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Sara A. Newland

Smith College, snewland@smith.edu

John Chung En Liu

National Taiwan University

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Ethnic identity and local government responsiveness in Taiwan

Sara A. Newland¹  | John Chung-En Liu²

¹Department of Government, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, USA

²Department of Sociology, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan

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Abstract

Countless studies have shown that local officials are less responsive to ethnic minority citizens. Surprisingly, we find no similar pattern of discrimination by Taiwanese local officials. In an online contacting experiment, we send citizen service requests to the websites of 358 township and district chiefs, randomly varying the name of the putative citizen to reflect an indigenous or an ethnically Chinese identity and collecting data on officials' responses. We find that officials are equally responsive to both identities. Drawing on in-depth interviews and nonparticipant observation in government service centers, we attribute this surprising finding to institutional elements of Taiwan's local bureaucracy that limit the impact of individual-level bias. However, our research provides preliminary evidence that local governments are generally less responsive in indigenous areas. While clearly defined procedures may prevent discrimination against indigenous individuals, interregional differences in local state capacity can nonetheless produce unequal experiences with local governance.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Does the presence of an elite bureaucracy, operating according to rules that limit bureaucratic discretion, diminish ethnic bias in responsiveness? Since 2011, a series of experiments has

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demonstrated that officials are less likely to respond to online requests for help from citizens who are ethnic or religious minorities. In both democracies and autocracies, these studies suggest that in-group bias leads officials to be more responsive to members of their own ethnic group. Since most officials are not ethnic minorities, in-group bias leads to lower response rates or lower-quality responses to requests from minority citizens.

These findings have been replicated in diverse contexts ranging from the United States to South Africa and mainland China (Butler & Broockman, 2011; Distelhorst & Hou, 2014; McClendon, 2016). And there are many reasons to believe that we should observe the same pattern in Taiwan, where there is ample evidence of discriminatory attitudes and behavior toward indigenous people. In 2018, newly appointed Executive Yuan spokesperson Kolas Yotaka was ridiculed by netizens and DPP critics for using a Romanized spelling of her indigenous name instead of a Chinese name.¹ Recently, indigenous activists in Taiwan have also protested violations of indigenous land rights, tourists' lack of respect for indigenous culture, and the absence of meaningful language rights.² Indeed, the vibrancy of Taiwan's indigenous rights movement in recent years is a response to indigenous groups' long history of poverty and discrimination (Huang & Liu, 2016).

It is perhaps surprising, then, that we find no evidence that local officials in Taiwan are less responsive to indigenous citizens than to ethnically Chinese ones. Indeed, across a range of parametric and nonparametric specifications, and across four different measures of responsiveness—whether officials respond to a citizen's request for help, and the length, timeliness, and quality of that response—we observe no statistically significant differences between the responses to putatively Han and indigenous citizens. Drawing on in-depth interviews with officials and citizens, nonparticipant observation in district service centers,³ and government documents, we argue that the distinctive character of Taiwan's bureaucracy limits opportunities for discriminatory behavior. The bureaucracy—an elite, highly regularized descendent of the earlier “developmental state” (Johnson, 1982; Wade, 2004)—effectively constrains local public servants and creates few opportunities for the kind of individual discretion that can lead to discrimination, at least in the context of online responses to constituent service requests. However, the absence of *individual* discrimination does not imply the absence of *structural* barriers to access that disproportionately affect indigenous people. While some of Taiwan's local governments are adept at using websites, smartphone apps, and other relatively new tools to connect with and respond to citizens, others are largely unable to use these tools effectively. Because these problems occur disproportionately in areas with relatively large indigenous populations, these groups may be poorly served by new e-governance mechanisms even in the absence of overt discrimination.

This article thus seeks to make three main contributions. First, we expand the methodological toolbox that has been used to study local government responsiveness. Online contacting experiments are useful for causal inference, but leave important questions about external validity unanswered. Furthermore, the lack of qualitative evidence in these studies can make it difficult to identify the causal mechanisms that produce their results. We therefore complement an experiment with interviews and nonparticipant observation in the social services office of several local government service centers (*qugongsuo*) to better understand how local officials serve citizens in face-to-face encounters, and why we fail to observe the patterns of bias that seem so pervasive elsewhere in the world. Second, this methodological contribution leads to an important substantive insight: Taiwan's particular blend of local-level institutions for streamlining the work of local officials, and monitoring their performance, helps to limit opportunities for bias. Finally, our results point to the importance of contextualizing experimental results within

broader observational data. Even when a given official is equally responsive to Han and indigenous citizens, ethnic inequality may still emerge if local governments are less responsive to *all* citizens in the places where indigenous people disproportionately live.

2 | EXISTING LITERATURE

Contacting experiments are widely used to understand local officials' responsiveness to citizens. By randomly varying either the identity of the putative citizen reaching out to officials or the content of the citizen's appeal, researchers seek to understand to whom—and to what kinds of messages—officials are most responsive. In democracies and autocracies alike, existing research has shown that local officials tend to be more responsive to members of the ethnic majority population, a result largely attributed to in-group bias that leads politicians from both ethnic majority and ethnic minority groups to favor their fellow group members (Alesina, Glaeser, & Sacerdote, 2001; Butler & Broockman, 2011; Distelhorst & Hou, 2014; McClendon, 2016; White, Nathan, & Faller, 2015). Perhaps surprisingly, these results seem quite consistent across authoritarian and democratic contexts, although responsiveness may be driven by different motivations in the two.⁴ Overall, Costa (2017)'s meta-analysis suggests that minority constituents are almost ten percentage points less likely to receive responses than their nonminority counterparts. One limitation of the existing experimental literature is that it does not assess whether (or why) the same dynamics guide officials' decision making regarding online and in-person responsiveness. This article thus makes an important contribution by embedding an online contacting experiment within a broader multi-method approach, conducting ethnographic nonparticipant observation in local government service centers and interviews with local officials in these centers to gain a broader understanding of the dynamics of local government responsiveness.

