

Focal Moments and Protests in Autocracies: How Pro-democracy Anniversaries Shape Dissent in China

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Abstract

Social scientists have long observed that focal points enable citizens to coordinate collective action. For antiregime 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 antiregime protests. Our key 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, we find that the anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements occasion nearly 30 percent more protests than any other day. Protests during pro-democracy anniversaries are more likely to employ “rights-conscious” discourse, which scholars have argued is code for democratic resistance, and to be repressed by the government. We find no similar trends for other holidays.

Keywords

collective action, autocratic politics, China, repression, social movements

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The dynamics of autocratic politics have undergone important shifts since the end of the Cold War. As the rate of coups declines (Marinov and Goemans 2014), mass protests increasingly constitute a key threat to autocratic survival. In turn, scholars have sought to understand their dynamics: who participates (Rosenfeld 2017), how protesters organize (Howard and Hussain 2013; Steinert-Threlkeld et al. 2015; Christensen and Garfias 2018), and whether violence is effective (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

This article asks *when* antiregime 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 antiregime 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 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 2019), deploying security forces, or censoring media to block coordination (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2017). As a result, it may be optimal for protesters in autocracies to avoid relying on focal points for coordination. We refer to this as a *repression effect*.

We argue 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 long-standing antiregime 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." These anniversaries may also be used by activists to remind citizens of regime crimes. We refer to this as a *memory effect* that activists attempt to sustain and repressive governments often attempt to purge.

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 several 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 politically relevant dates. We find that the anniversaries of China's failed pro-democracy movements experience nearly 30 percent more protests than the typical day. The odds that a protest emerges are between 27 percent and 37 percent greater, and the probability of a protest spike, which we define below,

increases by nearly 50 percent. Focal moment protests are nearly twice as likely to be repressed by the government. Using tools from computational linguistics, we also show that protesters during pro-democracy anniversaries are far more likely to embrace “rights consciousness,” which many scholars suggest is code for democratic resistance (Bernstein and Lü 2003; Goldman 2005; L. Li 2010; Pei 2010; Wong 2011; J. Chen 2013). We find no evidence that other political, cultural, ethnic, or religious anniversaries constitute focal moments for protest.

This article makes several broader contributions. 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 backlash is more common when victims occupy central positions in social networks. We show that, by giving citizens focal points with which to mobilize, state repression creates recurring opportunities for collective action long into the future. In turn, this advances a growing literature about the causes and consequences of antiregime 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. Many explanations focus on the political and economic conditions under which elections occur (Tucker 2007; Hyde 2011; Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski 2014; Salehyan and Linebarger 2015; Brancati 2016). We show that a range of other dates constitute critical focal moments for protest as well.

Second, this article contributes to a growing literature about the politics of memory in autocracies. It is increasingly clear that repressive governments attempt to suppress memories of regime crimes (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Truex 2019). Our results are consistent with the possibility that citizens keep historical memories alive by engaging in collective action: to remind their neighbors that, despite the regime’s best efforts, others have not forgotten. We thus extend a literature from transitional justice about how societies commemorate atrocities *after* civil violence and dictatorship (de Brito, González-Enríquez, and Aguilar 2001; Gibson 2004; Balcells, Palanza, and Voytas 2018). We show that the struggle between memory and forgetting conditions politics in profound ways well before dictatorships fall. The anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements are focal moments for collective action, and so, repressive governments have incentives to purge them from historical memory. To keep those memories alive—and to sustain the focal moments that enable tacit coordination—activists have incentives to organize protests on pro-democracy anniversaries as well.

These results also advance our understanding of politics in China. Perhaps inspired by the CCP’s apparent strength, some 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). X. Chen (2012, 6)

describes the CCP's model as "contentious authoritarianism," which "accommodate[s] or facilitate[s] widespread and routinized popular collective action."¹ Other scholars, by contrast, argue that antiregime sentiment is widespread and attribute the absence of mass protests to the regime's capacity for violence. These scholars point to recurring protests about corruption, land expropriation, environmental problems, and human rights violations (Cai 2010; O'Brien 2013; Steinhardt and Wu 2016; Wang et al. 2018). Jiang and Yang (2016), X. Li, Shi, and Zhu (2018), and Robinson and Tannenberg (2019) argue that preference falsification is endemic in China. This article 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, which are associated with the CCP's historical crimes against citizens.

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 forgotten."² Our evidence suggests otherwise. The calendar of protest in China was set by events in 1978, 1986, 1989, 2008, and 2014. Once repressed, pro-democracy movements may fold. But by providing focal moments around which citizens can coordinate, these pro-democracy movements reverberate into the future.

This article proceeds as follows. Theoretical Framework section presents our theoretical framework. Data and Empirical Strategy section introduces our data. Focal Moments, Pro-democracy Anniversaries, and Protests section presents our core results. Are Focal Moment Protests Linguistically Distinctive? section shows that protests around pro-democracy anniversaries embrace a discourse of rights consciousness. Are Focal Moment Protests More Often Repressed? section explores whether protests around pro-democracy anniversaries are more likely to be repressed. Conclusion section concludes. The Online Appendix includes additional information and a range of robustness checks.

