ELITE COMPETITION, LOCAL EXTRACTION, AND SOCIAL UNREST: UNDERSTANDING MASS PROTEST IN AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

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Abstract. Why do we observe mass protest in authoritarian regimes? How can we explain subnational variation within a country? This study provides an institutional approach to explain mass protest in nondemocracies. I propose that the pattern of social protest reflects the intensity of subnational elite competition within authoritarian institutions. In China, the cadre promotion system incentivizes local elites to compete in the fiscal and economic field by extracting local resources, and these efforts often trigger local protest. Using a protest dataset that records large-scale local resistance from China, I find that Chinese social protest is associated with local elite competition in a nonlinear pattern. A rising intensity in local competition encourages greater extraction efforts and triggers more resistance; however, intensified competition does not lead to excessive extraction because officials fear that too much social instability could hurt their careers. I also find that land expropriation by local governments becomes the main extractive mechanism that triggers social grievance in contemporary China. These findings highlight the important role of competitive local politics and how it shapes the subnational variation of protest in authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: protests, local elite competition, land expropriation, authoritarian politics

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In recent years, mobilized dissent and popular uprisings have drawn much attention to the study of protest dynamics in authoritarian regimes. Existing research has explored a wide range of agendas on popular protest, including its impact on regime transition (Celestino and Gleditsch, 2013), the efficiency of violent and nonviolent resistance (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011), the organizational features of resistance movements (Sutton, Butcher and Svensson, 2014), and the spatial diffusion of dissent movements (Gleditsch and Rivera, 2017). However, despite the growing interest in protest research, our understanding of the origin and pattern of civil protest under authoritarian contexts is still limited, especially for local unrest. Much cross-national research focuses mainly on high-profile revolutionary resistance that escalated to the national level and spread across the country, but less attention is given to more localized grass-root resistance and the factors fueling these disruptions. Understanding these local protests is important because they inform us about the source of grievances and the way people mobilize, which are critical for explaining the conditions under which localized dissent will escalate to widespread national resistance.

Existing theories regarding protest and contentious actions cannot fully explain protests in authoritarian regimes. For one reason, as Tilly, Tarrow and McAdam (2001) indicated in their canonical book, the traditional approaches—such as grievance-based, organization-based, and political opportunity-based explanations—work best to explain contention in democracies but less well in explaining contention in nondemocratic states. Particularly, in large authoritarian countries where state control of society is strong and organized movements are typically prohibited, accounts of organizational capacity and political opportunity fall short of providing complete explanations on why these protests occur and what fuels them. Grievance-based arguments are also insufficient because grievances are just too widespread to explain comparatively rare instances of dissent mobilization (Skocpol, 1979). Previous literature has also largely treated the state as a unified actor and missed the critical role of sub-state political elites who have substantial influence on the degree of social mobilization and violence (Wilkinson, 2004; Robertson, 2007).

In this article, I provide an explanation of local protest emergence with a particular attention to sub-state elite competition and resource extraction in authoritarian regimes. While political competition is usually understood in the context of western democracies, elites in authoritarian systems still compete over positions, resources, and power. For example in China, the cadre promotion system, similar to the Soviet Union's *nomenklatura* system, encourages subnational elites to compete with their peers in the same administrative district, and promotion is largely based on their ability to boost local fiscal growth. Promotion incentives along with frequent turnover (two or three years) in local leadership motivate elites to compete intensively over short-term fiscal growth by seizing and extracting local resources, such as taxation and land expropriation and sales, to quickly boost their performance. These extraction efforts often trigger resistance and protests.

However, political elites, though motivated by promotion, are disincentivized from over-extraction. Excessive extraction can produce social unrest that is not valued by upper-level officials who would grant promotions, and so it serves as a countervailing incentive to that which drives extraction in the first place. Some protests may be tolerable, but they lead to increases in cost (punishment or demotion) to elites seeking promotion as the protests increase in magnitude. When there is little competition, leaders are unlikely to devote much effort because promotion is easy and effort is costly. However, when competition is intense, the cost of unrest resulting from excessive extraction becomes high and thus disincentivizes the risk-averse leaders from over-extraction because the threat of instability looms large in the region (more protests emerge), which makes the upper-level officials more concerned about maintaining social stability than fiscal revenues. Even ambitious leaders have to tread carefully not to outpace their competitors by increasing extraction so much as to instigate resistance further. Therefore, more competition yields more extraction effort, until the competition reaches a point where the marginal costs of greater extraction (i.e., social unrest) exceed the potential benefit, making the potential rewards so unlikely that the expenditure of effort is not worthwhile. This suggests that greater competition intensity may result in more extraction and local resistance, but only to a point.

To test this theoretical argument, I use an event dataset recording large-scale protest events in China. The event data are collected from the International Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS), which the U.S. government established to analyze political instability around the world and provide relevant policy advice. ICEWS includes a wide range of international and regional news media and translates foreign languages—including Chinese—to augment its coverage, which makes it useful for analyzing protest in China.[1] Collecting a comprehensive list of protests in China is certainly difficult, if not impossible, given the secrecy of the official record. This study does not intend to explain all protest events in China. Rather, it focuses on explaining relatively large-scale resistance resulting from resource extraction by local governments. Since ICEWS examines a wide range of news sources, it is more capable of capturing relatively large-scale events that are more visible to news media and harder for local governments to cover up. The dataset documents many large-scale incidents triggered by land expropriation by the government, which are the target of this research.[2] Protest reports are mostly from independent news agencies in Hong Kong, which reduces the potential biases that may be introduced by PRC-owned media outlets (Huang, Boranbay-Akan and Huang, 2016). Since the data has been recently released to the public, a growing number of conflict studies have taken advantage of the data to analyze protest dynamics in cross-national or subnational settings (Metternich et al., 2013; Steinert-Threlkeld, 2017).

For sub-state elite competition, I follow Lü and Landry (2014) using the number of peer competitors in the jurisdiction, a slow-varying variable, as a proxy for the general competition intensity and investigate the competition among prefecture-level leaders.[3] Since the

[1]English sources include Hong Kong AFP in English, Hong Kong South China Morning Post Online in English, Radio Free Asia, Hong Kong Chung Kuo Lao Kung Tung Hsun WWW-Text in English, Hong Kong Asia Times Online in English, BBC Monitoring in English. Chinese sources include Hong Kong Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Chinese, Hong Kong Wen Wei Po (Internet Version-WWW) in Chinese, Hong Kong Tung Fang Jih Pao (Internet Version-WWW) in Chinese, Boxun Xinwen Wang, Hong Kong Tai Yang Pao (Internet Version-WWW) in Chinese, Ming Pao, Apple Daily. Other regional sources include Sing Tao Jih Pao, Taipei Lien-Ho Pao (Internet Version-WWW) in Chinese etc.

[2]Land protests are more visible to the media because it is often caused by large-scale land expropriation by the government that affects thousands of land-losing residents, making it easier to incite collective actions; it is usually more violent because land expropriation directly threatens the basic living needs for the residents and causes significant economic harm to land-losing farmers.