While the use of audit studies to assess local government responsiveness is a relatively recent development in political science, these studies join a much longer tradition of research into “street-level bureaucracy” (Lipsky, 1980)—the front-line state employees who represent the most frequent point of contact between citizens and government. Lipsky's seminal work on the topic noted that American teachers, police officers, social workers, and other “street-level bureaucrats” do not merely implement social policy, they *make* it. Much recent scholarship has agreed with Lipsky that street-level bureaucrats exercise substantial discretion over their work (Evans, 2010; Evans & Harris, 2004; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), although some follow what Zacka (2017) calls the “compliance model,” assuming street-level bureaucrats to be at their best when they hew as closely as possible to written policies. And some argue that discretion has been substantially limited by the increasing importance of managers and by the role of computers in replacing human “street-level bureaucracy” with largely automated “system-level bureaucracy” (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Lymbery, 1998).

While most scholars agree that street-level bureaucrats continue to exercise some degree of discretion, there is substantial debate over the normative implications of this fact (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018). Some argue that discretion creates opportunities for intrusive, unpredictable, and highly variable services, and for exploitation of citizens who use street-level services (Goodin, 1988). But others see discretion as unavoidable and potentially positive provided that bureaucrats are well equipped for the kind of complex moral decision making that such discretion demands (Zacka, 2017). By bridging the gap between the literatures on street-level bureaucracy and on ethnic bias in government responsiveness, we aim to introduce an

important element to this discussion, drawing attention to the ways in which procedural limitations on bureaucratic discretion may limit opportunities for ethnic bias among “street-level bureaucrats.”

3 | TAIWAN'S EVOLVING POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

The extent of ethnic bias, and the role of political institutions in ameliorating or exacerbating these biases, is a live issue in Taiwan today. Taiwan's indigenous population, which makes up about 2% of the country's population, was historically subjected to brutal treatment by Chinese settlers. Indigenous Taiwanese remain socially disadvantaged relative to the Han Chinese majority; they have a lower education level, a lower life expectancy, and a higher obesity rate (Ho & Tsai, 2007; S.-L. Tsai, 2004; Wen, Tsai, Shih, & Chung, 2004). They face discrimination in the labor market, are often pushed into low-wage jobs, and have trouble accessing social welfare benefits (Chiao, 2008; Chu, 2000; Wang & Wang, 2019). Furthermore, indigenous Taiwanese often suffer from higher rates of mental illness due to the pressure to integrate into Han society (Y.-Y. Tsai, 2007b). In recent years, demands for greater minority inclusion have led to the creation of several new political institutions to represent indigenous interests, most importantly the Council of Indigenous Peoples (a ministry-level entity that is part of the Executive Yuan) and a system of reserved seats for indigenous peoples in the national legislature. However, these institutions have had limited effects on the substantive representation of indigenous peoples' interests, and continued discrimination and racist attitudes toward indigenous peoples mean that these new guarantees on paper may not translate into equal representation in practice (Ku, 2005; Templeman, 2018).

These concerns over the representation of indigenous minorities are one part of a broader national conversation over local governance and representation in Taiwan. A relatively young democracy, Taiwan was ruled by a one-party dictatorship under the Nationalist Party (KMT) for decades. In the 1980s, the KMT began a gradual process of democratization, spurred by both social pressure and ruling party calculations (Slater & Wong, 2013; Yang, 2007). Since holding its first direct presidential election in 1996, Taiwan has gradually reformed its political institutions (Stockton, 2010). These changes have helped to create an increasingly competitive electoral system, albeit one that continues to be marred by charges of personalism and corruption. Alongside Taiwan's developing democratic institutions sits an elite bureaucracy in the tradition of Japan's postwar “developmental state” (Johnson, 1982). Taiwan's bureaucracy is highly educated, elite, and technocratic, and has long played an important role in guiding public policy (Greene, 2008; Wade, 2004; Wong, 2005). In recent years, the bureaucracy has begun to transition into a more service-oriented workforce, with a greater focus on effectively meeting citizens' needs for basic public services.

One increasingly important component of citizen service—for both elected and appointed officials—has been an emphasis on “e-governance” tools. Since the late 1990s, Taiwan's government has demonstrated a strong commitment to using technology to promote better governance, and citizens increasingly take advantage of e-government opportunities like the ability to easily file their taxes online. In 2013 alone, almost 375,000 unique complaints and requests were made to local governments via email, and another 100,000 to the central government (National Development Council [Taiwan], 2010). However, the development of these services has been largely driven by top-down mandates that local governments create particular forms of online services, rather than by bottom-up demands for services from citizens (Hung, 2012).⁵

Our study—as far as we know, the first of its kind in Taiwan—thus has the potential to provide important information about how well officials are actually using the services they have created to respond to citizens' needs.

