Selective Reporting in State Media of Authoritarian Regimes

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Background

There has been significant documentation and extended discussion of the draconian restrictions on Chinese media implemented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). However, while it's understood that calculated alterations of narratives proliferate the contents of Chinese state reporting, very little research exists that examines these differences in Chinese state reporting of global events that cross references these sources to Western sources exhaustively in both empirical and qualitative ways. Research into this would no doubt yield considerable findings into the methods of Chinese State reporters as well as revealing underlying motivations of these writers and additionally gleaning some insight into the objectives of their superiors who demand specific reporting procedures and practices of their writers in the sensitive situation imposed via the climate of restricted speech that exists in China. Preliminarily a few researchers have made observations that indicate the Chinese tend to alternate depending on use to their agenda between using incidents of civil unrest to support their arguments that democratic diffusion should be resisted or not reporting the incident at all.. This project seeks to use statistical analysis and other empirical analysis strategies to find trends in Chinese state media's reporting of incidences of unrest abroad compared to Western media and observe what it might implicate for broader Chinese information diffusion strategy. These results will be compared according to several leading hypotheses for predicted outcomes of the Chinese media's reporting towards these events.

Research Question

What are the general trends and patterns that guide Chinese state media's reporting of dissidence and political upheaval in foreign countries?

Methods

- A collection of 21st century incidences of political upheaval and dissidence was outlined to be researched.
- Once enough preliminary data was gathered, articles from Reuters, NPR, and the Associated Press about these events were gathered as a control as these sources are relatively unbiased.
- Articles on these same events were gathered from Chinese state outlets such as Xinhua, People's daily, Global Times, and China Daily. The articles were procured largely using the database LexisNexis, the in-house search functions of Chinese state media sites, and publicly available consumer level search engines.
- These articles from all sources were then converted into plain text files, had other small details of their reporting filled in and were encoded.
- From there, these text files were scrutinized by a custom coded text analysis program.

Preliminary Results

Our initial hypotheses generally anticipated a predisposition against bottom-up mobilization and popular movements and, for the most part this has generally been the truth. In addition, several of our assumptions have been supported in indicating that China is generally likely to report on unrest near their borders and indicate it as a ploy or plot by the United States to destabilize China and the world or as a symptom of the failures of democracy. Another example is that Chinese state sources are generally less likely to report on unrest in countries they have important trade relations in, especially along the Belt and Road Initiative affiliate countries. Furthermore, in general Chinese state media is extremely likely to downplay or generally mischaracterize the nature of civil unrest events compared to western outlets which distorts the proportion of these events. In terms of empirical data, of the 84 events we covered, the 4 media aggregates, on average, reported on them 51.7% (174/336) of the time. It is worth noting that among event types, Chinese outlets in general were much more apprehensive to report on attempted coups compared to conspiracies and successful coups. However, each outlet varied significantly in the consistency of reporting with Xinhua being by far the most consistent followed by China Daily and then Global Times and People's Daily were the least likely to report. Certain data analysis results are still pending including linguistic analysis and coding of western sources to set for control variables so it is difficult to translate these findings into additional certain empirical conclusions at this point but so far it is promising.
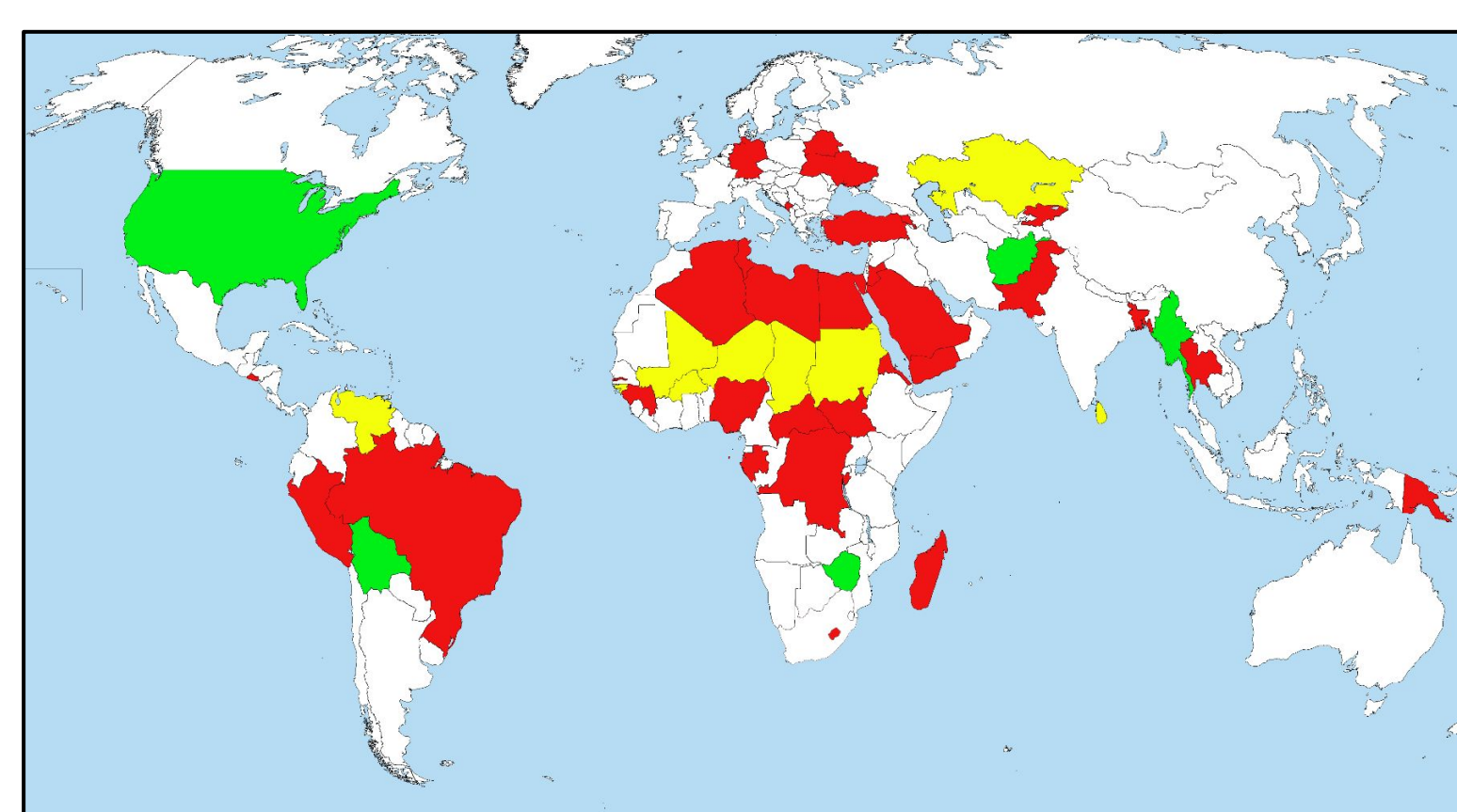

