Busemeyer, 2023). Future studies can incorporate both subjective and objective measures of lockdown impacts to strengthen the validity and relevance of their findings.

Finally, future studies on the relationship between crisis-related welfare attitudes and political behavior are warranted. When the demand for welfare services remains unmet during a crisis, people are more likely to express their grievances through various channels, such as protests and demonstrations. This article examines the impact of physical constraints and policy interventions during lockdowns on public perceptions of welfare programs and policies. Unmet public demands for welfare services during the pandemic may serve as a catalyst for shifts in citizens' political attitudes and behaviors. We acknowledge the limitations of this study, as it relies solely on survey data from two major Chinese cities. To

gain a more comprehensive understanding of how lockdown patterns influence welfare support across different contexts, future research should incorporate cross-city and cross-national studies using both small-N and large-N analyses. Additionally, further research is needed to explore the interaction between institutional contexts (autocracy vs. democracy) and policy approaches (lockdown vs. non-lockdown) in shaping welfare support over both the short and long term.

Notes

1. For example, according to CNN, during August 20–September 5, 2022, at least 74 cities in China, including 15 provincial capitals and Tianjin, a provincial-level municipality with a combined population of 313 million, had imposed lockdowns that covered entire cities, districts, or multiple neighborhoods (Gan et al., 2022). More details can be found here: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/05/china/china-covid-lockdown-74-cities-intl-hnk/index.html> [Date Accessed: November 8, 2022].
2. More detailed information about the timeline and policies related to the COVID-19 lockdown in Shanghai can be found here: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/shanghai-city-lift-lockdown-restrictions-june-1-2022-05-30/> [Date Accessed: June 21, 2022]
3. The research project and the hypotheses mentioned in the article have been pre-registered in the Open Science Framework Registry prior to the receipt of the data. Moreover, this study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). To save space, we do not report findings for two hypotheses in the body text—results for the two hypotheses can be found in Supplementary Materials Appendix C (Table C.3., Table C.4., Figure C.3., and Figure C.4.). In short, the COVID-19 lockdown does not necessarily have a greater positive impact on welfare support for low-income citizens and self-employed personnel than it does on welfare support for high-income citizens and public-sector employees.
4. We randomized the order of these questions.
5. According to the official website of the Nanjing municipal government, from March 3, 2020, to June 4, 2022, streets, villages, or communities classified as “medium-risk or high-risk zones” were under lockdown in Nanjing. All 11 districts in Nanjing had streets, villages, or communities that experienced lockdown during this period, but there were no cases of entire lockdown at the district level. For low-risk areas in Nanjing, residents are not restricted to travel, but nucleic acid test reports are required to enter and exit these areas. For detailed information about COVID-19-related policies and reports in Nanjing, please refer to: <https://www.nanjing.gov.cn/zt/yqfk/> [Date Accessed: June 20, 2022].
6. *Hukou* is the official household registration system in China, and it can be used to determine whether or not a person is a permanent resident of a given area. Nonlocal *hukou* holders are identified as nonlocal citizens who do not have access to welfare benefits reserved

for local citizens, such as public schooling for their children.

7. We also imply sub-group analyses by city (Nanjing and Shanghai) to test H1 and H2. Results are reported in Supplementary Materials Appendix Table C.5., Table C.6., and Table C.7.
8. We also present results with the less flexible linear specification of *Lockdown impact* with the appropriate interaction in Supplementary Materials Appendix (Table C.1. and Figure C.2.). These results also support H2: the effect of *Type I welfare treatment* keeps increasing across *Lockdown impact* scale while the effect of *Type II welfare treatment* continues to descend as the scale of *Lockdown impact* increases. Moreover, the interaction term between *Lockdown impact* and *Type I welfare treatment* is signed as expected, and the coefficient of the interaction term is marginally significant ($p = .072$ with controls).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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