[3]The number of prefecture-cities does not very much over time, so the competition variable has more explanatory power on the cross-sectional variation than the temporal variation of the dependent variable.

number of higher-level positions is fixed in each province, the degree of promotion competition among subordinate prefecture leaders is primarily driven by the number of peer competitors in the same jurisdiction, which depends on the number of prefecture-units controlled by a province. Using the pool size of competitors thus provides empirical leverage for researchers to measure the competition intensity.[4] Prefecture-level competition also serves as a useful level of focus in this research because prefecture-city authorities play a major role in local resource extraction, especially land expropriation and sales.[5] Recent studies on local land finance in China have shown that land granting and sales have become the main policy instrument for prefecture-city leaders to raise their fiscal revenues and compete for performance (Yan, Liu and Man, 2013; Liu and Wu, 2015). Measuring competition at the prefecture-level thus helps examine the effects of competition on local resistance, especially on expropriation-related land conflicts.

Empirical evidence supports the curvilinear relationship between subnational elite competition and social protest against local governments. A rising intensity in official competition increases local extraction and spurs protests, but excessive competition does not lead to excessive extraction and local unrest. In addition to the overall effect of competition on social unrest, I look for the mechanisms linking political competition and social grievance, finding that land expropriation and leasing by local governments have become the main extractive mechanisms by which local competition triggers land resistance. This finding resonates with a growing awareness in the current literature that land issues constitute the major source of social dissent in contemporary China; it also speaks to the scholarship of contentious politics in autocracies by providing a micro-level explanation for protest emergence.

Provincial administrations that experienced upgrades and degrades in their prefecture cities are Anhui, Beijing, Chongqing, Hainan, Ningxia, Shanghai, and Tianjin.

[4]This measure is intended to capture the overall level of competition in the local district. But it is also possible that not all bureaucrats share the same ambition for promotion. Considering this, I include some personal factors that may influence promotion incentives (such as age and tenure) in the empirical analysis to account for individual variation in promotion ambition.

[5]It is important to note that according to the Regulations for PRC Law of Land Administration, land use rights can only be granted by local government bodies at the city or county level on behalf of the State (Mattingly, 2016). City and county governments have final authority over land use rights. Townships and village governments have no direct authority over land-use decisions and are mainly administering orders. Therefore, while rural land takings usually occur in local towns and villages, these efforts reflect the decisions by the county or city governments but not below.

This study contributes to research bearing on mass protests, elite competition politics, and authoritarian institutions in three main ways. First, it highlights the role of institutions in shaping the dynamics of local resistance, a factor that has yet been well explored in the repression and dissent literature. Previous research often assumes grievance as given in authoritarian countries and less work has considered the source of the grievance and the processes by which political elites' behavior may fuel mobilization. Second, it uses new data to study the subnational variation of protest in authoritarian countries, an important agenda in the literature aiming for exploring the dynamic at the local level. Finally, this article contributes to the growing interest in understanding the broader political and economic consequences of elite competition in the context of Chinese authoritarian institution, showing that social unrest mirrors the power struggle among subnational elites within the party-state.

Elite Competition and Mass Protest in Authoritarian Regimes

Traditional explanations of protest and mass mobilization have mostly followed three schools of thoughts: resource mobilization, political opportunity, and grievance. Resource mobilization emphasizes the role of mobilizing structures, both formal and informal organizations that facilitate collective actions by offering organizational coordination and resources (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). The political opportunity approach examines state capability in deterring and suppressing mobilization (McAdam, 1999; Fearon and Laitin, 2003). Grievance-based approaches stress injustices, such as the unequal distribution of power and wealth in a society, the accumulation of political discrimination and identity deprivation (Tilly, Tarrow and McAdam, 2001; Cederman, Weidmann and Gleditsch, 2011). These accounts, however, are better suited for explaining contentious politics in democracies than autocracies because mobilization opportunity and capacity are particularly limited by the rule of dictatorship. A grievance-based approach may offer a plausible theoretical framework for explaining popular disruption, but the process through which grievance is triggered and leads to protest is often assumed rather than explicitly studied.

Only recently have researchers begun to study how institutions may instigate mass mobilization and violence in authoritarian contexts. For example, in hybrid authoritarian regimes where elections are held to empower elites, studies have shown that electoral competition incentivizes political elites to strategically mobilize their supporters and use violence against oppositions to influence electoral results. Wilkinson (2004) shows that some Indian politicians strategically instigate inter-ethnic riots to ensure the electoral support of their own ethnic group when the electoral race is particularly close. Boone (2011) also finds that Kenyan political elites use land seizure and re-allocation as leverage to mobilize supporters in elections and punish opponents.

In addition to electoral competition, political elites can use public protests to garner social support in the competition for resources. For example, Robertson (2007) shows that in Communist Russia where independent labor organizations were either prohibited or subject to government control, labor unions or organizations become a powerful tool for elites to mobilize political support. When resources were scarce and inter-region competition for fiscal distribution from the center was intensified, labor strikes and demonstrations became more likely because they provided local leaders important social pressure for their resource demands.

Subnational elite competition also operates in single-party authoritarian regimes and influences resistance, but the operating system and incentive structure may differ from those hybrid regimes. In a party-state system where promotion of local elites is determined by their superiors and the evaluation metric is largely based on their local fiscal growth, these leaders are incentivized to compete against their peers over fiscal extraction by seizing and extracting local resources such as taxes and land grabs, and these extraction efforts can spur social unrest. In the following section, I will illustrate in greater detail on how elite competition shapes the pattern of mass protest, particularly in the context of China.

Competitive Local Politics and Mass Protest in China

The Chinese bureaucratic structure is marked by a combination of decentralized economic responsibility and centralized political appointments (Xu, 2011). The devolution of economic and fiscal responsibility implies that local leaders are in charge of public investment and expenditure, revenue collection, public enterprise management, and other economic affairs in their districts. But the highly concentrated control of personnel in the Communist Party grants higher-level officials the authority to determine the careers of lower-level officials, and this determination is largely based on local economic performance.[6] This dual system of decentralized economic obligation and centralized personnel selection provides strong incentives for these politically motivated local officials, who are evaluated under objective criteria, to compete with their administrative peers in economic fields and fiscal growth by extracting indigenous resources to boost their performance (Xu, 2011). These local officials target their performance particularly at fiscal revenue because it sends a more credible signal about their ability to promote economic growth and extract fiscal resources when other indicators of local economic performance (e.g., GDP) are noisy and unreliable (Lü and Landry, 2014). The hierarchical personnel selection and competition system in China are essential to sustaining the single-party system and is commonly characterized as a *political tournament* in the literature of Chinese institutional studies (Xu, 2011).

Fiscal performance is not the only factor influencing political elites' career; other factors, such as political connections and collusion, do matter. Some research finds that faction ties shape official career advancement (Shih, Adolph and Liu, 2012). However, these effects pertain primarily to members of the Central Committee. Evidence has shown that local-level cadres such as city and county leaders who increase fiscal revenues and boost economic performance are rewarded with career advancement, but that this effect decreases as competition moves up the bureaucratic ladder, especially above the rank of provincial governor (Landry,

[6]While there is no official documentation is publicly available on specific promotion indicators, Landry (2008) surveyed 104 cities and listed 33 socioeconomic indicators of municipal modernization rates that are known crucial for city leader evaluation. Among these, points allocated for economic performance (8) clearly exceed average points (2-3) for other criteria.

