

# Protests and Focal Moments in Autocracies: Evidence from China<sup>\*</sup>

Erin Baggott Carter<sup>†</sup>      Brett L. Carter<sup>‡</sup>

November 13, 2018

## Abstract

Social scientists have long observed that focal points enable citizens to coordinate collective action. For anti-regime protests in autocracies, however, focal points also enable repressive governments to prepare in advance. We propose a theory to explain when citizens are likely to employ focal points to organize anti-regime protests. Our basic insight is that tacit coordination is most critical when explicit coordination is costly. Empirically, we use our theory to identify a setting where focal points are likely to be salient, and then argue that the anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements satisfy conditions for focality. In China, the world's most populous autocracy, we find that the anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements occasion 35% more protests than any other day. Protests during pro-democracy anniversaries are more likely to target symbols of state authority, and are twice as likely to be repressed by the government. We find no similar trends for other holidays.

Word Count: 11,993

---

<sup>\*</sup> Authors appear alphabetically. We thank Manfred Elfstrom for sharing his data on Chinese protests and two anonymous research assistants. For helpful feedback, we thank Andrew Coe, James Fearon, Ronan Fu, Haifeng Huang, Patrick James, Dave Kang, Saori Katada, Alex Yu-Ting Lin, Gerry Munck, and seminar participants at the University of Southern California.

<sup>†</sup> Assistant Professor, School of International Relations, University of Southern California. [baggott@usc.edu](mailto:baggott@usc.edu).

<sup>‡</sup> Assistant Professor, School of International Relations, University of Southern California. [blcarter@usc.edu](mailto:blcarter@usc.edu).

# 1 Introduction

Mass protests constitute a chief threat to the world’s autocrats (Goemans and Marinov 2014). Accordingly, scholars have sought to understand their dynamics: who protests (Rosenfeld 2017), how they organize (Howard and Hussain 2013; Steinert-Threlkeld et al. 2015; Manacorda and Tesei 2016; Christensen and Garfias 2018), and whether violence enables activists to achieve their objectives (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Beber, Roessler and Scacco 2014; Enos, Kaufman and Sands 2017).

In this paper, we ask *when* anti-regime protests emerge in autocracies: whether there exists a well-defined calendar of collective action. We propose a theory to explain when citizens employ focal points to coordinate anti-regime protests. We build on two insights. First, scholars of collective action have long observed that focal points facilitate coordination; we refer to this as a *coordination effect*. For citizens in autocracies, however, using focal points to coordinate protests entails profound risks. If citizens in autocracies are aware of focal points, then so too are governments. In turn, governments should prepare in advance: by incarcerating activists (Truex 2018), deploying security forces, or censoring media to block coordination (King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 2017). As a result, it may well be optimal for would-be protesters in autocracies to *avoid* relying on focal points for coordination. We refer to this as a *repression effect*.

Our central argument is that the coordination effect dominates the repression effect when the threat of repression is most salient. In these environments, the coordination advantages afforded by focal points are sufficiently important to outweigh the forgone element of surprise. We regard focal points as the product of a community’s cultural touchstones and historical traumas; they are context specific, and may also be geographic or temporal. Our empirical strategy, then, is to identify one potential source of focal points, and then focus on a setting where, our theory suggests, citizens are likely to employ focal points to coordinate protests. We argue that the anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements constitute one source of focal points. These anniversaries remind citizens of longstanding anti-regime sentiment, and that their compatriots were willing to challenge the regime in the past. To underscore their temporal nature, we refer to them as “focal moments.” Empirically, we focus on China, where the government’s record of repression should render focal moments especially salient. China is an attractive empirical setting for reasons of data availability as well. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has repressed a series of pro-democracy movements since seizing power in 1949. Since the anniversaries of these failed pro-democracy movements recur annually, we can measure just how much stronger is the mobilizational power of these anniversaries relative to other holidays and anniversaries. In turn, we can confirm that pro-democracy anniversaries have unique properties for collective action.

We find that the anniversaries of China’s failed pro-democracy movements experience 35% more protests than the typical day. The odds that a protest *emerges* are 30% greater, and the probability of a protest spike, which we define below, nearly doubles. Focal moment protests are more likely to

target symbols of state authority, and are twice as likely to be repressed by the government. We find no evidence that other political, cultural, ethnic, or religious anniversaries constitute focal moments for protest. Many observers believe that the CCP's crimes have receded from the minds of Chinese citizens. As one scholar put it: "There's a sad reality that many parts of China have moved on, and to some extent forgotten."<sup>1</sup> Our evidence suggests otherwise. The calendar of protest in China was set by events in 1978, 1986, 1989, 2008, and 2014. Once repressed by autocratic governments, pro-democracy movements may fold. But by providing focal moments around which citizens can coordinate collective action, these pro-democracy movements reverberate long into the future.

This paper contributes to several literatures. First, scholars have long recognized that government repression can backfire: by exacerbating the grievances it sought to suppress (Goldstone and Tilly 2009; Lawrence 2017). However, it remains unclear precisely why, or when, this backlash occurs. Opp and Roehl (1990) suggest that repression pushes previously acquiescent citizens to oppose the government, while Siegel (2011) argues that a backlash is more common when victims occupy more central positions in a society's networks. This paper shows that, by giving citizens focal points with which to mobilize in the future, government repression creates recurring opportunities for collective action. Repression, in short, is costly, and governments bear that cost long into the future.

Second, this paper contributes to the large literature that explores the causes and consequences of pro-democracy protests. Drawing on the Colored Revolutions in Eastern Europe and the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa, scholars have sought to explain *when* and *why* elections foster protests. Their explanations have largely focused on the political and economic conditions in which elections occur. Tucker (2007), Fearon (2011), Salehyan and Linebarger (2015), and others argue that fraud on election day renders protests more likely. Brancati (2016) and Salehyan and Linebarger (2015) find that economic crises trigger electoral protests. Hafner-Burton, Hyde and Jablonski (2014) find that repression reduces the likelihood of protest. Daxecker (2012) argues that election monitors may increase the rate of protest following elections, while Hyde (2011) suggests that monitors reduce electoral fraud and incumbent performance, and hence may also reduce the rate of protest. Our results suggest that autocratic elections may foster protests not because of the conditions underlying elections – grievances in autocracies are seldom in short supply – but simply because elections enable citizens to coordinate. Our results also suggest that a range of other dates may also constitute focal moments for protest.

This paper also contributes to the growing literature about collective action and autocratic durability in contemporary China. Perhaps inspired by the CCP's apparent strength, many scholars believe that collective action poses no fundamental threat, because it abides state-determined taboos (Perry 2008), because popular support for the CCP is relatively strong (Dickson 2015), or because the regime can manage protests when they emerge (Nathan 2003; Dimitrov 2008). Chen

---

<sup>1</sup>The Brown University Dean's Professor of China Studies, Edward Steinfeld, quoted in Harvard Magazine (2014).

(2012, 6) describes the CCP’s model as “contentious authoritarianism,” which “accommodate[s] or facilitate[s] widespread and routinized popular collective action.”<sup>2</sup> Other scholars, by contrast, argue that anti-regime sentiment is widespread, and attribute the absence of mass protests to the regime’s capacity for violence.<sup>3</sup> These scholars point to tens of thousands of protests annually about corruption, land expropriation, environmental problems, and human rights violations (Cai 2010; O’Brien 1996; Steinhardt and Wu 2016; Wang et al. 2017). Jiang and Yang (2016) argue that preference falsification is endemic in China.<sup>4</sup> This paper unifies that debate. While the CCP permits many protests, it represses those that most threaten its authority: protests that emerge on the anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements. Because the CCP knows citizens remember and revile its previous acts of repression, it treats protests that emerge on these anniversaries as existential for the regime.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents our theoretical framework. Section 3 introduces our data. Section 4 presents our results. Section 5 probes whether protests during pro-democracy anniversaries are more likely to target politically sensitive locations, whether these protests are more likely to be repressed, and whether these protests are systematically larger. Section 6 concludes.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Focal Moments, Focal Locations, and Collective Action in Autocracies

Scholars have long observed that focal points – both locational and temporal – enable coordination (Schelling 1960; Olson 1977). For anti-regime protests in autocracies, however, the locational and temporal dimensions are analytically distinct. They are focal for different reasons, and repressive governments defend against them with different techniques.

Locations are generally focal because they are central and politically sensitive. They are easy for citizens to access and, once occupied by protesters, signal some shift in the power balance between protesters and the government. Accordingly, the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt was

---

<sup>2</sup>See also Steinhardt (2016). For instance, the CCP permits and even publicizes some protests to discourage corruption among local officials, release social tension, and insulate the center from discontent (Lorentzen 2013, 2014). See also Huang, Boranbay-Akan and Huang (2016), Qin, Strömberg and Wu (2017), Hassid (2012), Chen (2017), and Steinhardt (2015). Egorov, Guriev and Sonin (2009) and Hollyer, Rosendorff and Vreeland (2015) explore these tradeoffs in a more general context. This research agenda draws upon McCubbins and Schwartz (1984), who deemed protests useful to the regime as a “fire alarm,” that is more accurate at locating pockets of discontent than the surveillance apparatus. It has managed anti-Japanese protests to serve its foreign policy goals (Weiss 2014), and has leveraged local officials’ social networks to demobilize protesters (Deng and O’Brien 2013). Perry (2010) argues that protesters follow scripts accepted by the state, reflecting “rules consciousness” rather than “rights consciousness.” Indeed, most protests are not transgressive: they rarely feature violence, radical political claims, or organizational link-ups (Li 2017).

<sup>3</sup>For more on preference falsification, see Kuran (1989, 1991).

<sup>4</sup>A political purge led survey respondents to report dramatically higher levels of support for the CCP, especially among respondents who were wealthy, educated, frequent internet users, government employees, and who grew up during the Cultural Revolution, this novel quasi-experiment reveals.

centered on Tahrir (Liberation) Square, so christened unofficially after the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 and made official after the Revolution of 1952. Similarly, the 2018 #MeToo protesters at Peking University hung anti-regime posters at the Sanjiaodi corner where pro-democracy posters hung in 1989.<sup>5</sup> To defend these focal locations, governments take precautions that reflect their physicality. Focal locations are subject to police patrols and occasionally closed altogether, like Tiananmen Square on the massacre’s 10-year anniversary and activist Liu Xiaobo’s house during the 2011 Jasmine Movement (Perry 2001). These precautions are occasionally enshrined in a city’s design. In exchange for his political support, in 1969 South Africa’s Apartheid government built President Hastings Banda of Malawi a new capital at Lilongwe, with the State House separated from the popular quarter by a three mile nature reserve and the national military headquarters (Myers 2003).