Theoretical Framework

Focal Moments and Protest in Autocracies

Scholars have long observed that focal points enable individuals to coordinate (Schelling 1960; Olson 1977). 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) suggested and Svobik (2012) demonstrated empirically, successful revolutions are generally rare.

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 2019; Dragu and Przeworski 2019). As a result, it remains theoretically unclear whether would-be protesters use focal points to coordinate in autocracies.

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 where autocrats maintain particularly robust repressive apparatuses. 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 to potential protesters. 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 to citizens when the security apparatus is relatively inefficient: when the government's violent response to a protest is likely to be delayed by organizational inefficiencies or when it lacks a robust surveillance apparatus that detects collective action as soon as it begins. Conversely, when governments possess the capacity to detect and repress protests quickly, the element of surprise yields fewer benefits to protesters.

Put simply, 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 citizen protests rises with the regime's capacity for repression. Focal moments should be associated with antiregime protests in autocracies when the coordination effect dominates the repression effect.

On the Origins and Persistence of Focal Moments

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 centered on Tahrir (Liberation) Square and so christened unofficially after the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 and made official after the Revolution of 1952. In the Republic of Congo, protests generally emerge at the Makélékélé Athletic Center, the main square in an opposition neighborhood and near the Presidential Palace (Clark 2008). The 2018 #MeToo protesters at Peking University hung antiregime posters at the Sanjiaodi corner where pro-democracy posters hung in 1989.³ 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 ten-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).

The origins of focal moments are less clear. Scholars have identified one focal moment that is common across the world's electoral autocracies: regular elections. During election seasons, citizens are more engaged in politics and more aware of their neighbors' discontent (Tucker 2007; Hollyer, Rosendorff, and Vreeland 2015). When governments resort to electoral fraud, citizens experience violations of basic rights simultaneously (Fearon 2011). Opposition leaders have strong incentives to coordinate mass protests and alert citizens to electoral fraud (Javeline 2003; Radnitz 2010; Bunce and Wolchik 2011). By affirming the possibility of a postregime future, elections decrease the costs to frustrated regime elites of defecting from the coalition and joining the opposition (Hale 2005).

What other focal moments do citizens employ to coordinate protests? We argue that anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements have three critical properties that render them focal moments for collective action. First, they remind citizens that antiregime sentiment is long-standing 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. Third, they are 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. Accordingly, in 1999, the ten-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 around 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 2019). 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).

These tactics underscore that repressive governments have a powerful interest in purging regime crimes from a society's historical memory. They do so to undermine the memories that inspire their citizens' anger and protest. In turn, citizens have powerful incentives to keep those memories alive. In the most repressive environments, this is profoundly difficult. The most repressive dictatorships cultivate an informational environment that privileges forgetting. They cultivate an environment

in which citizens inform on each other (Lichter, Löffler, and Siegloch 2018; Thomson 2019). They employ robust censorship apparatuses that purge references to regime crimes from public discourse (Fu, Chan, and Chau 2013; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Roberts 2018). They block alternative media sources in favor of the regime's propaganda apparatus, which lets it broadcast its preferred narrative (Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009).

Scholars of transitional justice have documented how citizens commemorate atrocities after wars end and dictatorships fall (de Brito, González-Enríquez, and Aguilar 2001; Gibson 2004; Manning 2011; Balcells, Palanza, and Voytas 2018). These commemorations often public and occasionally enshrined in law. Citizens who live under repressive governments must commemorate regime crimes differently. For some citizens, protests on the anniversaries of regime crimes may serve to commemorate those who have died. For others, these protests serve a slightly different purpose: to help keep the focal moment alive for the future.⁴ We refer to this as a memory effect, and it too is most salient in repressive environments, when other forms of commemoration are prohibited and regime crimes—which constitute focal moments—are most likely to be purged from memory.

This yields our first hypothesis:

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.

For several reasons, our theory also suggests that protests that emerge around focal moments will be repressed at a higher rate. 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. Finally, by quickly disbanding the protest before it expands, repressive governments aim to foster a process of historical forgetting.

Focal moment protests are profoundly threatening. We expect governments to marshal their repressive apparatuses accordingly.

Hypothesis 2: All else equal, focal moment protests are more likely to be repressed.

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 and Lewis 2017). 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. 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 repressive environments? We argue that a key distinction between anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements and other anniversaries is a history of antiregime collective action. This history helps foster a common belief that protests will emerge again. Unless other anniversaries generated widespread protests that featured explicit demands for democratic reforms, citizens should be less confident that their compatriots will be inclined to protest in the future. Moreover, the memory effect suggests that political events are less likely to be associated with regime crimes and hence not subject to commemorative forces. Although some ethnic anniversaries may be, these, by definition, are relevant to a much smaller share of the population and so less likely to generate commemorative protests than pro-democracy anniversaries.

Hypothesis 3: 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.

Data and Empirical Strategy

As On the Origins and Persistence of Focal Moments subsection suggests, focality is context specific, a function of a society'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 recur annually, and so, we can measure their mobilizational power relative to other potentially salient moments. In turn, we can confirm that pro-democracy anniversaries have unique properties for collective action.

