

Who Wants to Work with Pro-democracy Advocates? The Effects of Movements' Blame Attribution and Social Mass Base on Movement Coalition Formation in Authoritarian Regimes

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Abstract

In authoritarian regimes, why are some policy-based movements willing to build coalitions with pro-democracy groups while others are not? This paper argues that the nature of blame attribution and the social mass of a policy-based movement influence its decision to join pro-democracy groups. Specifically, policy-based movements that blame the national government and appeal to a cross-class mass base are more likely to cooperate with pro-democracy groups to advocate for significant regime reforms to address the policy issues. Using online survey experiments in Vietnam and Malaysia, I find evidence for the effect of the nature of blame attribution. That is, policy-based movements attributing blame to the national governments are more willing to work with regime dissidents than those targeting the subnational governments. On the other hand, I find no support for the effect of social mass base and the interaction between the two variables. This paper underscores the importance of social movements' choices of targets and provides insights into why authoritarian leaders globally allocate significant resources to employ "blame avoidance" strategies, thereby perpetuating their power.

When the mass fish deaths occurred in the central provinces of Vietnam in 2016, thousands of people took to the streets to raise their concerns about the environment. What stood out was the collaboration between pro-democracy activists and environmentalists in street protests. They called for significant regime reforms, emphasizing the need for greater government transparency, accountability, and freedom of information to address the environmental problem (Nguyen and Datzberger 2018). Similar partnerships between regime dissidents and policy-based protestors can be seen in other authoritarian settings. For instance, in China, anti-Japan nationalists and pro-democracy groups occasionally unite, advocating for democracy to safeguard national interests (J. C. Weiss 2014). In Malaysia and Russia, there is evidence of climate change activists teaming up with pro-democracy groups to push for government changes and democracy as solutions to environmental issues (Tee 2019; Davydova 2021). In Russia, nationalists and pro-democracy activists were involved in protests against the allegedly fraudulent December 2011 parliamentary elections (Kolsto 2014). Indeed, cross-movement coalitions that brought together movements of markedly different natures have facilitated democratic transitions in many authoritarian regimes (Brancati 2016; L. H. Ong 2022; Mateo 2022; Thurber 2019).

Interestingly, on the other hand, many other policy-based movements under authoritarian rule are hesitant or even avoid cooperating with pro-democracy activists completely. Research shows that examples of policy movements avoiding association with pro-democracy groups span different regions. In Vietnam, land protesters often scrupulously avoid linking their protests to even the slightest whiff of opposition to the regime and pro-democracy groups – avoiding even using the word "protest" to describe their actions (Chau 2019). In Egypt, even as labor protests increased in the 2000s, "only in rare instances... did workers raise overtly political demands"

(Beinin 2012, 6). In Russia, labor protests often eschew democratic messages (Robertson 2010, Chapter 2).

These examples raise a puzzling question: *When do pro-democracy advocates and policy-based movements unite against authoritarian regimes, and when do they hold back?* While pro-democracy advocates make strategic choices when collaborating with policy-based movements, they generally seek partnerships with other groups for several reasons. First, democracy is a public good that benefits many beyond pro-democracy activists; thus, seeking collaboration with other groups ensures a broader impact and strengthens the collective effort to promote democratic values. Second, authoritarian governments tend to suppress pro-democracy advocates. Thus, forming coalitions with policy movements may reduce the risk of state repression. Additionally, pro-democracy activists primarily focus on post-materialist values that “emphasize self-expression and the quality of life” (P. 97), meaning their constituencies are typically urban and educated, who no longer have to worry about economic and physical security (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Collaborating with other movements, including rural groups, helps them tap into a broader base. Consequently, pro-democracy advocates have strong incentives to collaborate with other movements.