2008; Landry, Lü and Duan, 2015). Thus, rather than being in contention, political faction and performance are complementary factors that work at different administrative levels in which political ties have a more important role in the central ladder and fiscal performance in the local ladder of the Chinese administrative hierarchy (Landry, Lü and Duan, 2015; Jia, Kudamatsu and Seim, 2014).

The question then turns to how competition-motivated extraction contributes to local protest. The easiest way to boost fiscal revenue is by increasing local taxation, and it was local officials' major policy instrument in the 1990s. For example, rural governments relied on the extraction of taxes and fees from peasants to meet their expenses and achieve developmental goals set by higher-level governments. The surging taxes and fees triggered peasant protests targeting the aggressive taxation effort (Bernstein and Lü, 2003).[7] Under fiscal decentralization and tax-sharing between the center and local districts, local governments are responsible for collecting tax revenue, and fiscal revenues are one of the *hard targets* for evaluating the performance of local officials. Officials faced fiscal pressure to collect arbitrary administrative fees and fines to augment income growth and compensate for budget shortages (Lü and Landry, 2014). These extraction efforts have exacerbated the grievances of local citizens and generated discontent among rural peasants, who bear the burden of illicit agricultural fees. Fiscal re-centralizing reforms in the 1990s led to a surge in anti-taxation protests across the country, from disgruntled taxi drivers in urban areas raging against excessive fees and fines to aggrieved peasants protesting agricultural taxation (Tong and Lei, 2013).

More recently, land has become the new target of fiscal revenue extraction by local governments, resulting in growing land grievances in the past decade. After illicit taxes and fees drew massive anti-fee riots and protests in Sichuan, Hunan, Anhui, and other provinces

[7]Although Bernstein and Lü offer a useful explanation of fiscal extraction and peasant protests, the leader competition aspect is underplayed in their work and other qualitative studies. Also, their work focuses on taxation as a key mechanism triggering protests in the 1990s. But in the period of 2001-2014 that I focus on in this study, land grabbing became a new extraction mechanism that local leaders shifted to and triggered many land extraction protests after arbitrary local taxation was banned by the central government. The taxation argument cannot adequately explain land extraction protests that I investigated here.

(Bernstein, 2004), the central government announced a tax-and-fee reform, curbing the illicit tax burden levied on farmers. This reform was implemented nationwide and agricultural taxation was completely abolished in 2006 (Givens and MacDonald, 2013). In reaction, underfunded local officials turned from tax-and-fee extraction to a more lucrative extractive strategy, land expropriation and sales, which offset local budget shortages through huge land transfers that granted land rights to outside investors. Land revenue, which previously consisted of only 10% of extra-budgetary income for the local governments, surged to 80% of their coffers in 2008 (Kung and Chen, 2013). The practice of land seizures was further encouraged by the regulation of state-owned land conveyances that demanded only 5% of revenues be transferred to the central government, with remaining revenues retained by local governments (Liu, Wu and Ma, 2012). More importantly, land leasing attracts outside investment in local economies and encourages indigenous industrial construction, which can further boost fiscal revenues and advance local officials' performance. As a result, feverish land speculation has made it easier to convert urban and rural land into industrial parks, power plants, and residential complexes, and this competitive land supply has triggered extensive land conflicts across the country (Tao et al., 2010).

Defective land appropriation laws and unsupervised converting procedures further facilitate land grabbing efforts by local officials and exacerbate land grievances. Data collected by the Ministry of Land and Resources show that 40% of the petitions received from peasants were related to land acquisitions and illegal land seizures, of which 87% involved inadequate compensations for land and unfair resettlement (Zhao, 2009). A survey conducted in 2008 by the official New China News Agency also found that up to 80% of land projects involve illegal land right conversion and improper confiscation processes.[8] According to the Land Administration Law, land use rights can be granted by local government bodies at the *city* or *county* level on behalf of the central government under the goal of public interest (Yuan, 2004); local governments at these levels thus can legitimately acquire land from rural collectives and decide their own compensation rates accordingly within their jurisdictions.

[8] http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat9/sub63/item1109.html

This leaves ample leeway for local officials to interpret which land they can confiscate and determine how much to compensate residents. Moreover, current Chinese land law does not stipulate the procedure to be followed where compensation is not paid adequately (Liu, 2007). As a result, land sales have become a revenue-generating business in which politically incentivized local leaders seek to maximize their fiscal profits by balancing the land acquisition costs and the land leasing price, and the flawed land conversion law facilitates this revenue-seeking behavior (Cao, Feng and Tao, 2008). When a large piece of land is targeted with thousands of households affected, it becomes even harder for officials to reach their land acquisition-compensation balance and further incentivizes local officials to suppress compensation costs at the expense of local residents' interest. These local governments apply various schemes to underpay the peasants–such as undervaluing the land yield and opting for a lower multiplier–and coercively relocate residents to accelerate conversion. The grievances of these under-compensated and unfairly treated citizens have contributed to severe land conflicts and collective resistance in China (Zhu and Roy, 2009).

Promotion Reward, Risk of Unrest, and Extraction. While promotion competition encourages elites to compete in their fiscal performance by extracting local resources, these elites are disincentivized from excessive extraction due to the risk of social unrest resulting from over-extraction. The countervailing incentives thus suggest a nonlinear relationship between competition intensity and the level of protests in the region. According to Lü and Landry (2014), who investigated the association between political competition and tax extraction, extraction reveals an inverse U-shaped relationship with elite competition. Local leaders' payoff is a function of maximizing the expected benefit from promotion minus the cost of extraction effort. When little competition exists, leaders are unlikely to devote much effort because promotion is easy and effort is costly. However, when a considerable amount of competition exists, the greater level of competition induces more extraction effort, until the competition reaches a point where the marginal costs of greater extraction exceed the potential benefit, making the potential rewards so unlikely that the expenditure of effort is not worthwhile.

In the proposed nonlinear relationship, Lü and Landry describe several mechanisms that limit extraction effort when competition is highly intensified. One notable mechanism is the risk of protest: more extraction can produce civil unrest that is not valued by upper-level officials who would grant promotions, and so it serves as a countervailing incentive to that which drives extraction in the first place. They suggest that this mechanism produces a U-shaped curve, but do not probe it in more depth. My argument takes this as a starting point. If extraction leads to protest, protest serves as a dampener on extraction, and competition has an inverse U-shaped relationship with extraction, then we should also see a similar U-shaped relationship between *competition and protest*. This fits the larger literature on protest and promotion and conforms to recent findings which show that protest may affect officials' career prospects but does not guarantee punishment or an outright veto of promotion by the leadership (Cai and Zhu, 2013)[9]. Some protest may be tolerable, but it leads to increased costs to elites seeking promotion as protest increases in magnitude.