We argue that specific dates are focal for protests in autocracies when they have two properties. First, they remind citizens that anti-regime sentiment is longstanding and widespread, and hence generate common knowledge about popular frustration. Second, they are associated with collective action in the past, and hence give citizens reason to believe their compatriots will challenge the regime again. In Cameroon, for instance, anglophone citizens have long been marginalized by a series of francophone governments. This linguistic cleavage is a function of colonialism. In 1961, the colonial government in British Cameroons organized a plebiscite that gave citizens the opportunity to join Nigeria, governed from Lagos, or French Cameroon, governed from Yaoundé. Citizens in the southern half of British Cameroons voted for a unified Cameroon, partly on the promise that their regions would effectively be autonomous. Unification occurred on October 1, 1961. In the decades since, October 1 has emerged as a focal moment for protest by Cameroon’s anglophone population, who have enjoyed little autonomy.

## 2.2 The Benefits and Costs of Focal Points

The benefits of focal points to would-be protesters are well understood: Focal points facilitate coordination by reducing uncertainty about when and where protests will occur, and so reduce the expected costs of protest to any given individual. For citizens in autocracies, however, using focal points to coordinate protests entails profound risks. Just as citizens are cognizant of focal points, so too are governments. In turn, by employing focal points as coordinating devices, citizens forgo the element of surprise, and so cede to the government the ability to prepare for protests in advance. Indeed, repressive governments protect themselves as focal moments approach in a range of ways: by incarcerating dissidents, deploying security forces, or censoring the information environment (King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 2017; Truex 2018; Dragu and Przeworski 2019). As a result, it remains theoretically unclear whether would-be protesters use focal points to coordinate in autocracies.

---

<sup>5</sup>Shawn Zhang (@shawnwzhang), “Historical triangle democracy wall 三角地,” Twitter, April 23, 2018.

In turn, understanding whether there exists a well-defined calendar of collective action in autocracies requires understanding when the coordination advantages of focal points outweigh the forgone element of surprise. Theoretically, we argue that focal points are more useful as coordinating devices in the presence of a robust repressive apparatus. There are two reasons for this. First, as the government's repressive capacity increases, explicit coordination grows more dangerous, and the tacit coordination enabled by focal points becomes more valuable. Second, as the government's repressive capacity increases, the element of surprise – which citizens sacrifice when they employ focal points – confers fewer advantages. The reason is that the element of surprise is most valuable when the security apparatus is relatively inefficient: when the government's violent response to a protest is likely to be delayed by organizational inefficiencies. Conversely, when governments possess the organizational capacity to repress protests quickly, the element of surprise yields fewer benefits to protesters, and hence is less important. The element of surprise is most beneficial when the government's repressive capacity is weak, not strong.

All else equal, the value of focal points to citizens rises with the autocrat's capacity for repression.

### **2.3 Where do Focal Moments Come From?**

Although focal points are generally a function of a community's cultural practices and historical legacies, scholars have identified one focal moment that is common across the world's electoral autocracies: the regular elections occasioned by nominally democratic institutions. During election seasons, citizens are more engaged in politics and more aware of their neighbors' discontent (Kuran 1991; Tucker 2007; Hollyer, Rosendorff and Vreeland 2015). When governments resort to electoral fraud, citizens experience violations of basic rights simultaneously (Tucker 2007; Fearon 2011). Opposition leaders have strong incentives to coordinate mass protests and alert citizens to electoral fraud (Beissinger 2002; Javeline 2003; McFaul 2005; Radnitz 2010; Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Fearon 2011). By affirming the possibility of a post-regime future, elections decrease the costs to frustrated regime elites of defecting from the coalition and joining the opposition (Hale 2005).

If election seasons are the chief sources of focal moments in autocracies, then the prospects for political change driven by collective action are not good. Elections, after all, are rare. In the absence of regular elections, what other focal moments do citizens employ to coordinate protests? We argue that anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements may also constitute focal moments. Pro-democracy anniversaries remind citizens that anti-regime sentiment is longstanding and that their compatriots have mobilized against the regime in the past. They are also temporally precise. Opposition leaders and regime dissidents know this, and so have incentives to leverage focal moments to amplify their communication networks.

If pro-democracy anniversaries constitute focal moments for collective action, we should expect autocrats to treat them as politically sensitive. They do. In 1999, the 10-year anniversary of the

famous Tiananmen massacre, the government closed the Square for “renovations” (Perry 2001). Social media posts by China’s 50-cent army of paid regime supporters appear to spike at politically sensitive moments, including on the pro-democracy anniversaries that our theory privileges (King, Pan and Roberts 2017). Regime dissidents are more likely to be detained before pro-democracy anniversaries, and are routinely released after the anniversary has passed (Truex 2018). Leaked directives from the CCP’s propaganda apparatus suggest a similar chronology to the regime’s media strategy: “increase reports on unity and stability, propagandize the unity between the army and the people, between the army and the government, the cadres and the people, and ethnic harmony” (Brady 2008, 96). This yields our first hypothesis for empirical testing:

*Hypothesis 1: In repressive environments, the rate of protest will be higher on anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements than on other days of the calendar year.*

## **2.4 Why Other Anniversaries Are Not Focal Moments**

Why are anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements more likely to constitute focal moments for protest than other anniversaries? It is possible, for instance, that ethnic, cultural, or religious holidays may foster a shared communal identity and a common sense of injustice. When insular communities gather, information may spread more quickly and securely. Common knowledge may be easier to create, and coordination easier to organize. Accordingly, protest movements may be easier to begin and sustain (Larson 2017; Larson and Lewis 2017, 2018). Distinctly political anniversaries or events may also be focal moments: national independence holidays, ruling party congresses, or celebrations of the ruling party’s creation. Political anniversaries may also be generated by moments when the incumbent regime failed the country in some profound way, perhaps by failing to prevent a foreign invasion or terrorist attack.

In short, societies have a range of potential anniversaries that could constitute focal moments for protest. In repressive environments, however, unless these other anniversaries generated widespread protests that featured explicit demands for democracy, citizens should be less confident that their compatriots will be inclined to protest in the future. A key distinction between anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements and other anniversaries is this history of collective action, which helps foster a common belief that protests will emerge again.

*Hypothesis 2: In repressive environments, the rate of protest on other political, ethnic, cultural, or religious anniversaries will generally not reach the rate of protest on anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements.*

## **2.5 How Focal Moment Protests are Different**

Our theory has implications for the nature of protests that emerge around focal moments. First, we expect focal moment protests to target focal locations: in particular, symbols of state authority.

These focal locations facilitate tacit coordination in the same ways as focal moments. In the Soviet Union, for instance, protests routinely targeted “profane” symbols of state authority (Kowalewski 1980, 439). More recently, Arab Spring protesters across the Middle East routinely selected two locations to ransack as their regimes fell: the presidential palace and the propaganda building.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Chinese citizens celebrated when the CCP’s propaganda headquarters went up in flames in 2009, and protested outside the same building in 2014 when the regime declared a new “Constitution Day” to celebrate the rights enjoyed by Chinese citizens.

*Hypothesis 3: In repressive environments, focal moment protests will be more likely to target symbols of state authority.*

We also expect protests that emerge around focal moments to be repressed at a higher rate. Our theory suggests three reasons for this. First, since protests that occur during focal moments should be more threatening, the government should be quicker to respond with violence. Second, since focal moments are so central to collective action *and* governments are aware of them, governments can prepare in advance. Third, by employing violence, governments may try to signal to citizens *in the future* that focal moment protests are unusually dangerous. In short, since focal moment protests are profoundly threatening, governments should marshal their repressive apparatuses accordingly.

*Hypothesis 4: In repressive environments, focal moment protests are more likely to be repressed.*

Finally, our theory has implications for the equilibrium number of participants in any given focal moment protest. One force renders them larger: Since focal moments facilitate coordination, more citizens can participate. Another force renders them smaller: Precisely because focal moments are so threatening and governments can prepare for them in advance, focal moment protests are more likely to be repressed. As a result, their equilibrium size is ambiguous, and may vary according to country specific characteristics.

### 3 Data and Empirical Strategy

As the discussion above suggests, focality is context specific, a function of a community’s cultural practices and historical legacies. Because of this specificity, testing our theory cross-nationally is difficult. Accordingly, we focus on one country where our theory predicts focal moments should occasion collective action: China, where the likelihood of repression is high, the costs of failed protests are substantial, and tacit coordination is vital. Empirically, China is attractive because the duration of the CCP regime gives us statistical power. Since its founding in 1949, the regime has survived several major pro-democracy movements. The anniversaries of these failed movements

---

<sup>6</sup>Ahmed Mohamed Al Moussawi, “Arab Change Movement,” *Al Sabaah*, April 25, 2011.



recur annually, and so we can measure their mobilizational power relative to other potentially salient anniversaries. In turn, we can confirm that pro-democracy anniversaries have unique properties for collective action.

### **3.1 Identifying Anniversaries**

We worked with a team of Chinese citizens to identify the anniversaries of pro-democracy movements, as well as other dates with political, cultural, ethnic, or religious salience. We briefly describe each category below; the Online Appendix provides more detail.

#### **Pro-Democracy Anniversaries**

We identified five pro-democracy movements in modern Chinese history, as well as the date on which each movement reached its peak. These five pro-democracy movements are the Tiananmen Square protests, Democracy Wall, Constitution Day, Charter 08, and the National Peoples' Congress (NPC) Direct Election Movement. We employed three critical criteria for coding. First, these citizen movements must make explicit calls for democratic reforms. Movements such as the 1976 Qing Ming Movement, which called on the CCP to make internal reforms and fight corruption, are not sufficient. Second, these movements must be driven by domestic actors, rather than foreign ones. Third, we code a single date for each movement as the focal moment: the date on which the movement reached its peak or was violently repressed by the CCP government. This final criterion ensures that we do not select on the dependent variable. These pro-democracy movements are summarized in Table 1.

#### **Foreign Inspired Pro-Democracy Anniversaries**

We identify three pro-democracy movements that originated abroad: the foundation of the China Democracy Party, Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Prize, and the Jasmine Movement. Their foreign origins are key, both for our theory and in contemporary Chinese politics. Theoretically, focal moments are powerful insofar as they remind citizens that their compatriots mobilized against the regime in the past. Today, the Chinese propaganda apparatus routinely stigmatizes pro-democracy activists as driven by "foreign hostile forces." To preserve their integrity in the eyes of compatriots, Chinese dissidents are careful to ensure that their movements are wholly domestic: that they cannot be justifiably branded as "foreign" by the CCP regime's propaganda apparatus.

