

Focal Moments and Popular Protests in Autocracies: Evidence from China^{*}

Brett L. Carter[†] Erin Baggott Carter[‡]

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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 offer a theory to explain when citizens are more likely to employ focal points to organize anti-regime protests. Our basic insight is that tacit coordination is 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 of the year. 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.

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[†]Assistant Professor, School of International Relations, University of Southern California. blcarter@usc.edu.

[‡]Assistant Professor, School of International Relations, University of Southern California. baggott@usc.edu.

1 Introduction

The dynamics of autocratic politics have undergone important shifts since the end of the Cold War. As the rate of elite coups has declined (Goemans and Marinov 2014), mass protests have emerged as a chief threat to the world’s autocrats. 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. To do so, we propose a theory to explain when citizens employ focal points to coordinate anti-regime protests. Our theory builds on two insights. First, since communication is dangerous and failed protests are costly, coordination among citizens is vital; focal points facilitate this. Second, if citizens in autocracies are aware of focal points, then so too are their governments. In turn, governments should prepare in advance: by incarcerating activists (Truex 2016), deploying security forces, or censoring media content to block coordination (King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 2017). We argue that the first effect dominates the second – and so citizens should be more likely to employ focal points – where 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.

Focal points are likely the product of a community’s cultural touchstones and historical traumas, which makes testing this theory difficult cross-nationally. Focal points can also be either 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. They are, as Volkan (2001, 79) put it, “chosen traumas.” 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 others, which enables us to ensure that pro-democracy anniversaries have unique properties for collective action.

We find that the anniversaries of China's failed pro-democracy movements experience roughly 35% more protests than the typical day. During a pro-democracy anniversary, the odds that a protest *emerges* are roughly 30% greater than otherwise, and the probability of a protest spike – defined as a two standard deviation increase relative to the mean daily protest rate – nearly doubles. The Chinese government is more than twice as likely to employ violence against protests on pro-democracy anniversaries. By contrast, we find no evidence that other political, cultural, ethnic, or religious anniversaries constitute focal moments for protests. 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."¹ Our evidence suggests otherwise. The calendar of popular 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.

In proposing a theory to explain when citizens employ focal points to coordinate protests – and in documenting the calendar of collective action – this paper makes several contributions to the literature on collective action in autocracies. First, 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),

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

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, not just regular elections.

Second, scholars have long observed that government repression can backfire: that it can exacerbate the grievances that it was intended to suppress. Goldstone and Tilly (2009) summarize a series of episodes in which this appears to have occurred.² 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 underscores that the backlash engendered by repression may not occur immediately. By giving citizens focal points with which to mobilize in the future, governments subject themselves to recurring opportunities for collective action. Repression, in short, is costly, and governments may bear that cost long into the future.

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 (2012, 6) describes the CCP’s model as “contentious authoritarianism,” which “accommodate[s] or facilitate[s] widespread and routinized popular collective action.”³ Other scholars, by contrast,

²For more, see Lawrence (2017).

³See also Steinhardt (2016). For instance, the CCP permits and even publicizes some protests

argue that anti-regime sentiment is widespread, and attribute the absence of mass protests to the regime’s capacity for violence.⁴ 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.⁵ This paper suggests that both perspectives are correct. We find that the CCP represses protests that are occasioned by the anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements, yet permits others. Citizens are aware of the CCP’s historical crimes, and so the CCP regards the anniversaries of these crimes as threatening.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents a theoretical framework for understanding when citizens employ focal moments to coordinate anti-regime protests, and why the anniversaries of China’s failed pro-democracy movements constitute focal moments. Section 3 introduces the data on collective action in China and describes our list of democratic, political, cultural, ethnic, 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).

⁴For more on preference falsification, see Kuran (1989, 1991).

⁵A 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.

and religious anniversaries. Section 4 presents our results. Section 5 considers three extensions: whether protests during pro-democracy anniversaries are more likely to target politically sensitive locations, whether these protests are more likely to be repressed by the government, and whether these protests are systematically larger. Section 6 concludes with suggestions for future research.

2 Theoretical Framework

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

Social scientists have long observed that focal points enable citizens to coordinate. Coordination is especially important for would-be protesters in autocracies. With the costs of failed protests so high and the likelihood that any single individual’s participation proves pivotal so small, citizens have strong incentives to stay home. As a result, Tullock (1987) surmised before the Berlin Wall fell and Svulik (2009, 2012) demonstrated empirically for much of the post-World War II period, successful revolutions should be rare.⁶

Schelling (1960) and Olson (1977) regarded focal points as both locational and temporal, as the famous “Grand Central Station at Noon” example makes clear. 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 important shift in the balance of power between protesters and the government. Accordingly, the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt was centered on Tahrir (Liberation) Square, unofficially christened as such after the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 and made official after Egyptian 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 1989.⁷ To defend these focal locations, governments take precautions that reflect their

⁶If the dynamics of collective action could help inoculate autocrats from revolution, so too, Chong (1991), Kuran (1989, 1991), and Tarrow (1994) argued, could those same dynamics help bring autocrats down when protests had already passed some critical threshold of participation.

⁷Shawn Zhang (@shawnwzhang), “Historical triangle democracy wall 三角地,” Twitter, April 23,

physical nature. Focal locations are subject to increased police patrols and occasionally closed altogether, as was Tiananmen Square on the the 10-year anniversary of the massacre and activist Liu Xiaobo's house during the abortive 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).