Identifying Anniversaries

We worked with a team of Chinese citizens to identify the anniversaries of pro-democracy movements and other dates with political, cultural, ethnic, or religious

salience. We briefly describe each category below and provide more detail in the Online Appendix.

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 four 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 criterion ensures that we do not select on the dependent variable. Finally, we exclude pro-democracy movements that have been co-opted by the regime. For example, the May Fourth Movement of 1919 began with democratic connotations but has since been rebranded as a nationalist holiday that is actively celebrated by the CCP (Buckley and Qin 2019). Such co-opting drowns out the democratic focality of a date, for protesters are unwilling to stage rallies that could be seen as supportive of the regime. 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 the 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'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" with China's rising inequality. We include commemorative anniversaries, such as the founding of the People's Republic of China, CCP, or People's Liberation Army, as well as ideological anniversaries like Labor Day. The second set includes policy failures: the Japanese invasion of China, the Nanjing Massacre, and the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, among others.⁵ The third set includes recurring political meetings that may present an opportunity for citizens to signal discontent

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 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) arrested participants, including Wei, who spent eighteen 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 in 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 closed-circuit television building in Beijing, and dozens of prominent lawyers signed an open letter demanding that the CCP respect the rights enshrined in the 1982 constitution.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Date	Name	Description
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” manifesto released by Czech dissidents in 1977. After the manifesto gained 10,000 additional signatures from prominent citizens, the CCP forbade discussion of it in the media. Citizens responded by distributing the document on Beijing streets. Although Charter 08 did not culminate in major protests, the public signatures constitute collective action.
December 19	National Peoples’ Congress Direct Election Movement	In 1986, public intellectual Fang Lizhi called on the CCP 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, on December 23, students in Hefei staged a sit-in in front of government offices. 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 regime policies: the quinquennial Party Congress, the annual NPC, 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, 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 omit Christmas to avoid an ecological inference problem due to the fact that democracy activist Liu Xiaobo was sentenced on December 25, 2009.

Collective Action in China

To measure protests, we employ data from Manfred Elfstrom and the China Labour Bulletin (CLB), a nongovernmental organization in Hong Kong that advocates for labor rights. Drawing on international, domestic, and social media, they maintain a geocoded data set of all known strikes and protests. Elfstrom's data set covers 2003 through 2012; the CLB data set covers 2011 through 2016. Since their respective coding rules and sources are essentially identical, we merged the Elfstrom and CLB data sets to maximize coverage. In the Online Appendix, we show that the two data sets are essentially identical in 2011 and 2012, the years for which they overlap. Accordingly, the variable *Protests_{it}* records the number of protests in province *i* on day *t*. For 2003 through 2010, we use Elfstrom's data; for 2011 through 2016, we use CLB data.

Although the Elfstrom/CLB data sets are leading records of collective action in China,⁶ they focus on protests that are ostensibly about labor issues such as pension and wage arrears. Our primary interest, of course, is in *political* protest. As a result, these data constitute a hard test for our theory. The reason is that citizens with political grievances should be more likely to protest during politically salient moments than citizens with economic grievances, who should be more likely to protest when an economic grievance is realized. Accordingly, if protests about economic grievances cluster on pro-democracy anniversaries, this is powerful evidence that those moments matter. This might also suggest that citizens with political grievances are savvy enough to cloak their claims as economic grievances, the better to avoid state repression. We find evidence of this in Are Focal Moment Protests Linguistically Distinctive? section, where we exploit the CLB's online repository of images from the protests in its database. This, indeed, is another reason why the Elfstrom/CLB data are so attractive. The CLB's online repository of protest images lets us probe the language used by participants in a given protest.

The Online Appendix presents empirical distributions of the number of protests each day and week. In our data set, 4.7 percent of province-days experienced at least one protest. The Online Appendix also includes descriptive statistics for protests by province and over time. There is some evidence that, at the province level, protests are correlated with economic output, which may reflect higher levels of social media use or urbanization rates. Likewise, protests appear to have increased over time. These patterns may reflect reporting bias. To accommodate unobserved differences in the data generating process, we employ province and year fixed effects in all models.

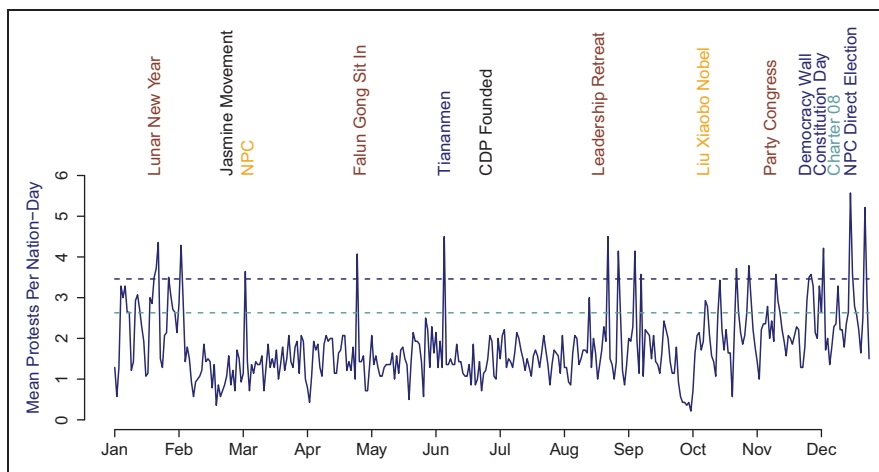


Figure 1. The life cycle of collective action in China.