Figure 5: People's Daily Reporting Frequency by Event Type

Figure 6: Xinhua Reporting Frequency by Event Type

Figure 7: China Daily Reporting Frequency by Event Type

Figure 8: Global Times Reporting Frequency by Event Type

Figures 5-8: These bar charts represent the frequency of reports from 4 different Chinese news sources on 84* political unrest events. Source reliability rankings do not change.

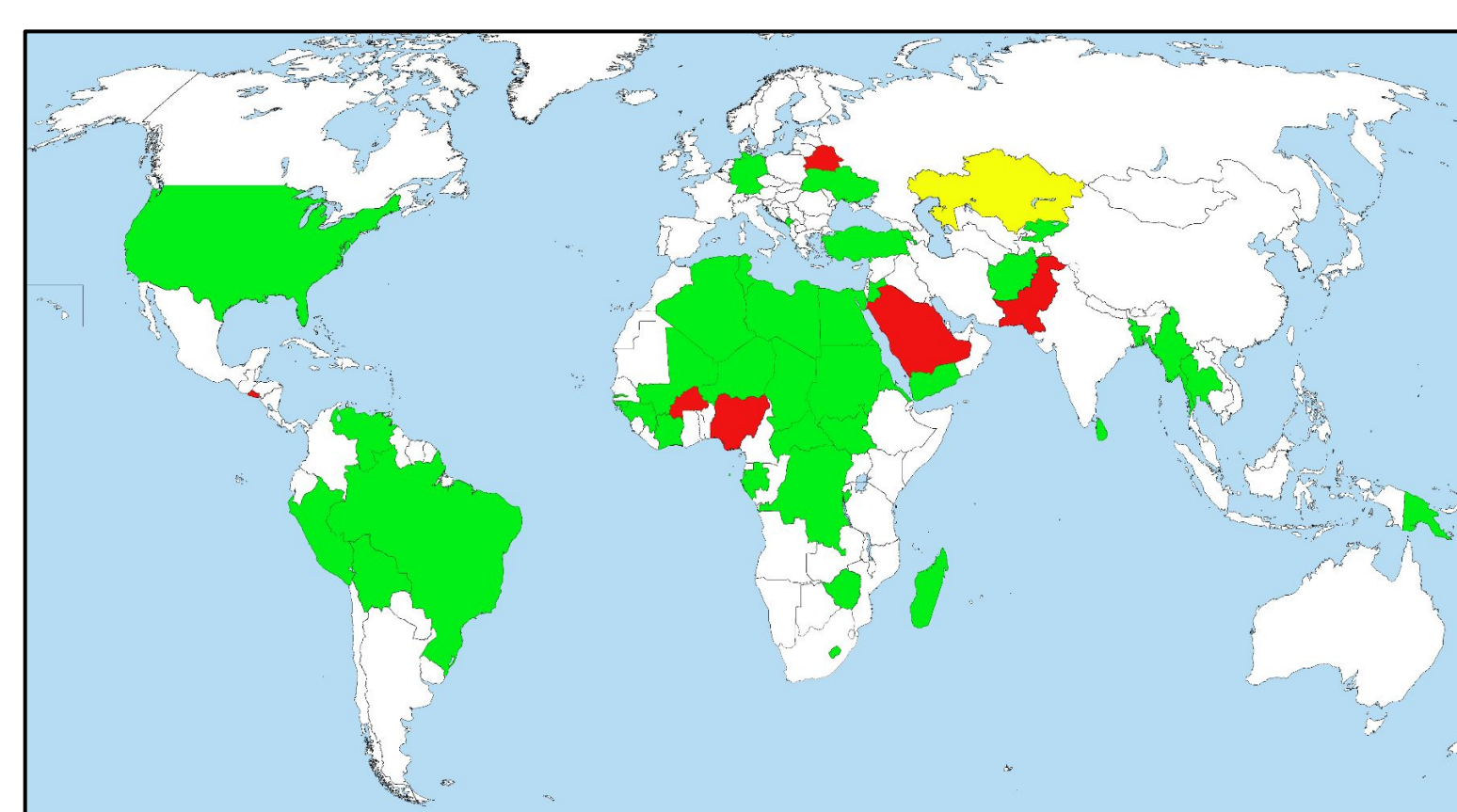**Figure 1:** People's Daily Coverage of Events by Country

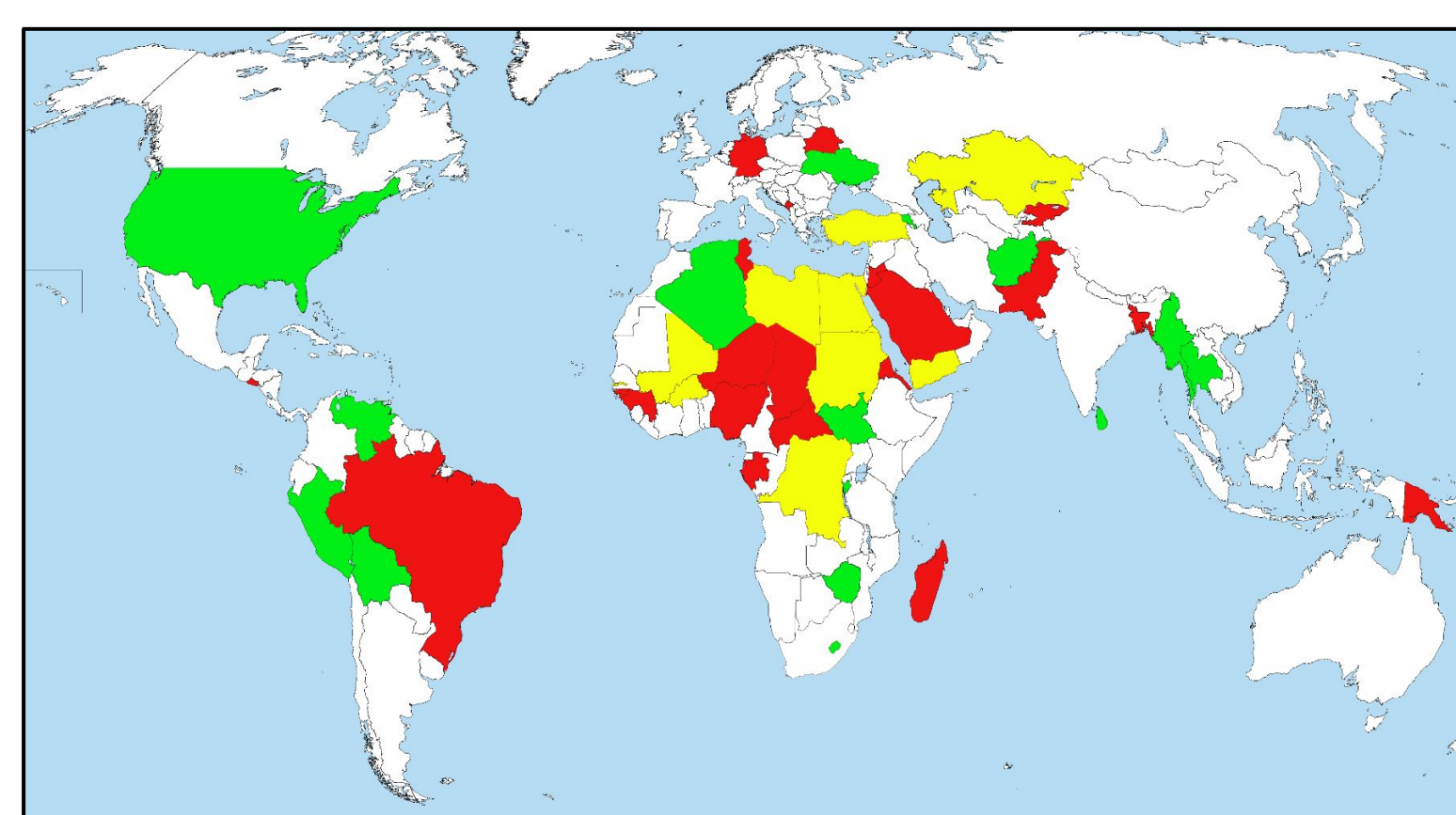**Figure 2:** Xinhua Coverage of Events by Country