#### **Political Anniversaries**

Our list of political anniversaries includes three sets of dates. The first set draws attention to the government's failure to realize its ideological principles, and hence undermines its claims to legitimacy. Many of these dates juxtapose the regime's status as the "vanguard of the peasants"

Table 1: Pro-Democracy Anniversaries

Date	Name	Description
June 4	Tiananmen Square	In April 1989, following the death of a prominent liberal leader, thousands of students protested in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. Following an April 26 editorial in the <i>People’s Daily</i> , which accused the students of being manipulated by foreign agents, over 100,000 citizens joined the protest. CCP leaders regarded the participation of workers as representative of a broader cross-section of society, and therefore as particularly threatening. The People’s Liberation Army cleared the square on June 4, murdering several thousand citizens.
November 27	Democracy Wall	In November 1978, citizens in Beijing’s Xidan neighborhood hung pro-democracy posters on a public wall. Activists then formed the Democratic Assembly Group and, on November 27, led a 10,000-person march from “Democracy Wall” to Tiananmen Square. Protest leader Wei Jingsheng demanded that the government adopt democracy as its “fifth modernization,” a rejoinder to Deng Xiaoping’s four modernizations. The CCP arrested participants, including Wei, who spent 18 years in prison and was later exiled. After demolishing Democracy Wall in December 1979, Deng called for revoking the constitutional right to hang posters.
December 4	Constitution Day	On December 4, 1982, the CCP adopted a constitution that grants citizens freedom of speech and assembly, equality before the law, and the right to vote and stand for election. In 2014, the CCP moved to buttress its legitimacy by creating Constitution Day, celebrated on December 4. The proclamation sparked a backlash. On December 4, nearly 1,000 citizens protested outside the CCTV building in Beijing, and dozens of prominent lawyers signed an open letter demanding that the CCP respect the rights enshrined in the 1982 constitution.
December 10	Charter 08	On December 10, 2008, 303 civil society leaders signed a manifesto that demanded independent courts, respect for human rights, and an end to one-party rule. Entitled “Charter 08,” it was inspired by the “Charter 77” pro-democracy manifesto released by Czech dissidents in 1977. The document collected 10,000 additional signatures from prominent citizens, compelling the government to forbid discussion of Charter 08 in the media. Citizens responded by distributing the document on Beijing streets. Although Charter 08 did not culminate in major street protests, it still constituted collective action: prominent citizens signed the document publicly.
December 19	NPC Direct Election Movement	In 1986, public intellectual Fang Lizhi called on the government to respect freedom of expression. Constitutional rights, he declared, should be treated as “actual rights.” Students were electrified. On December 5, students at the Hefei University of Science and Technology demanded the right to directly elect representatives to the National People’s Congress. Protests quickly spread to 150 universities. On December 19, Shanghai authorities forcibly dispersed protesters. In response, students in Hefei staged a sit-in in front of government offices on December 23. Fang brokered a compromise between the students and the Hefei government, after which the students called off protests. The government ultimately refused the reforms to which it agreed.

with China’s rising inequality. We include commemorative anniversaries, such as the founding of the PRC, CCP, or PLA, as well as ideological anniversaries, like Labor Day. The second set includes policy failures for which the government bears some responsibility: the Japanese invasion of China, the Nanjing Massacre, and the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, among others.<sup>7</sup> The third set includes recurring political meetings, which may present an opportunity for citizens to signal discontent with regime policies: the quinquennial Party Congress, the annual National People’s Congress, and the annual senior leadership retreat to a beach resort outside Beijing.

### **Cultural, Ethnic, and Religious Anniversaries**

Many of China’s major cultural holidays have rich histories, and occur on dates specified by the lunar calendar: the Lunar New Year, Tomb Sweeping Festival, Lantern Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Ghost Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, the Double Seventh holiday, and the Double Ninth holiday. For these, we converted lunar dates into their Gregorian equivalents for each year in our sample. We also include a range of cultural holidays of more recent vintage, such as Singles’ Day.

Finally, we include ethnic and religious anniversaries. In Tibet, for instance, the Tibetan rebellion of 1959 is widely commemorated, as are the large-scale anti-Chinese riots of 2009 in Xinjiang. We include the date of the Falun Gong’s 10,000-person sit-in in Beijing, as well as the date the Falun Gong was banned. We include Christmas as well, since China’s Christian population is large and faces increasing levels of persecution.

### **3.2 Collective Action in China**

We use protest data from Manfred Elfstrom and the China Labour Bulletin (CLB), a non-governmental organization in Hong Kong that advocates for labor rights in China. Drawing on international, domestic, and social media, they maintain a geocoded dataset of all known strikes and protests. Elfstrom’s dataset covers the period between 2006 and 2012, while the CLB dataset covers the period between 2011 and 2016.<sup>8</sup> To maximize coverage, we merged the Elfstrom and CLB datasets. We did so after confirming that their respective coding rules and sources are essentially identical, as all available information suggests they are. We exploit the fact that the two datasets overlap in 2011 and 2012. In the Online Appendix, we show that the two datasets are essentially identical in 2011 and 2012. Accordingly, the variable  $Protests_{it}$  records the number of protests in province  $i$  on day  $t$ . For 2006 through 2010, we use Elfstrom’s data; for 2011 through 2016, we use CLB data.

Figure 1 suggests that the rate of protest across China has risen exponentially since 2006.

---

<sup>7</sup>Survey research finds that national sovereignty is one of the most important issues for Chinese citizens (Carter, Johnston and Quek 2018). Thus they may be especially likely to penalize the government for backing down against foreign aggressors.

<sup>8</sup>An earlier version of these data covering 2008-2012 was analyzed by Distelhorst and Hou (2017). Note that social media reports are an accepted way to measure unrest in China, as the government does not release official data on protests (Cai 2010; Wallace and Weiss 2015).

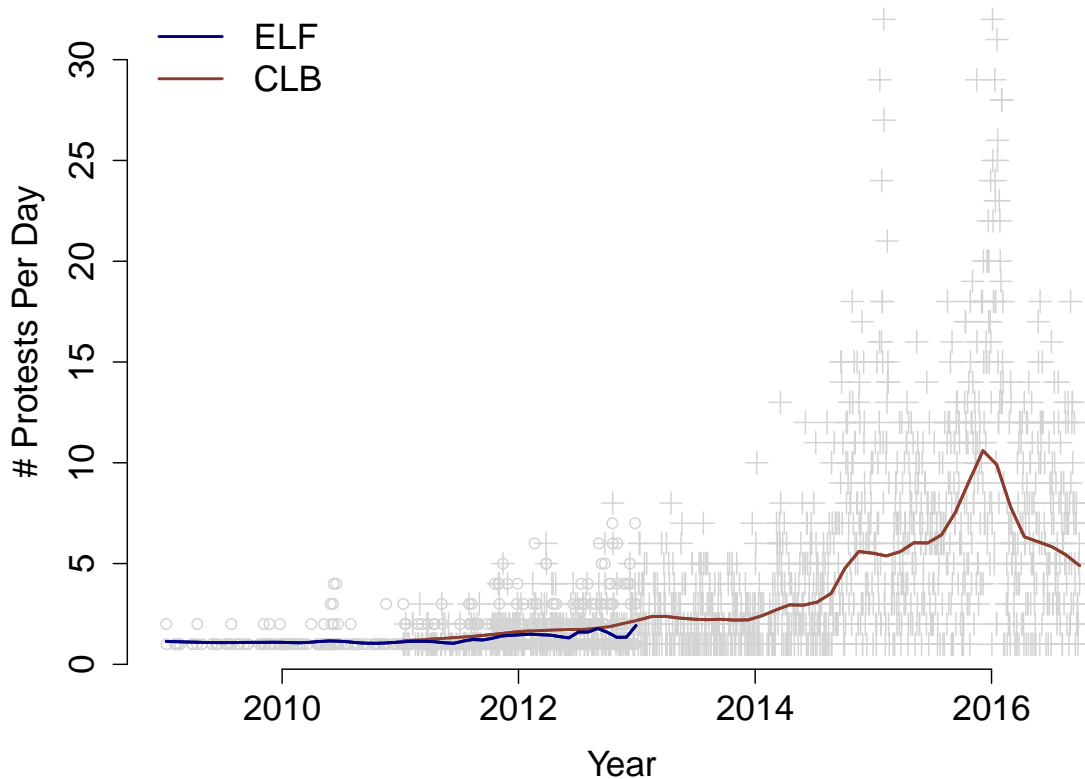


Figure 1: Protest Data. Data from Manfred Elfstrom are shown in blue and cover the 2006-2012 period. Data from the China Labour Bulletin are shown in red and cover January 2011 through September 2016. We aggregate these two measures into a single variable,  $Protests_{it}$ , which uses Elfstrom’s data for the 2006-2010 period and the CLB’s data thereafter.

In part, this may reflect the data collection process. By relying on social media reports, the Elfstrom and CLB measures may underreport protest events prior to the recent boom in internet penetration and social media. There are good reasons to believe, however, that this increase does not only reflect rising social media use. The Chinese government reported roughly 10,000 protests in 1994 and 80,000 protests in 2008. Then, since its own data indicated rising popular discontent, the government stopped releasing it. One Chinese sociologist estimated that, in 2010, there were 180,000 protests across the country. The time trend in Figure 1 is consistent with rising popular frustration. Between 2016 and 2018, journalists have documented increased repression and censorship under Xi Jinping. The declined in observed protests after 2016 could be a result of either of these trends: fewer actual protests because citizens fear repression, or fewer observed

protests because the data are primarily crowdsourced from social media posts. To accommodate unobserved differences in the data generating process, we employ year fixed effects.

The Online Appendix includes descriptive statistics about protests by province. In short, we find some evidence that, at the province level, protests are correlated with economic output, which may reflect greater social media use or urbanization rates. Likewise, protests are also recorded disproportionately in Guangdong, near CLB headquarters. To accommodate these unobserved differences, we employ province fixed effects.

## 4 Focal Moments, Pro-Democracy Anniversaries, and Protests

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Figure 2 visualizes the life cycle of collective action in China. For each calendar day  $d \in \{1, 365\}$  along the  $x$ -axis, we compute the mean number of protests across the country between 2006 and 2017, recorded on the  $y$ -axis. The two dashed horizontal lines indicate daily protest levels equal to the mean plus one or two standard deviations, respectively. For clarity, we label China’s pro-democracy anniversaries, both domestic and foreign inspired. Those in dark blue exceed the two standard deviation threshold. Those in light blue exceed the one standard deviation threshold. Anniversaries that do not inspire elevated protest levels appear in black. We label other dates that exceed the two standard deviation threshold in red, and other dates that exceed the one standard deviation threshold in orange. These, as we explain below, are important anniversaries in their own right.