This article focuses on a set of officials, some elected and others appointed, that play an essential role in basic service provision across Taiwan. Taiwan's 22 cities and counties are divided into 368 districts (164 urban *qu*, 174 rural *xiang*, *zhen*, and *xianxiashi*, and 30 indigenous *shandixiang* and *yuanzhuminqu*). In urban districts, the top official (*quzhang*) is bureaucratically appointed; in rural and indigenous districts, they are directly elected by citizens. For simplicity, we translate the top leader's title as “district chief” across all types of districts. The district chief, and the district-level bureaucracy over which they preside, is responsible for implementation of many of Taiwan's social welfare programs, including the national health insurance program; social welfare programs for the elderly and disabled; local infrastructure and sanitation (garbage disposal, road and streetlight maintenance, pest removal); childcare subsidies; and many others. While these programs are generally funded by, and carried out in consultation with, the government of the city or county in which a given district is located, district-level officials are an important resource for citizens seeking to access Taiwan's social welfare system. While they are certainly not the only “street-level bureaucrats” to whom citizens turn for help—city council members, neighborhood leaders (*lizhang*), and block captains (*linzhang*) are all at the front lines of citizen service as well (Read, 2012)—the district chief and their staff represent an important point of contact between citizens and the local state.

4 | DATA AND METHODS

We submit requests for help, putatively from Taiwanese citizens, to the online “Mayor's Mailbox” or email address of 358 district chiefs, randomly varying the name of the citizen to be indigenous or Han Chinese. We first stratify by district type (elected vs. appointed, with elected districts further stratified into indigenous and nonindigenous districts), randomly assigning treatment within each stratum. We exclude the localities of Kinmen (six townships) and Matsu (four townships), which are geographically and culturally quite distinct from the rest of Taiwan. We then assess whether local politicians are more responsive to requests by ethnically Chinese constituents than others. We measure responsiveness in terms of (a) whether a response is received, (b) response quality (an assessment of how completely they address the putative citizen's needs), (c) response time, and (d) length of response.⁶

In the second round, we swap treatment and control groups—in other words, the politicians that received an email from a putatively indigenous citizen in the first round receive an email from a putatively Han citizen in the second. This enables us not only to compare responsiveness between treatment and control groups in each round, but also to assess the within-person treatment effect (i.e., whether on average each official was less responsive to the indigenous than the Han citizen).

Hello,

My friend told me that the government provides a childcare subsidy. I just had a baby. Can you please tell me how I can meet the application requirements? Thank you!

Randomly assigned Han Chinese or indigenous name

In round one, the English translation of the email that each official received was as follows:

In round two, the email was as follows:

Hello,

I am expecting a baby in December. After I give birth I plan to temporarily stop working. I heard there is a subsidy available. Can you please tell me how to apply?

Randomly assigned Han Chinese or indigenous name

These treatments are useful tools for assessing local government responsiveness for several reasons. First, based on the publicly posted responses to citizen questions on some local government message boards, these are realistic questions that a citizen might pose to the district chief. Second, because the requests are straightforward and relate to a regular part of these officials' duties, responding requires minimal time on the part of officials, an important ethical consideration for IRB approval.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Overall responsiveness is high

After excluding Kinmen and Matsu, any districts that did not provide contact information, and any districts whose email addresses bounced or whose "Mayor's Mailbox" submission forms failed to load, we were able to successfully submit requests for assistance to 328 of Taiwan's 368 district-level administrative divisions (89.1%) in the first round, and 290 in the second round.⁷ We report balance statistics in Table 1 and baseline summary statistics on our four measures of responsiveness in Table 2. On the whole, our results suggest that Taiwan's citizens benefit from unusually high rates of responsiveness, at least where online requests are concerned. We received 268 responses to the 328 requests for help we were able to successfully send in Round 1, a baseline response rate of 81.7%. In cross-national comparison, this rate is extremely high. Costa (2017)'s meta-analysis of 41 experimental studies on responsiveness suggests that the average responsiveness rate in such studies is 53%, and that the highest observed responsiveness rates were the 78–79% response rates in a study conducted in Germany (Grohs, Adam, & Knill, 2015). In Round 2, the response rate declined to 74.8% (217/290)—still quite high by international standards. As early as 2002, other sources described Taiwan as a leader in implementing e-governance programs; our results suggest that Taiwan has remained a global leader in this area (West, 2002).

TABLE 1 Balance statistics

Variable	Indigenous name	Han name	T pval	KS pval
Area (km)	9,605	9,361.4	0.90	0.39
Population	63,232	68,311	0.56	0.63
Indigenous %	8.65	11.23	0.34	0.15
Total income	12,540,478	16,385,741	0.13	0.63
Per capita income	717.09	745.51	0.08	0.12
Tsai Ing-wen vote share	0.36	0.34	0.07	0.06
Sex of district chief	0.14	0.17	0.44	NA

Note: We report balance on valid data (i.e., all cases to which we were able to submit an email or a "Mayor's Mailbox" request in round 1). "KS pval" refers to bootstrapped Kolmogorov–Smirnov *p*-values (from a nonparametric test for the similarity of two continuous distributions).

