

The Temporal Logic of Repression in China: A Political Calendar Approach

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Abstract

Existing research explains repression as a function of largely invariant system-level factors: democracy, international treaties and trade agreements, civil society, domestic legal provisions, and many others. These theories fail to explain wide swings in detentions and other human rights abuses that occur within societies in short periods of time. Why and when do we observe government crackdowns on political dissidents? This paper argues that detentions exhibit predictable, often cyclical patterns that correspond with a country's "political calendar"—the national events that dictate the rhythm of political and social life. An analysis of dissident detentions in China from 1998 to 2014 shows that evidence that the regime anticipates shifts in the political opportunity structure and represses accordingly. Coordination events like key historical anniversaries or regime meetings bring significant spikes in detentions.

Repression, detention, dissidents, authoritarianism, collective action, contentious politics, human rights, China, political calendar approach

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Introduction

On January 26, 2014, prominent Chinese rights activist Xu Zhiyong was sentenced to four years in prison on the grounds of “assembling a crowd to disturb public order.” Xu is the founder of the New Citizens’ Movement, a quasi-underground group that aims to strengthen the rule of law and promote political reform in China. Shortly after Xi Jinping gained power in November 2012, Xu and his followers ramped up their call for anti-corruption reforms, demanding an asset transparency system at higher levels of government. Many took part in small demonstrations. Xu was quickly reprimanded—house arrest in April 2013, detention on July 16th, and arrest on August 22nd. Several other participants were also detained and face lengthy prison sentences (“New Citizens” 2014). Xi Jinping, once heralded a political liberal by many observers (Kristof 2013), was quickly re-labeled a “hardliner” and “more Maoist than reformer” (“China: Nationwide Arrests” 2013; Demick 2013).

This type of repression is ubiquitous in authoritarian systems. The Cuban government imprisoned 75 dissidents on grounds of espionage during what became known as the “Black Spring” of 2003. Their modal sentence was 20 years in prison (Lauria et al. 2008). In November 2012, Bahrain’s Sunni monarchy revoked the citizenship of 31 political activists and opposition members, include some members of parliament (Fahim 2012). Thirteen peaceful Catholic activists in Vietnam received heavy prison sentences in 2013 on charges undertaking “activities aimed at overthrowing” the government. They were purportedly involved with Viet Tan, an overseas reformist group (“Vietnam: Release” 2013).

A number of existing studies document dissident activity (see Kowalewski & Johnson 1987; Opp & Gern 1993; Siqueira 2005; Bond 2003; Goldman 1999; Ma 1993; Roasa 2010; Barraclough 1985) but fail to explore temporal variation in government repression. Why

and when do we observe government crackdowns on dissident behavior? More broadly, what drives governments to commit human rights abuses when they do?

An extensive cross-national literature explains repression as a function of system-level factors. Respect for human rights proves positively associated with democracy (Poe & Tate 2004; Davenport & Armstrong 2004; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2005; Davenport 2007b); certain domestic legal institutions (Cross 1999; Davenport 1996; Keith, Tate, and Poe 2009; Mitchell, Ring & Spellman 2013; Powell & Staton 2009; Cingranelli & Filippov 2010); the absence of “youth bulges” and a smaller population (Gleditsch 2002; Nordas & Davenport 2013); and NGO/INGO presence (Franklin 2008; Hafner-Burton 2008; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui 2005; Murdie & Davis 2012), among many others (Hill & Jones 2014).¹ The effects of international influences, like preferential trade agreements (Hafner-Burton 2005), “naming and shaming” (Hafner-Burton 2008; Franklin 2008; Murdie & Davis 2012), and UN treaty ratification (Hathaway 2002; Hill 2010; Keith 1999; Neumayer 2005; Simmons 2009) prove more muddled, although there is evidence that global respect for human rights has increased with the rise of these institutions (Fariss 2014).

These theories do well to explain differences in repression levels across countries, but fail to explain wide swings in detentions and other human rights abuses that occur within countries in short periods of time. This may be in part because of data limitations. The two common measures—the CIRI “Physical Integrity Index” (Cingranelli & Richards 1999, 2012) and the “Political Terror Scale” (PTS) (Gibney et al. 2009; Wood & Gibney 2010)—use Amnesty International and U.S. State Department reports of political imprisonment, torture, executions, etc. to create ordinal measures of repression. These indices, while a major contribution in themselves, lack precision because they are aggregated to the country-

¹See Hill & Jones for an excellent “tour of the literature.”

year and rely on relatively crude standards-based scales (Davenport 2007a). On the PTS, China has earned a rating of “4 - Civil and political rights violations have expanded to large numbers of the population” every year since 2000, despite drastic swings in documented detentions and other abuses during this period.

In this paper, I develop and test a theory that explains temporal variation in repression as a function of a country’s political calendar. I turn the focus to events— historical anniversaries, government meetings, leadership transitions, foreign social movements— rather than the standard set of structural country-level covariates. The core idea is that certain events produce shifts in dissidents’ cost-benefit calculus, and a regime will engage in both preemptive and reactive repression to silence this dissent.² Dissidents react to events that heighten the possibility for mobilization, visibility, and accommodation. In turn, detentions exhibit predictable, often cyclical patterns that correspond closely with the political calendar.

A unique event-level dataset of political prisoners in China to test these ideas. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China maintains a Political Prisoner Database (CECC-PPD) that contains a list of known individuals that have been detained in China for political reasons. This data was cleaned and augmented to create an index of monthly “democracy related” detentions from 1998 to 2014, which allows us to see and explain temporal variation in government crackdowns. There were 146 of these detentions in total over this period. A simple interrupted time series analysis shows that repression is indeed a predictable function of the mobilization, visibility, and accommodation events. Detentions show cyclical patterns, coinciding with the five-year anniversaries of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and founding of the PRC, and ten-year leadership transitions. These cycles are punctuated by shocks like

²This framework builds off the concept of “political opportunity structure” in social movement theory (Beissinger 2002; Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978, 1995; Tarrow 2011; Tilly & Tarrow 2007; McAdam et al. 2001).

the August 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2011 Arab Spring Movement. Such events produce special mobilization and visibility opportunities for dissidents, and special threats to regime stability.