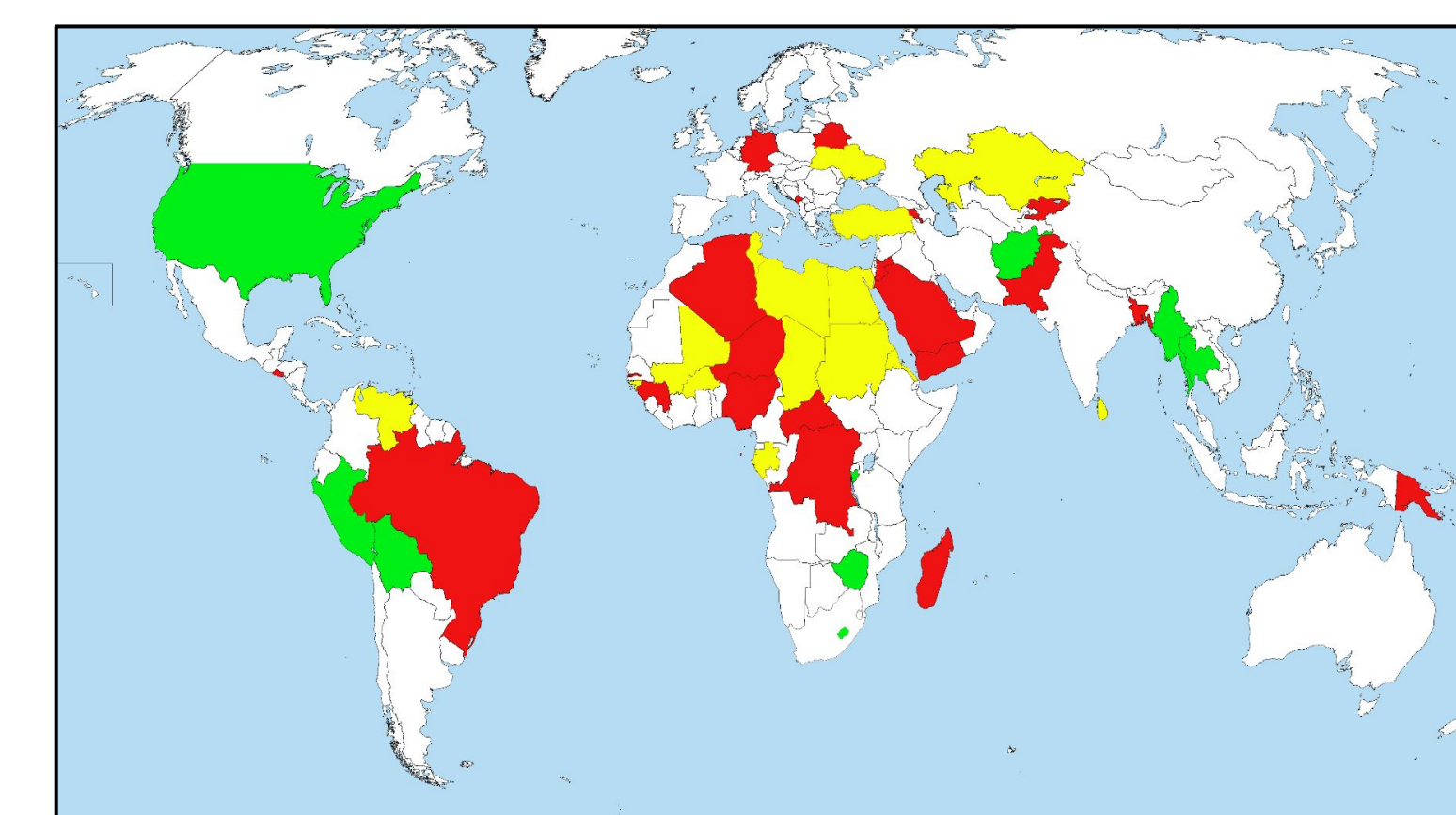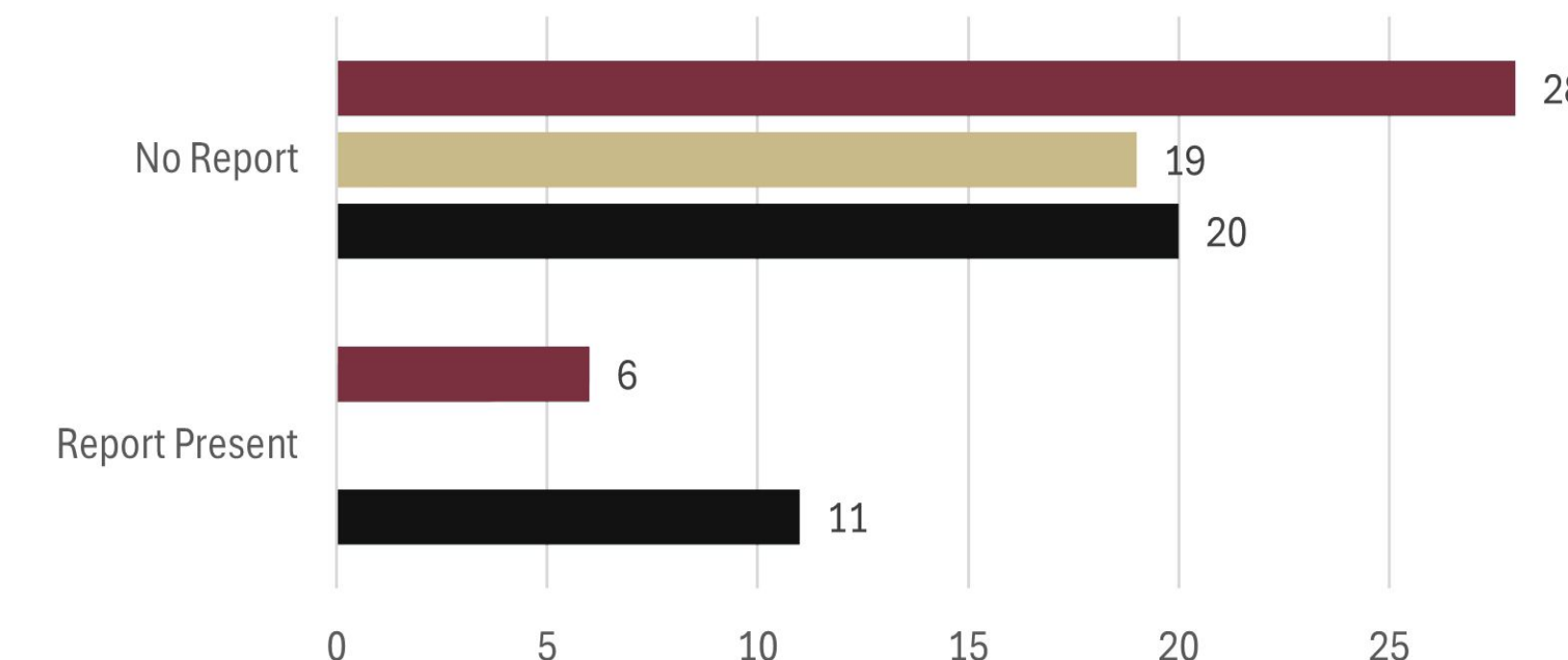