These descriptive statistics underscore the relevance of pro-democracy anniversaries. Of the five candidate dates, each, on average, exceeds the one standard deviation threshold. Three exceed the two standard deviation threshold. Foreign inspired pro-democracy anniversaries appear to occasion collective action less consistently. Neither the Jasmine Movement nor the CDP’s founding exceeds the one standard deviation threshold, though Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel Prize does.

Other days that exceed the two standard deviation threshold are also sensitive anniversaries, though not explicitly pro-democratic. The Lunar New Year spans a two week period in January and February, when migrant workers routinely protest wage arrears; these protests occur in public transit locations, since they cannot afford to return home to their families.<sup>9</sup> Protest rates also exceed the two standard deviation threshold in mid-August, when party leaders retreat to a beach resort outside of Beijing. Protest rates again exceed the two standard deviation threshold in late October and early November, during the quinquennial Party Congresses; in our sample, these opened on November 8, 2012, and October 19, 2017 and each lasted a week. The weeks before and during Party Congresses are some of China’s most tense, and, we find, sometimes occasion protest.

---

<sup>9</sup>Note that the precise dates of the Lunar New Year shift by year, which may cause the elevated daily protest rate through January and early February.

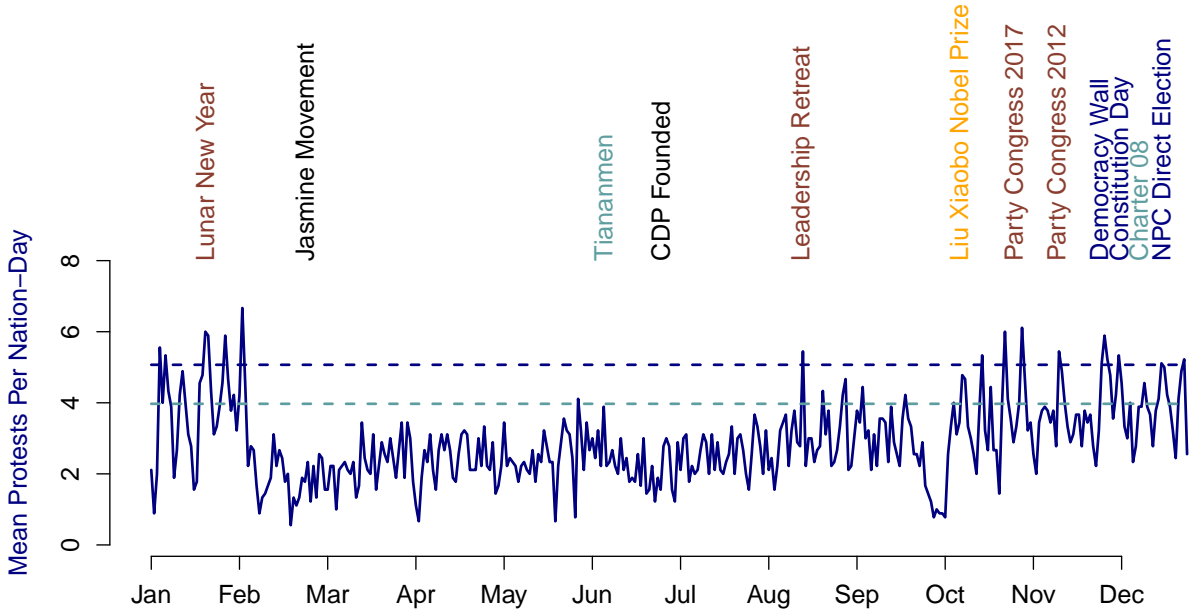


Figure 2: The life cycle of collective action in China. The  $x$ -axis records calendar days. The  $y$ -axis records the average number of protests in China on day  $t$ . The dashed light blue line indicates protest levels that exceeded the mean level of protest plus one standard deviation. The dashed navy line indicates the two standard deviation threshold. Pro-democracy anniversaries with protest levels above the one- and two-standard deviation thresholds are labeled in light blue and dark blue, respectively.

## 4.2 Model Specification

To probe this more systematically, we estimate models of the form:

$$y_{it} = \alpha + \beta (\text{Pro-Democracy Anniversary Window}_t) + \phi X_{it} + \psi W_{is} + \gamma_i + \gamma_s + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  indexes province,  $t$  indexes day, and  $s$  indexes year. The vectors  $X_{it}$  and  $W_{is}$  include day- and year-level covariates, respectively. To accommodate unobserved characteristics by province and year, respectively, we include a full set of province fixed effects, given by  $\gamma_i$ , and a full set of year fixed effects, given by  $\gamma_s$ . Since our outcome variable is a count – the number of protests in province  $i$  on day  $t$  – we employ a negative binomial model.

Our explanatory variable of interest is *Pro-Democracy Anniversary Window* $_t$ : a one-day window centered on contemporary China’s five major pro-democracy anniversaries. This one-day window is restrictive, but consistent with our theory. Focal moments are powerful because they are temporally specific. As a robustness check, in Section 4.4 we vary the size of these temporal windows.

We include a range of controls in the vectors  $X_{it}$  and  $W_{is}$ . At the day level, we include a lagged outcome variable, since protests on day  $t - 1$  may render protests on day  $t$  more likely. We also include the political, cultural, ethnic, and religious anniversaries from Section 3.1. At the year-level, we control for a range of economic and social conditions that may be associated with popular unrest. These conditions could be felt by citizens as shocks, and hence compel them to protest at the next available anniversary window. If these are somehow correlated with one type of anniversary – perhaps because cultural or political anniversaries outnumber pro-democracy anniversaries – then failing to control for these conditions may generate bias. We control for province  $i$ 's gross regional product in year  $s$ , its urban unemployment rate, consumer price inflation, and pension shortfall.<sup>10</sup> We control for province  $i$ 's population, since protests may be more likely where there are more potential protesters, as well as the share of citizens who live in rural areas, since social service provision is typically lower in the countryside and hence associated with political grievance. We also control for province  $i$ 's sex ratio, since imbalanced ratios may generate unrest. The full set of variables appears in Table 6.

We estimate variants of Equation (1) that include each discrete anniversary as a dichotomous variable. That is, we disaggregate our aggregate anniversary indicators into their constituent anniversaries, which enables us to identify whether the aggregate variable is driven by any particular anniversary, or if any particular anniversary behaves contrary to our expectations.

### 4.3 Results

The results appear in Table 2. Across models, we find strong evidence that the rate of popular protest is substantially higher on pro-democracy anniversaries than other days of the calendar year. Figure 3 visualizes these results. The black line gives the predicted number of protests that occur on a given province-day. This baseline rate is relatively low: just 0.19. For province-days during a pro-democracy window, the predicted number of protests increases by roughly 21%, to 0.23. The Online Appendix presents the disaggregated anniversary results. Strikingly, we find that *each* of the pro-democracy anniversaries, save one, is associated with higher rates of protest than otherwise. We regard this as powerful evidence that focal points matter, despite the government's ability to deploy its repressive apparatus against them.

The sole exception is the Tiananmen anniversary. Tiananmen is widely regarded as the most dangerous anniversary in the political calendar, and so the government mobilizes its repressive apparatus accordingly. Just as it is common knowledge that citizens are dissatisfied on June 4, so too is it common knowledge that, on June 4, the regime is most willing to brutally repress its citizens.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, the anniversary experienced spikes above the two standard deviation threshold in four years (2009, 2010, 2016, and 2017), and a spike above the one standard deviation

<sup>10</sup>Cai (2010) finds that pension arrears are a common motivation for collective action in China. To measure pension shortfalls, we compute pension expenses less pension revenue.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Wan and Denyer (2014).

threshold in one year (2012). In two other years (2013 and 2014), protest rates exceeded the two standard deviation threshold either a week before or after the Tiananmen anniversary.<sup>12</sup> In short, Tiananmen experienced large protest spikes in several years, but the increased temporal range of some of those protests combined with the lack of protests in other years attenuates the coefficient estimate.

We find no evidence that political, cultural, ethnic, or religious anniversaries constitute focal moments for protest, or that pro-democracy anniversaries that originate abroad condition protest. These null results are perhaps intuitive. Many political anniversaries are explicitly nationalist, and so anti-regime protests may be regarded as unseemly. Citizens may believe it unpatriotic to protest on days that recall harm to the nation, like the Nanjing Massacre, the Japanese invasion, or the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. On cultural anniversaries, the opportunity cost of protest may be relatively high, since citizens routinely engage in family or cultural festivities. The exception to this, we show in the Online Appendix, is Singles' Day, when the protest rates spikes as well. China's tens of millions of unmarried men may see this as an occasion to vent their discontent with China's sex ratio imbalance, a product, in part, of CCP policy. We also find that the Christmas holiday is associated with higher protest rates, which is also unsurprising. China's Christian population is systematically persecuted and geographically diffuse. The Christmas holiday appears to be focal for them.

There is little evidence that ethnic or religious anniversaries constitute focal moments for collective action *across* China. This is not to suggest, however, that these anniversaries are not focal moments for protest *in certain provinces*. They are not, however, focal nationally.

Other covariates behave as expected. There are fewer protests in wealthy and urban provinces, and more protests in populous provinces with pension shortfalls. Protests, once started, are easier to sustain.

#### 4.4 Robustness Checks

The Online Appendix includes a range of robustness checks. First, readers may be concerned that our one day temporal window surrounding pro-democracy anniversaries is too restrictive. To ensure that our results are not sensitive to small changes in the size of the window, we reproduce Table 2 for anniversary windows of plus/minus zero, two, and three days. The results appear in the Online Appendix, and are visualized in Figure 3. The results are substantively unchanged.

Second, since the models in Table 2 are based on protest counts, readers may be concerned that they are driven by a handful of days on which the number of protests was extremely high. To ensure this is not the case, we dichotomize our outcome variable, such that variable  $Protests_{it}$  assumes value 1 if the number of protests in province  $i$  on day  $t$  is positive and value 0 otherwise.

---

<sup>12</sup>Since it is common knowledge that the regime represses on this most sensitive holiday, citizens may respond by coordinating before or after the focal date.