The fear of significant social unrest thus has three implications for local extraction and protest emergence under intensified competition. First, when the risk of political instability is high and well-understood by risk-averse leaders, incentives for extraction decrease because the security threat looms large in the region (more protests emerge), which makes the upper-level officials value maintaining social stability more than fiscal revenues. Second, even ambitious leaders have to tread carefully not to outpace their competitors (whose behaviors are revealed only ex post) by increasing extraction so much as to instigate protests and resistance further. Third, less competitive elites who are close to their tenure and less well-endowed in resources tend to feel restrained in the race as the cost of extraction becomes high (i.e., political punishment) while the prospect of promotion reward becomes low (too many competitors). This suggests that greater competition intensity results in more extraction and local resistance in the region, but only to a point. I will empirically test the argument that

[9]Cai and Zhu (2013) list a number of political reasons for the state's tolerance of agents who fail to maintain social peace. One is that training cadre is costly and dismissing all agents should they commit malfeasance would be unrealistic. Also, upper-level leaders understand that local officials sometimes are under pressure to commit malfeasance and they should not be the ones to blame for every protest incident. A certain tolerance and discretion are needed in disciplining agents, and these local officials are aware of the need.

protest serves as a restraining mechanism which leads to the inverse U-shaped relationship suggested by the past literature in the following sections.[10]

Data and Research Design

To analyze protest at the subnational level, I use event data from the ICEWS data project. The dataset incorporates news reports from English and other foreign languages — including Chinese — from over 300 different publishers in a mixture of international and regional newswires. For protests in China, the dataset incorporates many independent newswires based in Hong Kong which are written in either English or Chinese. News sourced from independent news agencies reduces the potential biases that may incur when using local PRC-owned news reports. Foreign language stories are translated to English by machine and then sent to event coding. The entire text corpus during the period of 1990-2014 involved 20.6 million events and approximately one hundred thousand stories per month. However, ICEWS news collections became stable after the year of 2001, so this study starts from that year.[11] Additionally, ICEWS employed natural language processing techniques based on constructing word graphs of the relevant sentences in each media report and coded the event features by using the Conflict and Median Event Observation (CAMEO) ontology (Gerner, Schrodt and Yilmaz, 2009). Multiple event parameters such as source and target actors, event date and locations, news headlines, and news raw text were also extracted to facilitate empirical analyses.[12]

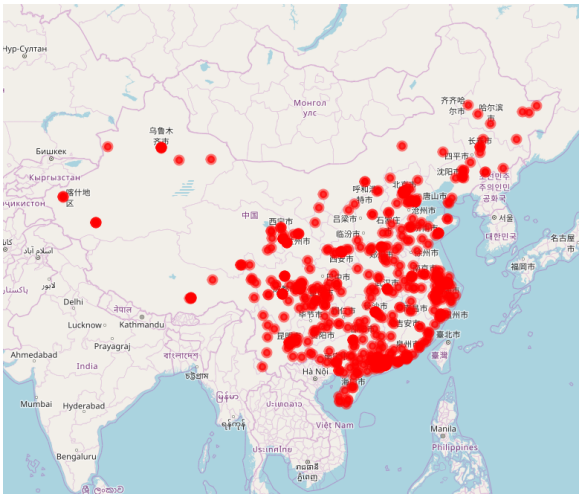
While ICEWS scans a wide range of international and regional newspapers, it is incapable of capturing all protest events in China, where media censorship is strong. The events captured by ICEWS are relatively high-profile and larger in scale and thus more visible to news media and harder for local governments to cover up. Of the 725 identified protest events,

[10]A case study on the protest in Jiangsu is described in Appendix section A to illustrate how land expropriation, motivated by local competition, incited large-scale resistance to provide some intuition for the theory.

[11]Figure A.5 in Appendix shows that the monthly event counts become more consistent after early 2000, potentially due to a more stable supply of news articles incorporated by ICEWS.

[12]Protest Events are coded if there are keywords— such as demonstrate or rally, protest, strike, obstruct passage, block street — or the synonym of these keywords occurring in the sentences of news articles.

Figure 1. Geographic Locations of Social Protest in China, 2001-2014



Data source: ICEWS protest event data (figure created by author)

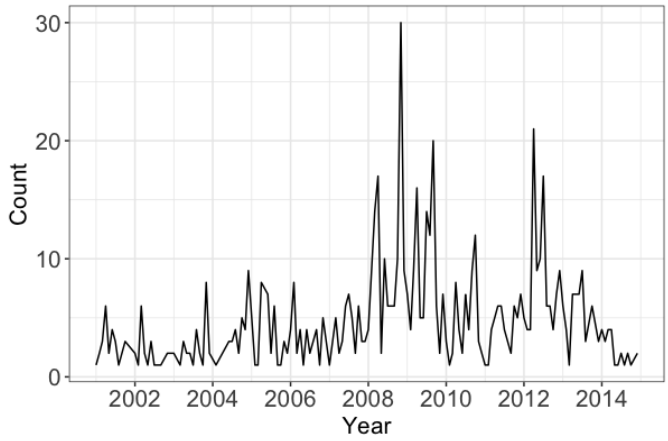
roughly 90% involve several hundreds and often thousands of protesters[13]; land protest events all involve several hundreds if not thousands of participants.[14] Land conflicts are particularly large in scale because state land expropriation projects usually involve a large amount of rural land-takings and affect a great number of land-losing residents and households, which makes large-scale collective resistance more likely. These large-scale events are also difficult for local authorities to cover up and more likely to be reported by media.

To ensure the quality of event information, I filtered out all duplicated reports which are common in reporting massive events. I also verified machine-coded locations by hand-coding the geolocations of events in my sample. Existing literature has cautioned the use of machine-coded data for geo-spatial analyses at the subnational level due to its mediocre location accuracy against hand-coded data, even though the accuracy is reliable at the national level (Hammond and Weidmann, 2014). With this caution in mind, I hand-coded event locations to minimize the potential geo-coding errors and ensure the accuracy of event

[13]Smaller incidents that involved only dozens of people or fewer are mostly self-immolation incidents by Tibetan protesters, individual hunger strikes against repression on the Falun Gong religion, and other individuals petitioning for justice in Beijing.

[14]It is suspected that there might be hundreds of thousands of protests in China in the past decade, but there are no official records for this number and the scale of these protests. This estimate likely includes a lot of small-scale incidents and individual protests that involve only scores of petitioners. Not all events in China target the governments, and these protests are not the focus of this research. Here, I focus on explaining large-scale collective actions which are more visible to the media and related to extraction by government.

Figure 2. Frequency Statistics of Protest in China, 2001-2014



locations presented in the analysis. [15] Since the theory suggests that the intensity of competition among prefecture-city leaders in the province explains the intensity of social unrest in a province, the events are aggregated to the province-year level for the purpose of analysis.[16] Figure 1 presents the location of each event that occurred by the longitude and latitude,[17] and Figure 2 displays the temporal trend of events. Protest event types and their freqencies are also presented in Figure A.2 in Appendix.[18]

Several additional efforts are taken to validate the event data. First, I compare the events recorded by the ICEWS database with two other Chinese language data sources that also record *large-scale* social protest in China. First, I compare it to the protest data collected by the *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)*, a highly reputable academic research center. Their data represents one of a few efforts to collect systemically protest information in China. They surveyed a wide range of Chinese news media reports that were either printed in

[15]Comparing to my hand-coded locations in my sample, ICEWS location coder achieves roughly 51 % accuracy in identifying the provinces where protest events were located, which is consistent to the existing finding on the mediocre performance for machine-based location coding at the subnational level (Hammond and Weidmann, 2014; Lee, Liu and Ward, 2019). A more detailed description of the geo-coding errors by machine and the process of hand-coding this study does are presented in Appendix section N.