This paper aims to make two empirical and theoretical contributions to existing research on human rights and authoritarian politics. It presents the first attempt to quantify and explain temporal variation in dissident detentions in China, joining other studies that take a micro-level approach to studying repression and human rights (Davenport 2005; Fielding and Shortland 2010; Francisco 1995, 1996; Moore 1995, 1998; Rasler 1996; Shellman 2006). In the Chinese politics literature, researchers have rightly devoted considerable attention to explaining the nature of petitions, protests, and other forms of collective action (see Perry 2002; O'Brien 1996; Hurst & O'Brien 2002; Cai 2004; O'Brien & Li 2005, 2006; Mertha 2008; Lorentzen 2013; Chen 2014). Many of these activities are targeted at localized or personal grievances— poor working conditions, low-level corruption, land compensation— and do not present a direct challenge to the regime itself. Some China scholars now contend that such routinized contestation has actually enhanced the resilience of the CCP regime (O'Brien 1996; Lorentzen 2013; Chen 2014). In contrast, political dissidents push directly for political reform, and unraveling detention patterns can give us broader clues about the nature of regime stability for this crucial case. The detentions data could also be used to construct a measure of unrest at the provincial level over time, a measure that is currently missing given the regime's reluctance to report on mass incidents.

Theoretically, the innovation is to explain temporal variation in repression as a function of a country's "political calendar." Many frameworks for understanding authoritarian politics implicitly acknowledge that events matter, and can potentially unleash latent grievances in the

population to produce collective action (Kuran 1991; Beissinger 2002; Boix 2003, Acemoglu & Robinson 2006, Svobik 2012; Tilly & Tarrow 2007; McAdam et al. 2001).³ Nevertheless, events have yet to be seriously considered as a theoretical concept of interest in the human rights literature, nor has there been much empirical work that codes events as variables of interest (Beissinger 2002).⁴ The analysis here shows that the “political calendar approach” has significant explanatory power for predicting dissident detentions within China over time, and it likely has similar applicability to other authoritarian systems.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The first section defines key terms and outlines hypotheses relating events to dissident detentions. After describing the data collection for the project, I summarize the research design and present the quantitative analysis. I then offer a brief case study of repression during Xi Jinping’s early tenure to illustrate the link between regime transitions and repression. The paper concludes with a note on avenues for future research.

Concepts and Theoretical Framework

H_1 [mobilization]: Dissident detentions will increase in periods preceding and during known mobilizing events, and during unexpected mobilizing events.

H_2 [mobilization]: Dissident detentions will be shorter in advance of known mobilization events, and longer during unexpected mobilization events.

Existing research on repression and human rights abuses often focuses on the cost-benefit calculus of the regime to generate hypotheses. Factors that increase the net costs of

³In the frameworks of Boix (2003), Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), or Svobik (2012), such moments correspond to instances where the exogenous probability of revolutionary success (often depicted π) is high.

⁴Beissinger (2002) treatment of nationalist mobilization stands a notable example of event-based analysis, and it treats events both as effects and causes in and of themselves. Although his analysis focuses on large-scale protests, not repression per se, it also identifies a cyclical pattern to contention.

repression– like international treaties (Hathaway 2002; Hill 2010; Keith 1999; Neumayer 2005; Simmons 2009), preferential trade agreements, muckraking NGOs (Franklin 2008; Hafner-Burton 2008; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui 2005; Murdie & Davis 2012) or democracy itself (Poe & Tate 2004; Davenport & Armstrong 2004; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2005; Davenport 2007b)– are expected to reduce abuses.

The framework here brings in the other half of the story. To predict temporal variation in political dissident detentions, we need to understand the “supply” of dissent, as well as the regime’s decision calculus. New game theoretic research models the interactions between dissidents and the governments they oppose (Pierskalla 2010; Ritter 2013; Shadmehr 2014). Crackdowns occur at the intersection of these two decisions, in moments when the expected benefits to both dissent and punishment are high.⁵

The term dissident can be used to describe anyone who actively challenges an established institution. For the purposes of this paper, I define political dissidents as any individuals who aim to promote political reform in an authoritarian society through public criticism. Dissidents are ideological extremists, individuals with such antipathy for authoritarianism that they are willing to speak out even in the face of imminent persecution (Kuran 1991). The end goal is to promote democratization or at the very least, meaningful reform in this direction.

Dissidents face a decision of whether to voice criticism and promote reform, or to remain reticent and tolerate the status quo. We can think of the dissidents’ expected benefits as related to three factors: the *mobilization* potential of the broader population, the *visibility*

⁵Empirically, so many studies have demonstrated the empirical link between dissent and repression that Davenport has termed the relationship “The Law of Coercive Responsiveness” (Davenport 2005, 2007; Fielding & Shortland 2010; Francisco 1995, 1996; Moore 1995, 1998; Rasler 1996; Shellman 2006; Davenport 2007). Formal models have begun to take this relationship as an assumption (Ritter 2013).

of their criticism, and the likelihood of *accommodation* among the regime. Dissidents will be more likely to act when the broader population seems primed for collective action, when there is increased visibility, and when it appears that leadership might be willing to listen. Social movement theory identifies these sorts of factors as core to the “political opportunity structure,” and shifts to that structure will produce shifts in dissident behavior (see Eisinger 1973; Tilly 1978, 1995; Tarrow 2011; Tilly & Tarrow 2007; McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001).

The goal will be to generate new hypotheses by exploring how specific recurring event types— the “political calendar”— affect the dissident’s calculus and in turn, the likelihood of repression. I consider three categories: mobilization events, visibility events, and leadership transitions.

Mobilization events— anniversaries of key historical moments, deaths of noted reformers, news of foreign revolutions, governance shocks, and so forth— can heighten the public’s relative preference for democracy or activate shared grievances (Beissinger 2002; Boix 2003; Acemoglu & Robinson 2006; Svulik 2012). Because dissidents often aim to mobilize the broader population, the benefits to dissent are higher at these critical junctures. Dissidents may calculate that appropriately-timed criticism can push the public towards collective action.