Specific dates may be focal for less obvious reasons: a community's cultural touchstones, historical legacies, and political events. 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 that 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, which give citizens the opportunity to join Nigeria, governed from Lagos, or French Cameroon, governed from Yaoundé. The plebiscite was held on February 11, 1961, and citizens in the southern half of British Cameroons voted to join a unified Cameroon, governed from Yaoundé. They did so, in part, on the promise that the unified country would be governed federally, and so the anglophone regions would effectively be autonomous. Unification happened on October 1, 1961. In the decades since, October 1 has emerged as a focal moment for protest by Cameroon's anglophone population, even though the repressive Yaoundé government can prepare for these protests well in advance. Scholars have identified several ways that repressive governments protect themselves as focal moments approach: by incarcerating dissidents, censoring social media posts, or paying supporters to flood social media with pro-regime content (King, Pan and Roberts 2013, 2017; Truex 2016).

2018.

2.2 When do Citizens Employ Focal Points? Government Repression

Focal points yield a range of benefits to would-be protesters. First, focal points reduce uncertainty about participation: about whether citizens are prepared to challenge the regime, and when and where that challenge will emerge. Second, by facilitating coordination, focal points reduce the costs of a failed protest to any given individual. The reason is that, as the size of a protest increases, the likelihood that a participant is incarcerated, injured, or killed by security forces declines. Activists and opposition leaders know that focal points have these properties. In turn, they can use their expansive communication networks to leverage the presence of a focal point. This is why, in 2017, opposition leaders in the Republic of Congo staged protests against President Denis Sassou Nguesso's government on June 10, the National Day of Reconciliation. The holiday commemorates the Sovereign National Conference of 1991, when citizens first removed Sassou Nguesso from power.⁸

Focal points are commonly regarded as unmitigated assets for collective action. As the discussion in Section 2.1 makes clear, however, employing focal points to coordinate protests in autocracies entails a drawback. Just as citizens are cognizant of focal points, so too are governments. 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. To render protests less likely, governments may repress, or signal to citizens that repression is likely.

When should we expect focal moments to be associated with anti-regime protests? When, that is, should we expect the coordination advantages conferred by focal points to outweigh the forgone element of surprise? Theoretically, we argue that focal points are more useful as coordinating devices as the government's repressive capacity increases. There are three 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 importance of protest size increases with it, which again makes coordination more important and focal points more valuable. Protest size is critical in repressive contexts for a variety of reasons. It diffuses the costs of failed protest events across participants, decreasing the risks to any individual citizen. It attracts international media attention, which may

⁸Interview with anonymous opposition leader, June 2017.

constrain the repressive government. It may foster defections from the security apparatus, which are widely regarded as pivotal for coalescing protests into revolution.

Finally, 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.

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

2.3 When do Citizens Employ Focal Points? Substitute Technologies

We suggest a second condition under which citizens should be more likely to employ focal points to coordinate protests. Focal points are most useful when communication is difficult, and so citizens must rely on tacit coordination. Communication in autocracies is always dangerous, of course, but there are a variety of reasons that it may be more or less so.

The international community has long been optimistic that the communication advantages afforded by social media platforms would enable citizens to coordinate anti-regime protests. Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor and Secretary of State under President George W. Bush, once proclaimed social media “one of the biggest tools for democratization and political freedom that we have ever seen before.” Then Deputy National Security Advisor, Mark Pfeifle, even suggested awarding Twitter the Nobel Peace Prize. A range of recent literature makes clear that social media can help foster collective action. Manacorda and Tesei (2016) find that, during economic downturns, mobile phone coverage increases protest activity across the African continent. Using a global sample, Christensen and Garfias (2018) find that mobile phones increase the rate of protest, but have their largest effects in democracies, where repression is less likely. Steinert-Threlkeld et al. (2015) show that, during the Arab Spring, Twitter activity on day t was a strong predictor

of protest activity on day $t + 1$.⁹

To counter these coordination advantages, repressive governments increasingly go to extraordinary lengths to suppress communications technologies during politically sensitive moments. King, Pan and Roberts (2013, 2017) find that the Chinese government censors online content that fosters collective action and employs social media trolls to foster uncertainty about citizen preferences. The Chinese government’s online censorship operation has apparently attracted the attention of the Russian government, which hosted the Russia-China ICT Development and Security Forum at the Seventh Annual Safe Internet Forum. The *China Digital Times* described the Forum this way: “Part of the Forum’s goal is to harness Chinese expertise in internet management to gain further control over Russia’s internet” (Wade 2016). London’s Financial Times (2016) put it more bluntly: “Russia’s chief internet censor enlists China’s know-how.” There is also some evidence that internet shutdowns are becoming increasingly common. In 2016, for instance, some 50 governments blocked internet access to their citizens. This, indeed, was partly how President Paul Biya’s government in Cameroon sought to block mass protests in 2017. Between January 17 and April 21, Biya simply shut down the internet in Cameroon’s anglophone regions, depriving some 20% of the population – including its nascent technology sector – of internet.

Theoretically, we argue that citizens are less likely to employ focal points to coordinate protests when they can exploit other coordinating devices – such as telecommunications – that preserve the element of surprise.

2.4 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

⁹Pierskalla and Hollenbach (2013) find that mobile phone coverage across the African continent is associated with a higher level of violent conflict, suggesting that mobile phone coverage may help rebel groups mobilize.

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) concludes that revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine succeeded, in part, because high ranking security officials refused to suppress the opposition leaders who “might be the authorities of the future.” In Africa’s autocracies, election days are some 50% more likely to witness protests than other days of the calendar year (Carter 2016).