TABLE 2 Response quality measures (descriptive statistics)

Outcome	Definition	Round	N	Range	Mean	SD
Response	1 if response was received, 0 otherwise	1	328	0–1	0.82	0.39
Response	1 if response was received, 0 otherwise	2	290	0–1	0.75	0.43
Length	Number of words	1	268	22–6,260	457.9	474.4
Length	Number of words	2	217	26.0–5,823.0	424.3	556
Span	Hours to response	1	263	8.52–968	111.32	131.53
Span	Hours to response	2	214	0.47–2,650.53	124.6	251.67
Quality	Five-point scale (NA if no response)	1	268	0–5	3.6	1.2
Quality	Five-point scale (NA if no response)	2	217	0–5	3.2	1.4

This is consistent with qualitative evidence from interviews with local officials in district service offices, who reported online responsiveness as a small but increasingly important component of their jobs. They use online platforms—Facebook, “Mayor’s Mailbox” websites, LINE (the most popular messaging app in Taiwan), the local government website, city-specific smartphone apps, and so on—to give information to citizens and communicate specific details (for instance, about the content of an application form) more clearly and effectively than they could over the phone.⁸ As one district chief described: “I am on this [gestures to his smartphone] all the time. I check it in the middle of the night; if a message has come in for me, I try to quickly respond. This really is a 24-hour job now.”⁹

Top-down policies and citizens’ expectations regarding online service both create pressures for fast and effective online responsiveness. In cities with appointed district chiefs, the chiefs are evaluated annually on their implementation of policies designated as especially important by their superiors at the city level. In recent years, e-governance has figured prominently among these high-priority policies.¹⁰ While officials report a generational divide among citizens, with young people much more likely to use e-government services, these services allow for more efficient and effective communication between officials and the citizens who do adopt them.¹¹ And districts that effectively use e-governance techniques to achieve other policy goals have been rewarded with recognition as top-performing districts. For example, Banqiao District was recently recognized as one of the top-performing district governments in New Taipei City; one of the key policy targets set for district governments was to increase the participation of elderly people in health and exercise programs, and Banqiao was rewarded in part for creating an app to enable citizens to monitor their health and running a series of activities to teach elderly people to use the app.¹²

Citizens have come to expect a high degree of responsiveness via e-governance mechanisms, and use these very mechanisms to complain when they are dissatisfied with local government performance. For instance, one citizen used the Xinwu district Facebook page to complain about the district government’s lack of responsiveness: “The Xinwu district service center does not respond to citizens’ complaints, and thus fails to fulfill the duties of public servants.” Another citizen responded, “Right! According to the evaluation by the city government’s research and development office, the Xinwu district service does not provide a form on which citizens can record their degree of satisfaction.”¹³ This exchange reveals that citizens care about online responsiveness—they are sufficiently dissatisfied when the tools they are promised on paper are not delivered in practice to find other avenues (such as Facebook pages) to publicly

complain. Hung (2012) has argued that the development of Taiwan's e-governance has been driven largely by top-down policies, but our research suggests that citizens have come to expect that these mechanisms will be available to them, are able to evaluate whether local governments are following the law regarding provision of e-governance tools, and are vocal in their complaints when they find existing e-governance tools lacking.

5.2 | No evidence of anti-indigenous bias

These high overall response rates could, in theory, mask substantially unequal patterns of responsiveness to different groups of citizens. However, our results suggest that this is not the case. Table 3 provides regression results for our four measures of responsiveness, controlling for a range of pretreatment covariates. While putative subjects with indigenous names receive slightly fewer responses than those with Han names (84.1 vs. 79.3% in round 1), in none of our models is the treatment effect statistically different from zero. Furthermore, even if these results were statistically significant, their substantive significance would be comparatively small. The upper bound of the 95% confidence interval around our results is 13.3% in round 1 and 16.2% in round 2 (in other words, we can say with 95% confidence that the true gap in response rate to emails from Han and indigenous citizens is less than or equal to 13.3% in round 1 and 16.2% in round 2). While these upper bounds would be cause for concern if our results suggested that they were the true differences in responsiveness to the two groups of citizens, these numbers are still low by comparative standards (for instance, they are less than half as large as the mean difference in responsiveness to Han and minority names reported by Distelhorst & Hou, 2014, 33%).

We conduct several robustness checks to increase our confidence in these results. First, we check bivariate models (dropping all covariates). Second, we reshape several covariates, logging income, population, and area. In both cases, there is still no statistically significant treatment effect. Third, we recode our response quality measure to include nonresponses. We conduct a Box-Cox transformation on these data (appropriate given the nonnormal shape of the data), and find no statistically significant treatment effect.¹⁴ Fourth, we use randomization inference to assess the bivariate association between treatment and each outcome in a nonparametric framework, and find no statistically significant difference between treatment and control groups for any of the four outcomes. Fifth, we check for heterogeneous treatment effects by elected/appointed status; we do not find evidence of heterogeneous treatment effects across the two types of districts. Finally, including Huber-White robust standard errors changes the statistical significance of some covariates but does not affect our central finding.¹⁵

The results in Table 3 are cross-sectional; in other words, they compare average outcomes across the group that received an email from a putative indigenous citizen to averages for the group that received an email from a putative Han citizen. One advantage of our multi-wave design is that it allows us to expose each district to both the treatment and the control conditions, as individuals who received an email from a putative Han citizen in round 1 received an email from a putative indigenous citizen in round 2, and vice versa. In expectation, randomization should produce treatment and control groups that resemble each other across a range of covariates, but this can never be proven. Using a two-way fixed-effects model allows us to assess whether a single individual is, on average, more or less responsive to emails from putatively Han or indigenous citizens, rendering concerns about the comparability of treatment and control groups irrelevant.

