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"The Persistent Power of the Street"

(joint with Leonardo Bursztyn, David Yang, Noam Yuchtman, Jane Zhang)

Abstract

What mobilizes individuals to participate in political movements? In this paper we test whether participation in a single political protest increases subsequent protest attendance. We also aim to uncover the mechanisms underlying persistent political engagement, considering changes in individuals' political beliefs, preferences, and changes to their social network. To identify a causal effect of past protest participation, we randomly "nudge" Hong Kong university students on the margin of attending an anti-authoritarian protest into participation. To identify the effects of social networks, we cross-randomize the intensity of this treatment across majorXcohort cells to generate exogenous variation in protest activity in an individual's social network. We find that experimentally-induced protest attendance is associated with very small changes in beliefs and preferences, both immediately after the protest and a year later. However, experimentally-induced past protest participation is significantly associated with political behavior one year later, with persistent engagement in the political movement greatest among individuals in the experimental cells with highest treatment intensity. Direct questions about motives for turnout confirm that the social utility of protests increased among the persistently politically engaged. These results highlight the path-dependence of political movements and the important role of social interactions in shaping political behavior.