

Focal Points, Dissident Calendars, and Preemptive Repression

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Abstract

This article explains temporal variation in repression as a function of the “dissident calendar,” the set of events that serve as natural focal points for coordination. The core argument is that regimes can anticipate the events that create these focal points and engage in preemptive repression to survive their passing. This dynamic produces predictable, often cyclical patterns in repression. An analysis of dissident detentions in China from 1998 to 2014 shows that “focal events” alone appear to be responsible for more than 20 percent of dissident detentions over the analysis period. Such detentions tend to be shorter and rely less on formal criminal procedures, suggesting a “catch-and-release” dynamic. Additional analysis of detentions in Tibet shows how the calendar may vary by issue or group.

Keywords

repression, preemptive, detention, focal point, dissidents, authoritarian, mobilization, collective action, human rights, China, Tibet

Why and when do we observe crackdowns on political dissidents? More broadly, what drives governments to commit repressive acts when they do?

The standard answer is that repression comes in response to increases in visible dissent (Carey 2006, 2010; Davenport 2007; Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003;

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Moore 2000). When confronted with protests, strikes, and other forms of overt collective action, government actors engage in repression to preserve the state and their own grasp on power. Indeed, our most powerful mental images of repression are of protestors facing down bullets or tanks or teargas, whether at Kent State or Tahrir Square. Until recently, the consensus around the dissent–repression nexus was so strong that Davenport (2007) identified it as one of the core findings in the repression literature, dubbing it the “Law of Coercive Responsiveness.”

New empirical scholarship has begun to amend this law. Ritter and Conrad (2016) show that the relationship between dissent and repression is conditional on regime type, and it appears to hold primarily for democratic governments, which engage in more reactive forms of repression. Authoritarian regimes, in contrast, are more adept at using preemptive repression, they address threats when opposition is still trying to mobilize, before overt collective action ever actually takes place. Preemptive repression comes in many forms: curfews, prohibitions on assembly, and the monitoring and imprisonment of dissidents, to name a few (Ritter and Conrad 2016; Snyder 1976; Sullivan 2015, 2016). Such strategies allow authoritarian regimes to prevent most dissent from ever becoming visible, while also keeping repression itself largely out of public sight.

The purpose of this article is to further strengthen our understanding of preemptive repression by focusing explicitly on temporal variation and the explanatory power of dates and events. I introduce the concept of the “dissident calendar”—the set of events known in advance that serve as natural focal points for coordination and collective action (Mehta, Starmer, and Sugden 1994a; Schelling 1980). Historical anniversaries, high-level regime meetings, and even international sporting events present dissident groups with a unique opportunity to mobilize the broader population into overt collective action. My argument is that regimes anticipate the events that create these focal points and engage in preemptive repression to survive their passing. This dynamic produces predictable, often cyclical patterns in repression. Importantly, the dissident calendar may vary across oppositional communities, producing varied patterns for different groups, issues, and regions.

A data set of political prisoners in China is used to test these ideas. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China maintains a Political Prisoner Database (CECC-PPD) that contains a list of known individuals who have been detained in China for political reasons. These data were used to create an index of monthly “democracy-related” detentions. An interrupted time-series analysis shows that repression is indeed a predictable function of “focal events.” Detentions show cyclical patterns, coinciding with the five-year anniversaries of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and high-level Chinese Communist Party (CCP) meetings. On average, a focal event falling in or shortly after a given month increases the expected number of detentions by some 108 percent to 221 percent. The estimates suggest these events alone are responsible for more than 20 percent of political dissident detentions in China over the analysis period. A replication of the analysis for detentions in Tibet yields coefficients of

similar magnitude, illustrating how focal events can vary across groups within a given polity.

The data also allow for an analysis of punishment outcomes. We observe that dissidents arrested shortly before focal events are about 12 percent to 13 percent less likely to receive a formal charge in the criminal justice system and 12 percent to 13 percent more likely to have a short imprisonment period (defined as spending less than thirty days in custody). Overall, this suggests a “catch-and-release” dynamic that allows the regime to get through the sensitive dates that might produce broader, overt collective action. Dissidents are taken off the streets, intimidated and mined for information, and released once the danger has passed. Attention-grabbing trials are often avoided entirely, minimizing the risk of popular backlash (Francisco 1996; Rasler 1996; Sullivan 2016).

This article presents one of the first attempts to quantify and explain temporal variation in dissident detentions, joining other studies that take a microlevel approach to the study of repression (Davenport 2014; Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003; Fielding and Shortland 2010; Francisco 1996; Moore 1998, 2000; Rasler 1996; Ritter and Conrad 2016; Sullivan, Loyle, and Davenport 2012; Sullivan 2015, 2016). This type of data allows us to move beyond country-level explanations of repression and respect for human rights (Hill and Jones 2014) and to explore focal events as predictors of personal integrity violations. Despite its theoretical importance, we still know relatively little about how exactly preemptive repression works in practice—who suffers personal integrity violations, when, for how long, and of what sort.

Focal Points, Dissident Calendars, and Preemptive Repression

State repression is broadly defined as threats, intimidation, violence, and other forms of physical sanctions used to deter individuals or organizations from activities threatening to those in power (Davenport 2007; Earl 2003). Infringements on rights involving security of person, including freedom from being tortured, killed, “disappeared,” or unlawfully imprisoned, are known as personal integrity violations (Davenport 2007). The dependent variable used in this study—politically motivated detentions—can be considered a measure of the broader concept of physical integrity violations, which is itself a subcategory of the broader concept of state repression.