A final source of reporting bias is more difficult to address. We refer to this as “microtemporal” variation: protests on particular days may be more or less likely to be reported than others and for reasons unrelated to focality. For instance, citizens may be less likely to work on some anniversaries or holidays. If so, they may have more time to report protests on social media. Alternatively, the CCP censorship apparatus may be more active on some days than others, rendering protests less likely to be reported. The holiday mechanism should not affect reporting rates around pro-democracy anniversaries; these are not holidays. The censorship mechanism should render our estimates *conservative*. The CCP amplifies censorship around pro-democracy holidays (Fu, Chan, and Chau 2013; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013; Roberts 2018). Since the Elfstrom/CLB data are based on social media reports, protest records during pro-democracy anniversaries—when online censorship spikes—are likely biased downward. The estimates in Results subsection are likely lower bounds of the effect of pro-democracy anniversaries on protest.

Focal Moments, Pro-democracy Anniversaries, and Protests

Descriptive Statistics

Figure 1 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 2003 and 2016 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. Four 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.⁷ The annual meeting of China's rubber stamp parliament, the NPC, nearly meets the two-standard-deviation threshold in early March. Protests spike again around April 25, the anniversary of the 10,000-person Tiananmen Square sit-in staged by the Falun Gong spiritual group in 1999. Protest rates 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 Congress; in our sample, this opened on November 8, 2012, and lasted a week. The weeks before and during Party Congresses are some of China's most tense and, we find, sometimes occasion protest.

Model Specification

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

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta(\text{Pro-democracy Anniversary Window}_t) + \phi X_{it} + \psi W_{is} + \gamma_i + \gamma_s + \varepsilon, \quad (1)$$

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 γ_i , and a full set of year 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 \pm one-day window centered on contemporary China's five major pro-democracy anniversaries. This one-day window is restrictive but theoretically informed. Focal moments are powerful because they are temporally specific. Throughout the main text, we also present results for a \pm three-day window. As a robustness check, in

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Nbr. Val.	Nbr. NA	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev.	Source
Protests _{it}	158,565	0	0.00	8.00	0.06	0.29	Elfstrom, CLB
Pro-democracy anniversary _t	158,565	0	0.00	1.00	0.03	0.17	Authors
Political anniversary _t	158,565	0	0.00	1.00	0.10	0.30	Authors
Cultural anniversary _t	158,565	0	0.00	1.00	0.08	0.27	Authors
Ethnic/religious anniversary _t	158,565	0	0.00	1.00	0.03	0.18	Authors
Log GRP _{is}	158,565	0	5.22	11.30	9.04	1.14	NBS
Log population _{is}	158,565	0	5.61	9.31	8.08	0.86	NBS
Rural population share _{is}	135,904	22,661	0.10	0.79	0.49	0.15	NBS
Pension shortfall _{is}	158,565	0	-11.40	3.27	-0.84	1.42	NBS
Urban unemployment rate _{is}	157,104	1,461	1.20	6.50	3.59	0.70	NBS
CPI _{is}	158,565	0	-2.30	10.10	2.77	1.90	NBS

Note: CLB = China Labour Bulletin; Nbr. Val. = number of values; Nbr. NA = number of NAs; CPI = consumer price inflation; NBS = Chinese National Bureau of Statistics; GRP = gross regional product.

Robustness Checks and Extensions section, we further vary the size of these temporal windows.

We include a range of controls in 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 Identifying Anniversaries subsection. At the year level, we control for economic and social conditions that may be associated with popular unrest. We control for province i 's gross regional product in year s , its urban unemployment rate, consumer price inflation, and pension shortfall.⁸ 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 it may be more difficult to organize protests across long distances. We also control for province i 's consumer price inflation. Table 2 presents sources and descriptive statistics for all variables.

We estimate variants of equation (1) that include each 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 anniversary behaves contrary to expectations.

Results

The results appear in Table 3. Across models, the rate of protest is substantially higher on pro-democracy anniversaries than other days. Figure 2 visualizes this. The black line gives the predicted number of protests that occur on a given

Table 3. Anniversary Windows and Protests.