In light of these incentives, this paper examines the conditions that lead to the emergence of policy-democracy movements based on the strategic decisions of policy movements. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: *why are some policy-based movements willing to align with pro-democracy groups while others are not? Specifically, what affects a policy-based movement's decisions to join a democracy group to advocate for significant regime changes to address their grievances?*

Scholars have long recognized the importance of opposition coalitions in challenging authoritarian governments (Brancati 2016, Thurber 2019, Hatab 2018; Durac 2015; Van Dyke and McCammon 2010; Dan 2019; Kervliet 2019; Dobson 2012; Kim 2000). Surprisingly, despite the importance of opposition coalitions under authoritarian rule, little research has examined the types of policy-based movements willing to collaborate with pro-democracy activists. A large amount of literature on opposition coalitions focuses on the emergence and the effect of political opposition party alliances (Nugent 2020; Gandhi and Ong 2019; Ong 2022), broad-based social movements (L. H. Ong 2022), and coordination between systemic opposition parties and non-systemic opposition forces (Armstrong, Reuter, and Robertson 2020). The lack of research on the policy-democracy coalition is an essential oversight for three reasons. First, as elaborated below, policy-based and pro-democracy groups are distinct entities. Their collaboration forms cross-movement coalitions that, according to Mayer (2009), “play an important role in virtually every social movement.” Consequently, many authoritarian governments take extensive measures to prevent the emergence of such coalitions (Kerkvliet 2019; Dobson 2012). Second, given the significant threats that opposition coalitions pose to authoritarian regimes, understanding policy-based movements' decisions to join democratic groups will expand our knowledge of the factors that affect the stability of authoritarian regimes and prospects for democratization. Third, the types of movement alliances that are likely to emerge have important implications for post-transition democratic governance and policy priorities. For example, a post-transition coalition between pro-democracy activists and workers may lead to different policy priorities compared to an alliance between pro-democracy activists and nationalist advocates.

In this paper, I focus specifically on policy-democracy movement coalitions in which *policy movements and pro-democracy activists cooperate to advocate for significant regime*

reforms such as democracy, free and fair elections, and freedom of civil liberties to resolve policy issues (policy movements' grievances). I focus on this specific coalition for two main reasons. Although policy activists and pro-democracy advocates could join forces to advocate solely for democracy issues, these types of coalitions are typically rare (Brancati 2016) and have been discussed widely elsewhere (Brancati 2016; Weyland 2014). On the other hand, while policy movements and pro-democracy advocates may participate in demonstrations that focus exclusively on policy issues, this is not always in the interest of pro-democracy groups. When policy-based movements and pro-democracy advocates join forces, their common demand usually centers around pushing for democracy to address policy issues. This is because, during policy crises, pro-democracy activists can seize the opportunity to promote democratic institutions, which may not garner as much public attention during non-crisis periods.

In this paper, I examine a policy-based movement's decisions and rationales to join a pro-democracy group to advocate for major regime reforms to address policy issues. I argue that two factors facilitate policy-based movements to join democracy groups. First, because policy movements and pro-democracy groups are relatively distinct in terms of ideology and identity, cooperation "becomes the product of discovering a *common adversary* or being marginalized in the political sphere" (Mayer 2009, p.224). Building on research that underscores the role of blame attribution (i.e., targets of blame) in politics and protests, I propose that the alignment in the chosen target determines the willingness of policy protesters to collaborate with democracy groups. Specifically, when a policy-based movement attributes blame for deprivation to the *national* government governing the authoritarian regime, it is more likely to form alliances with pro-democracy advocates compared to a movement blaming the *subnational* government. Two mechanisms may explain this connection. Blaming the national government narrows the

ideological gap between the two movements, as both see significant regime reforms as essential to resolving policy issues. Targeting the national government demands substantial resources, as the joint movement focuses on political elites with control over violence and significant power in the country. Therefore, collaboration enhances their collective strength if both movements target the national government.

Second, authoritarian governments often delegitimize opponents who spread democratic institutions and values to dissuade the public from joining them (Scott, 1990). In most authoritarian contexts, democracy movements are labeled as illegal and unlawful. This means that building coalitions with pro-democracy groups poses a risk of harsh state repression. This follows that policy movements are inclined to collaborate with pro-democracy groups when they believe that joint efforts will not increase the likelihood of repression. Inspired by the research on the social mass base, I argue that policy-based movements whose grievances potentially appeal to a cross-class mass base are more likely to cooperate with democracy activists. If the policy issues resonate with different social classes, it would be much more challenging for the government to repress the coalition. In addition, if the policy issues appeal to a cross-class mass base, advocating for radical solutions such as regime change is perceived to be more reasonable.

There is a possibility that blame attribution interacts with the social mass base. While blaming the national government is necessary for coalition building because it narrows the ideological gap, it may not be a sufficient condition. Joining a more extreme group to target the national government could increase the probability of state repression. Therefore, I contend that movements blaming national governments *and* appealing to cross-class constituencies are more inclined to collaborate with democracy activists. This interaction addresses both the ideological alignment and the potential risks associated with the coalition.