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 are rare, occurring just once every several years. Moreover, many of the world’s most repressive autocracies, including its most populous, do not organize elections. 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. Indeed, 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 2016). 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).

Hypothesis 1: In autocracies with a robust repressive apparatus, the rate of popular protest will be higher on anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements than on other days of the calendar year.

2.5 Why Other Anniversaries Are Not Focal Moments

Why are anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements more likely to constitute focal moments for protest than a community’s other anniversaries? It seems 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. Why should anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements be uniquely powerful? In less repressive autocracies, where coordination is less vital, these other anniversaries may be sufficient to constitute focal moments. We regard this possibility as an interesting avenue for future research. In more repressive autocracies, 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 once again.

Hypothesis 2: In autocracies with a robust repressive apparatus, the rate of popular protest on other

political, ethnic, cultural, or religious anniversaries will generally not reach the rate of protest on anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements.

3 Data and Empirical Strategy

As the discussion above makes clear, focality is context specific, a function of a community's cultural practices, historical legacies, and political calendars. Because of this specificity, testing our theory in a cross-national setting 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, internet and telecommunications activity are closely monitored, 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 recur annually, and so we can measure their mobilizational power relative to China's other 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 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 is essential for ensuring that we do not select on the dependent variable. We summarize each of these pro-democracy movements in Table 1, and we provide additional detail in the online appendix.

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. We provide more detail about these movements in the online appendix.

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” 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 underscores 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.¹⁰

¹⁰Survey 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.

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.

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 Anniversaries

Many of China’s major cultural holidays have rich, lengthy 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 each lunar date into its Gregorian equivalent for each year in our sample. We also include a range of cultural holidays that are of more recent vintage, such as Singles’ Day.

Ethnic or Religious Anniversaries

Reflecting China’s diversity, we include a range of 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 organization was officially banned. We include Christmas as well, since China’s Christian population is large, growing, subject to persecution, and required to worship in state-approved churches.¹¹

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, the Elfstrom and CLB data record the date and location of all known strikes and protests, with Elfstrom’s data spanning 2006 and 2012, and the CLB data spanning

¹¹The CCP does not recognize the authority of the Vatican, and hence appoints its own bishops in a CCP-sanctioned parallel Catholic church.

2011 and 2016.¹²

To maximize coverage, we merged the Elfstrom and CLB datasets. We did so after confirming that their coding rules and sources are essentially identical, as all available information suggests they are. We did this by exploiting the fact that the two datasets overlap for 2011 and 2012. Figure 1 reports the number of protests, by day, between 2006 and 2016, with the Elfstrom daily average in blue and the CLB daily average in red. As expected, the two datasets are essentially identical in 2011 and 2012. We also conducted a Granger test to confirm that their protest records are statistically indistinguishable; we report the results in the online appendix. Accordingly, we create the variable $Protests_{it}$, which records the number of protests in province i on day t . For the period between 2006 and 2010, we use Elfstrom’s data; for 2011 through 2016, we use the CLB data. As an additional precaution, we employ year-level fixed effects to accommodate unobserved differences in the data generating process.

Figure 1 suggests that the rate of protest across China has risen exponentially since 2006. 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 decline 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. Throughout this paper, we employ year fixed effects to account for such trends.

¹²An earlier version of these data covering 2008-2012 was analyzed by Distelhorst and Hou (2017). 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).