TABLE 3 Cross-sectional regression results by dependent variable and round

	Dependent variable							
	Response (1)		Response (2)		Quality (1)		Quality (2)	
	Logistic	OLS	Logistic	OLS	OLS	OLS	OLS	OLS
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	
Treatment	-0.40 (0.30)	-0.37 (0.29)	-0.10 (0.15)	-0.18 (0.19)	-40.22 (59.41)	-98.56 (77.71)	18.08 (16.42)	2.38 (34.21)
Population	0.01 (0.01)	0.005 (0.01)	0.0004 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.98 (1.11)	-1.57 (1.53)	-0.15 (0.30)	-0.25 (0.67)
% Indig.	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.005)	0.003 (0.01)	-0.62 (1.79)	-0.14 (2.30)	1.27** (0.49)	2.27** (1.01)
Income	-0.0000 (0.0000)	-0.0000 (0.0000)	-0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.003 (0.004)	0.005 (0.01)	0.0004 (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)
Area	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.004 (0.01)	-0.005 (0.01)	0.004 (0.01)	-0.64 (2.65)	2.10 (3.25)	-0.84 (0.73)	2.27 (1.42)
Elected	-0.07 (0.35)	-0.40 (0.33)	-0.49*** (0.17)	-0.82*** (0.21)	-91.49 (66.18)	-181.52** (85.52)	12.84 (18.31)	17.91 (37.62)
Constant	1.80***	1.52***	3.85***	3.63***	553.44***	581.89***	98.07***	82.86**
Observations	328	290	268	217	268	217	263	214
R ²			0.04	0.09	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.10
Adjusted R ²			0.02	0.06	-0.01	0.004	0.02	0.07
Log likelihood			-149.25					
Akaike Inf. Crit.			312.51					

Note: *p < .1; **p < .05; ***p < .01.

TABLE 4 Panel regression results

	Dependent variable			
	Response	Quality	Length	Span
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment	-0.05**	-0.07	-46.00	760.09
	(0.02)	(0.13)	(46.42)	(1,106.09)
Observations	618	485	485	477
R ²	0.02	0.002	0.005	0.002

Note: * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Table 4 presents the panel results. By using a two-way fixed-effect model in each case, we essentially compare each individual to themselves. Because our covariates do not vary between the two rounds, these models look only at the bivariate relationship between treatment and each outcome measure. As in the cross-sectional results, treatment has no statistically significant association with the length, quality, or time to response. While indigenous identities are 5% less likely to receive a response than Han identities, this is not statistically significant when we correct for multiple testing.¹⁶ This responsiveness gap is also substantively small in cross-national comparison; Costa (2017)'s meta-analysis finds that across 31 papers on government responsiveness, minority constituents are almost 10% less likely to receive a response than nonminority constituents. A second piece of evidence that treatment assignment does not matter very much lies in the extremely low R^2 for each model. At 0.02 or less for all four models, treatment assignment appears to explain very little of the variation in each of the four outcome measures.

While our results do not provide evidence of individual-level discrimination against indigenous citizens, they do provide preliminary evidence for interregional disparities that may negatively affect indigenous people and the services they receive from local government. Table 3 suggests that officials in districts with elected chiefs provide shorter, lower-quality responses than those with appointed chiefs. Because, in accordance with the Local Government Act (*difang zhidufa*), all indigenous districts have directly elected chiefs, the possibility that directly electing a chief might lead to lower responsiveness has significant implications for responsiveness in indigenous areas.¹⁷ In other words, these findings suggest that the poor services in indigenous areas may be a byproduct of a broader interregional inequality between places that elect their district-level officials and those whose leaders are appointed via a city-level bureaucratic process. Not just indigenous districts, but also rural ones outside major cities—which typically elect their township heads—are disadvantaged by this system (Newland, 2019).

Nonetheless, poor responsiveness in indigenous districts cannot be fully explained by the underperformance of directly elected district-level heads, as districts with a larger proportion of indigenous citizens in the population take longer to respond (see Table 3). While the correlation between response time and indigenous share in the population is positive for both indigenous and nonindigenous districts across both rounds of the experiment, it is strongest within indigenous districts. While these results should be viewed as suggestive—high nonresponse rates in indigenous districts mean that we have data on response time for only a small number of indigenous districts—we hope that future research will explore why a larger proportion of indigenous residents appears to be associated with slower response times by local officials.

In addition, if we compare responsiveness between the 30 officially designated indigenous districts and nonindigenous districts, we find large differences. In both rounds of the experiment, officials in indigenous districts were substantially less responsive than officials in nonindigenous districts: The response rate for round 1 was 83.8% across nonindigenous districts and only 57.7% across indigenous districts. In round 2, both groups were slightly less responsive overall, but the responsiveness gap remained almost the same: 77.3% of nonindigenous districts responded to our emails, whereas only 50% of officials in indigenous districts did. A Welch's *t*-test for groups with unequal variances shows that these differences are statistically significant at $p < .02$. These disparities suggest that the absence of individual-level discrimination is not a sufficient condition to guarantee truly equal responsiveness by local officials. If the types of districts with disproportionately large indigenous populations—districts with elected chiefs and officially designated indigenous districts—have local officials that underperform relative to officials elsewhere in Taiwan, then these regional disparities may produce interethnic inequality even if individual officials are no more responsive to Han citizens than to indigenous ones.