For its part, the authoritarian regime will use detentions and other violations of physical integrity rights to prevent this type mobilization.⁶ If the mobilization event is known in advance, the regime may seek to prevent dissent through pre-emptive detentions. When such events come by surprise, it will react quickly to repress dissidents and eliminate prospects for collective action. In this way, mobilization events of any type should also reliably predict

⁶Note that there is some debate as to whether repression might actually engender further mobilization (see Shadmehr 2014; Pierskalla 2010; Moore 1998). In my view, the sorts of detentions studied here are relatively well-contained in Chinese society, so this sort of small scale repression generally does not have a countervailing mobilizing effect.

dissident detentions, although the precise timing will depend on whether the event is known or unexpected. This “mobilization hypothesis” is articulated formally below.

H_1 [mobilization]: Dissident detentions will increase in periods preceding and during known mobilizing events, and during unexpected mobilizing events.

Visibility events do not involve a shared grievance, per se, but offer dissidents a platform for airing their concerns. International summits and sporting events present dissidents an opportunity to magnify their voices, as do highly publicized government meetings. Media coverage of these events enables dissidents to broadcast their ideals, embarrass the regime, and push for political reform.

Regimes must tread lightly during visibility events, as public repression would only validate dissidents and could sour public opinion at home and abroad. For this reason, I expect heightened repression in advance of these moments on the political calendar, but not during.

H_2 : [visibility] Dissident detentions will increase in periods preceding visibility events.

Finally, *leadership transitions* shift dissidents’ perceived likelihood of accommodation. During transitions, there is often a general air of uncertainty about the political leanings of new leadership. While most new authoritarian leaders prove to be hardliners, there is always the possibility they are democrats in disguise.⁷ This uncertainty may lead to excessive optimism, and engender provocative behavior among dissident groups as they “test the waters” (Pierskala 2010).⁸

⁷As Kuran (1991) notes, “A Politburo member distancing himself from the Party leader does more to expose the regime’s vulnerability than a green-grocer who stops displaying the obligatory Marxist slogan.”

⁸In Pierskala’s (2010) framework, the opposition lacks information over the strength of the government, producing a similar repressive dynamic.

If new leaders are indeed sympathetic—albeit rarely the case—this dissent will go unpunished and could facilitate reform. If they are less sympathetic—as is usually the case—they will be forced to crackdown to prevent dissident activity from spiraling out of control. This sends a strong signal about their preferences, resolves any lingering uncertainty, and reduces the expected benefit of dissent for the remainder of their leadership period. This uncertainty-signaling dynamic should produce predictable dissident crackdowns around these events.

*H*₃: [accommodation] Dissident detentions will increase in periods following leadership transitions.

The remainder of the paper will be dedicated to testing these hypotheses with quantitative data from the Chinese case, as well as validating the dynamics of the accommodation hypothesis through a short case study of the Hu-Xi transition.

Data and Research Design

I rely on a time series dataset built from information contained in the Congressional-Executive Commission on China's (CECC) Political Prisoner Database (PPD). The CECC draws on a range publicly available Chinese and English sources to identify individuals that have been detained or imprisoned in China for non-criminal reasons. The PPD includes fields for: 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 also contains a short background description for each prisoner. An example description is shown below:

Lu Gengsong

According to Chinese Human Rights Defenders, the Hangzhou City Intermediate People's Court on February 5, 2008, sentenced freelance writer and China Democracy member Lu Gengsong to four years in prison for "inciting subversion of state power," a crime under Article 105 of the Criminal Law. Before the sentencing, some of Lu's supporters were placed under house arrest. On April 7, the Zhejiang Provincial High People's Court affirmed the decision. Police in Hangzhou detained Lu on August 24, 2007, and formally arrested him on September 29. They said Lu had written articles "attacking the Communist Party." Lu frequently posted articles on the Internet about official corruption and reportedly exposed collusion between local officials and real estate developers. In the days before his detention, Lu reported on the psychiatric confinement of the activist He Weihua and attended the trial of another activist, Yang Yunbiao. On August 23, 2011, Lu completed his sentence and was released from the Hangzhou Xijiao Prison.

As of June 30, 2014— the date the full database was pulled— there were 7593 entries in the PPD, with the first detention recorded on May 29, 1981.

Many detentions are related to multiple issues, so the total number of detainee-issues exceeds the number of detentions. About 52% of detentions (3995 detentions) were related to ethnicity in some way, with Tibetan and Uyghur minorities the most common targets. Members of the Falungong comprised another 1332 detainees, and 45% of all detentions were related to religious issues. Detentions related to property (217 detentions) and environmental (107 detentions) concerns are also commonplace.

The focus of this analysis will be on political dissidents actively promoting democratic reform. The PPD includes a coding for democracy-related detentions, with 474 falling under this categorization. I exclude any observations missing the precise month of the detention, as well as any detentions falling prior to 1998.⁹ This leaves a total of 146 democratic dissident detentions with full data distributed across the months from January 1998 through June 2014. The individual detention data were aggregated to the monthly level, giving a count of

⁹China passed a major amendment to its Criminal Law in 1997 which included a revamping of sentences and political crimes. I exclude all entries prior to 1998 in the interest of keeping comparability across the sample. The data quality in early years is also suspect.

political dissident detentions over time.¹⁰

In terms of independent variables, the theoretical framework suggests we should consider three types of events that have different implications for dissident activity— mobilization events (both known and unexpected), visibility events, and leadership transitions. The full set of coded events is shown in Table 1 below. During the analysis period, we see two formal regime transitions— from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao in November 2002, and from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in November 2012. I consider the five-year anniversaries of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and founding of the PRC to be known mobilization events. The most significant unexpected mobilization event occurred during the Arab Spring Movement, which reached its peak from January to March in 2011. I also consider the death of reformer Zhao Ziyang in January 2005 to be in this category. Visibility events include the five year CCP Party Congresses, and annual the “Two Meetings” of the National People’s Congress and Chinese People’s Political Consultative Congress each March. Notable international events, like the 2008 Beijing Olympics or 2004 Asian Cup, also fall under this heading.