We know that in authoritarian systems, much of the repression that occurs is preemptive in nature (Greitens 2016; King, Pan, and Roberts 2013, 2014; Sullivan 2015, 2016; Wang and Minzer 2015). Bloated domestic security budgets fund “secret police” and other surveillance outfits that keep a close watch on potential troublemakers. Sullivan’s (2015, 2016) archival research on Guatemala (1975–1985) shows how the National Police sought to repress the mobilization activities of dissident groups. In the Chinese case, King, Pan, and Roberts (2013, 2014) describe

how the CCP skillfully censors social media posts aimed at stirring up protests or demonstrations, again targeting the mobilization stage of contentious behavior. When dissident mobilization does occur, regimes can intervene and deplete oppositional groups of their personnel, resources, and optimism. As Sullivan (2016) shows, such a strategy is effective in reducing overt, collective dissent.

Thus, to understand patterns in detentions in authoritarian systems, we must identify factors that increase the possibility of public dissent, not necessarily dissent itself (which is actively being prevented). Schelling's (1980) "focal point" concept offers a helpful starting point. In games of pure coordination, players will often employ strategies that have some unique salience or prominence. Schelling famously asked a group of students where they would go and when if they had to meet a stranger in New York City the following day, not being able to communicate in advance. The most common answer was the information booth at Grand Central Terminal at noon. Note that there is no added payoff from going to Grand Central—and in fact any place and time in the city could be an equilibrium—but that its salience is what led students to choose this strategy (Janssen 2001). As Schelling describes,

People can often concert their intentions or expectations with others if each knows that the other is trying to do the same. Most situations . . . provide some clue for coordinating behavior, some focal point for each person's expectation of what the other expects him to expect to be expected to do. (p. 57)

Experimental evidence shows that players are able to use the labels or symbols associated with different strategies to coordinate on mutually beneficial outcomes, confirming Schelling's initial empirical findings (Mehta, Starmer, and Sugden 1994a, 1994b).

In authoritarian systems, the choice to engage in collective action constitutes a coordination game of the class Schelling describes (Pierskalla 2009; Shadmehr 2014; Tucker 2007). Instead of places to meet in New York City, discontented citizens are picking moments or dates in which to voice their discontent. The benefits to dissent are increasing in the number of people joining in, as there is a greater chance of engendering change and a lower risk of personal punishment (Kuran 1991). Yet, because of the constrained information environment, discontented citizens frequently have difficulty reliably communicating their strategies to each other in advance. The task is further complicated by the fact that there is effectively an infinite set of date–place combinations from which to choose.

Focal points are key to solving the coordination problem and engendering collective action. I define focal events as dates known in advance that have high salience and reduce problems of coordination for citizens seeking to act collectively. Such dates may include anniversaries of key historical events, national commemorations or celebrations, elections or appointments of high-level officials, or high-level regime meetings (Davenport 1997; Opp and Gern 1993; Tucker 2007). These

events need not increase anger or antipathy in the population itself (though some may); the key feature is simply that they are salient and known in advance. I refer to the dissident calendar as the set of these dates.

Of course, we know that the agents of repression do not simply stand by and allow dissidents to mobilize (Greitens 2016; Sullivan 2015; Wang and Minzer 2015). Sophisticated authoritarian regimes are well aware of the dissident calendar and the list of focal events. The core hypothesis tested in this article is that such governments engage in preemptive repression in advance of such dates.

Hypothesis 1 [detentions]: Dissident detentions will increase in periods shortly preceding and during focal events.

This brand of targeted, preemptive repression can prevent any latent revolutionary bandwagons from taking off (Kuran 1991). Note that we may never observe visible dissent (protests, strikes, demonstrations, petitions, etc.) during these periods, as dissidents themselves are removed from the system and prevented from voicing opposition and mobilizing others.

Importantly, the set of focal events can vary from issue to issue, group to group. This yields variation in the timing of repressive crackdowns, as different dissident calendars may operate within the same polity.

If dissidents in authoritarian systems face this sort of preemptive repression strategy, shouldn't they learn and try to coordinate around other dates? Certainly, dissidents do mobilize in other ways, and at other times, which is why we see detentions occurring at nonfocal times and places. The argument here is simply that dissidents are bound to the political calendar, in some sense. In the same way that Grand Central Terminal is focal in New York City, and 30th and Lexington is not, June 4 will always be salient for the Chinese population, and June 22 will not. Because coordination is unreliable, the discontent naturally rely on focal events to reach each other and the broader population. They cannot create these events on their own.

Once the focal event passes, the danger for the regime passes as well. For this reason, we might also expect detentions preceding such events to take on a different nature, as regimes are simply trying to get through these dates with minimal trouble:

Hypothesis 2 [process]: Reliance on extralegal detention procedures will increase in periods shortly preceding and during focal events.

Regimes may formally arrest, charge, try, and convict political dissidents or they may rely on other means to get these individuals off the streets. Disappearances, forced travel, informal detention centers, and other extralegal forms of intimidation are standard moves in the repertoire of repression (Davenport 2007; Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003). In anticipating focal events, we should expect regimes to rely more on informal repression, as such tactics can be used more flexibly through the passage of the sensitive date. Compared to the formal arrest and trial process, informal