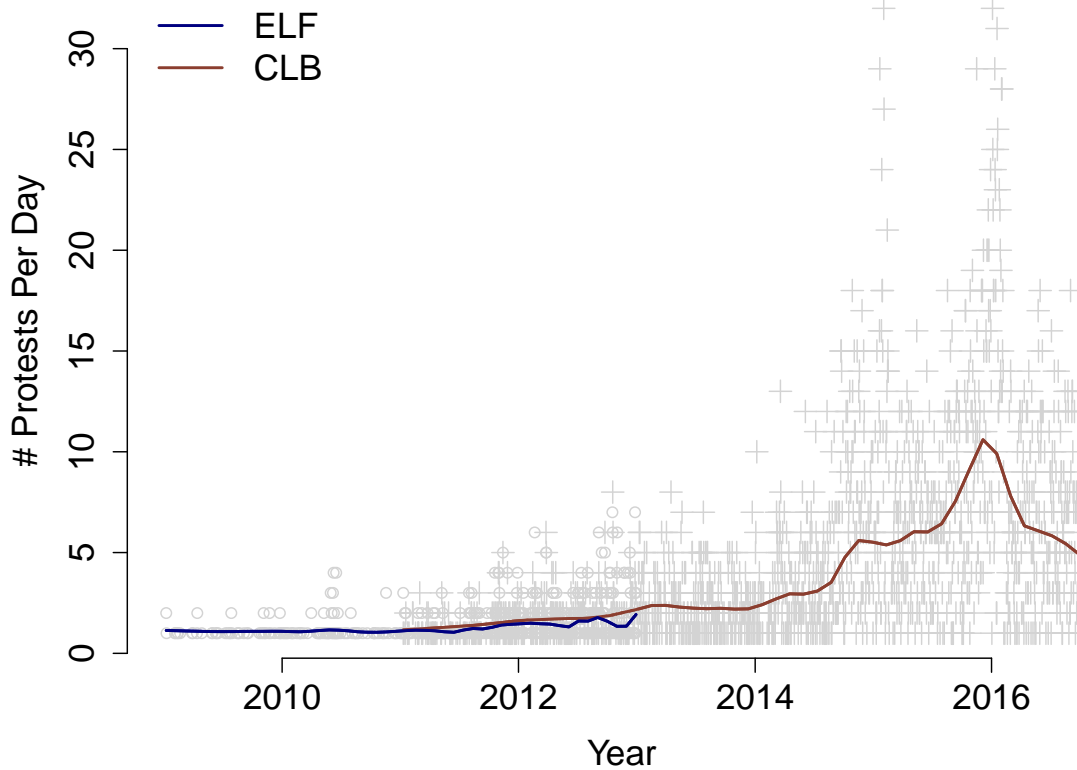


Figure 1: Protest Data. Data from Manfred Elfstrom are shown in blue and cover the 2006-2012 period. Data from the China Labour Bulletin are shown in red and cover January 2011 through September 2016. We aggregate these two measures into a single variable, $Protests_{it}$, which uses Elfstrom’s data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

The online appendix includes a range of 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 unobserved differences by province, we employ province-level 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 suggest the relevance of China’s 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.¹³ 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

¹³Note 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.

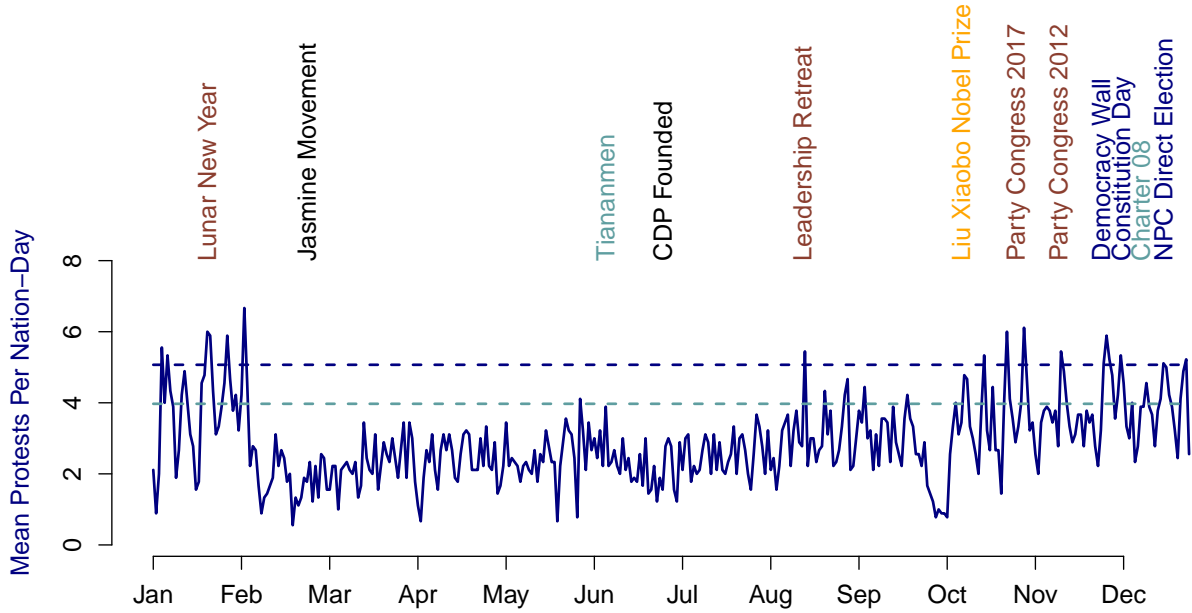


Figure 2: The life cycle of collective action in China. The x -axis records calendar days. The y -axis records the average number of protests in China on day t . The dashed light blue line indicates protest levels that exceed the mean level of protest plus one standard deviation. The dashed navy line 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.

during Party Congresses are some of China’s most tense, and, we find, sometimes occasion protest.

Figure 3 further underscores the salience of China’s pro-democracy anniversaries. From the top panel, the top bar reports the share of province-days on which the number of protests exceeds the sample average by at least two standard deviations: roughly 0.05. The second bar makes clear that, for province-days that fall within a pro-democracy window – defined as the anniversary itself, as well as the day before and after – the share of two standard deviation protest days increases to 0.08. The third bar, analogous to the first, reports the share of province-days on which the number of protests exceeds the sample average by at least one standard deviation: now roughly 0.1. For province-days that fall within a pro-democracy window, the share of one standard deviation protest days rises to 0.13, from the fourth bar.

The top bar on the bottom panel suggests that 0.03 of all province-days fall within a pro-