Variable	Dependent variable: Protests _{it}					
	One-day Anniversary Window			Three-day Anniversary Window		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Pro-democracy anniversary	.220*** (.055)	0.220*** (0.055)	0.180*** (0.055)	.250*** (.037)	0.250*** (0.037)	0.230*** (0.037)
Foreign pro-democracy anniversary	-.500*** (.096)	-0.490*** (0.095)	-0.510*** (0.096)	-.380*** (.061)	-0.380*** (0.060)	-0.400*** (0.060)
Political anniversary			-0.210*** (0.041)			-0.130*** (0.029)
Cultural anniversary			-0.160*** (0.044)			-0.086*** (0.030)
Ethnic/religious anniversary			-0.280*** (0.071)			-0.170*** (0.046)
Protests _{it-1}	.240*** (.016)	0.240*** (0.016)	0.230*** (0.016)	.230*** (.016)	0.230*** (0.016)	0.230*** (0.016)
Log GRP		-1.600*** (0.270)	-1.600*** (0.270)		-1.600*** (0.270)	-1.600*** (0.270)
Rural population		0.480 (0.840)	0.480 (0.840)		0.480 (0.840)	0.480 (0.840)
Rural population share		-9.200*** (1.400)	-9.200*** (1.400)		-9.300*** (1.400)	-9.300*** (1.400)
Pension shortfall		0.094*** (0.013)	0.094*** (0.013)		0.094*** (0.013)	0.094*** (0.013)
Urban unemployment rate		0.220*** (0.073)	0.220*** (0.073)		0.220*** (0.073)	0.220*** (0.073)
Consumer price inflation		-0.048 (0.034)	-0.048 (0.034)		-0.048 (0.034)	-0.048 (0.034)
Constant	-5.600*** (.160)	8.900 (7.600)	8.900 (7.600)	-5.600*** (.160)	8.800 (7.600)	8.900 (7.600)
Province fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	158,534	134,808	134,808	158,534	134,808	134,808
Log-likelihood	-25,930.000	-25,196.000	-25,168.000	-25,907.000	-25,172.000	-25,152.000

*p < .1.

**p < .05.

***p < .01.

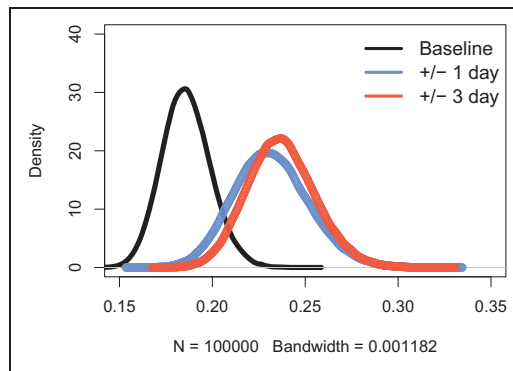


Figure 2. Predicted number of protests. The baseline rate appears in black, the predicted rate for \pm one-day pro-democracy anniversary windows appear in blue, and the predicted rate for \pm three-day pro-democracy anniversary windows appear in red.

province-day. This baseline is just less than .2. For province-days during a pro-democracy window, the predicted number of protests increases by nearly 30 percent to just less than .25.

The Online Appendix presents the disaggregated anniversary results. We find that three of the five pro-democracy anniversaries are consistently 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 first 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 repress citizens (Wan and Denyer 2014). Nonetheless, Tiananmen experienced significantly elevated protest rates in 2007, 2010, and 2016. The second exception is the 1978 Democracy Wall movement, our oldest pro-democracy anniversary. This is consistent with the possibility that focality may decay over time or that protests emerge in some years but not others. The Democracy Wall anniversary experienced significantly elevated protest rates in 2009 and 2014.

We find little evidence that political, cultural, ethnic, or religious anniversaries constitute focal moments for protest or that pro-democracy anniversaries that originate abroad condition protest. These results are perhaps intuitive. Many political anniversaries are explicitly nationalist, and so, antiregime 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 or the Japanese invasion. On cultural anniversaries, the opportunity cost of protest may be relatively high since citizens routinely engage in family or cultural festivities.

There is little evidence that ethnic or religious anniversaries constitute focal moments for collective action *across* China. This is not to suggest 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 provinces and more protests in provinces with pension shortfalls and elevated unemployment rates. $Protests_{it-1}$ is highly predictive of $Protests_{it}$.

Robustness Checks and Extensions

The Online Appendix includes several robustness checks and extensions. First, we show that the results in Table 3 are substantively unchanged for anniversary windows of \pm zero, two, and five days. Second, since the models in Table 3 are based on protest counts, the results may be 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 $Protest_{it}$ assumes value 1 if the number of protests in province i on day t is positive and 0 otherwise. We then estimate the effect of pro-democracy anniversaries on the probability that protests occur in province i on day t . The daily odds of protest during a pro-democracy anniversary window are between 27 percent and 37 percent greater than the baseline.

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. We find that the baseline rate that day t in province I is a very high protest day is 3 percent; during pro-democracy anniversary window, the rate of a very high protest day rises to 5 percent. The baseline rate of a high protest day in province i is 11 percent; during pro-democracy anniversary windows, the rate rises to 16 percent.

Fourth, the number of days that reflect pro-democracy anniversary windows is relatively small, and so, the statistically significant results in Table 3 might reflect random chance. To ensure this is not the case, we employ randomization inference. For each of 1,000 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.⁹ Figure 3 displays the distribution of these 1,000 estimated coefficients, with our actual coefficient from Model 2 in Table 3 given by the red line. The protest levels observed around pro-democracy anniversaries are unlikely to be random.

Fifth, we explore the formation of focal moments. Since two—Charter 08 and Constitution Day—emerged *during* our sample period, we can verify that neither witnessed higher protest rates *before* the pro-democracy movement that made it a focal moment. As expected, neither anniversary experienced elevated protest rates before it became focal, and each did after it became focal.