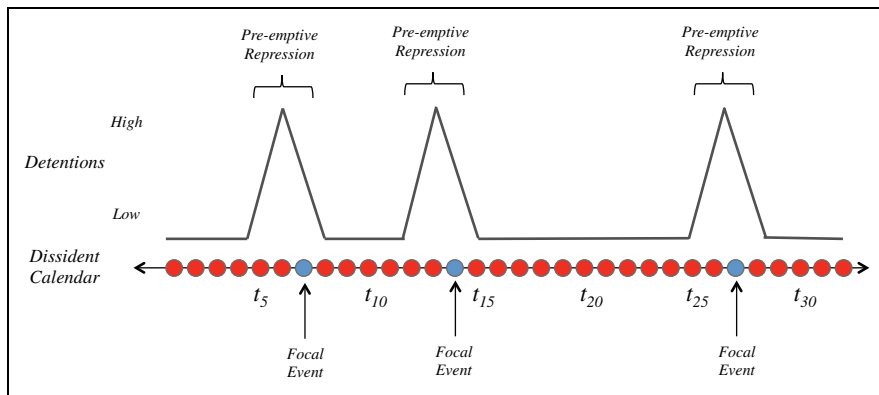


Figure 1. Theory summary.

repression is also lower profile and reduces the risk of engendering a popular backlash (Francisco 1996; Rasler 1996; Sullivan 2016). Individuals need not actually commit a crime to be detained informally.

This strategy also has the effect of reducing the average duration of detentions during focal events:

Hypothesis 3 [duration]: The duration of detentions will decrease in periods shortly preceding and during focal events.

Even in authoritarian systems, individuals cannot be held in jail indefinitely without charge.¹ When informal measures are used, detention duration decreases. Of course, charges can be fabricated if necessary, but this entails a lengthy, highly visible trial process that could engender further collective action. Repression also comes with reputation costs, especially at the international level. It is easier for the regime to engage in a catch-and-release strategy with informal detentions to get through focal events. This minimizes the appearance of overt repression, while still achieving the goal of reducing prospects for collective action.

Figure 1 provides a visual summary of the core theoretical intuition, illustrating focal events and cyclical waves of preemptive repression. The remainder of this article tests these ideas in the Chinese case.

Data

Detentions Data

The term “dissident” can be used to describe anyone who actively challenges an established institution. We can further subdivide this by issue category. “Environmental dissidents” challenge status quo environmental policies, “religious dissidents” challenge the state on religious issues, “labor dissidents” seek change on

labor conditions, and so forth. My empirical focus is on China's "democratic dissidents." These are individuals who have the end goal of promoting democratization or at the very least, meaningful liberalizing political reforms. Such individuals complain about human rights abuses, demand freedom of speech and association, and call for more democratic political processes.

The analysis utilizes a time-series data set built from the information contained in the CECC-PPD. The CECC draws on a range of publicly available Chinese and English sources to identify individuals who have been detained or imprisoned in China for noncriminal reasons. The CECC-PPD draws heavily from other data collected by prominent China human rights organizations. These include the Dui Hua Foundation, the Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), Human Rights Watch, and Human Rights in China (HRC).

The core hypotheses concern when democratic dissidents are detained, and how they are treated once detained. The CECC-PPD contains a number of fields for each detainee who allow for the evaluation of these ideas, including the date of detention, formal arrest, and trial (if applicable); activist issue category; the length of sentence; current detention status; location of residence and detention; and basic demographic information. The data set also contains a short background description for each prisoner.

As of January 27, 2015—the date the full database was pulled—there were 7,820 entries in the CECC-PPD, with the first detention recorded on May 29, 1981. Most of the entries are not relevant for the democratic dissident analysis. The vast majority of records (4,030 detentions) are related to ethnic issues in some way, with Tibetan and Uyghur minorities the most common targets. Members of the Falun Gong represent another 1,367 detainees, and 44 percent of all detentions are related to religious issues. Detentions related to property (232 detentions) and environmental (119 detentions) concerns are also commonplace. Such detentions are outside the theoretical scope of the argument, as they are not expected to follow the logic of focal events and dissident calendars. For example, labor, environmental, and property right activists in China are often involved in protests about personal or localized grievances, and there is not a set of salient dates that really unites them.

Relatedly, I exclude all entries prior to 1998 (2,622 entries, 33.5 percent of the sample) in the interest of keeping comparability across the sample. China passed a major amendment to its Criminal Law in 1997, which included a revamping of sentences and political crimes. The data quality also appears worse for earlier years. I also exclude entries missing the specific month/date of detention (586 entries, 7.5 percent of the data set).

The CECC-PPD includes a coding for democracy-related ("dem") or Tiananmen-related detentions ("6,489"). This yields a total of 222 known detentions of political dissidents occurring from 1998 through the end of 2014. The individual detention entries were aggregated to the monthly level, giving a count of political dissident detentions over time, referred to as *dem.det.* This time series is shown in Figure 2. We see a large number of relatively "quiet" months, followed