Table 2: Effect of Aggregate 1 Day Anniversary Window on Protest

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Protests				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Pro-Democracy Anniversary	0.120** (0.055)	0.160*** (0.054)	0.130** (0.053)	0.230*** (0.066)	0.190*** (0.066)
Foreign Pro-Democracy Anniversary	-0.540*** (0.100)	-0.690*** (0.100)	-0.600*** (0.100)	-0.410*** (0.130)	-0.450*** (0.130)
Political Anniversary					-0.230*** (0.050)
Cultural Anniversary					-0.034 (0.055)
Ethnic/Religious Anniversary					-0.220*** (0.073)
Protests <sub>it-1</sub>	0.580*** (0.015)	0.350*** (0.015)	0.230*** (0.015)	0.190*** (0.019)	0.180*** (0.019)
Log GRP				-4.500*** (0.570)	-4.500*** (0.570)
Log Population				-7.300*** (1.900)	-7.300*** (1.900)
Rural Population Share				-13.000*** (2.500)	-13.000*** (2.500)
Pension Shortfall				-0.00000** (0.00000)	-0.00000** (0.00000)
Sex Ratio				0.003 (0.006)	0.003 (0.006)
Urban Unemployment Rate				-0.120 (0.096)	-0.120 (0.096)
Consumer Price Inflation				-0.007 (0.056)	-0.006 (0.056)
Constant	-3.300*** (0.340)	-1.700*** (0.059)	-3.200*** (0.340)	110.000*** (17.000)	111.000*** (17.000)
Province Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	52,669	52,669	52,669	32,612	32,612

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

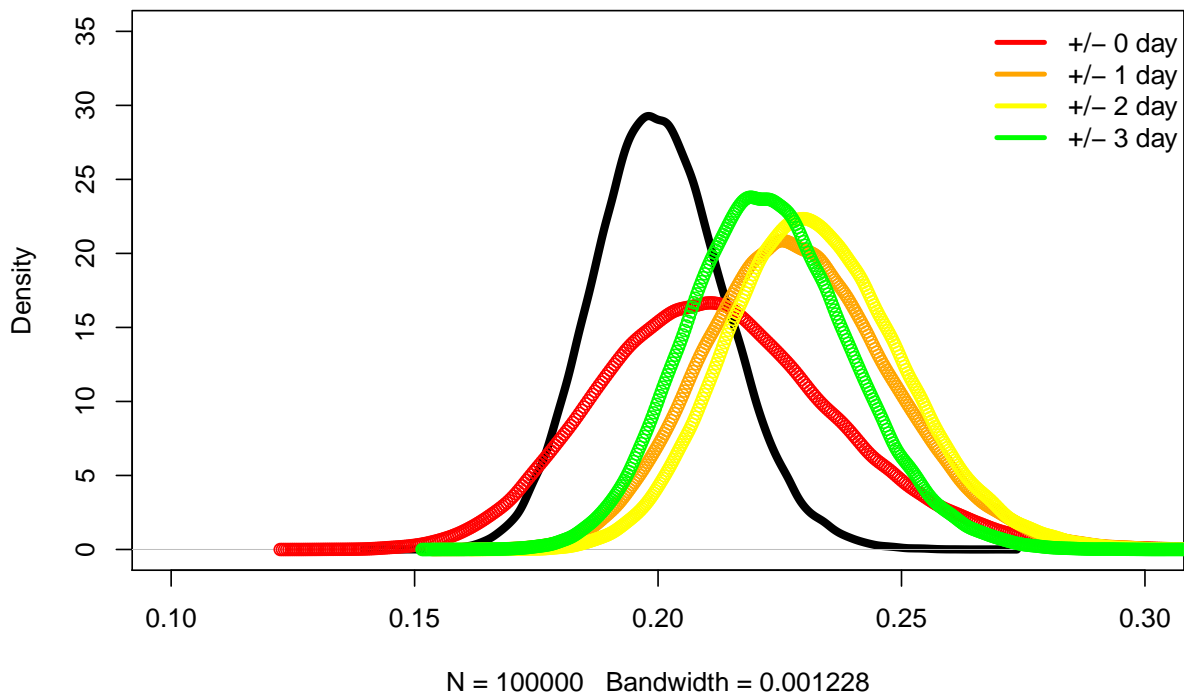


Figure 3: Predicted number of protests. The baseline rate appears in black, the predicted rate for  $\pm 0$  day anniversary windows appears in red, the predicted rate for  $\pm 1$  day windows appears in orange, the predicted rate for  $\pm 2$  day windows appears in yellow, and the predicted rate for  $\pm 3$  day windows appears in green. Supporting tables appear in the Online Appendix.

We then estimate the effect of pro-democracy anniversaries on the probability that protests emerge in province  $i$  on day  $t$ . The results are virtually identical to those in Table 2. The daily odds of protest during a pro-democracy anniversary window are between 20% and 40% greater than the baseline. Again, the odds of protest are lower during cultural and political anniversaries, and foreign-inspired anniversaries have no effect.

Third, we probe the determinants of “high” and “very high protest days”: province-days on which the protest level exceeds one and two standard deviations, respectively, above the sample mean. Figure 4 visualizes the predicted probabilities, using the results in the Online Appendix. The baseline probability that day  $t$  in province  $s$  is a very high protest day is less than 3%; during pro-democracy anniversary windows, the probability of a very high protest day rises to 5%. The baseline probability of a high protest day in a given province is 11%; during pro-democracy anniversary windows, the probability rises to roughly 14%.

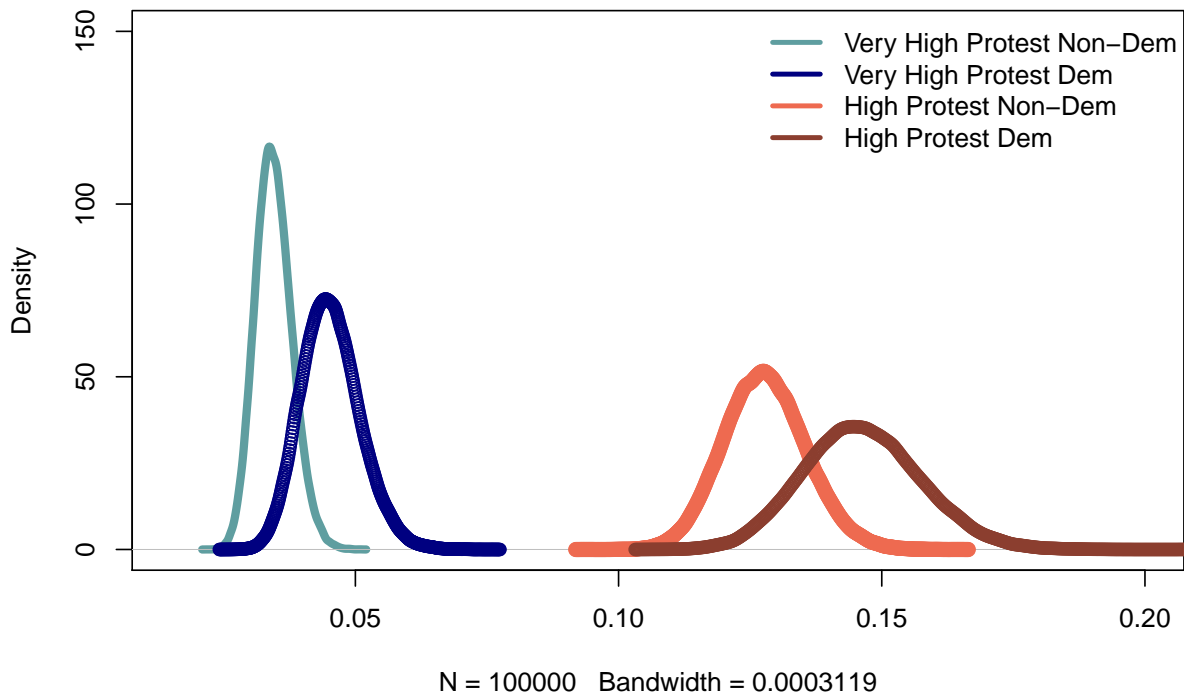


Figure 4: Predicted probability of high protest and very high protest days during pro-democracy anniversary windows and otherwise.

Fourth, readers may be concerned that the number of days that reflect pro-democracy anniversary windows is relatively small – five pro-democracy anniversaries, yielding windows for 15 days per calendar year – and so the statistically significant results in Table 2 might reflect random chance. To ensure this is not the case, we employ randomization inference. For each of 10,000 simulations, we randomly assign five days per calendar year as a treatment, construct one day temporal windows on either side of these five days, estimate the baseline model in equation (1), and then retain the estimated coefficient.<sup>13</sup> Figure 5 displays the distribution of these 10,000 estimated coefficients, with our observed estimated coefficient from Model 5 in Table 2 given by the red line. It is exceedingly unlikely that the levels of protest observed during pro-democracy anniversary windows are a function of random chance.

We employ another placebo test as well. We exploit the fact that one focal moment emerged

<sup>13</sup>In constructing the placebo windows, we excluded days within two known high-protest periods: the Lunar New Year and the Party Congresses. To generate the coefficient estimates we employed Model 4 from the main table which includes all controls save other anniversaries (which could conceivably overlap with the placebo windows).

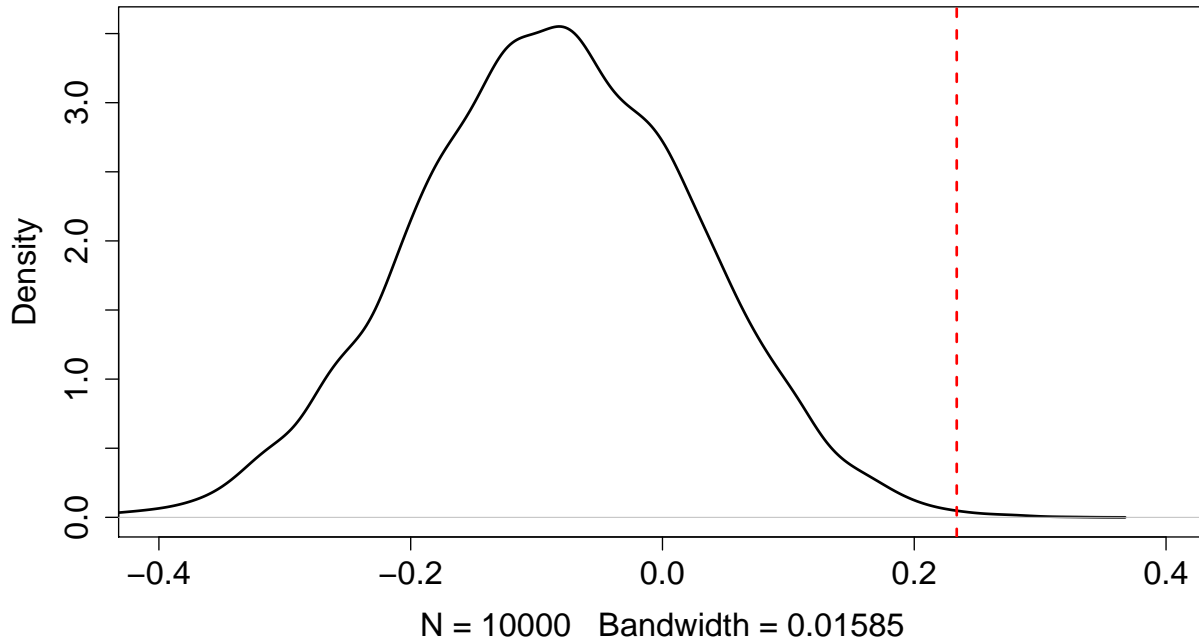


Figure 5: Randomization inference. The estimated coefficient is shown in red. The probability of observing a coefficient as extreme as this one approaches zero.

during our sample period. As a result, we can verify that this calendar day – and the window that surrounds it – did not witness elevated protest levels *before* the pro-democracy movement that made it a focal moment. The pro-democracy anniversary that emerged during our sample period is Constitution Day, which was created on December 4, 2014. In the Online Appendix, we show that prior to 2014, December 4 and the days surrounding it did not witness elevated protest levels.