[Table 1 About Here]

I created simple dummy indicators for whether these events occurred in a given month in our dataset. Because dissident activity and detentions do not generally occur instantaneously, the twelve months following the formal CCP power handover were coded as part of the transition event. For known mobilization events, like the anniversaries of the June 4th

¹⁰Note that this definition excludes citizens seeking change in other issue areas, like labor rights, freedom religion, or environmental protection. It also excludes citizens seeking redress for personal grievances. In China, such individuals are frequently detained, but they do not fall under the scope of the argument here. It also excludes violent rebel or oppositional groups (Fielding & Shortland 2010; Shellman 2006; Shellman et al. 2013); I am focused on explaining variation in the proactive repression of individuals seeking to spur political change through criticism, activism, and the mobilization of others, not military behavior during full-scale revolution or civil war.

Tiananmen Massacre, the “event window” includes the preceding three months. Unexpected coordination events, by definition, cannot be anticipated, so the window includes only the event itself. For visibility events, I exclude the month of the event itself, but include the preceding three months. The core substantive results are not particularly sensitive to these “event window” assumptions.

Before moving forward with the analysis, it is important to acknowledge the known limitations of the data. First, we should be concerned about the comprehensiveness of the PPD itself. The data is drawn from publicly available news sources, and thus fails to capture any detention and activity 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 the information on the known detentions is lacking— I am forced to exclude over half of the political dissident detentions because the month is missing.

A second issue, related to the first, is that the PPD is organized on the detainee level, and only records information on their most recent detention. This is problematic in that we lack information on earlier detentions for repeat-offenders, which in aggregate, underestimates the total number of detentions in earlier years. A quick scan of the data suggests that about 10% of detainees are recidivists, with some serving multiple previous detentions. Perhaps 20-40 detentions are missing in this way.

In technical terms, both issues can be considered measurement error in the dependent variable. Such error generally inflates the standard errors of the estimate but does not induce bias, provided it is not systematically associated with the covariates of interest. In this case, I do not believe there is a reason to think more or fewer detentions are recorded during regime transitions, or that the missingness is somehow associated with the transitions themselves.

Nevertheless, I will attempt to account for the general recency bias in the data by including linear and nonlinear time trends.

Analysis

The data allows us to generate a single time series of detentions in China in every month from 1998-2014, which is illustrated in Figure 1. We see a large number of relatively “quiet” months, followed by spikes in detentions clustered in a few brief periods. This is the core variation the paper seeks to explain.

[Figure 1 About Here]

Figure 1 also indicates the key events of interest that should produce spikes in detentions, at least according to our theory. The two regime transitions– depicted with twelve month windows– are indicated with light grey bars. The two unexpected coordination events– the death of Zhao Ziyang in 2005 and Arab Spring Movement of 2011– are shown with a dotted grey lines, and the various expected coordination events are indicated with dark red lines. The two prominent visibility events are shown with dotted grey lines.

As expected, the detentions seem to track these key events. During Xi’s initial months in office, for example, we see a sizable increase in detentions. The Tiananmen Anniversaries also appeared associated with detention spikes, as are the months leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Detentions are highest during the early months of Arab Spring, as the CCP was seeking to suppress the emerging Jasmine Spring movement at home. There were eight known political dissident detentions in China in February 2011 alone, just as the Egyptian protests reached their peak in Tahrir Square.

To assess the core hypotheses more systematically, I estimate different versions of the following interrupted time series model:

$$det.dem_t = \alpha + \beta_1 trans_t + \beta_2 known.mob_t + \beta_3 unexp.mob_t + \beta_4 vis_t + f(T) + \epsilon_t \quad (ITS)$$

Here, $det.dem_t$ represents our dependent variable, the total number of democratic dissident detentions in a given month t . The model has indicators for when a month includes or shortly follows a regime transition ($trans_t$), shortly precedes or includes a known mobilization event ($known.mob_t$), includes an unexpected coordination event ($unexp.mob_t$), or shortly precedes a visibility event (vis_t). We will also include time trends $f(T)$ in case the general level of detentions is simply a function of time.

[Table 2 About Here]

The coefficient estimates for seven different models are shown in Table 2. The table explores the robustness of the findings across different covariate sets and assumptions about the length of the regime transition window. Model 1 is the simple bivariate regression, and Model 2 introduces the $known.mob_t$, $unexp.mob_t$, and vis_t measures. Models 3 and 4 introduce a linear and polynomial time trend, respectively. Model 5 is a negative binomial specification, which better approximates the data generating process given the count nature of the data.

For all models, the coefficient on $trans_t$ proves positive and significant at conventional levels. The estimates suggest that in expectation, a month within a regime transition window has about one more political dissident detention than a month without. Months preceding known mobilization events produce a slightly smaller increase, about half a detention, and unexpected mobilization events bring about 2 to 3 more detentions. This likely reflects both an increase in dissident behavior and a heightened urgency on the part of the regime.

Interestingly, the coefficient on vis_t proves negative, which suggests that periods prior to visibility events actually have fewer detentions on average. This contradicts the expectations of the theory, but may be in part because of the choice of events included. The model includes indicators for the months preceding the annual March meetings of China's legislature, the National People's Congress. This has the effect of including the months of January and February every year, which coincides with Chinese New Year. Once we exclude the NPC meetings as visibility events, the coefficient becomes positive and weakly significant.

Models 6 and 7 explore robustness across our assumption for the regime transition window, a relationship of particular interest. The default assumption—reflected in Models 1-5—is to set the transition period for twelve months. Model 6 shortens the period for six months, and Model 7 to nine months. The estimate for β_1 remains positive and significant at conventional levels, but is highest for the nine month window.