Finally, we explore variation in protest size. Our theory does not have clear implications for the equilibrium number of participants in focal moment

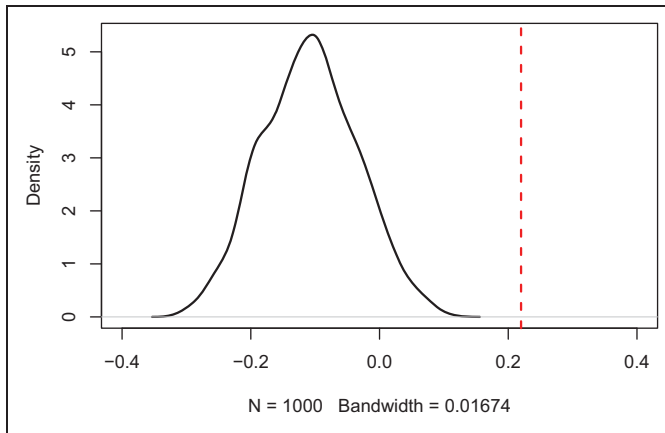


Figure 3. Randomization inference. The observed coefficient estimate appears in red. The probability of observing a coefficient as extreme as this one approaches zero.

protests. One force renders them larger: since focal moments facilitate coordination, more citizens can participate. Another force renders them smaller: since governments can prepare for focal moments in advance, those protests are more likely to be repressed. Empirically, the second effect appears to dominate: protests during pro-democracy anniversaries are smaller than those on other days. This suggests a numbers versus intensity dynamic: fewer citizens are willing to join protests around pro-democracy anniversaries, but those who do are highly motivated.¹⁰

Are Focal Moment Protests Linguistically Distinctive?

Are protests that emerge during pro-democracy anniversaries more “pro-democratic” in character?

Data and Empirical Strategy

To probe this, we exploit an image repository maintained by the CLB, which provides images of all protests in its data set between 2014 and 2019. These images generally feature banners, signs, manifestos, or tweets from a given protest. We scraped all 38,078 protest images and then used *tesseract* v4.00.00alpha, an optical character recognition program, to extract the words that these images contain. The result is a corpus of words, by protest, that participants used to describe their demands and grievances. We conducted the analysis in Chinese but present results in English.

To understand whether protests around pro-democracy anniversaries express different demands and grievances than others, we adapt Kessler’s (2017, 2018) work in

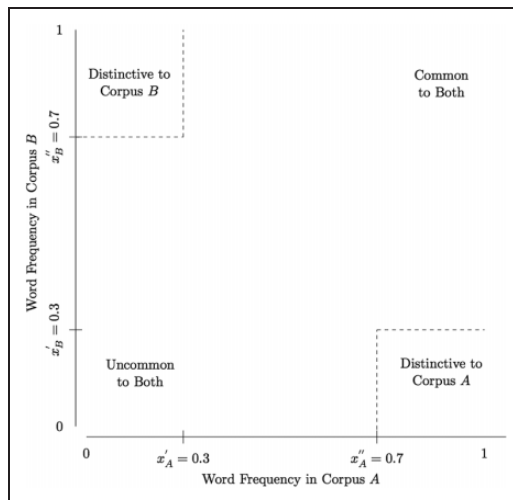


Figure 4. Visualizing semantic distinctiveness.

computational linguistics. His key idea is that, across any two corpora, words common to both are generally uninformative. These common words are pronouns, conjugations of the verb “to be,” question words like “who” and “where,” and generic words associated with a given topic (like “sports” for sports). Similarly, words uncommon to both corpora are also uninformative. These are peculiar, low-frequency words. By contrast, words common in one corpus but uncommon in another convey something meaningful about content in one corpus relative to another. If the demands and grievances of protest during pro-democracy anniversaries is distinctive, then this algorithm will detect how.

Kessler’s (2018) algorithm positions words in two-dimensional space based on their frequency in two corpora, which we denote A and B . Figure 4 illustrates this. For each word across corpora A and B , the algorithm computes its coordinates in two-dimensional space as a function of its frequency in each corpora, standardized by the frequency of the most common word in each corpora. This yields a measure of word frequency in each corpora on the $[0, 1]$ interval. Words in the bottom left of Figure 4 are uncommon to both; words in the top right are common to both. Words in the bottom right are distinctive to corpus A ; words in the top left are distinctive to corpus B .

We restrict attention to words where $x_A \geq 0.7$ and $x_B \leq 0.3$. For each, we count the number of references in corpus A and standardize this by total articles in corpus A . This yields a measure of distinctiveness that incorporates not only a word’s relative frequency to others but also its relative frequency across articles. We compute an analogous measure for corpus B .



Figure 5. Distinctive protest discourse.

Results

We define corpus *A* as all protest content during the three days before and after each of the pro-democracy anniversaries in Table 1 and the other corpus as all protest content during the rest of the year. The results appear in Figure 5. The left panel displays words that are distinctive to pro-democracy anniversaries; the right panel displays words that are distinctive to other protests.