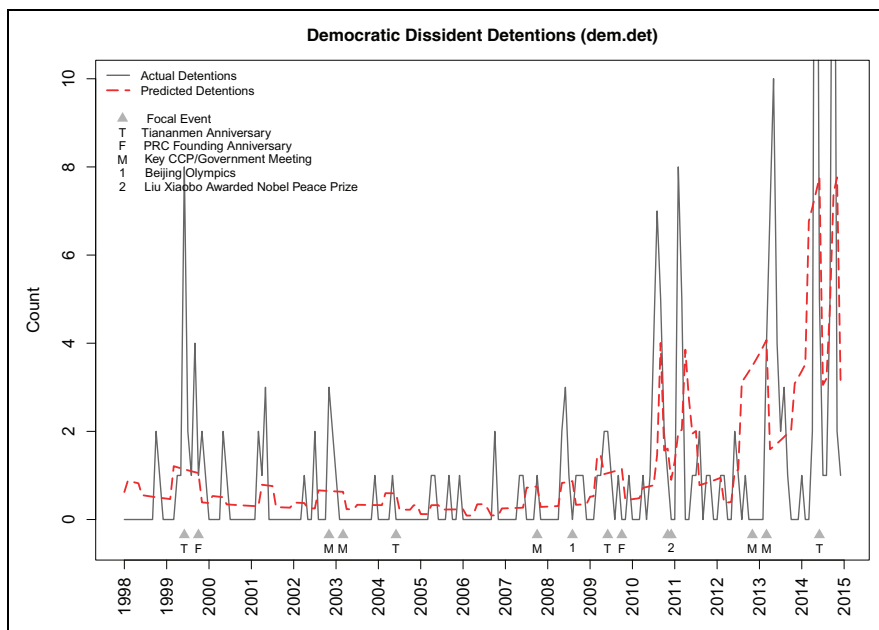


Figure 2. Predicting democratic dissident detentions in China. Figure shows total political detentions per month in China from 1998 to 2014 as they relate to key events. The dashed red line shows predicted values from the model with lowest AIC. All data drawn from the augmented CECC-PPD. AIC = Akaike information criterion, CECC-PPD = Congressional-Executive Commission on China-Political Prisoner Database.

by spikes in detentions clustered in a few brief periods. This is the core variation this article seeks to explain.

One major concern is that these exclusion filters produce a relatively narrow set of detentions (only 2.8 percent of entries in the data set are included in *dem.det*). To expand the scope of the inquiry, I analyze a second variable, *dem.det.ext*, with a broader conception of “democratic dissident.” In addition to the CECC-PPD codes for democracy-related (“dem”) or Tiananmen-related detentions (“6,489”), the *dem.det.ext* variable captures detentions related to freedom of speech (“spch”), civil society (“civil”), freedom of information (“info”), and freedom of association (“assoc”).² These filters yield an additional several hundred detentions, bringing the total to 1,102 in the analysis period (see Figure A4b in the Online Supplemental Material). I also replicate the core analysis with an event calendar and detentions for Tibetan separatists, *ethtib.det*, which captures 2,090 detentions from 1998 to 2014 (see Figure 3). In the end, the overall analysis encompasses 3,182 entries in the PPD, roughly 40.7 percent of the original data set. See Table A1 in the Online Supplemental Material for more information on the filters employed for the analysis.

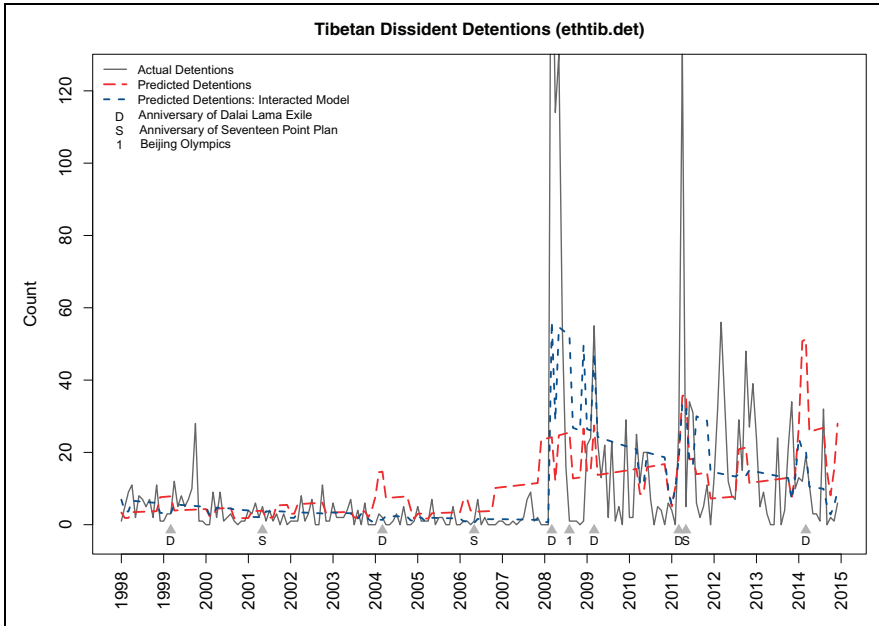


Figure 3. Predicting dissident detentions in Tibet. Figure shows total political detentions per month in China from 1998 to 2014 as they relate to key events. The dashed red line shows predicted values from the model with lowest AIC. All data drawn from the CECC-PPD. AIC = Akaike information criterion, CECC-PPD = Congressional-Executive Commission on China-Political Prisoner Database.

It is important to be forthright about the limitations of the data. The database is drawn from publicly available news sources and on-the-ground reports (from Dui Hua, CHR, and HRC), and it thus fails to capture any detention that is successfully kept out of the public view. The true number of political dissident detentions in China certainly exceeds what I am analyzing here, even when the broader variable *de.det.ext_t* is used.

To get a better sense of possible biases in the CECC-PPD, we can compare detentions it includes to those identified by a grassroots organization of Chinese human rights activists, the CHR. Beginning in 2013, CHR began collecting its own lists of activists in China who had been detained for at least five days or were tortured/inhumanely treated in some way. The CECC-PPD draws on data from CHR but does not include entries that are not able to be verified. Indeed, only about 20 percent of the CHR cases from 2014 are also included in the CECC-PPD.

The Online Supplemental Material details the results of this data validation exercise. There are three core findings. (see Figure A2 and Table A2). First, the CECC-PPD tends to do well in picking up detentions that formally enter the criminal justice system, as opposed to those where the dissident was punished through China's administrative justice system. Second, there appears to be some issue heterogeneity. The CECC-PPD

tends to include dissidents active on the democracy issue but misses out on individuals detained related to concerns over labor, property rights, or other commercial issues. Third, and most importantly, the presence of focal events does not appear to systematically increase the likelihood of a detention being identified by the CECC. The simple monthly time series of democratic detentions generated by the two organizations are also quite similar (see Figure A2 in the Online Supplemental Material).