[16]Although I would be interested in examining the connection between competition and protest at the lower counties-in-a-city level, the sample size of protest events currently available limits the ability to further disaggregate the data.

[17]This dot map shows the general geographic distribution of protest events. Figure A.1 in Appendix shows aggregated variation across provinces.

[18]Land conflicts stand as one of the most salient type of grievances, consistent with Tong and Lei's finding as well as other existing studies (Zhao, 2009; Zhu and Roy, 2009; Liu and Wu, 2015). Detailed description on different event types can also be found in Appendix section D.

newspapers or published online using protest keywords, making it a good point of comparison to the data in this study.[19] From 2000 to 2013, they found 871 events in which more than a hundred of protesters involved. The spatial correlation between their data and ICEWS is 0.92 and the geographical distribution of event types shares a similar pattern. ICEWS data are also compared to another data source generated by a recently published book on Chinese social protest using a mixture of news reports, NGO reports, and fieldwork from 2003 to 2010 (Tong and Lei, 2013). Their data recorded 548 large-scale social protests during the eight years. It was one of the few academic studies that conducted nation-wide quantitative research on protest in China. The spatial correlation between the ICEWS and their data sources is 0.89. Therefore, although the possibility of bias across all three sources exists, the similar geographical distribution revealed by different datasets using different sources increases our confidence in the observed pattern of protests and their intensity, especially on large-scale events where hundreds or thousands of dissidents participated. Additionally, I investigate the influence of potential media bias on the results by considering a number of potential sources of bias — such as population size, the number of local newspapers, local Internet penetration rates, and local distances to the capital — and estimate their effects on the results. Additionally, I simulate the potential media bias as a sensitivity analysis. These robustness checks are reported in Appendix Table A.2 and Figure A.4 and show consistency to my findings.

Main Explanatory Variable: Local elite competition. To measure the intensity of peer competition among local leaders in provinces, I use the number of prefecture city leaders in a province (*Leaders*) as a proxy. Current literature on promotion competition between local officials contains no consensus on what matrices should be used. Past studies have mainly focused on personal characteristics such as leaders' education level, age, and tenure to explain competition incentives, but lateral dimensions of peer competition have often been

[19]Unfortunately, their internal policy prevents release of the event dataset, so I cannot perform the same analysis with their data. But I was able to obtain the summary statistics of this data published in *Annual Report on China Rule of Law, (No. 12, 2014)* and the aggregated amount of protests they recorded to make a general comparison. Detailed summary statistics for the CASS data and its comparison with other data sources can be found in Appendix Table A.1 and Figure A.3.

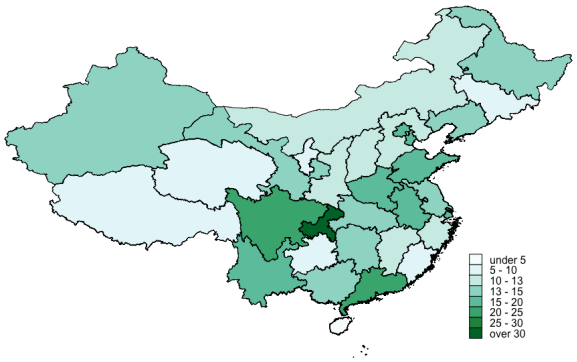
omitted. Aware of this, Lü and Landry (2014) alternatively use the number of administrative jurisdictions as a proxy for official competition. Since the set of upper-level positions is fixed through the quota system in the Chinese cadre institution, similar to the nomenklatura in the Soviet Union, the degree of competition is primarily driven by the number of contenders for promotion, which depends on the number of administrative units controlled by a province. This research follows this approach and the logic that the number of administrative peer contenders shapes the intensity of official competition. Also, city officials rarely bypass the provincial ladder and jump directly to positions in the central government. Thus, the number of city officials in a province helps capture the general competition intensity among counterparts at the same level.[20] Finally, the variation in the number of prefecture-level jurisdictions reflects the historical legacy of administrative districting in China and has changed infrequently (both the size and the density) after the founding of the PRC. The heterogeneous and relatively stable administrative structure provides some inferential leverages in the process of estimating its effect on contemporary protest intensity since the reverse causal direction is less likely.[21]

Additionally, since prefecture-level governments play a major role in local land granting and leasing, measuring competition at the city level gives us good leverage to investigate the competition effects on land grievances. Under the current land law in China, only the prefecture-city and county-level governments have the authority to grant and auction local lands to investors on behalf of the State. Townships and villages governments have no direct authority over land-use decisions; they are mostly facilitators in executing expropriation plans approved by upper-level governments. In current land granting practices, city-level authorities have more administrative power than county governments to integrate

[20]Each prefecture city has one mayor and one party secretary. The city mayor is usually the deputy secretary of the party committee, and the secretary ranks above the mayor in the Communist Party system. Since the goal here is to estimate the general competition intensity between cities in a province, I do not differentiate the competition between party secretaries and between mayors—though the pool size will be the same—and their effect on protest.

[21]While tracing the historical development of administrative boundaries is beyond the scope of this article, it is likely that local districting was shaped by the historical density of population and the level of economic development in the history. Given this, contemporary local population density and economic development are included in the empirical model to control for their effects on the frequency of protests.

Figure 3. Average Number of City Leaders across Provinces



Data source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (figure created by author)

rural farmland across different districts and allocate it for sale. Recent findings have indicated that city-level governments show a stronger reliance on land grants and sales than county administrations; several studies have also found that land supply has become a major policy tool for city leaders to offset their budget shortages (Yan, Liu and Man, 2013; Liu and Wu, 2015). Thus, examining competition among city governments allows me to study the more general impact of competitive extraction on local land resistance. The number of city leaders in each province is illustrated in Figure 3.[22]

Control Variables. I include several control variables that are considered important in explaining protest emergence in the literature. First, I control for the logged area size of the provinces, *Ln area*, to account for the amount of local resources available for extraction. I control for local GDP, *Ln GDP*, because higher levels of development may be associated with a growing amount of social grievances due to economic inequality or increasing resource extraction. In addition to covariates related to the potential grievances, I include controls for local mobilization capacity. I include logged local population, *Ln population*, to examine whether more populous provinces observe more protest activities. I add the degree of urbanization, *Urbanization*, to capture the idea that higher degrees of urbanization could also facilitate protest mobilization. Lastly, I include *Public security expense*, the sum of prefecture city security expenses, to account for the opportunity structure for protesters and

[22]The descriptive table on the number of leaders per province is presented in Appendix Table A.3.

the degree of social control on protest variation. All the covariates are lagged by one year to avoid simultaneity bias.