The results are striking. We bolded the terms that reflect “rights consciousness”: what O’Brien and Li (2006, 2-3) define as “a form of popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power, hinges on locating and exploiting divisions within the state, and relies on mobilizing support from the wider public.” A range of scholars have argued that rights-conscious discourse is a foundation of democratic resistance (Bernstein and Lü 2003; Goldman 2005; L. Li 2010; Pei 2010; Wong 2011; J. Chen 2013).

Protests around pro-democracy anniversaries are far more likely to embrace rights consciousness, which suggests that these protests are more pro-democratic than others. The left panel contains words like “citizen,” “netizen,” “court enforcement,” and “right to know.” Crucially, the term “people power teacher” refers to someone who organizes or inspires citizens to demand “people power.” This suggests that activists may be a crucial force behind protests during pro-democracy anniversaries, as they are in helping ordinary citizens register grievances without eliciting state repression (Fu 2018). The left panel features terms that also emphasize the extent of collective action and popular frustration: “hundreds of employees,” “more than 100 employees,” and “dozens of workers.” The left panel includes emotionally charged words as well, like “helpless,” “powerless,” and “bad faith.” It also includes language that conveys aspirations for change: “new world.”

To be sure, the left panel also includes language about economic grievance: “salary payroll,” “employee complaints,” and “workers’ wages,” which, we find, also dominate the right panel. But the combination of rights-conscious terms with economic grievances suggests that protests during pro-democracy anniversaries are indeed distinctive: that citizens with political grievances are savvy enough to cloak their claims as economic grievances, the better to reduce the likelihood of state repression. In the Online Appendix, we estimate a series of regressions to confirm that the increases in rights-conscious terms are statistically significant. By contrast, just one term in the right panel—“petition”—reflects rights consciousness.

Perry (2008) is less optimistic that rights consciousness reflects aspirations for democracy. Rights consciousness, she argues, is in fact “rules consciousness,” insofar as contention operates with scripts accepted by the state. In turns, she suggests, it stabilizes the CCP. Our results—in particular, the coincidence of rights consciousness discourse and pro-democracy anniversaries—call this interpretation into question.

Two Examples

We conclude with two examples from protests during pro-democracy anniversaries that illustrate this rights consciousness discourse. On December 4, 2014—the first official “Constitution Day,” ostensibly designed to commemorate the signing of the state constitution in 1982—between 1,000 and 10,000 teachers in Yuzhou, Henan province, went on strike for back pay and better wages. They demanded the release of the protest organizer from house arrest and protested in front of local government offices. Protesters were explicit: “Regarding the government, according to some western theories, the government was originally raised by the people. It should listen to the people and act for the people. But the result is reversed.” Another explicitly referenced the Constitution Day focal moment: “On the first Constitution Day, teachers in Yuzhou City defended their legitimate rights and interests!” (<https://wickedonna2.tumblr.com/post/104341050738/2014>).

On June 4, 2017—the Twenty-seventh anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre—between 100 and 1,000 people paraded in front of Hanzhong City government headquarters in Shaanxi province with a large red flag and lodged a petition. The ostensible motivation: state-owned Lueyang Iron and Steel plant had not paid workers’ social insurance. But protesters’ language was distinctly rights conscious. They displayed a large banner signed by hundreds of citizens that proclaimed “the government works for me.” Workers “voluntarily organized an activist team,” which “went to the streets and marched unhindered” to protest “government and business collusion.” Nonworkers evidently participated as well: “Retired elderly people and young people guarded the steel warehouse day and night to protect the workers’ last hope.”

Photographs of both protests appear in the Online Appendix.

Are Focal Moment Protests More Often Repressed?

Finally, we probe whether the CCP is more likely to employ violence against protests that emerge during pro-democracy anniversaries. In so doing, we address a large literature that suggests the Chinese government permits protests strategically: to let citizens vent frustration, locate pockets of unrest, identify incompetent government officials, or create audience costs in international affairs (Lorentzen 2013, 2014; Weiss 2014). Given this literature, readers may wonder whether the focal moment protests we document in Focal Moments, Pro-democracy Anniversaries, and Protests and Are Focal Moment Protests Linguistically Distinctive? sections are actually threatening to the government. Perhaps the government *permits* them.

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. 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

Table 4. Anniversary Windows and State Repression.

Variable	Dependent Variable					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Pro-democracy anniversary	.540* (.310)	0.580* (0.310)	0.590* (0.310)	.470** (.200)	0.470** (0.200)	0.480** (0.200)
Foreign Pro-democracy anniversary	-.890** (.370)	-.870** (0.370)	-.860** (0.370)	-.300 (.240)	-.290 (0.240)	-.300 (0.240)
Political anniversary			-0.230 (0.180)			-0.041 (0.140)
Cultural anniversary			0.580** (0.240)			0.350** (0.150)
Ethnic/religious anniversary			0.064 (0.330)			-0.036 (0.210)
Protests _{it-1}	.068 (.075)	0.073 (0.074)	0.075 (0.074)	.071 (.075)	0.075 (0.074)	0.074 (0.074)
Log GRP		-0.230 (1.900)	-0.210 (1.900)		-0.360 (1.900)	-0.180 (2.000)
Log population		1.200 (13.000)	2.700 (13.000)		1.700 (13.000)	1.800 (13.000)
Rural population share		-17,000** (8,600)	-17,000** (8,600)		-17,000** (8,600)	-17,000** (8,600)
Pension shortfall		0.037 (0.083)	0.041 (0.083)		0.033 (0.083)	0.037 (0.083)
Urban unemployment rate		-0.170 (0.360)	-0.170 (0.360)		-0.170 (0.360)	-0.150 (0.360)
Consumer price inflation		-0.170 (0.220)	-0.170 (0.220)		-0.170 (0.220)	-0.170 (0.220)
Constant	-1.000*** (.320)	1.100 (109.000)	-12.000 (110.000)	-1.000*** (.320)	-1.700 (109.000)	-4.100 (109.000)
Province fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	2,992	2,992	2,992	2,992	2,992	2,992
Log-likelihood	-1,165.000	-1,157.000	-1,153.000	-1,165.000	-1,158.000	-1,155.000