Event Data

In terms of independent variables, the core hypothesis concerns the effect of *focal events*, which are known in advance and help dissidents coordinate their behavior.

1. focal event ($focal_t$)—an event known in advance that has high political salience for a particular dissident community.

These might include anniversaries of key historical events, national commemorations/celebrations, or high-level regime meetings. I expect the CCP regime to engage in preemptive repression in advance of these dates, yielding spikes in repression. Detentions around these dates should also be shorter and more likely to rely on informal practices rather than the criminal justice system.

There are other types of events that may also beget mobilization and repression. To the extent these are correlated with focal events, this could confound the estimates. Existing research on repression and social movements has identified four relevant classes of events:

2. leadership transition ($trans_t$)—an event signaling the formal transition of power within the regime,
3. leadership division (div_t)—an event signaling heightened division within the regime over issues of political reform; includes death/purge of key political reformers,
4. governance shock ($shock_t$)—an event signaling gross policy mismanagement or scandal, and
5. foreign revolution ($revol_t$)—an event involving mass mobilization for democracy/political reform occurring abroad.

Transitions or open division among the leadership might give dissident communities the impression that they have elite allies, in turn begetting mobilization and responsive repression (Meyer 2004). Shocks that signal poor governance—scandals, highly publicized accidents, and consumer safety issues—heighten grievances and give the population something to mobilize around (Meyer 2004; Opp 2000). Foreign revolutions can spur mobilization and repression through a demonstration and diffusion effect, as citizens in one country may be inspired by mobilization in the next (Beissinger 2002; Danneman and Ritter 2014).

One methodological issue is that in any given polity, an infinite number of events occur over a given span of time. To proceed, some finite “universe of prominent events” is necessary, along with an objective coding scheme. To this end, a list of prominent events in China from 1998 to 2014 were compiled using time lines published online from *BBC News*, China Profile, and Wikipedia (zh). Revolutions/political movements occurring abroad, as measured by the Beissinger data set, were also added. In total, 172 events were identified in this way.

Using this list, the five event types (focal events, leadership transitions, leadership division, governance shocks, and foreign revolutions) were coded by research assistants. There were a total of fourteen focal events from 1998 to 2014. Commemorations of the founding of the PRC, the major anniversaries of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the selection of key leaders at the five-year Party Congress, and even the Beijing Olympic Games fit the focal events criterion. Note that events that were not known in advance, like the death of purged reformer Zhao Ziyang or foreign revolutions like the Arab Spring, are not included in $focal_t$, as they do not operate by the same preemptive, catch-and-release logic. These events are captured in the other relevant mobilization events ($trans_t$, div_t , $shock_t$, $revol_t$) and associated variables, which encompass about thirty events in total. The full set of coded events is shown in Tables A3a and A3c in the Online Supplemental Material, along with more information on the coding scheme and replicability.

The data set uses simple dummy indicators for whether the events occurred in a given month. For the focal events, the “event window” for $focal_t$ includes the month of the event and the preceding two months. This captures the preemptive logic of repression for these dates. For governance shocks ($shock_t$), leadership division events (div_t), and foreign revolutions ($revol_t$), the default window is also three months—the month of the event and the following two months. The twelve months following the two formal leadership transitions ($trans_t$) are included in the window for these events.

Given that the windows used are somewhat arbitrary, the analysis below closely examines the sensitivity of the findings across these assumptions (Hegre and Sambanis 2006; Leamer 1985). The core findings prove robust across a range of covariate specifications and coding rules.

Analysis

Democratic Detentions Analysis

To assess the core hypothesis (Hypothesis 1) on detention patterns, I estimate different versions of the following interrupted time-series model:

$$Y_t = \alpha + \beta_1 focal_t + \gamma X_t + f(T) + \varepsilon_t. \quad (\text{ITS})$$

Here, Y_t represents our dependent variable, the total number of democratic dissident detentions in a given month t , operationalized with either $det.dem_t$

Table 1. Interrupted Time-series Estimates.

Y_t	<i>dem.det_t</i>			<i>dem.det.ext_t</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>focal_t</i>	0.736 (0.299)	1.169 (0.294)	0.913 (0.261)	0.420 (0.159)	0.577 (0.161)	0.476 (0.143)
<i>div_t</i>		-1.014 (0.601)	-0.998 (0.564)		-0.284 (0.275)	-0.522 (0.249)
<i>shcok_t</i>		-0.091 (0.491)	0.205 (0.438)		0.129 (0.254)	0.102 (0.229)
<i>revol_t</i>		0.750 (0.265)	0.369 (0.237)		0.405 (0.145)	0.280 (0.129)
<i>trans_t</i>		0.814 (0.385)	0.218 (0.362)		0.287 (0.218)	0.149 (0.204)
Window	3/12	3/12	3/12	3/12	3/12	3/12
$t + t^2 + t^3$	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>N</i>	204	204	204	204	204	204
Log likelihood	-540.2	-521.8	-485.4	-1,123.7	-1,111.8	-1,057.2
AIC	546.2	535.8	505.4	1,129.8	1,125.9	1,077.3

Note: Table shows results of regressions of *dem.det_t* and *dem.det.ext_t* on event window indicators. All models use a negative binomial specification. AIC = Akaike information criterion.

or *dem.det.ext_t*. The primary independent variable is the indicator for a month including or shortly preceding a focal event *focal_t*, and the coefficient of interest is β_1 . X_t indicates a vector of additional covariates that will be included in some specifications, the various “control events” that could beget more reactive repression (*trans_t*, *div_t*, *shock_t*, and *revol_t*). All estimates will employ a negative binomial model due to the count nature of the data. Some specifications also include a cubic function of time $f(T)$ to account for any temporal trends.