Finally, readers may be concerned that the economic issues that motivate some of the protests in the Elfstrom and CLB data somehow bias our results. To ensure this is not the case, we drop episodes of collective action that are more likely to be economic in nature, not political: “strikes” and episodes labeled as “miscellaneous.” In turn, we retain only those episodes of collective action described as “demonstrations” or “sit-ins.” By focusing only on collective action events that are more explicitly political, we expect the estimated effect of pro-democracy anniversaries *to be stronger*. This is indeed the case.

## 5 Are Focal Moment Protests Different?

### 5.1 Protest Location

The theory in Section 2 suggests that focal moment protests should be distinctive in a range of ways. First, we focus on location: whether focal moment protests are indeed more likely to target symbols of state authority, either because citizens choose to exploit the focal moment to target more politically sensitive locations, or these politically sensitive locations are themselves focal, and so facilitate tacit coordination.

To test this, identify all protests that occurred at state-owned enterprises (SOEs). These SOEs are critical to China’s political economy. They are managed by CCP appointees, their IPOs are used to disburse patronage among key CCP elites, and to many citizens they symbolize state authority. To determine whether SOEs are targeted disproportionately during focal moments, we shift to protest-level data. We create the variable  $SOE_j$ , which assumes value 1 if protest  $j$  occurred at an SOE and 0 otherwise. The CLB records 4,795 protests at private enterprises, 1,072 protests at SOEs, and nearly 3,000 at other locations.

Our baseline model is

$$SOE_j = \alpha + \beta (\text{Pro-Democracy Anniversary Window}_j) + \phi X_j + \psi W_j + \gamma_i + \gamma_s + \epsilon \quad (2)$$

where  $i$  indexes province,  $j$  indexes protest, and  $s$  indexes year. The vectors  $X_j$  and  $W_j$  include the same day- and year-level covariates, respectively, from above, now indexed by protest event. We include province and year fixed effects, given by  $\gamma_i$  and  $\gamma_s$ , respectively. Since the outcome is dichotomous, we employ a logit model.

The results appear in Table 3. Across models, protests that occur during pro-democracy anniversaries are far more likely to target SOEs. Models 4 and 5 suggest that the odds are more than 30% greater than otherwise. Figure 6 visualizes this. To generate this figure, we replicated equation (2) for protests at each type of location (joint ventures, foreign owned enterprises, state owned enterprises, and private enterprises). The supporting tables appear in the Online Appendix. For each location type, the light shade represents protests on typical days, and the dark shade represents protests during pro-democracy anniversary windows. The baseline probability that a protest occurs at an SOE is roughly 19% (shown in light blue). For protests that occur during pro-democracy anniversary windows, the predicted probability that a protest occurs at an SOE rises to 24% (shown in dark blue). By contrast, protests at joint ventures and private enterprises were no more likely during pro-democracy anniversary windows, and protests at foreign owned enterprises were less likely.

In short, focal moment protests are far more likely to target symbols of state authority. This is consistent with our theory. Since focal moments facilitate coordination, citizens can target sensitive locations that might otherwise be dangerous. Moreover, these locations may themselves be focal,

and so facilitate tacit coordination.

Table 3: Probability of Protests at State-Owned Enterprises

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	soe				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Pro-Democracy Anniversary	0.294** (0.148)	0.264* (0.150)	0.264* (0.150)	0.456** (0.189)	0.455** (0.191)
Foreign Pro-Democracy Anniversary	0.288 (0.282)	0.398 (0.287)	0.398 (0.287)	-0.134 (0.476)	-0.158 (0.477)
Political Anniversary					-0.148 (0.195)
Cultural Anniversary					-0.468* (0.241)
Ethnic/Religious Anniversary					0.141 (0.229)
Protests <sub>t-1</sub>	-0.168*** (0.044)	-0.034 (0.045)	-0.034 (0.046)	0.095 (0.064)	0.088 (0.064)
Log GRP				-0.635 (1.895)	-0.716 (1.899)
Log Population				-18.912 (15.241)	-19.020 (15.240)
Rural Population Share				9.152 (10.551)	8.635 (10.557)
Pension.shortfall				-0.00000 (0.00000)	-0.00000 (0.00000)
Sex Ratio				0.041 (0.025)	0.040 (0.025)
Urban Unemployment Rate				0.242 (0.410)	0.234 (0.411)
Consumer Price Inflation				-0.213 (0.143)	-0.194 (0.144)
Constant	-105.373* (54.187)	-0.288 (0.764)	-1.652 (56.993)	358.548 (379.454)	330.214 (380.653)
Province Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	8,593	8,593	8,593	4,787	4,787

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

## 5.2 State Response

Next, we probe whether the government is indeed more likely to employ violence against protests that emerge during pro-democracy anniversaries.

In so doing, we build on a large literature that suggests the Chinese government is able to “stage manage” protests: that it permits protests to let citizens voice unrest, identify pockets of

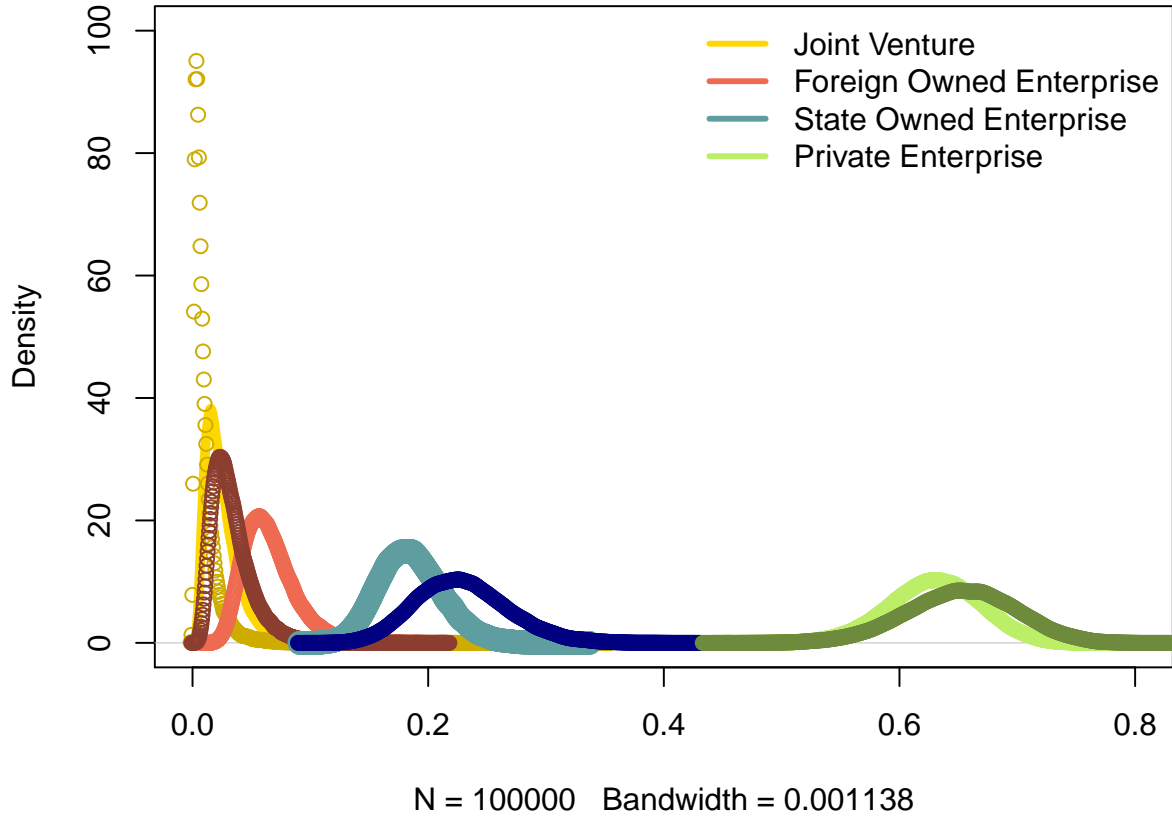


Figure 6: Predicted probability of protest at joint ventures, foreign owned enterprises, state owned enterprises, and private enterprises during pro-democracy anniversary windows and otherwise. For each location, the light shade represents protests on typical days, and the dark shade represents protests during pro-democracy anniversary windows.

unrest, identify incompetent government officials, or create audience costs in international affairs (Lorentzen 2013, 2014; Weiss 2014). In light of this literature, readers may question whether the focal moment protests we document in Section 4.3 are really so threatening to the government. It is possible, for instance, that the government *permits* them to occur. If this alternative theory is correct, then the government should be no more likely to respond to focal moment protests with violence than otherwise.

To test this, we exploit the state response data coded by the CLB. In particular, we create the variable  $Repression_j$ , which assumes value 1 if protest  $j$  was repressed by the government and 0 otherwise. We include a range of state responses in our definition of repression: police deploy-

ments, threats, arrests, beatings, pepper spray, shootings, destruction of property, and arson. The  $Repression_j$  variable also assumes value 1 when the government employs repression alongside mediation or negotiation. The CLB recorded 2,428 episodes of repression, 388 episodes of government mediation, and 161 episodes of negotiation.

Our baseline model is

$$Repression_j = \alpha + \beta (\text{Pro-Democracy Anniversary Window}_j) + \phi X_j + \psi W_j + \gamma_i + \gamma_s + \epsilon \quad (3)$$

where  $i$  indexes province,  $j$  indexes protest, and  $s$  indexes year. The vectors  $X_j$  and  $W_j$  include the same day- and year-level covariates, respectively, from above, now indexed by protest. Again, we include province and year fixed effects, given by  $\gamma_i$  and  $\gamma_s$ , respectively. Since the outcome is dichotomous, we employ a logit model.