*p < .1.

**p < .05.

***p < .01.

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.

Our protest-level data set counts 8,705 protest observations. Of these, a state response is observed for 2,992: 2,258 were repressed, and 734 protests were resolved through government mediation or negotiation. Although such missingness is natural for sensitive data gathered in an authoritarian context, it renders the results below necessarily suggestive. Protest-level descriptive statistics for all variables appear in the Online Appendix.

Our baseline model is

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Repression}_{ij} = & \alpha + \beta(\text{Pro-democracy Anniversary Window}_j) + \phi X_j + \psi W_j + \gamma_i \\ & + \gamma_s + \varepsilon, \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

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. Again, we include province and year fixed effects, given by γ_i and γ_s , respectively. Since the outcome is dichotomous, we employ a logit model.

The results appear in Table 4. Again, we treat them with caution since state response data are subject to some missingness. Still, the odds that the Chinese government employs repression against protests during pro-democracy moments are nearly twice as great as otherwise. This has important 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; X. Chen 2012; Lorentzen 2013, 2014; Steinhardt 2016). Our results make clear that, while many protests may be stage managed or otherwise permitted by the government, the protests that emerge during the anniversaries of pro-democracy movements are not. 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.

Conclusion

Collective action in autocracies is dangerous. To mitigate those dangers and, perhaps, to keep memories of historical resistance movements alive, citizens make use of the focal moments afforded by failed pro-democracy movements in the past. This article, most broadly, shows that failed pro-democracy movements have relevance long into the future. The rate of protest on the anniversaries of these pro-democracy movements is higher—by nearly 30 percent—than any other day of the calendar year. The probability of a protest spike—defined either as a one or two standard deviation increase relative to the mean daily protest rate—increases by nearly 50 percent. The odds that a protest *occurs at all* are between 27 percent and

37 percent greater. Put simply, when protests emerge, they do so disproportionately during the anniversaries of failed pro-democracy movements. The available evidence suggests that protests during pro-democracy anniversaries are nearly twice as likely to be repressed by the regime's security forces. These protests are also more likely to embrace a discourse of rights consciousness, which a range of scholars have suggested is code for democratic resistance.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first article to document the origins of focal moments for collective action in autocracies *other than* election seasons. In so doing, it suggests a range of topics for future research. How do autocracies strategize over their citizens' calendar of collective action? Preliminary evidence suggests that autocrats preemptively arrest dissidents (Truex 2019), 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? Repressive governments often maintain substantial propaganda apparatuses. What does propaganda communicate to citizens when sensitive anniversaries approach? Does it attempt to persuade citizens with propaganda about regime performance? Does it threaten them with violence? Do focal moments drive public good provision?

This article underscores that, for antiregime protests, focal points are not unqualified assets. Although they foster coordination, they enable repressive governments to strategize in advance. This article 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, our theory's cross-national predictions remain to be tested. We regard this as a key direction for future scholarship.

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Supplemental Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The Chinese Communist Party permits and even publicizes some protests to discourage corruption among local officials, release social tension, and insulate the center from discontent (O'Brien and Li 2006; Stern and O'Brien 2012; Hassid 2012; Lorentzen 2013, 2014; Steinhardt 2015, 2016; Huang, Boranbay-Akan, and Huang 2016; Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017; D. Chen 2017). Perry (2008) argues that protesters follow scripts accepted by the state, reflecting "rules consciousness" rather than "rights consciousness." Indeed, most protests rarely feature violence or radical political claims (Y. Li 2017).
2. Edward Steinfeld quoted in *Harvard Magazine* (2014).
3. Shawn Zhang (@shawnwzhang), "Historical triangle democracy wall 三角地," Twitter, April 23, 2018.
4. Interview with anonymous opposition activist in the Republic of Congo, June 2, 2017.
5. Carter, Johnston, and Quek (2018) find that national sovereignty is a key issue for Chinese citizens. Accordingly, citizens may penalize the government for backing down against foreign aggressors.
6. An earlier version of these data sets was analyzed by Distelhorst and Hou (2017). Göbel and Steinhardt (2019) find "extreme overlap" between China Labour Bulletin and a leading online blog of protests, Wickedonna.
7. 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.
8. Cai (2010) finds that pension arrears often motivate collective action in China.
9. We employed model 2 from Table 3, which includes all controls save other anniversaries (which could conceivably overlap with the placebo windows).
10. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

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