The coefficient estimates for six different models are shown in Table 1. The table explores robustness across different covariate sets and conceptions of the dependent variable. Model 1 is the simple bivariate regression of *dem.det_t* on *focal_t*, using a three-month window for *focal_t*. Model 2 includes the four different types of control events that yield reactive repression (leadership transitions, leadership divisions, governance shocks, and foreign revolutions), with the event window set to twelve months for *trans_t* and three months for *focal_t*, *div_t*, *shcok_t*, and *revol_t*. Model 3 includes temporal polynomials ($t + t^2 + t^3$). Models 4 to 6 are the equivalent but using the broader conception of democratic dissident detention, *dem.det.ext_t*, as the dependent variable.

The estimated effect of focal events on dissident detentions is both substantively and statistically significant, providing evidence in favor of Hypothesis 1. If a month precedes or includes a focal event, the expected log count of the number of

detentions increases by 0.74 to 1.17 for *dem.det* and a more modest 0.42 to 0.58 for *dem.det.ext*. In incidence rate ratio terms, this translates to about a 108 percent to 221 percent increase in the expected number of detentions (IRR ranging from 2.08 to 3.21) in a focal event month. Given that there are fourteen such events in the data set, the cumulative effect on repression is quite large.

To test the robustness of the core finding on focal events, I conduct a sensitivity analysis that probes the distribution of the coefficient estimates across different covariate sets and the two different conceptions of the dependent variable, *dem.det* and *dem.det.ext*. The sensitivity analysis includes all possible combinations of the following covariates:

- focal_t*: (event window = 2 months, 3 months, 4 months) (focal event month include/exclude) (6 options)
- div_t*: (exclude, event window = 2 months, 3 months, 4 months) (4 options)
- shock_t*: (exclude, event window = 2 months, 3 months, 4 months) (4 options)
- revol_t*: (exclude, event window = 2 months, 3 months, 4 months) (4 options)
- trans_t*: (exclude, event window = 9 months, 12 months, 15 months) (4 options)
- t*: (exclude, $t + t^2 + t^3$) (2 options)

Such “global sensitivity analyses” are recommended by Leamer and have been used in other political science papers (Hegre and Sambanis 2006; Leamer 1985). In total, 3,072 models ($6 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 2$) were estimated for each outcome variable, *dem.det* and *dem.det.ext*.

The results of the sensitivity analysis are shown in the left and center panels of Figure 4. The figure depicts the coefficient estimates and one-sided *p* values for *focal_t*, with each point representing the output of a different model. The red points signify models with a four-month window for the focal event, gray signifies three months, and blue signifies two months. The chart also shows specifications where the month of the focal event itself was not included in the event window (“focal excl”).³ The triangles indicate the models shown in Table 1, and the circle indicates the model with the lowest (“best”) value for the Akaike information criterion (AIC), a measure of statistical fit. The figure suggests that the estimates are robust to different covariate sets, time windows, and conceptions of the dependent variable. All specifications reach conventional levels of significance.

We can visually examine the predictive utility of the model to contextualize the importance of these events. Figure 2 shows the time series of dissident detentions for *dem.det*.⁴ The gray triangles indicate the fourteen focal events that prove associated with large spikes in detentions. The tenth and twenty-fifth anniversaries of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, as well as the Beijing Olympics and key CCP meetings, produce visible increases in the preceding months.

The dashed red line depicts predicted values from the model, which does appear to have some explanatory power.⁵ It picks up many of the noticeable spikes in the data, though it tends to underestimate the magnitude of those spikes. In particular,

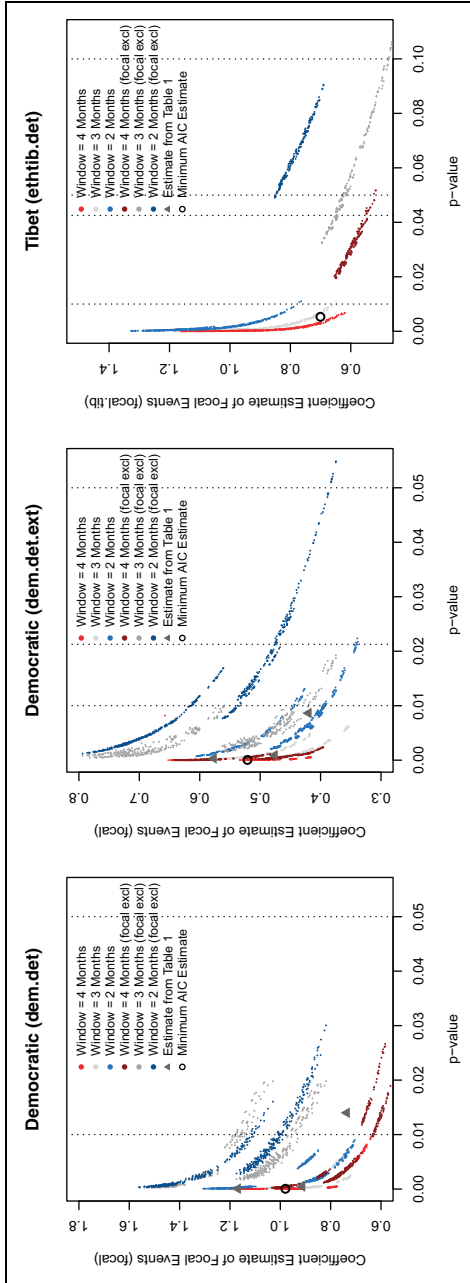


Figure 4. Results of sensitivity analysis. Figure shows results of sensitivity analysis for the coefficient estimate on $focal_t$ (for *dem.det* and *dem.det.ext*) and *focal.tib* for *ethntib.det*. Each point represents the estimate of a single model; 1,536 models were estimated in total for each conception of the dependent variable.

the Occupy Central movement in Hong Kong brought a huge surge in detentions in mainland China.⁶ This event is captured as a “foreign revolution” but clearly entails a greater threat to the regime than some of the other protests/revolutions in this category. Future extensions of this sort of analysis might find it fruitful to disaggregate external events into different subcategories (Danneman and Ritter 2014).