The Appendix includes the results of placebo tests that assess the general strength of the design. We might be concerned that the coefficient estimates are not actually meaningful, and that they could have arisen by some sort of idiosyncrasy in the data or some modeling decision. To demonstrate the validity of the regime transition conclusion, I examine the true β_1 estimates as they compare to a hypothetical set of estimates, generated by randomly assigning two regime transitions spaced ten years apart. That is, I suppose a regime transition occurred in January 1998 and January 2008, estimate the coefficients, repeat the process for February 1998 and February 2008, and so forth all the way until July 2003 and July 2013 (the last possible ten year window). Figure A1 shows the distribution of these placebo estimates. The true estimate lies well to the right extreme, and is larger than 95% of the estimates generated by this randomization process. This gives us further confidence that something

unique is happening in the months following the Hu and Xi transitions.

A second placebo test employs alternative detention measures that should not be associated with regime transitions or the various coordination events. In particular, detentions dealing with personalized grievances like environmental pollution, labor concerns, and property rights should not demonstrate this cyclical pattern, as the political preferences of new leadership are less relevant. Figure A2 shows the p-values and coefficient estimates for regressions using *det.dem*, *det.prop*, *det.lab*, and *det.env* as the dependent variable. Regime transitions have a weak positive association with labor detentions, and negative or non-associations with property and environment-related detentions.

Case Study

In this section, I examine the dynamics of repression during Xi Jinping's early tenure in office (2012-2014). Recall that according to the theory, leadership transitions shift dissidents' perceived likelihood of accommodation, encouraging the "testing the waters" behavior that is often met with repressive crackdowns. This dynamic seems to explain the spike in detentions we observe in January and February 2013.

Xi's formal ascension to power occurred from November 2012 to March 2013, when he was chosen General Secretary of the CCP and President of the People's Republic of China, respectively. His informal rise occurred well before, with speculation heightening after his selection into the nine person CCP Politburo Standing Committee in 2007. His early administrative record included stints as Party Secretary in Shanghai and Zhejiang, Governor of Fujian, President of the Central Party School, and leader in charge of preparations for the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Prior to assuming his highest office, there was considerable uncertainty over Xi's inten-

tions and general policy leanings. He demonstrated merit in promoting growth and reducing corruption during his provincial-level appointments, but his personal beliefs remained largely ambiguous. As dissident Yu Jie describes:

If Xi has any special ability, it's his ability to balance himself on a steel wire. Xi served in Hubei, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai, among other places. Nowhere does he have any political accomplishments worth praising, or any offenses worth condemning. No one knows his real thoughts: He hides them even deeper than Hu did before he became chairman.

This “hiding” is fairly standard the Chinese system, where rising to power often depends more on demonstrating loyalty to established leaders than taking strong policy positions (Shih 2008; Shih et al. 2010, 2012).

Given a blank canvas, optimistic observers began to paint Xi as a political reformer in hiding, a leader that would tolerate more open discussion and push the country in a democratic direction. In January 2013, Nicholas Kristof offered this prediction:

The new paramount leader, Xi Jinping, will spearhead a resurgence of economic reform, and probably some political easing as well. Mao's body will be hauled out of Tiananmen Square on his watch, and Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning writer, will be released from prison.

Insiders suggested that Xi was taking meetings with reform-minded political theorists, and had even set up a team to research the more liberal Singapore model (Wong & Ansfield 2012). One hopeful dissident predicted Xi would institute a popularly-elected parliament within five to seven years (Simpson 2013). Selective elements of Xi's personal background, namely his father's denouncement of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, his experience living in Iowa and his willingness to send his daughter abroad to Harvard, were taken as evidence that he could be “China's Gorbachev” (Kristof 2013; Griffiths 2012; Lindley-French 2012).

This is not to say there was uniform optimism about Xi's prospects as a political reformer. In 2009, Xi reportedly lambasted Western human rights critics at a dinner in Mexico, saying he was tired of the "few foreigners, with full bellies, who have nothing better to do than try to point fingers at our country" (Moore 2009). This speech was later removed from official outlets for being too provocative, although it may have hinted at Xi's true predilections. Dissident Yu Jie dubbed Xi "just another Communist Party hack," an "empty suit." In public interviews, Dali Yang argued that China should expect "more of the same, not some fundamental break from the past," noting that the country's leadership selection mechanisms are designed to preserve continuity in CCP leadership (Hultzer 2012).

To summarize, there was significant uncertainty about Xi Jinping's policy intentions and preferences upon his formal rise to power. Although the former has proven closer to the truth to date, there were cases to be made for both the "hardliner" and "political reformer in waiting" versions of Xi. It is this uncertainty that led to a rise in dissident activity in the early months of his tenure.

In May 2012, just a few months prior to the Hu-Xi Party leadership transition, a group of about twenty activists met in the outskirts of Beijing to plan the expansion of what came to be known as the New Citizens' Movement. Civil rights lawyer and movement founder Xu Zhiyong published an essay calling for broad participation:

China needs a new citizens' movement. This movement is a political movement in which this ancient nation bids utter farewell to authoritarianism and completes the civilized transformation to constitutional governance; it is a social movement to completely destroy the privileges of corruption, the abuse of power, the gap between rich and poor, and to construct a new order of fairness and justice; it is a cultural movement to bid farewell to the culture of autocrats and subjects and instead create a new nationalist spirit; it is the peaceful progressive movement to herald humanity's process of civilizing.

The essay goes on to define the movement as explicitly nonviolent, calling for the use of

slogans, marches, demonstrations, and performance art to draw attention to shared grievances (Caster 2014).

The coming transition to Xi's leadership in November may have emboldened the movement's early members, who saw a new leader with goals "tantalizingly close" to their own (Jacobs & Buckley 2014). Xi came to power with bold promises to reduce corruption, promote judicial fairness, and adhere to the country's constitution. The shared anti-corruption focus would become the "master frame" for the movement, which would allow Xu Zhiyong and other leaders to mobilize support while reaffirming the stated goals of new Party leadership. As Caster (2014) describes:

Chinese civil society initially perceived Xi Jinping as an influential ally in supporting concerns over official malfeasance. Belief in his resolve to stamp out corruption emboldened collective claim-making by activists who probably expected facilitation in their support of official policy.