The results appear in Table 4. As expected, the odds that the Chinese government employs repression against protests are roughly 2.5 times as great as otherwise. This has significant theoretical implications. Scholars increasingly recognize that the CCP condones or stage manages protests to permit citizens to “blow off steam” or to monitor local officials (Nathan 2003; Dimitrov 2008; Chen 2012; Lorentzen 2013, 2014; Steinhardt 2016). Our results make clear that, while a range of protests may be staged managed or otherwise permitted by the government, the protests that emerge during the anniversaries of pro-democracy movements are not condoned. This makes sense. These protests implicitly commemorate regime crimes, routinely press for democratic openings, and are timed to attract participants despite the threat of regime violence.

### 5.3 Protest Size

Finally, we probe whether protests that emerge during pro-democracy anniversary windows are larger than others. Our theory suggests that the equilibrium protest size should be ambiguous: Focal moments facilitate coordination, but the protests that occur around them are also more likely to be repressed.

We proceed with caution, since ascertaining protest size is difficult. Reflecting this, the CLB employed categories. It counted 1,813 protests with between 1 and 100 people, 1,543 protests with between 100 and 1,000 people, and just eight protests with greater than 1,000 people.<sup>14</sup> Since so few protests exceeded 1,000 people, we create a dichotomous variable,  $Size_j$ , which records value 1 if protest  $j$  exceeds 100 people and 0 otherwise. Our baseline model is

$$Size_j = \alpha + \beta (\text{Pro-Democracy Anniversary Window}_j) + \phi X_j + \psi W_j + \gamma_i + \gamma_s + \epsilon \quad (4)$$

where  $i$  indexes province,  $j$  indexes protest, and  $s$  indexes year. The vectors  $X_j$  and  $W_j$  include the same day- and year-level covariates, respectively, from above, now indexed by protest. We include

<sup>14</sup>Note that roughly 30% of protests between 2011 and 2016 do not include participation data.



Table 4: Effect of 1 Day Anniversary Window on State Violence

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Repression				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Pro-Democracy Anniversary	1.020** (0.446)	0.868** (0.432)	0.936** (0.454)	0.908* (0.547)	0.882 (0.549)
Foreign Pro-Democracy Anniversary	-0.530 (0.446)	-0.562 (0.433)	-0.583 (0.458)	-0.679 (0.523)	-0.688 (0.524)
Political Anniversary					-0.433 (0.278)
Cultural Anniversary					0.737* (0.397)
Ethnic/Religious Anniversary					-0.093 (0.389)
Protests <sub>t-1</sub>	-0.023 (0.067)	0.167** (0.069)	0.050 (0.076)	0.089 (0.100)	0.080 (0.100)
Log GRP				-3.070 (3.349)	-2.964 (3.384)
Log Population				81.080** (32.836)	81.078** (33.149)
Rural Population Share				-26.331* (15.126)	-26.364* (15.151)
Pension Shortfall				0.00000 (0.00000)	0.00000 (0.00000)
Sex Ratio				0.011 (0.035)	0.014 (0.035)
Urban Unemployment Rate				-1.540** (0.721)	-1.458** (0.715)
Consumer Price Inflation				0.324** (0.162)	0.314* (0.162)
Constant	-1,427.214*** (86.205)	-14.566 (882.743)	-1,378.451 (887.296)	-2,144.671*** (565.321)	-2,123.384*** (568.941)
Province Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,398	2,398	2,398	1,625	1,625

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

province and year fixed effects, given by  $\gamma_i$  and  $\gamma_s$ , respectively. Since the outcome is dichotomous, we employ a logit model.

The results appear in Table 5. Strikingly, there is some evidence that protests that emerge during pro-democracy anniversary windows may be *smaller* than others. The odds that a pro-democracy anniversary protest counts more than 100 people are about 67% as great as otherwise. This suggests that citizens *know* the government is more likely to repress protests around pro-democracy anniversaries, as we found in Section 5.2, and so, though they join protests in higher numbers than on other days, they join protests that are smaller and more diffuse.

Table 5: Protest Size

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
	Protest Size				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Pro-Democracy Anniversary	-0.430*** (0.150)	-0.400*** (0.140)	-0.390** (0.150)	-0.450** (0.180)	-0.460** (0.180)
Foreign Pro-Democracy Anniversary	0.160 (0.230)	0.210 (0.230)	0.074 (0.240)	-0.110 (0.280)	-0.130 (0.280)
Political Anniversary					-0.077 (0.130)
Cultural Anniversary					-0.110 (0.150)
Ethnic/Religious Anniversary					-0.073 (0.170)
Protests <sub>t-1</sub>	0.022 (0.030)	-0.110*** (0.032)	-0.081** (0.034)	-0.170*** (0.044)	-0.170*** (0.044)
Log GRP				8.100*** (1.700)	8.100*** (1.700)
Log Population				-8.100 (13.000)	-8.200 (13.000)
Rural Population Share				13.000* (7.300)	13.000* (7.300)
Pension Shortfall				0.00000 (0.00000)	0.00000 (0.00000)
Sex Ratio				-0.038** (0.017)	-0.038** (0.017)
Urban Unemployment Rate				0.086 (0.330)	0.093 (0.330)
Consumer Price Inflation				-0.210* (0.110)	-0.210* (0.110)
Constant	1,262.000*** (45.000)	13.000 (187.000)	1,210.000*** (310.000)	2,352.000*** (292.000)	2,350.000*** (292.000)
Province Fixed Effects	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Fixed Effects	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	8,303	8,303	8,303	4,569	4,569

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

## 6 Conclusion

Collective action in autocracies is dangerous. To mitigate those dangers, we find, citizens make use of the focal moments afforded by pro-democracy movements in the past. We show that these failed pro-democracy movements have relevance long into the future. The rate of protest on the anniversaries of these pro-democracy movements is far higher – some 35% – than any other day of the calendar year. The probability of a protest spike – defined as a two standard deviation increase relative to the mean daily protest rate – nearly doubles. The odds that a protest *emerges* are roughly 30% greater. Put simply, when protests emerge, they do so disproportionately during the anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements. We show also that protests during pro-democracy anniversaries are 2.5 times more likely to be repressed by the regime’s security forces. Perhaps as a result – and perhaps reflecting the government’s policy of permitting protests it deems relatively unthreatening – we find that protests that emerge during pro-democracy anniversaries are *smaller* than others.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper to document the origins of focal moments for collective action *other than* election seasons. In so doing, it suggests a range of topics for future research. How do autocracies strategize over their citizens’ collective action calendar? Preliminary evidence suggests that autocrats preemptively arrest dissidents (Truex 2018), censor online posts (King, Pan and Roberts 2013), and flood the internet with pro-regime messages (King, Pan and Roberts 2017). What other tools do authoritarian regimes employ? The state maintains an enormous propaganda apparatus, in print and on television. How does it speak to citizens when sensitive anniversaries approach? Does it attempt to persuade citizens with propaganda about regime performance? Does it threaten them with violence? Do these focal moments drive public good provision? Do autocracies who rely on financial support from Western governments undertake public relations campaigns in Western capitals as focal moments advance, the better to cultivate some measure of immunity in case repression is necessary? In short, how forcefully do these focal moments drive policy in the world’s autocracies?

This paper underscores that, for anti-regime protests, focal points – whether locational or temporal – are not unqualified assets. Though they foster coordination, they enable repressive governments to strategize in advance. This paper offers a theory that explains when citizens are more likely to employ focal points to coordinate protests, and hence forgo the element of surprise. Our basic insight is that the tacit coordination gains afforded by focal points are more important when explicit coordination is costly. Although we have documented the salience of focal moments in contemporary China, we have not done so cross-nationally. As a result, it remains unclear when citizens around the world are most likely to employ focal moments to organize protests, whether focal moment protests are more likely to be successful, or whether focal moment protests are more likely to catalyze sustained movements.

Indeed, there is substantial evidence that focal moment protests are critical. Since the Soweto

Uprising was brutally repressed by the apartheid South African government, June 16, 1976, has been a magnet for racial equality protesters. In Germany, Labor Day routinely occasions neo-Nazi protests and Antifa counter-protests. In Mexico, human rights protesters routinely commemorate the massacre of students that occurred in Tlatelolco on October 2, 1968. In Argentina, anti-government protests have occurred annually since protesters chanting “All of them must go! (¡Que se vayan todos!)” successfully brought down the Fernando de la Rúa government on December 21, 2001. In the United States, the 2017 and 2018 women’s marches – scheduled on the occasion of Donald Trump’s presidential inauguration – drew hundreds of thousands of protesters and helped to consolidate a nationwide movement.<sup>15</sup> In short, focal moments may motivate and facilitate a wide range of political behavior. Their dynamics remain understudied.

---

<sup>15</sup>Though empirical results are mixed, there is some evidence that terrorist groups are less likely to stage attacks during Islamic holidays like Ramadan (Reese, Ruby and Pape 2017; Toft and Zhukov 2015).

## References

- Beber, Bernd, Philip Roessler and Alexandra Scacco. 2014. "Intergroup Violence and Political Attitudes: Evidence from a Dividing Sudan." *Journal of Politics* 76(3):649–665.
- Beissinger, Mark. 2002. *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*. New York: Cambridge University.
- Brady, Anne-Marie. 2008. *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Brancati, Dawn. 2016. *Democracy Protests: Origins, Features, and Significance*. New York: Cambridge University.
- Bunce, Valerie and Sharon Wolchik. 2011. *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Post-Communist Countries*. New York: Cambridge University.
- Cai, Yongshun. 2010. *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*. Stanford University.
- Carter, Erin Baggott, Iain Johnston and Kai Quek. 2018. "Heterogenous Chinese Nationalism." University of Southern California, Harvard University, and Hong Kong University.
- Chen, Dan. 2017. "Facilitating Public Service Provision: The Emerging Role of Municipal Television News in China." *China Quarterly* 229:130–149.
- Chen, Xi. 2012. *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China*. Cambridge University.
- Chenoweth, Erica and Maria J. Stephan. 2011. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. New York: Columbia University.
- Christensen, Darin and Francisco Garfias. 2018. "Can You Hear Me Now? How Communication Technology Affects Protest and Repression." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 13:89–117.
- Daxecker, Ursula E. 2012. "The Cost of Exposing Cheating: International Election Monitoring, Fraud, and Post-Election Violence in Africa." *Journal of Peace Research* 49(4):503–516.
- Deng, Yanhua and Kevin J. O'Brien. 2013. "Relational Repression in China: Using Social Ties to Demobilize Protesters." *China Quarterly* 215:533–552.
- Dickson, Bruce J. 2015. *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival*. Oxford University.
- Dimitrov, M. 2008. "The Resilient Authoritarians." *Current History* 107(705):24–29.