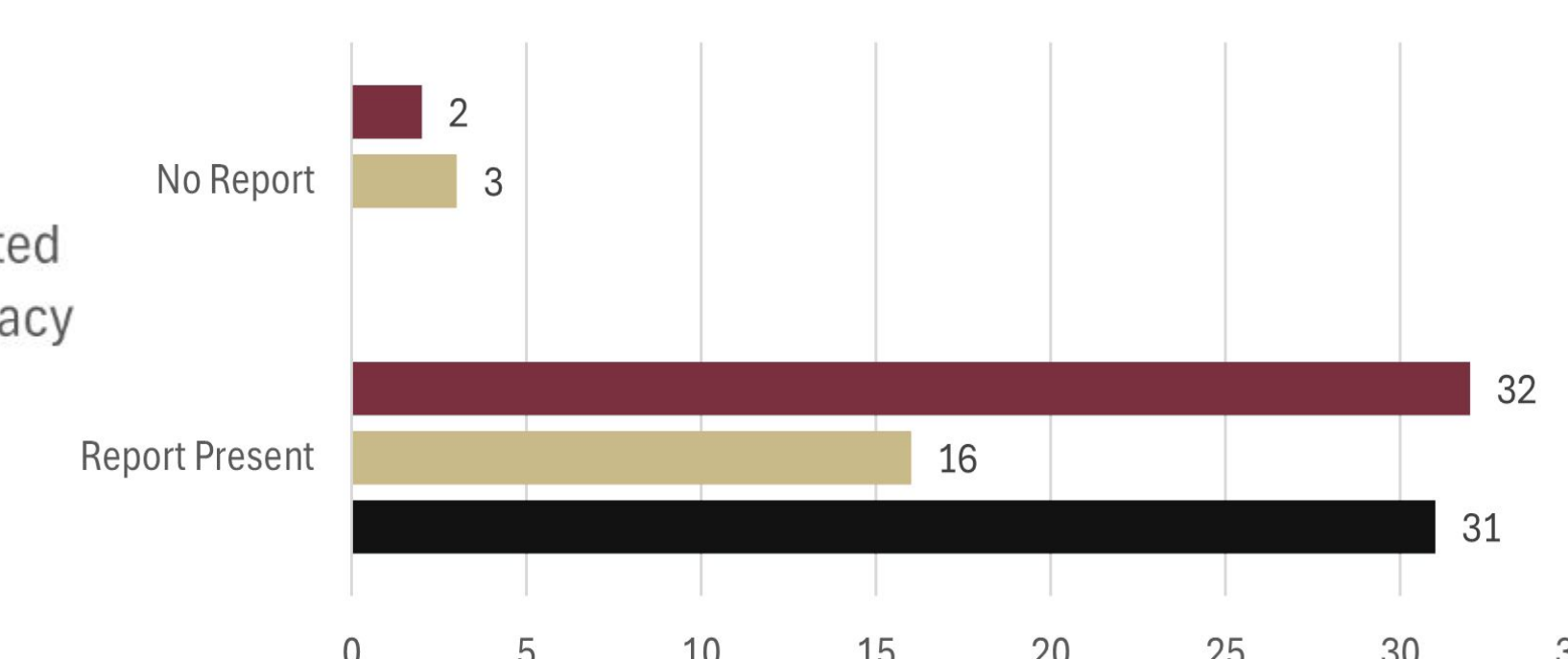