



# Protests and trust in the state: Evidence from African countries<sup>☆</sup>



Marc Sangnier<sup>a,\*</sup>, Yanos Zylberberg<sup>b,\*\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Aix-Marseille University, CNRS, EHESS, Centrale Marseille, Aix-Marseille School of Economics, France

<sup>b</sup> University of Bristol, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides empirical evidence that, after protests, citizens substantially revise their views on the current leader, but also their trust in the country's institutions. The empirical strategy exploits variation in the timing of an individual level survey and the proximity to social protests in 13 African countries. First, we find that trust in political leaders strongly and abruptly decreases after protests. Second, trust in the country monitoring institutions plunges as well. Both effects are much stronger when protests are repressed by the government. As no signs of distrust are recorded even a couple of days before the social conflicts, protests can be interpreted as sudden signals sent on a leaders' actions from which citizens extract information on their country fundamentals.

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## 1. Introduction

As pointed out by Kuran (1989, 1991a,b), an apparently minor signal may drive beliefs in leaders' behavior and in the quality of institutions far from their previous levels. Trust in the state may not only be a capital which slowly accumulates over decades, as frequently argued in the literature, but may also be based on imprecise priors, subject to large volatility.

One recent example of belief volatility is the Thai military overthrow of May 2014 which concluded six months of social convulsions. At the origin of the crisis, there was a reprehensible

decision—an amnesty for all political crimes—followed by protests informing the whole country of the close relationship between the electoral commission, the high-level courts, and the conservative traditional ruling class. After these initial protests, the movement grew to such an extent that the final overthrow was supported by a large part of the population and there were discussions on future changes in the constitution. These events show that it is important to analyze how citizens update their beliefs and understand the dynamics of trust in the state. We contribute to the empirical investigation of this dynamics.

In this paper, we study the evolution of trust toward the head of state and monitoring institutions in the immediate aftermath of social protests. We posit that protests inform citizens about the state of the World: citizens may learn (i) that their leader is dishonest, and (ii) that monitoring institutions are insufficient to prevent leaders from misbehaving. We test these hypotheses thanks to a careful match between two rounds of the Afrobarometer survey between 2005 and 2009, and a database on local conflicts and protests in Africa—the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset. Our empirical strategy takes advantage of the precise timing and localization of protests and interviews. The identification comes from the interaction of a spatial treatment, comparing respondents in the immediate surroundings of protests to their regional peers

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\* Corresponding author at: Aix-Marseille School of Economics, Chemin du Château Lafarge, Les Milles 13290, France.

\*\* Corresponding author at: University of Bristol, Priory Road Complex, Priory Road, Bristol BS8 1TU, United Kingdom.

E-mail addresses: [marc.sangnier@univ-amu.fr](mailto:marc.sangnier@univ-amu.fr) (M. Sangnier), [yanos.zylberberg@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:yanos.zylberberg@bristol.ac.uk) (Y. Zylberberg).

interviewed in the same wave, and a time treatment, comparing individuals interviewed less than 60 days after the occurrence of a protest to those interviewed less than 60 days before. The difference—between recent and future protests—in these within-region differences in beliefs cleans for a possible selection bias arising from non-random variations in protest occurrences within a region.

Our findings indicate large movements in opinions regarding leaders in charge. Importantly, protests also affect beliefs in institutions with a monitoring role such as the electoral commission. The occurrence of a single protest during the two previous months within a radius of 20 km reduces the probability for respondents to trust the president by half of the standard deviation across regions—a raw proxy for long-term differences across space. A similar amplitude is recorded for trust in institutions that supposedly exert some monitoring power over leaders in charge.

We also exploit some declarations of intent related to prospective civic involvement in the Afrobarometer survey, and show that the revisions in priors about leaders and institutions affect the nature and intensity of civic engagement. Protests negatively affect the willingness to vote for the party in power, especially so after a repressed protest. Protests also increase the propensity to consider abstaining in the future election or voting for another party than the ruling one. While the willingness to raise issues in a non-confrontational setting decreases, the declared intention to attend protest rallies increases. These findings may indicate a change in the nature of civic participation, with citizens favoring street protests (even when they are more likely to be repressed) to the silent protest in the ballot box.<sup>1</sup>

There exist competing interpretations to these findings and we undertake a number of empirical robustness checks that support our preferred interpretation. First, we do not find evidence of anticipation effects few weeks before future protests. Instead, we uncover evidence of a discontinuity around protest occurrences: agents update their beliefs abruptly and immediately after the observation of a protest, and they declare much lower trust in leaders and institutions than respondents that are interviewed just before.