This optimism ultimately proved costly for the movement, but again illustrates the level of uncertainty about Xi's true intentions.

In early 2013, protests demanding an official asset transparency system emerged in several major cities. On March 31st, several New Citizens' Movement dissidents— including seasoned democracy advocate Ding Jiayi— unfurled anti-corruption banners in Beijing's crowded Xidan shopping area (Caster 2014). Small-scale dinner discussions, held on the last Saturday of every month, also spread to roughly 30 cities. The total number of supporters swelled to over 5000 (Jacobs & Buckley 2014).

In April 2013, less than a month after Xi's formal appointment to the presidency, the government began a systematic crackdown on New Citizens' Movement activists. Ding Jiayi was detained on April 17, and formally arrested for "disturbing public order" on May 24 (Caster 2014). Ten participants in Jiangxi protests, including activists Liu Ping, Wei Zhongping, and

Li Suhua, were also detained. Xu Zhiyong, initially placed under house arrest, was eventually arrested on July 16 and charged on August 22 with the public order violation. Xu's detention drew international attention and caused additional demonstrations and arrests. Guo Feixiong and Li Huaping, movement leaders in southern and eastern China, respectively, were arrested in early August. Wang Gongquan, entrepreneur and movement financier, was detained in September 2013 and charged in October (Caster 2014; "China Jails" 2014; Jacobs & Buckley 2014; Phillips 2013). Between April and October 2013, at least 18 New Citizens' Movement activists were arrested, although local activists believed the number closer to 60 (Phillips 2013).

Although trials are ongoing, most of the detained dissidents will eventually be convicted of their charges. Xu was convicted in his January 2014 trial, and sentenced to four years imprisonment. This outcome is thought to have been directly determined by Xi Jinping and other senior leaders. Liu Ping and Wei Zhongping were found guilty of a more "using an evil cult to undermine law enforcement" and received six and a half year sentences. Li Suhua received a lesser charge and a three year sentence (Tatlow 2014). As one legal scholar describes, "Xi needs to put on a big show. He feels confident right now. He needs to show people who's boss" (Jacobs & Buckley 2014).

Xi's repressive turn signaled his hardline political preferences, producing a "chilling effect" that caused would-be dissidents to think twice before voicing their criticism ("China's Dissidents" 2014). It is difficult to measure the level of dissident activity itself, but close observers suggest things have quieted down. The last New Citizens' Movement record in the CECC-PPD database is that of financier Wang Gongquan, who was detained back in September 2013. Human Rights Watch researcher Maya Wang believes the Party's new tactics have

forced dissidents to “back off and watch what they say,” which many “generally lying low in multiple areas” (“China’s Dissidents” 2014).

The case of the New Citizens’ Movement interacted with the new Xi-led regime illustrates the core mechanisms of the theory. A regularized transition brings substantial uncertainty over the political preferences of new leadership. A group of dissidents is emboldened by the transition, and hopes the new leadership will be more amenable to criticism and political reform. Upon taking power, the hardline leadership reveals its true nature by suppressing dissident activity, which resolves any uncertainty. Dissidents in turn update their assessments and generally remain reticent, at least until the next transition or mobilization moment.

Conclusion

Repression is a predictable function of a country’s political calendar. Leadership transitions, anniversaries of historical moments, deaths of reformers, news of foreign social movements, and other similar events produce shifts in the expected benefits of dissent, in turn forcing the regime to crack down. Because many of these events are cyclical, we observe cyclical patterns in repression punctuated by exogenous events. In the Chinese case, the CECC-PPD data show evidence of these patterns, including spikes in detentions during the Jiang-Hu and Hu-Xi leadership transitions, known mobilization events like the anniversaries of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and founding of the PRC, and unexpected mobilization events like the Arab Spring Movement. Visibility events like the 2008 Beijing Olympics also appear to produce detention spikes, although some events may matter more than others.

This type of research is meant to complement to the cross-national literature on repression, and demonstrate the value of collecting more granular, within-case event-based abuse data (Davenport 2005; Fielding and Shortland 2010; Francisco 1995, 1996; Moore 1995, 1998;

Rasler 1996; Shellman 2006). The hope is that other researchers find the “political calendar approach” and empirical findings a helpful starting point for additional inquiries. One promising avenue would be to test for the presence of these cyclical, event driven dynamics in other authoritarian systems. According to new data from Geddes, Wright, and Franz (2014), there were 280 authoritarian regimes worldwide from 1946 to 2010. About 55% of leadership changes in these autocracies were within-regime transitions, the type of transition we observe in contemporary China. I expect we would observe similar dynamics in other systems—detentions spiking after transitions, punctuated by mobilization and visibility events. Replication of this empirical analysis requires only a simple time series of dissident detentions, coupled with information on the local political calendar.

Beyond testing the generalizability of this theory, future research can focus on additional questions relating to political dissidents. A rich legal literature focuses on the determinants of sentencing outcomes for criminal defendants in the U.S. context. Although the specifics vary from study to study, the basic design is to investigate the associations between case-level covariates and punishment severity (see Britt 2000; Huber & Gordon 2004; Kleck 1981; Mitchell 2005; Steffensmeier et al. 1998; Steffensmeier & Demuth 2000). For example, in their regression analysis federal court data from 1993-1996, Steffensmeier and Demuth (2000) find that ethnicity has a small to moderate effect on sentencing, with outcomes favoring white defendants over minority defendants. Huber and Gordon (2004) show that for elected judges in Pennsylvania, sentencing becomes more severe as reelection approaches.

Although the data on political dissidents is less comprehensive, it may be possible to extend this general approach to China and other authoritarian systems. In the CECC-PPD, we observe substantial variation in the length of detentions across dissidents, as well as the

legal process itself. Of the 146 political dissidents detained from 1998 to 2014, only about 47% were ultimately convicted of a crime. Detention lengths range from a few hours to fifteen years. Some detainees report physical or verbal abuse during imprisonment, while others seem to emerge relatively unharmed. Presumably, these patterns are driven by variation in the behavior and backgrounds of the dissidents themselves, although it may be possible that political calendar variables also play a role.