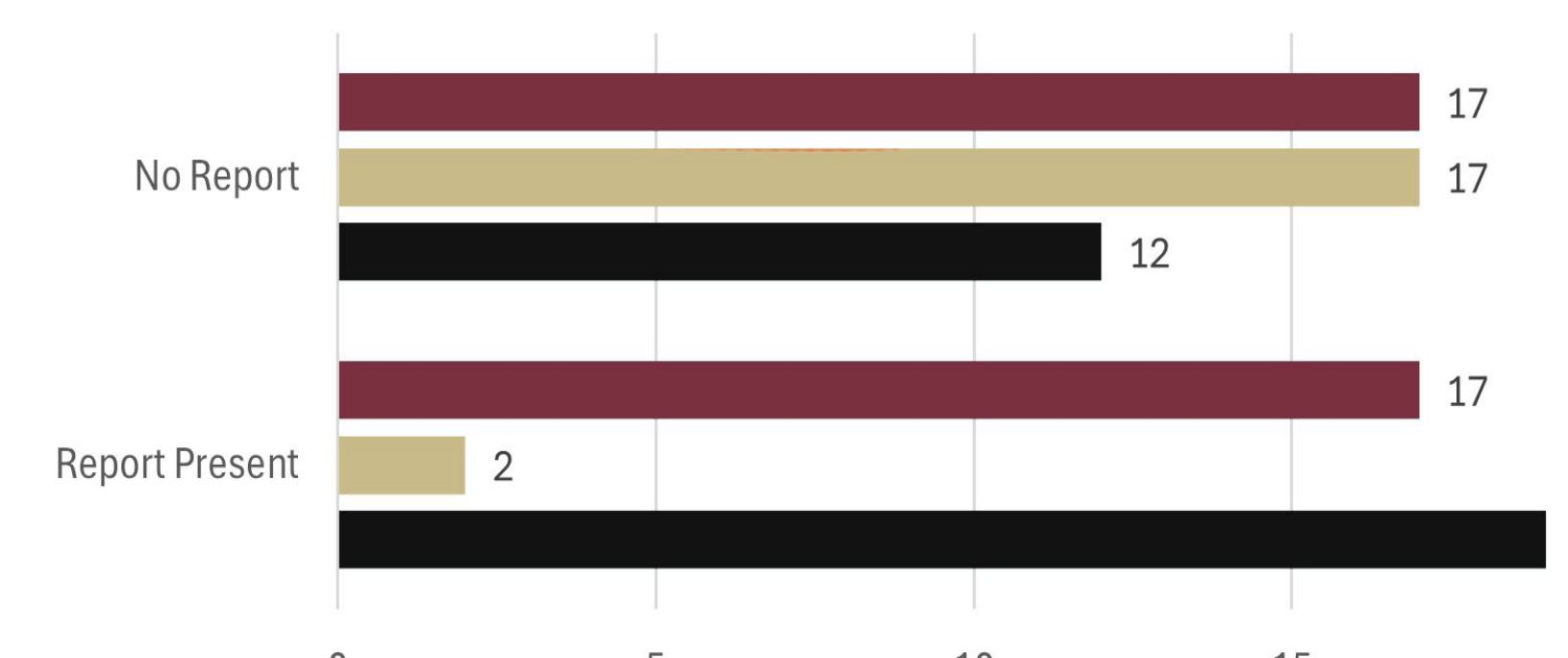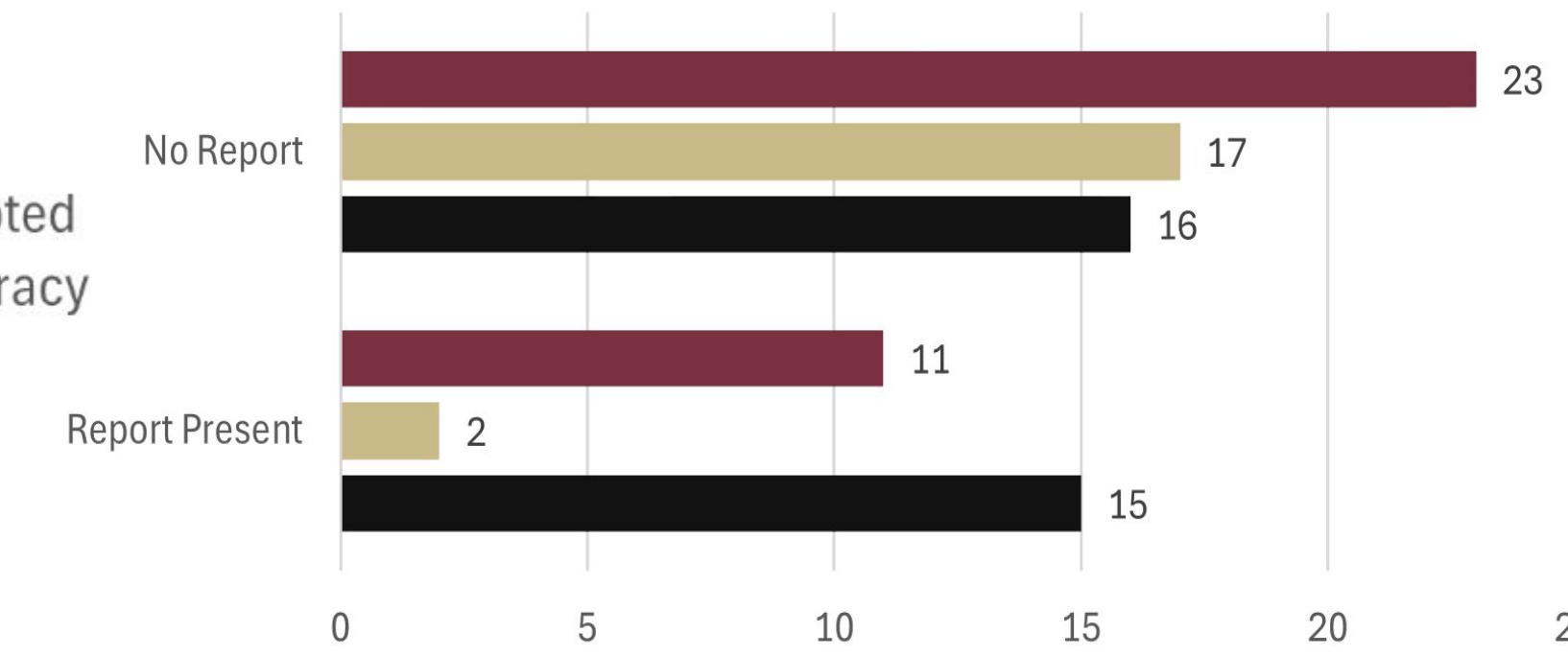**Figure 3:** China Daily Coverage of Events by Country