We conduct preliminary tests of two possible explanations for the responsiveness gap between indigenous and nonindigenous areas. First, we hypothesize that an e-governance “digital divide” might exist between these two types of areas, such that local officials in nonindigenous areas are better equipped to set up high-quality websites for addressing citizen needs and are better trained to use the online format to respond quickly to citizen requests for help. To test this hypothesis, we create a “failed to send” indicator coded 1 for pages with broken “mayor’s mailbox” links, email addresses that bounce, or “mayor’s mailbox” pages that time out after submitting a request. In round 1, 30 districts’ pages failed to send; four of these were from indigenous districts. In round 2, eight districts’ pages failed to send; one was from an indigenous district. These small numbers provide limited evidence, and we believe that this hypothesis warrants further investigation with other data sources. However, based on the data we have, we do not see convincing evidence of indigenous district governments’ relative inability to effectively use e-governance tools. While indigenous districts’ pages represented a slightly higher share of total failed pages than we would expect based on their share of total districts, a difference in means test for indigenous and nonindigenous districts is not statistically significant, and the divergence from their share in the population is substantively quite small.

A second possibility is that responsiveness is lower in indigenous areas because they are poorer than other areas of Taiwan, and local governments have fewer resources for citizen service. That indigenous *citizens* are economically disadvantaged is well established (Chiao, 2008; Chu, 2000). However, does this extend to local governments in indigenous areas? We test this hypothesis using 2015 budget data for 194 districts with elected leaders across Taiwan.¹⁸ Using data on budgeted (*yusuan*) and actual (*juesuan*) administrative expenditures (*xingzheng zhichu*), we find no evidence of meaningful differences between indigenous districts and nonindigenous ones with elected chiefs. A Kolmogorov–Smirnov test fails to reject the null hypothesis that two sets of data are drawn from the same underlying distribution ($p = .46$ for budgeted expenditures and 0.34 for final expenditures). Furthermore, in per capita terms, indigenous districts have *higher* administrative expenditures than their nonindigenous counterparts. In short, local budget data do not support the hypothesis that district governments in indigenous areas face greater resource constraints than elected governments in nonindigenous areas do. A third class of possible explanations involve the nature of service provision in indigenous areas. Do indigenous citizens use alternative mechanisms for connecting with local officials (for example, through social organizations, in-person encounters, or political parties) that lead officials to place little importance on online service provision? While the data we use in this article cannot

answer this question, we hope that future research will investigate this and other possible explanations for the “digital divide” we observe between indigenous and nonindigenous areas.

5.3 | Qualitative results: making sense of a surprising null finding

Given the consistent evidence of racial bias by local officials around the world, it is somewhat surprising that we find no such evidence in Taiwan. Nonetheless, this was a possibility that we envisioned as we designed this article; we hypothesized that strongly rule-bound performance of the Taiwanese bureaucracy might limit opportunities for individual bias to affect responsiveness to citizens.¹⁹ In this section, we use fieldwork conducted in Taiwan in 2016 and 2019 to make sense of our experimental results. Drawing on interviews with citizens and public servants, as well as nonparticipant observation in district service centers in four cities and counties throughout Taiwan, we argue that formal rules and informal norms constrain district officials and prevent their individual biases from affecting their job performance. We discuss two types of factors that inhibit bias in online responsiveness: strict formal procedures that include frequent top-down monitoring, and dedicated institutions for serving indigenous people.

The officials who staff district service centers are constrained by a series of specific norms and procedures that limit discretion in their interactions with citizens. The physical layout of the district service center embodies many of these constraints. In large urban districts, citizens typically get a number from a ticket machine upon entering the social welfare section; as an attendant becomes available, a screen above their desk flashes the next number, and the person with that number on their ticket walks up to the desk. In other words, there is no opportunity for an official to choose to serve an ethnically Chinese citizen rather than an indigenous one, and in many cases an official may not even know the citizen's ethnic identity until after their interaction is under way.²⁰ The spatial arrangement of the service hall also makes it difficult for poor-quality service to go undetected. The social welfare section is typically a large, open room, with service desks in close proximity to each other and to the waiting area for citizens. Large district offices often have a volunteer area within the social welfare section, staffed primarily by retirees who offer tea and basic assistance. The section head (*shehuike kezhang*) typically works in close proximity to the service desks.²¹ In short, the dense configuration of citizens, volunteers, and officials within the space of the social welfare section increases the likelihood that inattention, rudeness, and other manifestations of bias will be noticed and corrected.²²

Rules and procedures for online interactions between officials and citizens are similarly constrained. City and county governments in Taiwan set rules for how quickly districts must respond to citizen communications. The rapidity with which our putative citizens received responses from many officials suggests that these rules are, in most cases, taken quite seriously; on average, it took about 5 days for our requests for help to receive a response. Furthermore, these procedures are quite transparent and are made widely available to citizens. In many cases, submitting a request for help to an online “mayor's mailbox” generates an automated reply that tells the sender how quickly the local government is required to respond. Some local governments also publicize the procedures for online responsiveness on their websites, specifying who is responsible for communication at each step and the timeframe for responsiveness. For instance, Dashe District, Kaohsiung provides a diagram stating that any request must be addressed in 5 business days if the matter can be resolved by the district office and 30 business

days if it must be forwarded to the city. Some districts and cities provide even more detail, specifying the maximum length of time for each step in the process.