Research has also suggested that protests may demonstrate a contagion effect. If that is the case, the occurrence of mass protests could be a function of spillover from earlier protest events in neighboring districts. I constructed two variables to capture this dynamic. First, I build a *Protest spatial lag* variable into the model. To construct this variable, I calculate spatially-weighted matrices to aggregate the overall spatial effect of various geographic distances. These spatial weights were included in an $n \times n$ matrix composed of relative geographic distances. The spatial lag variable was then formed as the count of the protests in each other province in the previous year, weighted by the inverse distance to the province, under the logic that nearby districts should exhibit more influence than distant ones. This spatial lag will capture the contagion effect between provinces. Second, since the occurrence of protest events may also be affected by events happening in the nearby cities in the same province, I include a *Protest time lag* to capture protests in the same province in the previous year as a proxy for the contagion effect within provinces.[23] Summary statistics of each variable used are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

variable	mean	sd	min	max
Protest count (all)	1.74	3.06	0.00	25.00
Protest count (extraction)	0.81	1.74	0.00	17.00
Protest count (land)	0.37	1.04	0.00	9.00
Leaders	13.73	6.43	2.00	40.00
Leaders^2	229.79	269.47	4.00	1600.00
Ln area	12.02	1.23	8.75	14.33
Ln population	8.05	0.87	5.55	9.26
Ln GDP	8.47	1.14	4.77	10.88
Urbanization	0.45	0.15	0.23	0.89
Public security expense	79.21	77.02	3.21	569.85
Protest time lag	1.53	2.75	0.00	23.00
Protest spatial lag	1.67	1.06	0.34	6.63

[23]Since the level of analysis is at the province-year level, the spatially-weighted matrices (and thus the spatial lag) can only be created at the province level.

Table 2. Competition Effect Model

	All	All	Extraction	Extraction	Land	Land
Intercept	0.089	0.066	-0.549^{***}	-0.562^{***}	-1.443^{***}	-1.437^{***}
	(0.107)	(0.109)	(0.109)	(0.102)	(0.161)	(0.159)
Leaders	1.310^{***}	1.416^{***}	1.289^{***}	1.371^{***}	1.759^{***}	1.793^{***}
	(0.421)	(0.434)	(0.424)	(0.394)	(0.578)	(0.594)
Leaders^2	-0.970^{**}	-1.051^{***}	-0.966^{**}	-1.042^{***}	-1.351^{***}	-1.390^{***}
	(0.389)	(0.396)	(0.379)	(0.346)	(0.508)	(0.520)
Ln area	−0.021	−0.063	0.022	0.002	0.007	−0.019
	(0.139)	(0.145)	(0.146)	(0.138)	(0.196)	(0.202)
Ln population lag	-0.909^{***}	-0.894^{***}	−0.101	−0.103	−0.330	0.054
	(0.229)	(0.259)	(0.279)	(0.297)	(0.433)	(0.413)
Ln GDP lag	0.969^{***}	0.935^{***}	−0.037	−0.023	0.052	−0.330
	(0.247)	(0.300)	(0.316)	(0.329)	(0.498)	(0.451)
Urbanization lag	-0.324^{*}	-0.361^{*}	0.065	0.036	0.007	0.180
	(0.181)	(0.205)	(0.182)	(0.196)	(0.293)	(0.270)
Security expense lag	0.212^{**}	0.133	0.416^{***}	0.308^{**}	0.534^{***}	0.465^{***}
	(0.106)	(0.119)	(0.142)	(0.132)	(0.196)	(0.174)
Protest time lag		0.100		0.201^{***}		0.093
		(0.070)		(0.072)		(0.083)
Protest spatial lag		0.141^{**}		0.119		0.229^{*}
		(0.067)		(0.087)		(0.119)
AIC	1149.002	1070.106	777.844	714.694	488.844	467.656
BIC	1188.191	1116.089	816.015	759.455	527.015	512.417
Log Likelihood	-564.501	-523.053	-378.922	-345.347	-234.422	-221.828
Num. obs.	372	341	336	308	336	308
Num. groups: province	31	31	28	28	28	28

$^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$

Results

I use the negative binomial model given the event count nature of my dependent variable. To further account for the hierarchical data structure, I apply random effects to estimate parameters by considering the grouping structure embedded in the data. Random effects models, rather than fixed effects models, are applied because the key variable of interest, number of cities in a province, varies slowly or infrequently over time: Only six provinces (out of thirty-one) experience changes between 2001 and 2014. The slow-moving nature of the main explanatory variable implies that competition intensity will likely account for more variation of protests across provinces than variation within provinces.[24] All covariates are standardized for the ease of comparing effect size of estimated coefficients.

[24]I also fit poisson and negative binomial models with standard errors clustered at the province level to see if results are sensitive to different modeling approaches. Appendix Table A.7-A.8 show that the findings remain consistent.

Figure 4. Marginal Effect of Competition on the Level of Land Protest

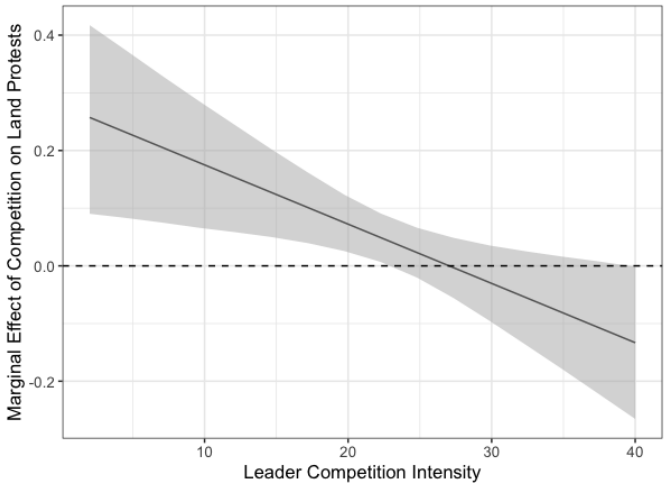


Table 2 shows supporting evidence of the nonlinear association between competition and protest. The first two models include all 31 provinces and all observed protest events in the estimation. The positive coefficient of the linear term and the negative coefficient of the quadratic term suggest that growing competition intensity increases levels of social protest, but only to a point. For the purpose of examining extraction-related grievances, protest events are further subset to only contain three types of events — protest against economic policy (taxes and fees), labor protest, and land protest. Certain provinces such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Ningxia that are well known to be subject to heightened concerns regarding social instability are dropped to account for different incentives for these local leaders and avoid underreporting bias in these security-prioritized areas. The resulting estimates in the third and fourth column show a similar curvilinear relationship which is consistent with recent findings regarding the effect of promotion competition on local taxation increase and labor wage depression, though a direct test on corresponding protest activities has yet to be performed (Chan, 2003; Lü and Landry, 2014).[25]

[25]I also report the coefficient tables for each model specifications in the Appendix Table A.4-A.6, starting with the most parsimonious (only the main explanatory variable without controls) and gradually adding control variables to show how the results may be affected by including these additional covariates. The finding remains consistent across different model specifications while the coefficient magnitude of the main explanatory variable shrinks as more control variables are added.

Furthermore, since my theory specifically expects a relationship between competition and land grievances, the last two models in column 5 and 6 estimate the result on land protest only. The nonlinear association and the magnitude of the coefficients support the expectation that official competition and land extraction trigger land protests, but only to a point. Figure 4 plots the simulated marginal effect of competition based on the model in column 6 on land protest. It shows a clear pattern of diminishing marginal return of competition on the level of land unrest across provinces.[26]

As for control variables, provincial land area, local GDP, population, and urbanization show no consistent pattern of statistical significance with protest frequencies, though effects vary across models. There is a positive relationship between public security expenses and protest frequencies, suggesting that local governments tend to invest more capital in social control resources such as policing personnel and equipment in regions where protests are more likely.