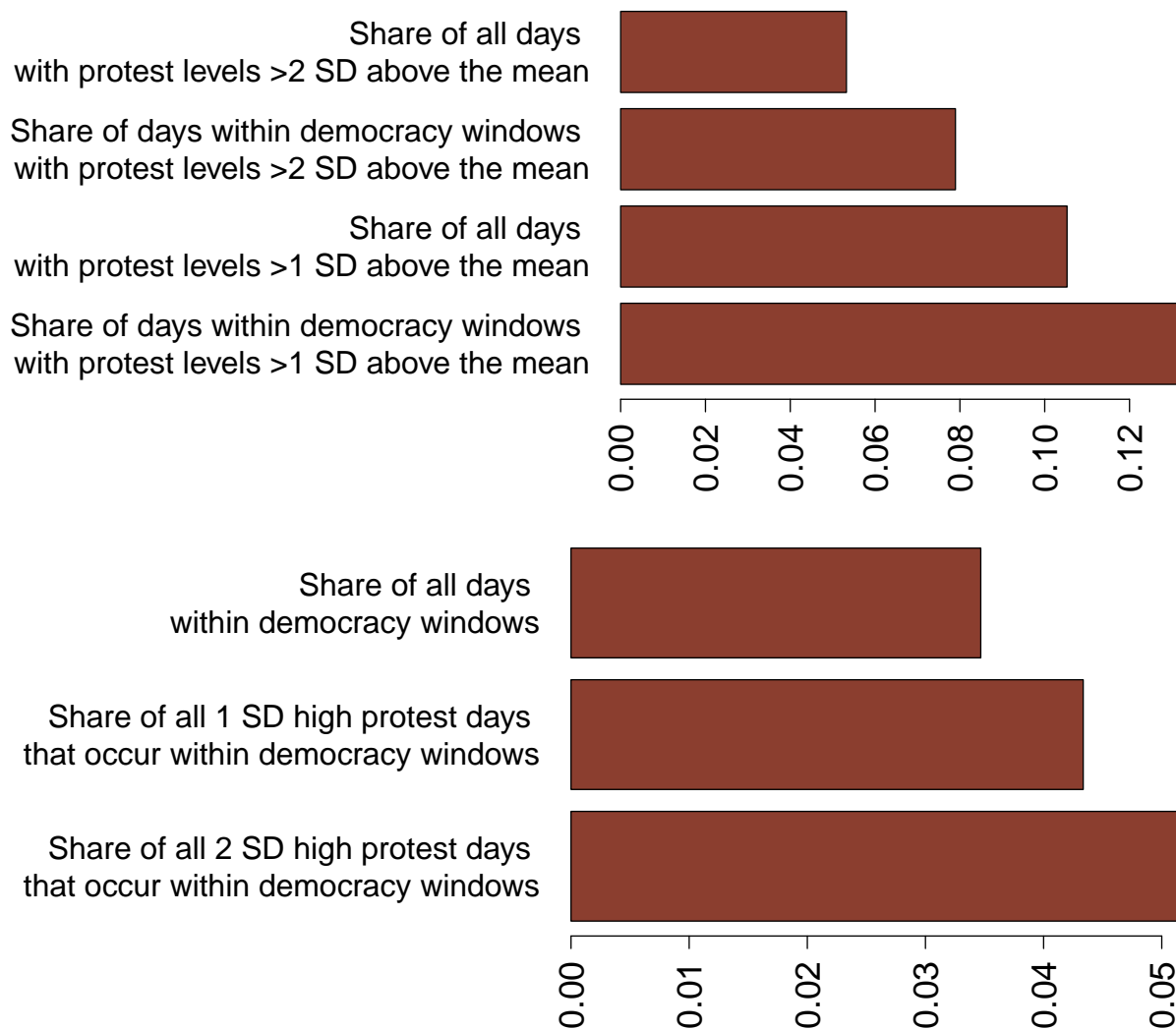


Figure 3: Rates of protest. In the top panel, the top two bars restrict attention to all province-days that fall either on a pro-democracy anniversary or one day before or after. The bottom two bars restrict attention to province-days that feature high protests, defined as one or two standard deviations above the protest daily mean. In the bottom panel, the top bar restricts attention to all province-days that fall either on a pro-democracy anniversary or one day before or after. The bottom two bars restrict attention to province-days that feature high protests, defined as one or two standard deviations above the protest daily mean.

democracy anniversary window. The second bar restricts attention to province-days where the number of protests exceeds one standard deviation about the sample mean. Of these, the share of province-days that falls within a pro-democracy anniversary window rises to just over 0.04. The third bar restricts attention to province-days where the number of protests exceeds two standard deviations about the sample mean. Now, the share of province-days that falls within a pro-democracy anniversary window rises to more than 0.05. In short, high protest days are substantially more likely to coincide with pro-democracy anniversaries.

4.2 Model Specification

To probe this more systematically, we estimate a series of statistical 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 a range of day- and year-level covariates, respectively. To accommodate unobserved characteristics by province or year, we include a full set of province-level fixed effects, given by γ_i , and a full set of year-level fixed effects, given by γ_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. In Section 4.4 we vary the size of these temporal windows to ensure our results are not overly sensitive.

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, as well as the range of other political, cultural, ethnic, and religious anniversaries that we discussed in 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.¹⁴ 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 sex 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. Model 1 includes a lagged outcome variable and province fixed effects. Model 2 includes the lagged outcome and year fixed effects. Model 3 includes the lagged outcome, province effects, and year effects. Model 4 introduces the year-level economic and social covariates. Model 5 introduces the range of other anniversaries: political, cultural, ethnic, and religious.

The results are consistent across models, and provide strong evidence that the rate of popular protest is substantially higher on pro-democracy anniversaries than on other days of the calendar year. Figure 4 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

¹⁴Cai (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.

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.¹⁵ 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 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.¹⁶ 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

¹⁵See, for example, Wan and Denyer (2014).

¹⁶Since it is common knowledge that the regime represses on this most sensitive holiday, citizens may respond by coordinating before or after the focal date.

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.

