



European Research Council
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Demand for Democracy

Berichterstattung

Projektinformationen

DemandDemoc

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[Projektwebsite](#) 

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Germany

Dieses Projekt findet Erwähnung in ...



Herausforderungen für die Demokratie in Europa: Einblicke in ein komplexes und turbulentes politisches Klima

Periodic Reporting for period 4 - DemandDemoc (Demand for Democracy)

Berichtszeitraum: 2021-09-01 bis 2022-12-31

Zusammenfassung vom Kontext und den Gesamtzielen des Projekts



Our research agenda has set out to understand the dynamics of political protests in a "partly free" society: how do individuals mobilize to protest for democratization, what are their backgrounds, what is the role of beliefs and social interactions? We have studied this in the context of Hong Kong during a historical critical juncture. At the beginning of our study in 2017, Hong Kong was a vibrant civil society with a visible tension between civil rights (Western-style legal standards and protection of fundamental rights) and political rights (only very limited say in electing political leaders and determining public affairs). Within this tension, citizens of Hong Kong were free to express their desire for more political and democratic participation, and repeatedly did so in pro-democracy marches every year on July 1st, to remind their rulers of the unfulfilled promises of democratic participation in the Basic Law, Hong Kong's constitution. By the end of the study in 2022, Hong Kong had become fully controlled by the Communist Party of China, with no remnant of civil rights, due legal protection, and hope for democratic political participation.

The objective of our project was to document the factors driving a process of democratization in the making, and to provide evidence of causal mechanisms at work. Such findings speak to economists and political scientists alike, as well as to a broader literature on democratization and political movements in social sciences. The methods that we developed can be applied by other researchers to different contexts, and contribute to the public debate about political change in East Asia.

Arbeit, die ab Beginn des Projekts bis zum Ende des durch den Bericht erfassten Berichtszeitraums geleistet wurde, und die wichtigsten bis dahin erzielten Ergebnisse



The ERC grant, starting in 2017, has allowed us to conduct surveys with a large number of students every year, both before and after the pro-democracy marches on July 1st, from 2017 until 2019.

First, we aimed to obtain a full and comprehensive picture of the social, economic, and ideological background of politically active students, and to understand how these traits and beliefs map into pro-democratic activism. We elicited preferences (providing cover in case students would not respond truthfully to open questions), beliefs, and second-order beliefs (beliefs about others' beliefs and preferences). We measured classic psychological preferences ("big 5 traits") and economic preferences (such as time discounting, risk aversion, reciprocity, inequality aversion). The panel survey has allowed us to investigate these traits in every yearly round of interviews on a broad number of students (~2000), from 2016 (a pilot wave that was conducted with seed funding) through 2017 and 2018 until 2019.

This data collection has resulted in a publication ("The Fundamental Determinants of Protest Participation", *Journal of Public Economics* 2022), in which we compare how the relationships between fundamental economic preferences and activism have changed as the nature and size of the protests changes through time, from the small protests of 2016-2018 to the large-scale ones of 2019. We document how the distribution of fundamental preferences is stable through time and very similar between university students and the broader population, while their relationship with protest participation increases in magnitude in 2019 (suggesting that the overall composition of participants did not change).

Second, we aimed at better understanding the role of information, especially about peers' beliefs and their potential participation in political actions, on one's own political activities. We embedded an experimental component in the regularly scheduled yearly surveys. In a first experiment, we have provided (a random subset of) students information about their peers' plans to attend the upcoming protest march. This allows us to understand whether one's own participation in a movement is a complement or a substitute to other people's participation. Our results point toward a "game" of substitutes, in which students reduce their participation when informed that the planned participation is higher than they expected (and vice versa). The results from this experiment have been published in "Protests as Strategic Games" (*Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2019).

In the second experiment, we have studied the drivers of sustained political participation — a particularly salient question in the Hong Kong context, with repeated marches every year (this was eventually published as "Persistent Political Engagement" in the *American Economic Review: Insights*). We have provided students with an indirect monetary incentive, increasing the likelihood to attend the protest march in 2017. We found that this (marginal) incentive did not change students' beliefs and political attitudes. However, one year later, we noticed a higher participation in the political march among the students who received the incentive one year prior. This points to the crucial role of social interactions (making new, politically engaged friends) in determining political activism.

To conclude, we are currently working on two projects (the data collection and analysis has taken place, we are finalizing the write-up). First, using our survey data from Hong Kong and data that we

previously collected in Beijing in 2013, we aim to study the selection of elites especially with regard to their background and their preferences, and how students in mainland China and in Hong Kong differ with regards to the broader population in this respect. Second, we have been invited to write a review article about the economics of protest participation, drawing from our findings in the Hong Kong context.

Our research has been received and disseminated widely. Besides resulting in three, high-profile publications, it has been presented, by either me or my coauthors, in 88 seminars, workshops, or conferences, and has been featured in three broad keynote lectures. It has also been featured in several (mostly Hong Kong-based) news articles, and has inspired a number of follow-up papers adapting the methodology to other contexts. We have organized two high-profile workshops on these topics, one in 2018 (on "Understanding the Demand for Democracy") and one in 2022 (on "Studying Critical Junctures in Real Time").

Fortschritte, die über den aktuellen Stand der Technik hinausgehen und voraussichtliche potenzielle Auswirkungen (einschließlich der bis dato erzielten sozioökonomischen Auswirkungen und weiter gefassten gesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen des Projekts)

Our research aims at advancing our understanding of political dynamics in societies with limited political participation. In our papers, we have tried to bring together economics, political science, and more broadly the psychological and sociological study of social movements. In our research of the role of preferences and beliefs among politically engaged students, we bring, for the first time, both psychological traits and economic preferences to the study of political activism. Our research is also novel in its consistent focus on the role of second order beliefs and how they determine political action, both descriptively and in an experimental setting. Our finding of "substitutability" in political activism (people reduce their own activity if told that other people are more politically active than expected) contrasts with a theoretical political economy literature that usually assumes complementarity, and poses new challenges to our understanding of the dynamics of political movements. We expect our research to produce further insights into these topics, especially on the role of social dynamics and the varying effects of beliefs over the political cycle of protest.



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