I test these arguments using online survey experiments in Vietnam and Malaysia. Using a hypothetical environmental movement in each country, I test how the movement's blame attribution and social mass base affect movement members' decisions to join a pro-democracy group. To manipulate the nature of blame attribution, I vary whether the movement blames the national or subnational governments for the environmental issue. To manipulate the movement's mass base, I vary whether the movement appeals to cross-class constituencies or only one social class.

The results show no effect of the movement's mass base on its members' decision to join pro-democracy groups. There is no significant difference between policy-based movements that appeal to a diverse mass base and those that appeal to only one class. By contrast, the nature of blame attribution does affect respondents' perception of building coalitions with a pro-democracy group. Framing the environmental crisis as caused by the national government makes respondents more likely to support cooperation with regime dissidents. Interestingly, I find no evidence of the interaction between blame attribution and social mass base. This means that policy-based movements are more likely to work with pro-democracy advocates when they blame central leaders regardless of whether their causes may appeal to one social group or diverse groups. These findings are consistent across both countries that differ in several dimensions such as institutions, ethnicity, culture, and the strength of the pro-democracy groups, suggesting the generalizability of the theory on blame attribution.

My paper has significant implications for research on authoritarian politics. It explains why authoritarian governments invest enormous resources and efforts in "blame avoidance" strategies. It also contributes to the debate on the factors that lead to social movement coalitions. In addition, the findings have an important implication for the durability of authoritarian regimes. In times of

policy crisis, if authoritarian governments manage to direct blame to other actors, they can prevent movements of different natures from working together to challenge their power.

My research sheds light on why policy movements addressing environmental, nationalist, and corruption issues are often associated with political dissidents (Steinhardt and Wu 2016; Nguyen and Datzberger 2018; J. C. Weiss 2014; L. H. Ong 2022). While some scholars argue that the nature of these issues naturally facilitates connections among diverse groups, I contend that the root causes of these issues typically lie in national governments, creating a conducive environment for an association between policy activists and political dissidents who generally target central leaders.

Policy-based movements and pro-democracy advocates

In general, protests and movements under authoritarian rule can be classified into two types: those advocating for regime changes and those not seeking regime changes as solutions to the existing problems. Essentially, this typology is grounded in the advocated solutions these movements propose to address the prevailing issues. In other words, the categorization is based on whether the movements call for a change in the ruling regime or pursue alternative means to resolve the challenges at hand.

Movements of the first type are typically called anti-regime movements, democracy movements, or regime dissident movements (Brancati 2016). Because movements of the second type do not call for regime changes, they typically demand policy reforms to address their grievances. In this paper, I refer to them as policy-based movements. Although large-scale, anti-regime/democracy movements in authoritarian regimes tend to make the headlines and receive scholarly attention, many movements in these contexts focus mainly on policy reforms (e.g.,

Brancati, 2016; Beissinger, 2002; Tufekci, 2017; Zuo and Benford, 1995; Kim, 2000). Policy-based movements and pro-democracy movements have distinct ideologies and identities.

The main goal of pro-democracy movements is to expand democratic institutions and values. Using a minimalist definition of democracy, some scholars define pro-democracy movements as those that demand “countries adopt or uphold democratic elections” (Brancati 2016; Przeworski 1999). Other scholars who embrace a broader concept of democracy consider pro-democracy protesters as those who seek to expand electoral rights and liberal freedoms such as the freedom of assembly and freedom of the press (Coppedge et al. 2011). The definition of pro-democracy movements may vary slightly, but all oppose authoritarian regimes. In other words, they are *anti-regime movements*.

On the contrary, policy movements focus on addressing specific policy issues. Though not an exhaustive list, common examples of outcomes that policy protesters target encompass land reforms (e.g., Trejo 2012, Chau 2019), labor reforms (e.g., Robertson 2010, Beinín 2012), and environmental protection (e.g., Dobson 2012, Steinhardt and Wu 2016). This means that environmental movements, labor strikes, land protests, and unemployment protests fall under the category of policy-based movements because they advocate for changes in environmental, labor, land, and economic policies. It is essential to note that policy-based movements do not necessarily entail economic or material demands. For instance, movements centered on identity or cultural issues may seek policy changes. For example, LGBT movements in Vietnam focus on advocating for health care and educational policies supporting LGBT people rather than directly challenging the political system (Rydstrom, Nguyen, and Hoang, 2023). Similarly, nationalist movements in Tibet call for policies respecting the Tibetan people's culture, language, and traditions (Demick 2021).