This paper explains the temporal logic of repression in China. Exploring new contexts and outcomes can further illuminate the strategic interplay between dissidents and the regimes they challenge.

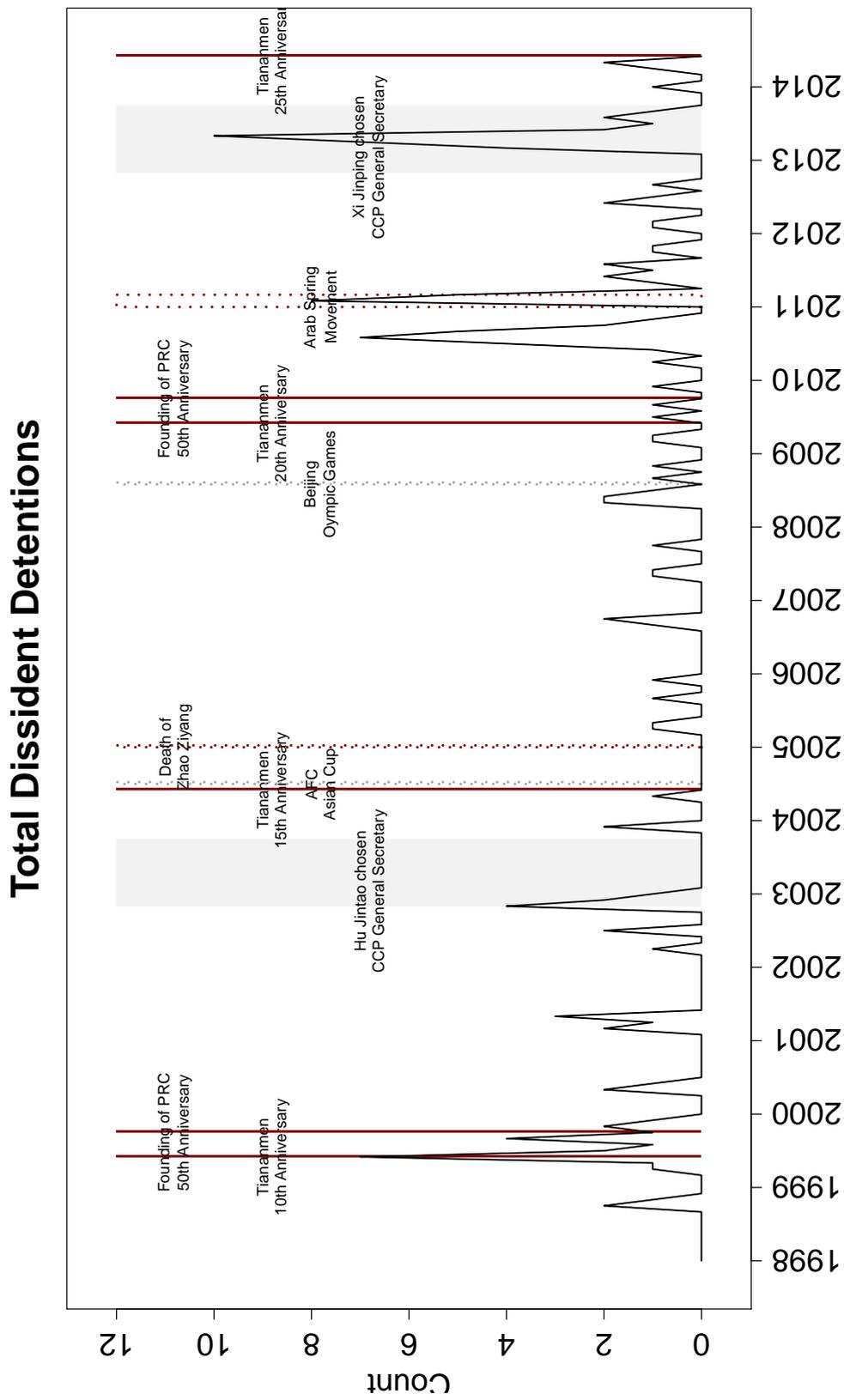
Tables and Figures

Table 1: Key Events in Analysis Period

| Event | Event Date |
|--|-----------------------|
| <i>Regime Transitions ($trans_t$)</i> | |
| - Hu Jintao elected General Secretary of CCP | 15 November 2002 |
| - Xi Jinping elected General Secretary of CCP | 15 November 2012 |
| <i>Known Mobilization Events ($known.mob_t$)</i> | |
| - 10th Anniversary of Tiananmen Square Massacre | 4 June 1999 |
| - 50th Anniversary of founding of PRC | 1 October 1999 |
| - 15th Anniversary of Tiananmen Square Massacre | 4 June 2004 |
| - 20th Anniversary of Tiananmen Square Massacre | 4 June 2009 |
| - 60th Anniversary of founding of PRC | 1 October 2009 |
| - 25th Anniversary of Tiananmen Square Massacre | 4 June 2014 |
| <i>Unexpected Mobilization Events ($unexp.mob_t$)</i> | |
| - Arab Spring Movement | January - March 2011 |
| - Death of Zhao Ziyang | 17 January 2005 |
| <i>Visibility Events (vis_t)</i> | |
| - NPC and CPPCC Meetings | March (all years) |
| - 15th Party Congress | 12-18 September 1997 |
| - 16th Party Congress | 8-15 November 2002 |
| - AFC Asian Cup | July 17-August 7 2004 |
| - 17th Party Congress | 15-21 October 2007 |
| - Beijing Olympic Games | 8-24 August 2008 |
| - 18th Party Congress | 8-15 November 2012 |

Note: Table shows key events in China from 1998-2013 that should correspond to dissident detentions. For regime transitions, the baseline model sets $trans_t = 1$ for the twelve months following the event date. For known mobilization events, the baseline model sets $known.mob_t = 1$ for the two months prior to the event date and the month of the event itself; $unexp.mob_t = 1$ only during the event itself. For visibility events, $unexp.mob_t = 1$ only for the two months prior to the event date.