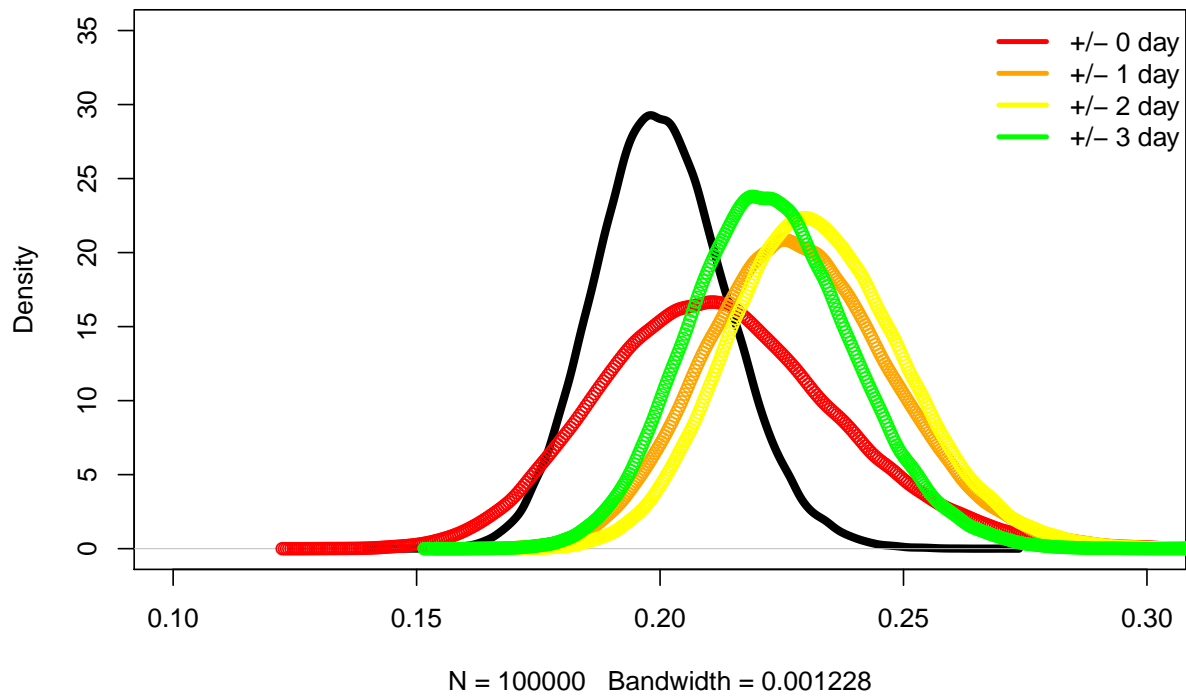


Figure 4: Predicted number of protests. The baseline rate appears in black, the predicted rate for +/- 0 day anniversary windows appears in red, the predicted rate for +/- 1 day windows appears in orange, the predicted rate for +/- 2 day windows appears in yellow, and the predicted rate for +/- 3 day windows appears in green. Supporting tables appear in the online appendix.

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 _{it-1}	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<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

4.4 Robustness Checks

The online appendix includes a range of robustness checks, which we summarize below. 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 4. 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. 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 5 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%. These estimates are consistent with the descriptive statistics in Figure 3.

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,

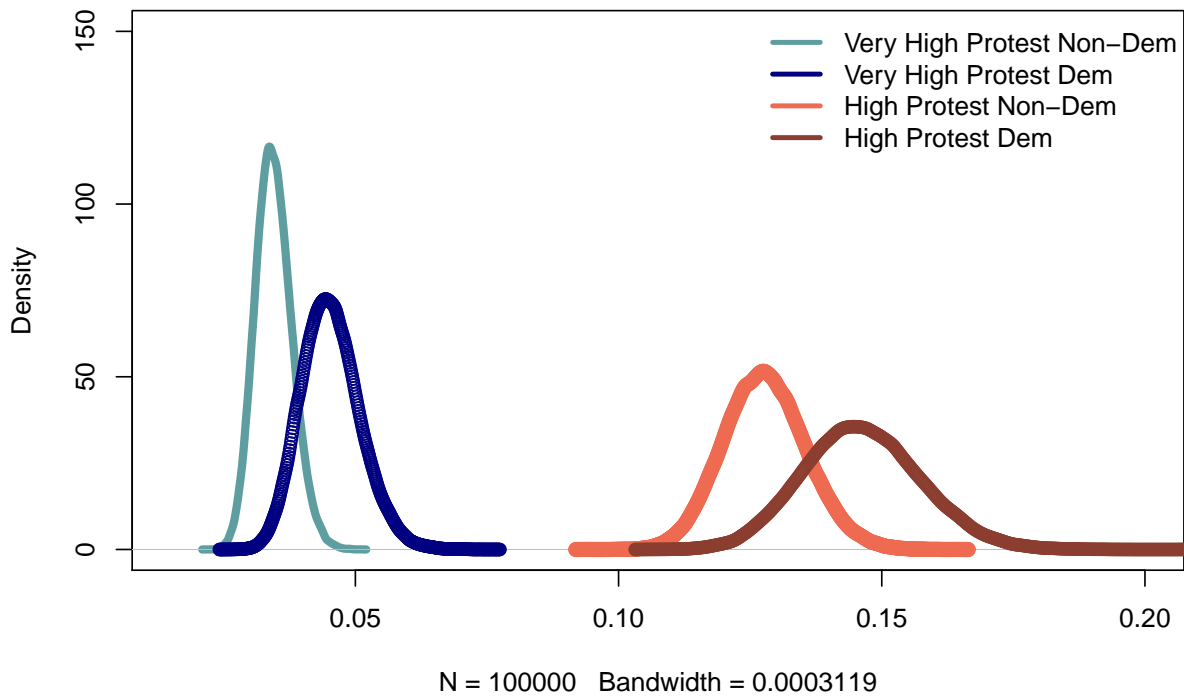


Figure 5: Predicted probability of high protest and very high protest days during pro-democracy anniversary windows and otherwise.