It is noteworthy that policy-based movements have the potential to evolve into anti-regime movements. A case in point is the farmers' uprisings in East Germany during the 1950s, which initially targeted local authorities but gradually shifted their focus to oppose the East German regime's agricultural collectivization policies (Thomson 2017). Similarly, the Solidarity movement in Poland started as a labor movement but eventually called for establishing democratic institutions to address labor issues (Kaminski 1999). Such transformations may be influenced by factors such as prolonged unsuccessful activism at the local level and shifts in political opportunities (Beissinger 2002). It is important to clarify that, for this paper, the typology emphasizes a movement's original demands.

This typology does not exclude the movements that focus on policy and democracy issues. Whether it is categorized as a policy, or a pro-democracy movement depends on which issue is more salient as part of their identity. For example, a land movement that advocates for land reforms and sometimes discusses democracy issues should be categorized as a policy-based movement rather than a democracy movement. On the other hand, if a movement focuses on advocating for democratic institutions as solutions for policy issues, it will be classified as a pro-democracy group. Indeed, most pro-democracy groups discuss policy issues related to land, labor, nationalism, and the environment. However, they are called pro-democracy activists by scholars, authoritarian governments, and the public because they advocate for democracy or other significant regime reforms to resolve these issues. In other words, advocating for democratic institutions is a dominant part of their group identity.

This typology also does not imply that members of different groups must not overlap. An individual may join two groups of different natures. If groups have many overlapping members, they are more likely to build coalitions (Thurber 2019).

In authoritarian settings, policy movement participants and pro-democracy advocates occasionally join forces to challenge authoritarian regimes, while at other times, they choose not to collaborate. What affects policy-democracy coalition formation under authoritarian rule? While not addressing this question directly, scholars suggest a few factors such as political opportunity structures, especially the level of state repression (Robertson 2010), economic conditions (Brancati 2016), and a “spark moment” (Kuran 1991), international factors (Levitsky and Way 2010), the intensity of division between opposition groups and the authoritarian government (Selçuk and Hekimci 2020), and pre-existing social network ties (Mateo 2022; Thurber 2019). While these factors are undoubtedly important, they do not fully account for the inconsistency in the formation of democracy-policy movement coalitions under authoritarian rule. For instance, even when the political environment is a significant factor, it remains unclear why, under the same environment, democracy-policy coalitions occur at times but not at other times.

Theory and Hypotheses: Blame Attribution and Social Mass Base

This section develops hypotheses on how a policy-based movement's blame attribution and social mass base affect its decision to cooperate with pro-democracy groups to advocate for significant regime reforms to address policy issues.

Blame attribution

As previously discussed, policy movements and pro-democracy groups typically do not align in terms of ideology. Building on Mayer's argument (2009) that ideologically distinct groups are more inclined to cooperate when they identify a 'common adversary' in the political arena, I emphasize the significance of blame attribution or targets of blame in coalition building. Studies on authoritarian politics also emphasize the pivotal role of blame attribution in shaping voters'

behavior, influencing democratization, and determining participation in protests (Beazer and Reuter 2019; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Boix 2003; Brancati 2016; Thomson 2017; Javeline 2003; Jay, Chen, and Cai 2020; O'Brien and Li 2006; Salehyan and Stewart 2017).

While an authoritarian regime consists of various political actors, what matters most is whether a policy movement targets the *national government* or the *subnational government*. Gibson (2013) defines a country as the interplay between national and subnational jurisdictions. The national government or the central government, usually based in the capital, is responsible for national laws and policies, of which there is only one in a country. In contrast, subnational governments or local governments refer to those below the national government, encompassing entities like state, provincial, municipal, district, city, and communal governments.¹

Focusing on the distinction between national and subnational governments in understanding movement coalitions under authoritarian rule is crucial for several reasons. First, “the vertical division of power is essential to understanding the operation of authoritarian regimes” (Chen 2017, p.314). In any country, even in a federal system where subnational governments have more autonomy, the national government (i.e., the federal government) intervenes regularly and substantively in the affairs of subnational governments (Gibson 2013). Second, subnational governments are typically empowered to implement policy and other policy goals. Third, empirical evidence suggests that citizens under authoritarian rule are more likely to discern *national and subnational* governments than different organizations at the same government level. For example, Chinese citizens can differentiate governments at different levels, as shown by the findings on

¹ In this paper, "national governments" and "central government" are used synonymously, while "subnational governments" and "local governments" are also used interchangeably.