These procedures limit opportunities for ethnic bias in responsiveness in several ways. First, they limit discretion more broadly. For instance, the variance of legally acceptable response times is small when all messages must receive a response within 5 days; even if indigenous citizens received slower responses, the substantive difference between a response in 3 days and a response in five is minimal. Of course, this presumes that the standards set by city governments are binding. Other research suggests that it is: City governments exercise frequent and meaningful oversight of district officials through regular meetings, research and development offices, annual performance evaluations, and other tools (Newland, 2019).

Second, breaking up steps in the response procedure across multiple officials decreases the likelihood that one “bad apple” will systematically disadvantage indigenous citizens. In addition to the fact that each response passes across multiple desks, the people answering these queries change from day to day, as (at large district service centers, at least) public servants all take turns answering phone and email queries.²³ While these mechanisms cannot guard against the possibility that implicit bias might affect many officials’ responsiveness to indigenous citizens, they at least make it unlikely that a handful of biased officials will be able to substantially alter responsiveness procedures or outcomes.

In addition to the rules and procedures that limit the opportunities for bias (and the magnitude of the effects of bias if it is present), a set of district-level positions designed explicitly to ensure that indigenous people have access to the local bureaucracy also helps to minimize the potential for bias against indigenous citizens. Each district service center is required to staff an indigenous affairs desk, which provides specialized services to all indigenous residents of the district. This is a required position regardless of the size of the local indigenous population; in districts with small indigenous populations, these desks are much less busy than the general social affairs desks or other offices that serve a broader population of citizens. In one Taipei district service center, for instance, the civil servant who staffed the indigenous affairs desk reported seeing 6–8 citizens per day, whereas officials in the social affairs office met with several citizens per hour.²⁴ Indigenous people are free to seek help from the regular social affairs office as well, but have the additional option of working with the dedicated representative for indigenous affairs, who is often tasked with administering social welfare programs such as housing rental subsidies, emergency assistance, and home repair subsidies that are available specifically to indigenous people.²⁵ These workers have specific interest and expertise in indigenous affairs—the positions are their own category in the civil service exam—and provide an additional channel by which indigenous people can seek government assistance.

6 | CONCLUSION

This article has argued that on the whole, Taiwan’s district-level governance appears to be both effective and equitable. At the time of our first experiment in 2017, almost 90% of Taiwan’s district-level governments provided a working method for citizens to contact the local district chief online. Of these, over 80% responded to our citizen service requests. On the whole, these responses arrived quickly and provided at least some of the information our putative citizens needed. We also find no evidence that local officials are biased in their responsiveness: They were equally responsive to emails from putatively Han and indigenous citizens across a variety of specifications. We argue that these findings—while surprising in the context of Taiwan’s

history of discrimination against indigenous people and the overwhelming evidence of discrimination in audit studies in other national contexts—make sense if we delve deeply into the local political-bureaucratic context. We argue that the strongly institutionalized procedures for public servants, and the existence of special mechanisms for serving the needs of indigenous citizens, prevent individual bias from translating into systematically different experiences of representation for Han and indigenous people.

One important caveat is in order: Bias may take multiple forms. The results of this study suggest that a given public servant is no more likely to respond to a request for help from a Han citizen than an otherwise identical indigenous one (or to offer a longer, better, or faster response). However, we cannot experimentally vary the real-world context in which indigenous people live, and Han and indigenous people are not, in many cases, “otherwise identical.” Our data provide preliminary evidence that predominantly indigenous areas have lower levels of online responsiveness than predominantly Han areas: Across the two rounds of our experiment, officials in officially designated indigenous areas responded to only 53.9% of the emails we sent, in comparison to the 80.7% response rate of officials in nonindigenous areas. While the small number of indigenous districts limits the statistical tools that we can use to meaningfully analyze these differences, the fact that there was a responsiveness gap of close to 30% points in each of the two rounds of the experiment should increase our confidence that the first-round results were not a fluke.²⁶

Consistent with Newland (2019), our results suggest that districts with appointed chiefs consistently outperform districts with elected ones. Since the Local Government Act (*difang zhidufa*) specifies that all indigenous areas should directly elect their district or township chiefs, this finding has particular salience to indigenous people. Ironically, while the direct election requirement is intended to enshrine the principal of indigenous sovereignty in national law, our results suggest that in practice this policy may make local officials in indigenous areas less responsive to citizens. In short, even in the absence of individual-level discrimination, indigenous people may receive worse treatment if they disproportionately live in areas where local governments are less responsive overall. While these claims warrant additional investigation, our research provides preliminary evidence that this form of systemic racism is a concern in Taiwan.

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ORCID

Sara A. Newland  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8974-2080>

ENDNOTES

¹ Brian Hioe, “Anger after netizens mock newly appointed Executive Yuan Spokesperson Kolas Yotaka’s name,” *New Bloom Magazine*, July 20, 2018.