Overall, there were 222 publicly observable detentions of democratic dissidents in China from 1998 to 2014 using the narrow definition *dem.det*. The model predicts about 223 detentions using the true covariate values, as depicted by the dashed red line. If we had observed no foreign revolutions ($revolt_t = 0$ throughout), we would expect to have observed about 194 detentions over this period. If there had been no focal events ($focal_t = 0$ throughout), we would expect to have observed about 150 detentions over this period, a decrease of about 32 percent. If there were neither foreign revolutions nor focal events ($revolt_t = 0$ and $focal_t = 0$ throughout), the expected number of detentions is about 125. These two types of events alone seem to be associated with about 40 percent to 45 percent of democratic dissident detentions in China during this period.

Replicating the analysis using the broader definition of democratic dissident *dem.det.ext* produces percentages of smaller magnitude (see Figure A4b in the Online Supplemental Material). The model predicts about 1,112 detentions using true covariate values. This number goes down to about 906 simulating the outcome had there been no focal events ($focal_t = 0$ throughout), and 836 had there been no focal events nor foreign revolutions ($revolt_t = 0$ and $focal_t = 0$ throughout). These represent decreases of 19 percent and 25 percent, respectively.

Tibet Detentions Extension

This article focuses on China’s democratic dissidents, but one key idea is that the set of focal events may vary from group to group. Focal events are socially constructed, dependent on local history and culture. Thus, within a given polity, different dissident calendars are likely operating at the same time, producing separate cycles of preemptive repression.

To test this idea, and further evaluate the detention hypothesis, we can look at patterns in the treatment of Tibetan dissidents (*ethtib.det*). The Tibetan independence movement, personified abroad by the Dalai Lama, poses a threat to the CCP distinct from the broader countrywide democracy movement. In recent years, the Chinese government has taken an increasingly repressive stance in the region, routinely detaining Tibetan activists and citizens less directly involved in the independence movement. Figure 3 illustrates this variation over time using detentions documented in the CECC-PPD. There were 2,090 detentions of Tibetans in the data set from 1998 through 2014.⁷

As before, publicly available time lines were used to create a list of prominent events, and focal events were identified within this list. Table A3c in the Online Supplemental Material shows the set of events used for the Tibet extension. Two

historical events are clear focal points and create cyclical opportunities for coordination. The first is the beginning of the Dalai Lama's formal exile from Tibet on March 31, 1959, in response to growing pressure from the CCP. The second is the signing of the Seventeen-point Plan (the "Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet") on May 23, 1951, which established CCP control over the region. In Tibet, the dates May 23 and March 31 carry the same significance as June 4 (the Tiananmen anniversary) does for China's democratic dissidents. The five-year anniversaries of these dates are natural focal events.

The data suggest that such dates produce similar surges in preemptive repression in Tibet. The third panel of Figure 4 above shows a sensitivity analysis for the coefficient estimate on $focal.tib_t$, the set of focal events in the Tibetan dissident calendar.⁸ Overall, we see a fairly robust relationship. The substantive and predictive importance of these events is roughly on par with that found in the analysis of democratic detentions. The model predicts about 2,050 detentions using the true covariate values, as depicted by the dashed red line in Figure 3. If there had been no focal events ($focal.tib_t = 0$ throughout), we would expect to have observed about 1,701 detentions over this period, a decrease of about 17 percent.

Looking more closely at Figure 3, we can see that the original specification fails to capture an important dynamic in the data, which repression and detentions in Tibet increased systematically following the March 2008 riots. These protests were themselves triggered in part by two focal events—the upcoming Beijing Olympics and the forty-ninth Anniversary of the Dalai Lama's exile. The dashed blue line in Figure 3 shows predictive values from an alternative specification, which includes an indicator for the month being after this unrest ($unrest.tib$) as well an interaction between this variable and $focal.tib_t$. This model outperforms those without the interaction term, suggesting that the effect of focal events was stronger after the 2008 protests, and much more muted in the previous decade. This specification attributes about 15.5 percent of the detentions (317/2,036) to focal events and does a better job fitting the data visually.

Duration and Process Extension

The theory also predicts that detentions will take on a different nature during and before focal events, as the regime is trying to simply pass through the sensitive date with minimal attention. Preemptive repression should take on a catch-and-release dynamic. Dissidents should be detained for shorter periods of time and without a lengthy and visible criminal charge, trial, sentencing, and appeal process.

To test the process (Hypothesis 2) and duration (Hypothesis 3) hypotheses, we can consider the data on a detention level, which is how the data set is originally organized. For most entries, the CECC-PPD contains information on the detainee's legal process and approximate time spent incarcerated. The first dependent variable of interest, $det.charge_i$, is an indicator for the detainee having formally received a criminal charge. About 45 percent of democratic detentions in the data set have a

Table 2. Effect of Focal Events on Process and Duration.