Figure 1: Total Known Political Dissident Detentions in China (1998-2013)



Note: Figure shows total political detentions per month in China from 1998-2014 as they relate to key events. All data drawn from the augmented CECC-PPD.

Table 2: Interrupted Time Series Estimates

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
|------------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| $trans_t$ | 0.77* (0.52) | 0.87** (0.51) | 0.77* (0.48) | 0.83** (0.46) | 0.88** (0.40) | 0.91* (0.63) | 1.17** (0.60) |
| $known.mob_t$ | | 0.58* (0.41) | 0.57* (0.44) | 0.50 (0.42) | 0.72** (0.41) | 0.43 (0.43) | 0.50 (0.42) |
| $unexp.mob_t$ | | 3.05** (1.68) | 2.90** (1.65) | 2.86** (1.61) | 2.21*** (0.70) | 2.87** (1.61) | 2.89** (1.61) |
| vis_t | | -0.60*** (0.14) | -0.60*** (0.14) | -0.59*** (0.15) | -1.23*** (0.36) | -0.66*** (0.16) | -0.62*** (0.15) |
| T | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| $T^2 + T^3$ | No | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| $TRANS_t$ Months | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 12 | 6 | 9 |
| Model | OLS | OLS | OLS | OLS | NBREG | OLS | OLS |

Note: Table shows results of regressions of $det.dem_t$ on the various event window indicators. Models 6 and 7 show sensitivity to the event window assumption for $TRANS_t$. Robust standard errors are shown in parenthesis. Model 4 is the “core specification” referred to throughout the paper. Significance levels reflect one sided hypothesis tests. * $p < 0.10$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$.

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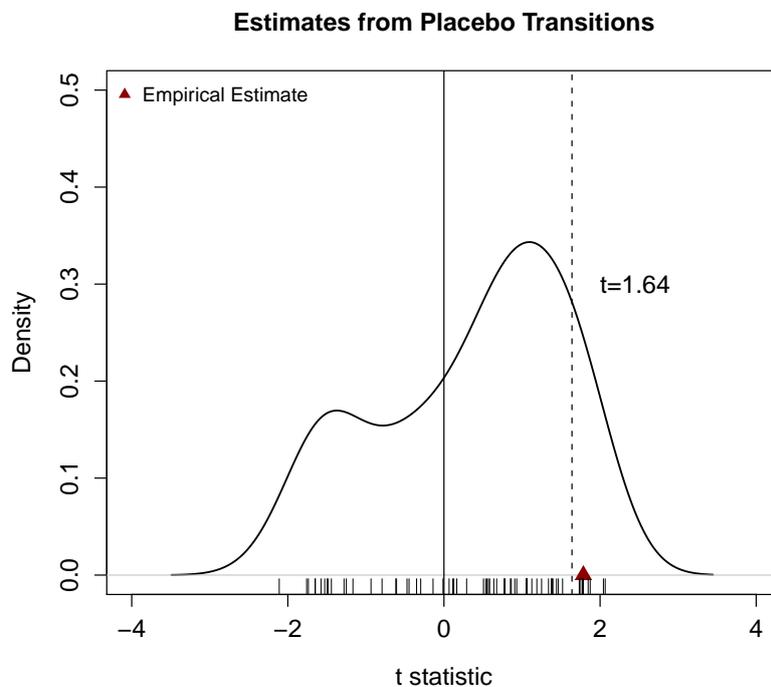
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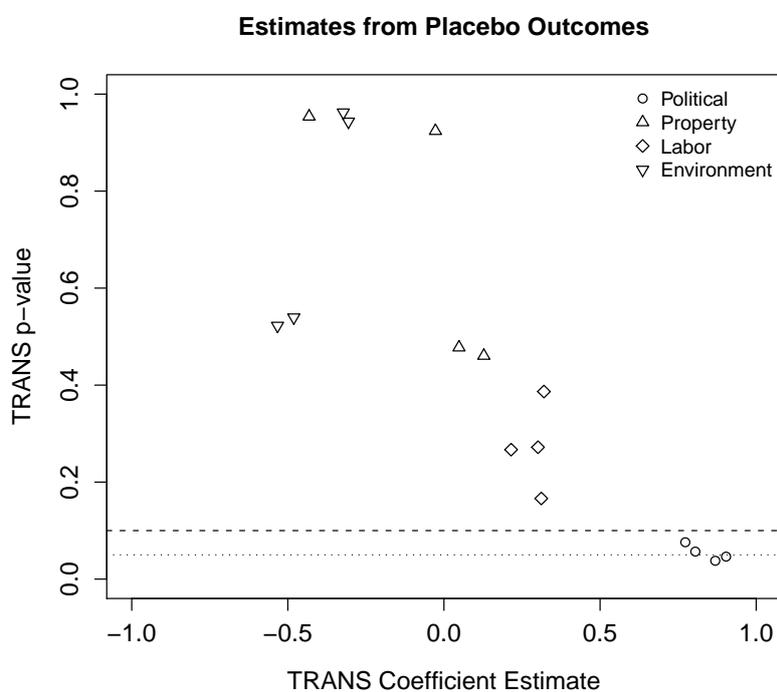
Appendix

Figure A1: Results from Placebo Test 1 – Placebo Transitions



Note: Figure shows the distribution of t-statistics for $trans_t$ from a placebo test that randomly permutes two regime transitions ten years apart from 1997-2013. All estimates use a 12 month regime transition window and the full covariate set Model 4. The red triangle indicates the observed t-statistic, which is greater than roughly 95% of the placebo t-statistics.

Figure A2: Results from Placebo Test 2 – Placebo Outcomes



Note: Figure shows the coefficient estimates and one-sided p-values for *trans* from regressions of different outcome variables (*det.dem*, *det.prop*, *det.lab*, *det.env*) on covariate sets M1-M4. All estimates use a 12 month regime transition window. Only the *det.dem* outcome variable seems strongly associated with *trans*.