² Rina Chandran, “Indigenous Taiwanese, seeking rights to ancestral lands, set up camp in Taipei city park,” *The Japan Times*, June 15, 2018; Loa Lok-Sin, “Protesting Aborigines ‘tour’ bureau,” *Taipei Times*, July 4, 2014; Brian Hioe, “Indigenous city councilor’s swearing-in ceremony declared invalid for being conducted in Amis,” *New Bloom Magazine*, December 28, 2018.

- ³ *Qugongsuo* in urban districts, *shi, xiang*, or *zhengongsuo* in rural ones. For simplicity, we refer to all as “district service centers” in this paper, unless explicitly distinguishing between different district types is relevant to a particular claim.
- ⁴ For a rich discussion of some of the motivations for bureaucratic responsiveness in authoritarian regimes, see Chen, Pan, and Xu (2016), Distelhorst and Hou (2017), and Tsai, 2007a.
- ⁵ While Hung (2012)'s research suggests that this dynamic is problematic, other scholars do not necessarily agree. Linders, Liao, and Wang (2018) suggest that Taiwan has transitioned from a “pull” to a “push” model of e-governance, with local officials now proactively providing services rather than waiting for citizens to demand them.
- ⁶ Following Distelhorst and Hou (2014), we use a five-point scale to measure response quality. We create five indicator variables for different pieces of information necessary for a complete answer to our putative citizen's request for assistance. These indicators are whether the response includes: (a) the name of the government agency responsible for implementing the program; (b) the requirements for receiving support; (c) the application procedures; (d) the contact information for the relevant government office; and (e) the compensation levels to which different groups of citizens are entitled (the program is means-tested). We then sum each response's scores on these five questions to create a response quality measure that ranges from 0 to 5.
- ⁷ The lower number in the second round reflects the fact that several cities have centralized their e-governance platforms, replacing district-level “mayor's mailbox” websites with city-level responsiveness platforms.
- ⁸ Interview with employee of district office (*qugongsuo*) social service bureau, Taoyuan, October 2016; interview with employee of district office, New Taipei City, October 2016.
- ⁹ Interview with district chief in Taoyuan, October 2016.
- ¹⁰ Interview with district chief in Taoyuan, October 2016.
- ¹¹ Interview with district chief in Taoyuan, October 2016; interview with section chief, social service section of a district office in Taoyuan, October 2016; interview with district chief in Taoyuan, January 2019.
- ¹² Interview with Local Government Division employee, New Taipei City, January 2019.
- ¹³ Facebook post by Li Shu-Fang and response by Yu-Sheng Li on the Xinwu district service center Facebook page, November 5, 2018.
- ¹⁴ In our preanalysis plan, we initially planned to use this coding scheme for Response Quality (ie., coding non-responses as 0 rather than NA). As the project developed, we decided that coding nonresponses as NAs made more sense for two reasons. First, coding nonresponses as zero means that Response Quality combines two distinct concepts—whether someone responds to an email and response quality conditional on a response being received. This overweights the importance of response/nonresponse in our overall results since we also include a binary response/nonresponse measure. And, like a double-barreled survey question, it makes the meaning of the response quality variable difficult to interpret. Second, when we designed the experiment we primarily envisioned response/nonresponse as the product of an individual decision by a bureaucrat. As we conducted the experiment, however, it became clear that many instances of nonresponse are likely the result of lower technical capacity in certain areas—email addresses that exist but are rarely checked, poorly functioning “Mayor's Mailbox” websites, and so on. These technical issues are also substantively meaningful in that they affect the quality of e-government services that citizens receive. However, they suggest quite a different causal mechanism for poor responsiveness than is at work in the decisions of district officials about how much information to provide as they respond to a given citizen.
- ¹⁵ Supplemental tables are available on request.
- ¹⁶ Without accounting for multiple testing, $p = .03$. The Bonferroni multiple testing correction to account for simultaneously testing four hypotheses means that we should only regard this result as statistically significant at $p < .0125$ (.05/4).
- ¹⁷ Because elected/appointed status cannot be experimentally varied, we cannot prove in this paper that direct election *causes* lower responsiveness. Newland (2019) explains why direct election may lead to poorer responsiveness, rather than merely being correlated with it.
- ¹⁸ We are grateful to Yu-Hsuan Su and Yating Chuang for sharing these data with us (Su and Chuang, 2019).

- ¹⁹ In our preanalysis plan registered with EGAP, we present two rival hypotheses—of discrimination against putatively indigenous citizens and no discrimination due to bureaucratic constraints—as equally plausible alternatives.
- ²⁰ Nonparticipant observation in district service centers in Taipei and New Taipei City, October 2016.
- ²¹ While the rooms are typically smaller in rural districts or smaller urban ones, this basic layout was consistent across nearly all of the district service centers in which I conducted nonparticipant observation.
- ²² Nonparticipant observation in district service centers in Taipei, New Taipei City, Taoyuan, and Yunlin County, October 2016 and January 2019.
- ²³ Interview with public servant staffing indigenous peoples' service desk at a district service center in Taipei, October 2016.
- ²⁴ Nonparticipant observation, Taipei City, October 2019; interview with indigenous affairs worker at a district service center in Taipei, October 2016.
- ²⁵ Interview with indigenous affairs worker at a district service center in Taoyuan, October 2016.
- ²⁶ There are 30 indigenous districts and townships; of these, 26 provided valid contact information in each round of the experiment.

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