The spatial variables, including the spatial lag (contagion between provinces) and the time lag (contagion within provinces), show that there is some potential contagion effect, though it is not significant across models. The positive effect of spatial lags implies that local protests in China may not be independent. They may be influenced by neighboring incidents as residents can share information and emulate bargaining strategies against local governments by observing nearby resistance. I also include a map of the residuals in Appendix Figure A.1, showing no clear spatially correlated pattern after controlling for the spatial dependencies.

Robustness. Additional efforts are made to validate the result. A potential concern might be the serial correlation in the data generating process. Autocorrelation diagnostics were applied to detect the temporal interdependence; the result of the autocorrelation function (ACF) test is presented in Appendix Figure A.5. It shows no clear temporal correlation detected, suggesting that my result is unlikely biased by serial correlation. I also analyze a

[26]The diminishing marginal effect turns negative at around 28 in the level of competition intensity (ranging from 2 to 40) as shown in Figure 4. The turning point can also be calculated by using coefficient estimates of *Leaders* and $Leaders^2$ on their original scales. The unscaled version of coefficient estimates are reported in Appendix Table A.10.

purely cross-sectional model with protest events aggregated over the entire study period to address a potential concern that the key explanatory variable, the number of cities within a province, does not vary much within a province and the result could be driven by increased observations in time-series cross-sectional data. The result reported in Appendix Table A.9 shows a consistent finding even with substantially reduced observations.

Prior literature has also suggested that while the number of peer competitors is a useful measurement for the intensity of competition within an administrative district, it is possible that not all leaders are necessarily interested in competition at all career stages. Existing literature indicates that age (seniority) might be one important personal feature affecting the chance of promotion for city leaders (Yao and Zhang, 2013). Leaders' incentives to engage in political competition decrease when they approach their age of retirement, and this ceiling effect on promotion is more dramatic in the range of 54-60 years old. To address this potential age ceiling effect, I re-sample the data and remove city mayors over age 55, assuming they are less interested in promotion competition. Table A.11 in Appendix shows that the association between competition and protest still holds after accounting for this potential ceiling effect. The results are also consistent if I use the age of prefecture party secretaries to discount the competition effect.

Additionally, some may suspect that this result could be driven by a few intensely competing prefectures that are responsible for the increased protest, while the majority of leaders in the same province have very few incidents under their watch. Figure A.6 in Appendix shows that the geographic distribution of protests is generally spread out across prefecture cities, suggesting that competition is not attributed to just a few cities but represents a general pattern in the provinces.

When local elites face fierce competition pressure, ambitious leaders may have a third policy option: increase repression and extraction simultaneously. It is theoretically possible that ambitious local elites could not only pursue excessive extraction but also engage in massive coercion to prevent protests that could hurt their careers. In this case, protest events are not only a function of competition but also a function of repressive efforts. Few protests

in highly competitive regions could be a result of extensive policing and dissent surveillance that preemptively prevents protests from occurring. To address this concern empirically, I have controlled for the sum of public security expenses by prefecture cities in each province as a proxy for overall policing investment. The result still holds after accounting for this alternative explanation, suggesting that the relationship between competition and protests is less likely affected by local governments' increased repressive capacity.

One might also worry that media censorship could potentially bias the analysis. Geographical and political connections that Hong Kong and Taiwan have with the mainland mitigate some censorship concerns but still cannot completely rule out the possibility that protests can be filtered by the state censorship machine. Also, while current literature has shown that Chinese government allows local protest to be reported because it serves as a mechanism to check corruption by local officials (Lorentzen, 2014; Huang, Boranbay-Akan and Huang, 2016), the central government still has an incentive to restrain reporting when a rising trend of dissidence across the country could lead to protest contagion and a greater threat to the regime. As Lorentzen pointed out, the autocrat's optimal media policy is not a total blackout nor any constant policy of permitting some stories while forbidding others. Rather, it must adjust how much news it permits to be reported depending on the underlying level of discontent. When discontent is relatively low, it can allow more open reporting, but "in periods where there is a great deal of discontent to report on, it must rein in the news media." Therefore, if state censorship is likely activated in response to a rising trend of protests, I will want to account for this temporal trend of protest as a proxy for the state's censorship efforts. I then add cubic time polynomial as suggested by Carter and Signorino (2010) to account for the temporal trend and dependence in my protest observations. Table A.12 in Appendix shows that the competition effect remains robust after considering protest trends and the potential censorship efforts.

Another type of reporting bias comes from a typical concern for event data: protests in rural or less connected areas receive fewer reports. I thus identify three sources of potential bias and include them in the statistical tests to see how much they could affect my results.

The first concern is the accessibility to information about social unrest. Protest events that occurred farther away from Hong Kong or Taiwan could be less likely to be discovered and then reported. Second, places with more local news agencies may report more events because there are simply more journalists on the ground and thus more likely to access to protest incidents. Lastly, more reports might come from places with high Internet penetration rates because protest events are more likely posted online and captured by news agents outside of mainland China. In Appendix Table A.2, I include additional controls of provincial distance to Hong Kong, provincial distance to Beijing, the number of local news agencies, and the provincial Internet penetration rate. The results remain robust.

Evidence of the Causal Mechanism: Land Seizure. The previous section showed that competition among local officials spurs social protests mainly through local resource extraction. But the kind of extraction local governments undertake, and how it triggers social resistance, needs further illustration. Here, I supplement the analysis with empirical data on land seizure and sales that provide more evidence to support the elite competition effect on protest through land expropriation. Recent research has shown that in addition to the irregular growth of public expenditure (Guo, 2009) and exorbitant taxation (Lü and Landry, 2014), increases in land expropriation and rising reliance on land finance also reflect the political incentives for Chinese local officials (Cao, Feng and Tao, 2008; Liu, Wu and Ma, 2012). Land sales not only compensate for local governments' fiscal shortfalls, but more importantly they spur local development by attracting outside investment and capital, which is directly translated to visible political accomplishments for local leaders.

To test the effect of land sales, I subset the protest data to include only land-related protests and add a variable, *Land sales*, that measures the number of land granting cases made by local governments in a calendar year.[27] The advantage of this measurement is that it captures the intensity of governmental land supply while avoiding the problem of land price fluctuation and divergent land values in different localities, which would likely bias the measure of land selling efforts by governments.

[27]Land grant is a common method used by local governments by first expropriating land from local people and then transferring the land use right to investors and receiving land conveyance as the return.

Table 3. Land Sales and Land Protest, 2009-2012

	Land Protest
Intercept	-0.779^{***}
	(0.232)
Land sale lag	0.546^{**}
	(0.236)
Ln area	-0.242
	(0.295)
Ln population lag	2.748^{***}
	(0.718)
Ln GDP lag	-3.255^{***}
	(0.778)
Urbanization lag	1.320^{***}
	(0.449)
Security expense lag	0.544^{***}
	(0.165)
AIC	224.682
BIC	252.885
Log Likelihood	-102.341
Num. obs.	124
Num. groups: province	31

$^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$

Table 3 provides the supporting evidence: provinces that have more land sales by local governments tend to experience more land protests than other provinces with fewer land supplies. Note that the land sales mechanism appears significant in the span of 2009-2012, which conforms to recent findings showing that farmland seizure efforts grew stronger after the agricultural tax was completely abolished by the central government after 2007.[28] While this reform was meant to curb illicit local taxation, it actually encouraged local official to compensate for budget shortfalls by converting to land leasing strategies (Givens and MacDonald, 2013).