Model #	Covariates	<i>det.charge</i>		<i>det.short</i>	
		Logit	LPM	Logit	LPM
Model 1	None	-.558 (.118)	-.132 (.027)	.693 (.133)	.135 (.025)
Model 2	Model 1 + <i>det.prov</i> _{<i>i</i>}	-.630 (.136)	-.122 (.026)	.751 (.158)	.121 (.024)
Model 3	Model 2 + <i>occupation1</i> : 7; + <i>religion1</i> : 4; _{<i>i</i>}	-.730 (.148)	-.121 (.025)	.805 (.169)	.125 (.023)

Note: Table shows results of regressions of *det.charge*_{*i*} and *det.short*_{*i*} on *focal*_{*i*}. The table explores robustness across three different covariate sets and two models, the logit and linear probability model. Data are at the detention level using the *dem.det.ext* criterion and the three-month window for focal events. Robust standard errors are shown in parentheses. LPM = linear probability model.

formal criminal charge attached. The rest are held without charge (about 35 percent) or sentenced through the administrative detention system (about 20 percent), both of which can be done in China with little to no judicial oversight.

The second dependent variable of note, related closely to the first, is whether the detainee was held for a short period of time. The data quality is insufficient to reliably code the exact length of time served, but it is possible to use fields in the data set to differentiate detainees who were released relatively quickly and those that spent considerable amounts of time in jail. The variable *det.short* is an indicator for the length of detention being less than thirty days. Among the 1,102 democratic detainees in the data set (using *dem.det.ext*), 221 (about 20 percent) were held for less than thirty days, 725 (about 66 percent) were held for more than thirty days, and the remaining 156 (about 14 percent) were not able to be reliably coded either way.

Table 2 reports the results of regressions of these two binary outcome variables on *focal*_{*i*} using the 1,102 democratic detentions (extended definition *det.dem.ext* = 1) in the CECC-PPD data set. For ease of interpretation, the table reports estimates from both a logit and linear probability specification. Each cell represents a single regression, showing the coefficient on *focal*_{*i*}, the indicator for whether the individual was detained prior to a focal event. The table shows twelve models in total. Model 1 refers to the bivariate specification, model 2 includes fixed effects for the province of detention, and model 3 includes indicators for the detainee's occupation and religion, if available.⁹

Overall, these data provide evidence in favor of the duration and process hypotheses, and the estimates are relatively stable across specifications. In expectation, Chinese citizens who were detained during or preceding focal events are about 12 percent to 13 percent less likely to receive a formal charge in the criminal justice system, and 12 percent to 13 percent more likely to spend less than thirty days in government custody. Repression appears to take on a different character in advance of focal events.

Conclusion

This article has argued that patterns of preemptive repression are driven by the dissident calendar—the set of focal events dissidents naturally use to overcome their coordination problem. Authoritarian regimes, or at least China’s CCP, anticipate these events and repress accordingly, detaining dissidents in greater numbers but for shorter periods of time and without formal criminal charges. Overall, this catch-and-release dynamic allows the regime to get through sensitive dates with minimal popular agitation.

Future research can explore why citizens within a given system experience variation in repression (Davenport 2014; Earl, Soule, and McCarthy 2003; Sullivan 2015). Why are some dissidents detained for years and others for days? Why are some individuals tortured and others left unharmed? This article has investigated the explanatory power of focal events and probes the importance of opposition demands, but there are potentially dozens of other relevant theoretical variables that have yet to be explored. Outcomes might be driven by a dissident’s ethnicity, her proclivity to divulge information, the career incentives of her local officials, or her position within the dissident network, among other factors. Tests of this nature will require richer information than available in the CECC-PPD, but such analyses are certainly within reach.

Author’s Note

All data and replication files are available at <http://www.rorytruex.com/publications>. [This version: WedMar 28 15:18:01 2018].

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In the Chinese legal system, for example, individuals cannot be detained for more than thirty days without a formal arrest and criminal charge (Criminal Procedure Law of the People's Republic of China, Art. 89).
2. I exclude detentions related to the Falun Gong and Tibetan and Uyghur minorities from the democratic dissident analysis, as these groups may operate by a different calendar of focal events.
3. This set of specifications accounts for the possibility that including the focal event month might also capture some detentions that occur after the focal event itself, which would no longer be considered preemptive in nature. Ideally, the analysis could be conducted at a lower level of aggregation (week or day), but a substantial number of entries in the Congressional-Executive Commission on China-Political Prisoner Database (CECC-PPD) are missing this information.
4. Figure A4b in the Online Supplemental Material shows the equivalent analysis for *dem.det.ext.*
5. Throughout this exercise, I utilize the model from the sensitivity analysis that had the minimum Akaike information criterion. The covariates for this model include *focal_t* (window = 4 months), *revol_t* (window = 3 months), *div_t* (window = 3 months), and $t + t^2 + t^3$.
6. All detentions in Hong Kong are excluded from the data set.
7. Note that these detentions were not included in the previous analysis because they were considered ethnic ("eth") or religious ("rel") detentions by the CECC, not democracy related ("dem") or Tiananmen related ("6,849").
8. Models representing all combinations of the following variables were used: *focal.tib_t*: (event window = 2 months, 3 months, 4 months), *focal_t*: (exclude, event window = 2 months, 3 months, 4 months), *revol_t*: (exclude, event window = 2 months, 3 months, 4 months), *trans_t*: (exclude, event window = 9 months, 12 months, 15 months), *trans.tib_t*: (exclude, event window = 9 months, 12 months, 15 months), and t : (exclude, $t + t^2 + t^3$). The *div_t* and *shock_t* events were excluded because they are not relevant to the Tibetan context.
9. Table A4 in the Online Supplemental Material shows the same regressions using the *focal_i* measure that excludes the month of the focal event from the event window.

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