Second, the mere existence of protests may signal the inability of leaders and institutions to prevent them: security and public order are public goods that are arguably guaranteed by leaders and institutions such as the police or courts. In addition, a policy may be desirable for the majority of citizens and protests may be the doing of a small minority. We do not find support for this interpretation as the occurrence of a protest lowers the declared support for nipping minority's opinions in the bud. In order to further reduce concern about this alternative interpretation, we show a placebo check using acts of violence against civilians (including violent demonstrations of football fans or ethnic violence) and battles between armed groups instead of protests. We also present additional results in which we distinguish protests motivated by public policy issues from those motivated by international shocks (as for example World food prices fluctuations or US foreign policy) or directed at private actors and we show that trust in the executive power only drops after the former.<sup>2</sup>

Third, it is possible that respondents are afraid to reveal their true sentiment because they perceive the interviewer as being sent by the government. We test this explanation by analyzing how respondents perceive the relationship between the surveyor and the government, and how it affects their responses. Along the same lines and in order to alleviate potential sampling biases, we test the sensitivity of our

findings to excluding interviews just before or just after the protest and we investigate possible changes in the interview protocol around the protest occurrence.

Fourth, we may capture the strong reaction of an informed or biased minority, and we find, indeed, that trust in the leader and institutions sharply decreases for the few individuals having demonstrated. However, we show that trust also decreases within the sample of non-participants. While we do uncover heterogeneity in the citizens' response along ethnic identity, such heterogeneity is not consistent with the usual interpretation of ethnic minorities being repressed by the main ethnic group. We find instead that the major revision in beliefs is recorded among the ethnic majority.

Our analysis also contributes to the literature in several ways. First, our results show that beliefs in the functioning of institutions are volatile and sensitive to social crises. This volatility may contrast with the common view of the literature, which depicts a very high persistence of social capital or trust.<sup>3</sup> We show that one single protest decreases trust in the head of state and institutions by about 50% of the gap that exists between cities and rural areas. We also uncover evidence of changing patterns in prospective civic engagement. The closest paper to ours in this respect is [Chong et al. \(2011\)](#) which show that voters withdraw from the political process and revise downward their beliefs in institutions after learning about corruption cases. Another recent contribution by [Grosjean et al. \(2013\)](#) also reports in a completely different context that beliefs and trust in institutions are sensitive to the economic cycle.

Our empirical investigation contributes to the literature on the impact of conflicts. The focus on protests rather than on "traditional" violent events such as wars or killings, is an original feature of this paper that makes it distinct from recent studies of changes in individuals' attitudes following civil wars or comparably violent events.<sup>4</sup> There is a recent and small literature on the impact of social protests and mass demonstrations but it remains mostly focused on the United States ([Collins and Margo 2004, 2007](#), [Madestam and Yanagizawa-Drott, 2012](#), [Madestam et al., 2013](#)).

One important contribution of our paper is to use disaggregated data on social unrest and to capture a localized response across time and space. It echoes the call by [Blattman and Miguel \(2010\)](#) for local investigation and identification of the consequences of conflicts. Each protest is precisely located and matched with respondents of the survey to isolate its impact on the local sentiment toward institutions and leaders. Our empirical strategy relies on a regression-discontinuity argument. Indeed, we identify the effect of protests by studying how the difference in priors between individuals interviewed in the surroundings of a protest and their regional peers differs just before and just after the protest occurrence. While the identification assumption—that the interview protocol (including the selection of respondents) is the same just before and just after a protest—is weaker than in a macro-level analysis, the estimate is local and we cannot analyze the spatial diffusion of social discontent over time.

Many theoretical contributions model protests as being informative about the underlying state of the World, and thus indirectly about potential leaders' misbehavior. We provide empirical support that protests may transmit some informational "content" to citizens about their institutions. However, our analysis does not really shed light on the decision to organize a protest or repress it as in [Lohmann \(1993\)](#), [Ellman and Wantchekon \(2000\)](#), [Laussel and van Ypersele \(2012\)](#), and [Passarelli and Tabellini \(2013\)](#), and the role of the

<sup>1</sup> These measures of future behaviors may express a short-lived frustration and may not translate into actual changes in civic involvement. However, we do not find evidence supporting a return to the pre-protest levels for trust variables few months after the protest.

<sup>2</sup> Note also that revisions in beliefs are stronger when the government does repress the protest while it would be weaker according to this alternative interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> On this issue, [Nunn \(2008\)](#) and [Nunn and Wantchekon \(2011\)](#) link today's development failure and distrust in Africa to historical slave trade intensity. [Besley and Reynal-Querol \(2014\)](#) also report long-term effects on trust of historical conflicts in Africa.

<sup>4</sup> See [Bellows and Miguel \(2009\)](#), [Blattman \(2009\)](#), [Jaeger et al. \(2012\)](#), [Voors et al. \(2012\)](#), [Cassar et al. \(2013\)](#), [Gilligan et al. \(2014\)](#), [Rohner et al. \(2013\)](#), and [Becchetti et al. \(2014\)](#) among others.

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