Table 4 provides additional evidence for the effect of official competition on land sales. The model controls for provincial *Ln area* to capture the resource endowments of available local land and considers the confounding effect of economic development, *Ln GDP lag*, on local land supply. It also controls for the level of *Urbanization*, which proxies the level of city expansion that consumes and converts local farmland to business and industrial usage.

[28]To curb land selling exuberance and competing for land price depreciation between local governments, the State Council regulated that all manufacturing lands should be rent through competitive bidding in the open land market rather than administrative negotiations. This act was enforced in 2007 and caused a considerable increase of land granting cases through the forms of auctions, public tender, and listing of quotation in the following years (Tao et al., 2010).

Table 4. Competition Effect and Land Sales, 2009-2012

	Land Sales Count
Intercept	7.967^{***}
	(0.090)
Leaders	0.608^{**}
	(0.298)
Leaders^2	-0.538^{*}
	(0.283)
Ln area	0.223^{*}
	(0.126)
Ln GDP lag	0.727^{***}
	(0.114)
Urbanization lag	-0.335^{**}
	(0.138)
AIC	2032.060
BIC	2054.622
Log Likelihood	-1008.030
Num. obs.	124
Num. groups: province	31

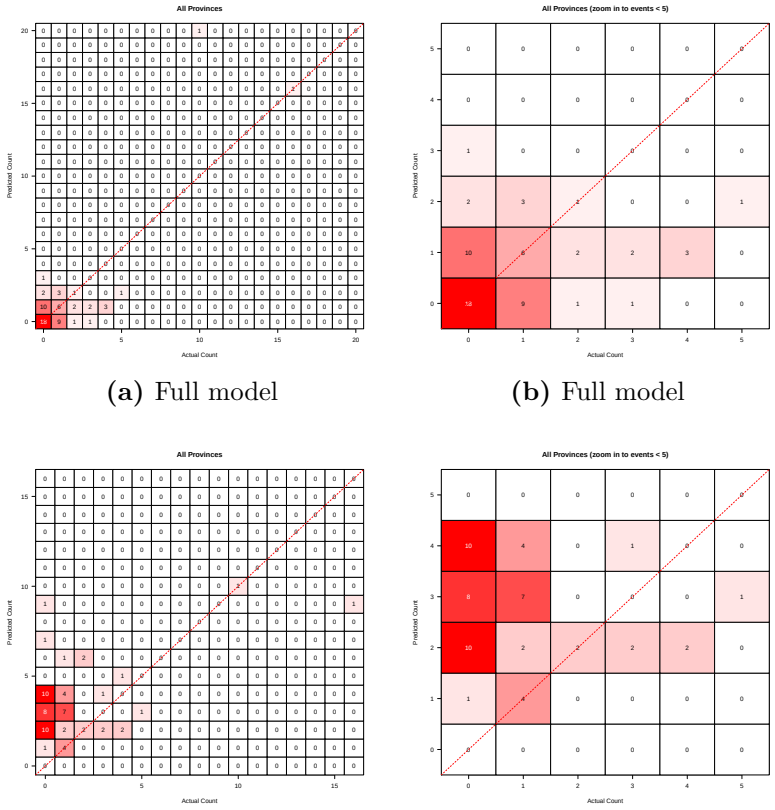
$^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$

The result shows that competition displays a similar nonlinear relation to local government land sales. This nonlinear relationship confirms the theoretical expectation that competition drives extraction but only to the extent that officials fear a considerable popular reaction, suggesting that increased intensity of official competition encourages land extraction and spurs protests, but only to a point.

Out-of-Sample Prediction

In addition to within-sample estimation, I conduct an out-of-sample test to evaluate my model performance and test its predictive strength for the immediate future. I subset my data into a training set (2001-2012, analyzed above) and a test set (2013-2014). Using the random effects model and the estimated coefficients generated in the training set, I predict the number of protest events in each province in the last two years of the available data. The prediction results are shown in Figure 5. The top left panel shows that the prediction performs well, in that predicted counts generally match actual counts (lying on or near the diagonal line). The Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) is 1.98, which is sufficiently small. While the model slightly underpredicts protests in Guangdong, it provides a good prediction on the general pattern of protest intensity.

Figure 5. Prediction Plots



(a) Full model **(b)** Full model

(c) Baseline model **(d)** Baseline model

The top right panel (b) provides a better look at the prediction result where the predictions hit the actual counts most of the time. In contrast, the baseline model in panel (d) which excludes the competition variable does not perform as well as the full model. The predictive counts in the baseline model miss actual counts more often than the full model, and the RMSE increases to 2.29. I perform additional out-of-sample predictions using different protest categories and the k-fold cross-validation test frequently used to avoid potential biases in one particular set of training and test data (Ward, Greenhill and Bakke, 2010; Hill and Jones, 2014). The results are presented in Appendix Table A.15-A.17, and they remain largely supportive in prediction improvement (improvement is shown in seven out of nine predictions). While improving predictions is not the focus of this study, it provides supplementary evidence to the main inference and additional leverage to evaluate the predictive power of elite competition and model performance on data that has yet to be analyzed. By

considering the effect of elite competition we gain more power on predicting the average intensity and variation of large-scale resistance in different localities, aiding us in better understanding of significant social upheavals.

Conclusion

This research uses subnational protest data to investigate the question of how authoritarian institutions affect social stability. In contrast to traditional accounts of social mobilization and state repression, which often assume social grievance as given, this research reveals competitive local politics as a source of grievance and unpacks how institutionalized elite competition can shape the dynamics of social grievance and protest under authoritarian rule. By contextualizing subnational elite competition in Chinese politics, I find that local elite competition encourages local resource extraction and triggers social resistance. Social unrest in China thus may not only reflect a transitional pain for a developing country but mirror a social consequence of power struggle among subnational elites within the party-state, which is an important but understudied factor in the existing literature. The finding suggests more attention to the role of sub-state elite politics in the scholarship of protest research in authoritarian contexts.

Previous literature on Chinese institutions tends to focus on elite behavior and cadre governance in central-local relations but understates the social impact. The study of elite politics should not be isolated within the scope of political institutions but extended to investigate its intertwining effect on citizens. The dynamics between local leaders and protesters point to the need for a better understanding of how local officials balance pressures for resource extraction against the need to preserve stability. This requires more transparent data and well-designed survey interviews to unpack the black box of local leaders' decision-making. Additionally, my emphasis on disaggregating protests into sub-categories in this research suggests that local politics may not exert uniform effects across different types of protests. Aggregating different kinds of unrest to the national level limits our ability to explain protests

and restricts our investigation of underlying chains of mechanisms. Understanding social resistance in China requires more effort to explore the micro-level dynamics of governance and state-society interaction.

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