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.¹⁷ Figure 6 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. The simulated coefficients follow a normal distribution, and the probability of observing a coefficient as extreme as the observed coefficient approaches zero. As a result, it is exceedingly unlikely that the levels of

¹⁷In 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).

protest observed during pro-democracy anniversary windows are a function of random chance.

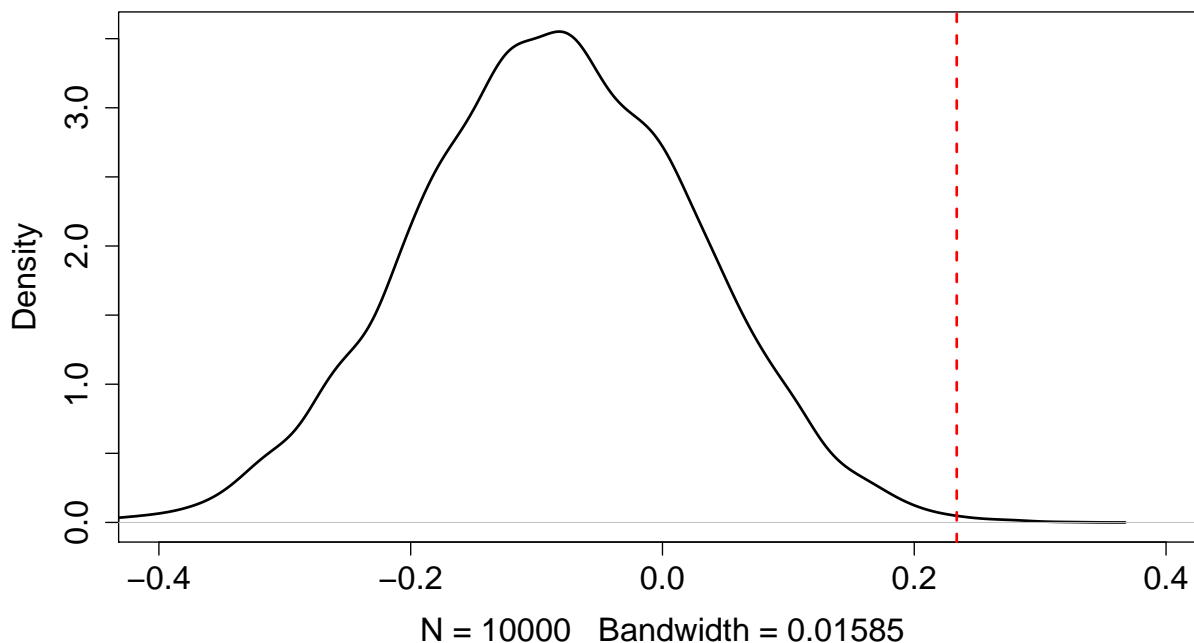


Figure 6: Randomization inference. The estimated coefficient is shown in red. The probability of observing a coefficient as extreme as this one approaches zero.

We employ another placebo test as well. We exploit the fact that one focal moment emerged *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 Extensions: The Dynamics of Focal Moment Protests

The Elfstrom and CLB data record a range of information about specific protests, which enable us to probe whether protests that occur on pro-democracy anniversaries exhibit different characteristics than those that do not. We focus on three dimensions: protest location, government response, and protest size.

5.1 Protest Location

We first ask whether the locations of protests that occur on pro-democracy anniversaries are systematically different than those that do not. The theory in Section 2 suggests two reasons they might be. Citizens may exploit the presence of a focal moment to target more politically sensitive locations, or these politically sensitive locations may themselves be focal, and so facilitate tacit coordination.

To test this, we exploit the location data coded by the CLB. In particular, we 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 (Carter 2018). To determine whether SOEs are targeted disproportionately during focal moments, we move to a protest-level dataset. Then, 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, 378 at foreign owned enterprises, 340 protests at Hong Kong/Macau/Taiwan-Owned enterprises, 136 protests at joint ventures, and 2,108 protests that occurred at unknown locations. We treat these 2,108 protests as having missing location data, and so we drop them.

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. Again, we include a full set of province- and year-level fixed effects, given by γ_i and γ_s , respectively. Since our outcome variable is dichotomous, we estimate (2) with 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 7 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, protesters are some 30% more likely to target locations during pro-democracy anniversaries that are politically sensitive. This is consistent with our theory. Since focal moments facilitate coordination, citizens can target sensitive locations that might otherwise be dangerous. Alternatively, these locations may themselves be focal, and so facilitate tacit coordination.