Figure 4: Global Times Coverage of Events by Country

- Full Coverage of Sampled Political Upheaval Events
- Partial Coverage of Sampled Political Upheaval Events
- No Coverage of Sampled Political Upheaval Events

Figures 1-4: The maps display 4 different Chinese news sources' coverage* of 84** political unrest events broken down visually by country. When viewed at this level, Xinhua is the most reliable reporter of these events followed by China Daily, Global Times, and lastly People's Daily, with only 5 countries (out of 50 sampled countries) receiving full coverage from them.

*Full coverage is defined as 100% of sampled events being reported on, **Partial Coverage** is defined as less than 100% of sampled events being reported on, and **No Coverage** is defined as 0% of events being reported on.
Out of the 84 events we analyzed, 34 were **attempted coups, 19 were coup **conspiracies**/plots and 31 were successful **coups**.

Discussion

At the outset of our research, we sought to find and document the general trends that influence how Chinese state media outlets report on events of public upheaval and dissidence in foreign countries, but what we've discovered at this stage of our research are several interesting insights about the structure of Chinese media, the purposes of different outlets, and interesting implications for China's foreign policy strategies. As it relates to the structure of Chinese media, the four outlets we chose for our sampling occupy different roles in the space of Chinese media, leading us to speculate that these sources compliment each other in acting as a radicalization pipeline in its beginning stages. Xinhua serves as the speculative entry level outlet, as it is the most factual and impartial of the outlets. Its role in the Chinese media space serves as a legitimizer of the Chinese media apparatus due to its relatively higher level of fact-based and impartial reporting of global events. China Daily by contrast is significantly less fact-based, less consistent, and more biased. Even still, it is a step behind in the pipeline to radicalization that People's Daily and Global Times occupy as direct mouthpieces of the party that take a hardline partisan and particularly clique oriented approach to reporting. Consequently, China Daily and especially Xinhua reported on more of our sampled events than did the partisan People's Daily and Global Times. In addition to the new understandings gained on the Chinese media structure, we were able to obtain more insight into implications for strategy and foreign policy focuses of the leadership and writing behind Chinese state media. For our purposes, the more factual and impartial Chinese sources are less useful for possible insights into the political motivations of these media outlets. This is possibly due in part as we've speculated to the fact that outlets like Xinhua are oriented towards a more international audience in order to build credibility for Chinese reporting and thus is more inclined to report a larger amount of international events reliably and truthfully. However, what the more biased sources reveal is much more conducive to gaining insight on the strategy behind this biased coverage. Figures 1- 4 help visually reveal that China is relatively reluctant to report on negative events in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) affiliates as well as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) participants.This falls in line with the findings of Ji and Liu (2017) that Chinese media paints its own strategic and economic allies in much more positive lights than its strategic and economic rivals. The full scope of the importance of this project, although very promising, is yet to be seen, and is pending additional research. There were however, limitations and additional considerations that should be contemplated for any further research. We believe that controlling for potentially significant variables such as distinction between private and publicly owned sources, lack of international sources, article type, and its specific coverage of events.