- Distelhorst, Greg and Yue Hou. 2017. "Constituency Service under Nondemocratic Rule: Evidence from China." *Journal of Politics* 79(3):1024–1040.
- Dragu, Tiberiu and Adam Przeworski. 2019. "Preventive Repression: Two Types of Moral Hazard." *American Political Science Review* .
- Egorov, Georgy, Sergei Guriev and Konstantin Sonin. 2009. "Why Resource-poor Dictators Allow Freer Media: A Theory and Evidence from Panel Data." *American Political Science Review* 103(4):645–668.
- Enos, Ryan, Aaron Russell Kaufman and Melissa Sands. 2017. "Can Violent Protest Change Local Policy Support? Evidence from the Aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles Riot." Harvard University.
- Fearon, James D. 2011. "Self-Enforcing Democracy." *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126(4):1661–1708.
- Goemans, Hein and Nikolay Marinov. 2014. "Coups and Democracy." *British Journal of Political Science* 44:799–825.
- Goldstone, Jack A. and Charles Tilly. 2009. Threat (and Opportunity): Popular Action and State Response in the Dynamics of Contentious Action. In *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, ed. Ronald R. Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone, Doug McAdam, Elizabeth J. Perry, William H. Sewell, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly. Cambridge University pp. 179–194.
- Hafner-Burton, Emilie M., Susan D. Hyde and Ryan S. Jablonski. 2014. "When Do Governments Resort to Election Violence?" *British Journal of Political Science* 44(01):149–179.
- Hale, Henry E. 2005. "Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia." *World Politics* 58(1):133–165.
- Harvard Magazine. 2014. "Tiananmen Plus Twenty-Five: A Tragedy and Its Aftermath." *Harvard Magazine* July-August.
- Hassid, Jonathan. 2012. "Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life." *Journal of Communication* 62(2):212–230.
- Hollyer, James R., B. Peter Rosendorff and James Raymond Vreeland. 2015. "Transparency, Protest, and Autocratic Instability." *American Political Science Review* 109(4):764–784.
- Howard, Philip N. and Muzammil M. Hussain. 2013. *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. New York: Oxford University.

- Huang, Haifeng, Serra Boranbay-Akan and Ling Huang. 2016. "Media, Protest Diffusion, and Authoritarian Resilience." *Political Science Research and Methods* .
- Hyde, Susan D. 2011. *The Pseudo-Democrat's Dilemma: Why Election Observation Became an International Norm*. Ithaca: Cornell University.
- Javeline, Debra. 2003. "The Role of Blame in Collective Action: Evidence from Russia." *APSR* 97(1):107–121.
- Jiang, Junyan and Dali L. Yang. 2016. "Lying or Believing? Measuring Preference Falsification From a Political Purge in China." *Comparative Political Studies* 49(5):600–634.
- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts. 2013. "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression." *American Political Science Review* 107(2):326–343.
- King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts. 2017. "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument." *American Political Science Review* . Harvard University.
- Kowalewski, David. 1980. "The Protest Uses of Symbolic Politics in the USSR." *Journal of Politics* 42(2):439–460.
- Kuran, Timur. 1989. "Sparks and Prairie Fires: A Theory of Unanticipated Political Revolution." *Public Choice* 61(1):41–74.
- Kuran, Timur. 1991. "Now Out of Never: The Element of Surprise in the East European Revolution of 1989." *World Politics* 44(1):7–48.
- Larson, Jennifer M. 2017. "Networks and Interethnic Cooperation." *Journal of Politics* 79(2):546–559.
- Larson, Jennifer M. and Janet I. Lewis. 2017. "Ethnic Networks." *American Journal of Political Science* 61(2):350–364.
- Larson, Jennifer M. and Janet I. Lewis. 2018. "Rumors, Kinship Networks, and Rebel Group Formation." *International Organization* .
- Lawrence, Adria. 2017. "Repression and Activism among the Arab Spring's First Movers: Morocco's (Almost) Revolutionaries." *British Journal of Political Science* 47(3):699–718.
- Li, Yao. 2017. "A Zero-Sum Game? Repression and Protest in China." *Government and Opposition* pp. 1–27.

- Lorentzen, Peter. 2013. "Regularizing Rioting: Permitting Public Protest in an Authoritarian Regime." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 8(2):127–158.
- Lorentzen, Peter. 2014. "China's Strategic Censorship." *American Journal of Political Science* 58(2):402–414.
- Manacorda, Marco and Andrea Tesei. 2016. "Liberation Technology: Mobile Phones and Political Mobilization in Africa." University of London.
- McCubbins, Mathew D. and Thomas Schwartz. 1984. "Congressional Oversight Overlooked: Police Patrols versus Fire Alarms." *American Journal of Political Science* 28(1):165–179.
- McFaul, Michael. 2005. "Transitions from Postcommunism." *Journal of Democracy* 16(3):5–19.
- Myers, Garth Andrew. 2003. *Verandahs of Power: Colonialism and Space in Urban Africa*. Syracuse: Syracuse University.
- Nathan, Andrew J. 2003. "Authoritarian Resilience." *Journal of Democracy* 14(1):6–17.
- O'Brien, Kevin J. 1996. "Rightful Resistance." *World Politics* 49(1):31–55.
- Olson, Mancur. 1977. *The Logic of Collective Action*. Cambridge: Harvard University.
- Opp, Karl-Dieter and Wolfgang Roehl. 1990. "Repression, Micromobilization, and Political Protest." *Social Forces* 69(2):521–547.
- Perry, Elizabeth. 2010. *China Today, China Tomorrow: Domestic Politics, Economy, and Society*. Rowman & Littlefield chapter Popular Protest: Playing by the Rules.
- Perry, Elizabeth J. 2001. "Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Popular Protest in Modern China." *Critical Asian Studies* 33(2):163–180.
- Perry, Elizabeth J. 2008. "Chinese Conceptions of "Rights": From Mencius to Mao – and Now." *Perspectives on Politics* 6(1):37–50.
- Qin, Bei, David Strömberg and Yanhui Wu. 2017. "Why Does China Allow Freer Social Media? Protests vs. Surveillance and Propaganda." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* .
- Radnitz, Scott. 2010. "The Color of Money: Privatization, Economic Dispersion, and the Post-Soviet 'Revolutions'." *Comparative Politics* 42(2):127–146.
- Reese, Michael J., Keven G. Ruby and Robert A. Pape. 2017. "Days of Action or Restraint? How the Islamic Calendar Impacts Violence." *American Political Science Review* 111(3):439–459.
- Rosenfeld, Bryn. 2017. "Reevaluating the Middle-Class Protest Paradigm: A Case-Control Study of Democratic Protest Coalitions in Russia." *American Political Science Review* 111(4):637–652.



- Salehyan, Idean and Christopher Linebarger. 2015. "Elections and Social Conflict in Africa, 1990–2009." *Studies in Comparative International Development* 50(1):23–49.
- Schelling, Thomas C. 1960. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Siegel, David A. 2011. "When Does Repression Work? Collective Action in Social Networks." *Journal of Politics* 73(4):993–1010.
- Steinert-Threlkeld, Zachary C., Delia Mocanu, Alessandro Vespignani and James Fowler. 2015. "Online Social Networks and Offline Protest." *EPJ Data Science* 4(19):1–9.
- Steinhardt, H. Christoph. 2015. "From Blind Spot to Media Spotlight: Propaganda Policy, Media Activism and the Emergence of Protest Events in the Chinese Public Sphere." *Asian Studies Review* 39(1):119–137.
- Steinhardt, H. Christoph. 2016. "State Behavior and the Intensification of Intellectual Criticism in China: The Social Stability Debate." *Modern China* 42(3):300–336.
- Steinhardt, H. Christoph and Fengshi Wu. 2016. "In the Name of the Public: Environmental Protest and the Changing Landscape of Popular Contention in China." *China Journal* 75:61–82.
- Toft, Monica Duffy and Yuri M. Zhukov. 2015. "Islamists and Nationalists." *American Political Science Review* 109(2):222–238.
- Truex, Rory. 2018. "Focal Points, Dissident Calendars, and Preemptive Repression." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* Forthcoming.
- Tucker, Joshua A. 2007. "Enough! Electoral Fraud, Collective Action Problems, and Post-Communist Colored Revolutions." *Perspectives on Politics* 5(3):535–551.
- Wallace, Jeremy L. and Jessica Chen Weiss. 2015. "The Political Geography of Nationalist Protest in China: Cities and the 2012 Anti-Japanese Protests." *China Quarterly* 222:403–429.
- Wan, William and Simon Denyer. 2014. "In Tiananmen Square, no trace of remembrance on 25th anniversary of protests." *Washington Post* June 4.
- Wang, Ching-Hsing, Dennis Lu-Chung Weng, Laura Barnstead and Garrett DuMond. 2017. "Disrespect for Human Rights and Contentious Participation: Evidence from China." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* .
- Weiss, Jessica Chen. 2014. *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## 7 Appendix

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics

	Nbr. Val.	Nbr. NA	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.	Source
Protests <sub><i>t</i></sub>	64511.00	37386.00	0.00	8.00	0.18	0.48	Elfstrom, CLB
Pro-Democracy Anniversary <sub><i>t</i></sub>	101897.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.03	0.18	Author
Political Anniversary <sub><i>t</i></sub>	101897.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.10	0.30	Author
Cultural Anniversary <sub><i>t</i></sub>	101897.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.08	0.27	Author
Ethno-Religious Anniversary <sub><i>t</i></sub>	101897.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.04	0.20	Author
Log GRP <sub><i>is</i></sub>	90582.00	11315.00	6.09	11.30	9.47	1.00	NBS
Log Population <sub><i>is</i></sub>	90582.00	11315.00	5.69	9.31	8.11	0.85	NBS
Rural Population Share <sub><i>is</i></sub>	79236.00	22661.00	0.10	0.78	0.47	0.14	NBS
Sex Ratio <sub><i>is</i></sub>	79267.00	22630.00	95.77	120.43	104.95	3.84	NBS
Urban Unemployment Rate <sub><i>is</i></sub>	90582.00	11315.00	1.20	4.50	3.40	0.65	NBS
CPI <sub><i>is</i></sub>	90582.00	11315.00	97.70	108.10	102.46	1.70	NBS

*Notes:* NBS refers to China's National Bureau of Statistics.