5.2 State Response

Is the Chinese government more likely to employ violence against protests that emerge during pro-democracy anniversaries than those that emerge outside focal moments? Our theory suggests that it should, and for a variety of reasons. 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*

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 _{t-1}	-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

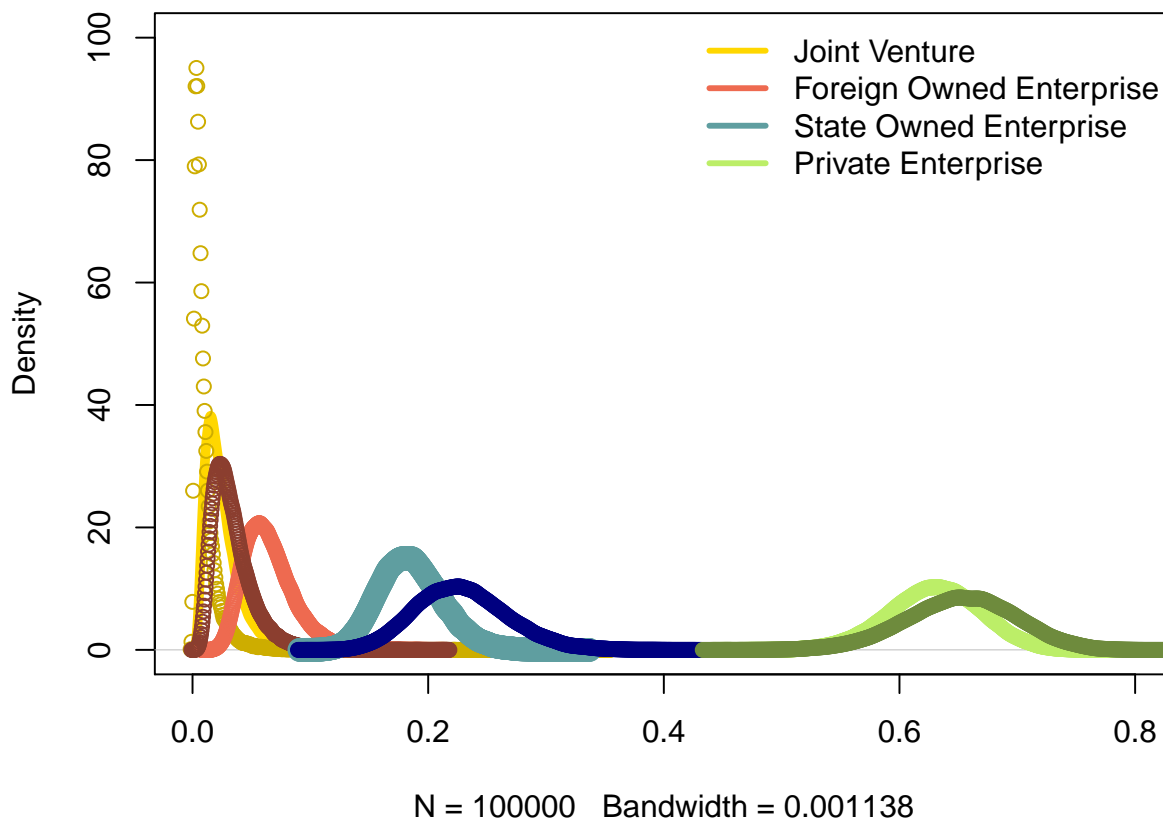


Figure 7: Predicted probability of protest at joint ventures, foreign owned enterprises, state owned enterprises, and private enterprises during pro-democracy anniversary windows and otherwise. For each location, the light shade represents protests on typical days, and the dark shade represents protests during pro-democracy anniversary windows.

the future that focal moment protests are unusually dangerous. In short, governments have powerful incentives to marshal whatever repressive capacity is necessary to suppress focal moments. Our theory suggests that focal moment protests are profoundly threatening, and so should be repressed accordingly.

Students of Chinese politics routinely observe that the government is able to “stage manage” protests: that it permits protests to let citizens voice unrest, identify pockets of unrest, identify incompetent government officials, or create audience costs in international affairs (Lorentzen 2013,

2014; Weiss 2014). In turn, readers may question whether the focal moment protests we document in Section 4.3 are really so threatening to the government. Perhaps the government even *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 deployments, 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 event. Again, we include a full set of province- and year-level fixed effects, given by γ_i and γ_s , respectively. Since our outcome variable is dichotomous, we estimate (3) with a logit model.

The results appear in Table 4. As our theory predicts, the Chinese government is far more likely to employ violence against protests that emerge during pro-democracy anniversaries. The odds of repression 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. Our results nuance this. While a range of protests may be staged managed or otherwise permitted by the government (Nathan 2003; Dimitrov 2008; Chen 2012; Lorentzen 2013, 2014; Steinhardt 2016), these results suggest that 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.

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 _{t-1}	-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<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

5.3 Protest Size

Next, we probe whether protests that emerge during pro-democracy anniversary windows are larger than others. Again, our theory suggests one reason they should be. Focal moments facilitate coordination, and so more citizens can participate. Empirically, however, the results in Section 5.2 suggest one reason that protests during pro-democracy anniversaries *may not* be larger. Protesters are more likely to be violently repressed, precisely because focal moments are so threatening to autocratic governments. Moreover, insofar as the Chinese government actually *permits* protests outside of pro-democracy anniversary windows, those protests may be larger. These conflicting theoretical forces render this an empirical question.

Fortunately, the CLB attempted to record the number of participants for each protest. Since precision is difficult, 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.¹⁸ 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 event. Again, we include a full set of province- and year-level fixed effects, given by γ_i and γ_s , respectively. Since our outcome variable is dichotomous, we estimate (4) with 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 the participants may be those who are most committed to political change.

¹⁸Note that roughly 30% of protests between 2011 and 2016 do not include participation data.

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 _{t-1}	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 2016), 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.¹⁹ In short, focal moments may motivate and facilitate a wide range of political behavior. Their dynamics remain understudied.

¹⁹Though 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).

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7 Appendix

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics

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

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