"hierarchical trust" (Li 2016). Similarly, Russian citizens can differentiate between regional and central governments, which affects their voting decisions (Beazer and Reuter 2019).

Making the public distinguish between the national and subnational governments is an autocrat's intention. Autocrats portray unity and solidarity among central leaders as a demonstration of regime strength (Schedler and Hoffmann 2016), making it challenging for citizens to discern differences among various central actors. Conversely, many authoritarian governments publicly address measures aimed at enhancing central oversight over local government officials (Lorentzen 2013; Egorov, Guriev, and Sonin 2009; Chen and Xu 2017; Stromseth, Maleskey, and Gueorguiev 2017), thereby emphasizing the differentiation between national and subnational governments.

Some policy movements in authoritarian regimes attribute blame to local officials because they genuinely believe that their grievances are localized or that doing so will minimize the risk of repression. Given the limited nature of their demands, these policy protesters may employ rightful resistance strategies or other nonconfrontational techniques, deliberately avoiding direct challenges to the central authority (O'Brien and Li 2006). In contrast, other policy-based movements contend that central authorities should be held accountable for their grievances, either because the issues are inherently linked to the national government or due to a shift in blame attribution from local to national authorities. For instance, climate change activists in Russia advocate for democracy to combat climate change, blaming President Vladimir Putin for what they perceive as insufficient efforts in environmental protection. Similarly, anti-Chinese protests in Vietnam often demand the Chinese government's respect for Vietnam's sovereignty while concurrently criticizing the Vietnamese government for tolerating or even condoning aggressive

Chinese activities (Kerkvliet 2019). Likewise, nationalist activists in China frequently censure their government for being perceived as "soft" toward Japan (J. C. Weiss 2014).

The perception of blame for grievances within a movement can evolve. Some policy movements may initially focus on local authorities but later redirect their grievances toward the national government and the political regime. This shift in target could result from persisting unaddressed grievances, ineffective activism at the local level, and changes in the broader political environment. However, to maximize the likelihood of attracting others to join a movement, it is crucial to identify a specific culprit at a given time (Javeline 2003). Attributing blame nonspecifically makes it challenging for a movement to recruit participants and garner support from bystanders and sympathizers.

I expect that if a policy-based movement attributes some of the blame to the national government, it is more likely to cooperate with pro-democracy movements. Why?

First, blaming the national government narrows the ideological gap between the two types of movements, specifically in terms of the proposed solution to address the policy issues. Pro-democracy activists emphasize that the country's existing problems result from failures at the national level, such as a broader lack of democracy, transparency, or freedom of speech, and significant shortcomings of central policies.² In their view, even issues linked to local governance problems lie in the national government's failure. For example, in Malaysia, regime dissidents often perceive that indigenous land, labor, and environmental issues result from the federal government's disrespect for human rights and repressive laws (M. Weiss 2003). Similarly, Cambodian pro-democracy groups argue that the illegal appropriation of land, a high level of

² They may also blame other actors, such as local authorities, enterprises, etc., but in their view, it is all because of the shortcomings of the political regime.

corruption, and depletion of natural resources result from a political regime where human and labor rights are not respected, and there is little freedom of expression and democracy (Checa 2018). Thus, solutions proposed by these groups to resolve policy issues typically focus on adopting significant regime reforms. As an illustration, many pro-democracy activists in Vietnam argue that land issues can only be resolved by allowing private ownership of land and multiparty elections (Kerkvliet 2019). While not all pro-democracy groups seek radical solutions, such as overthrowing the regime, all want significant reforms at the regime level.

Logically, when a policy movement highlights that its grievances are linked to problems at the national level, it may perceive that reforms at the national government may be necessary to address its grievances. For example, suppose a land movement blames the national government. In that case, it accepts that its grievances result from the failure of central policies and regime governance, which means that changes at the regime level are needed. How can we address land disputes if not reforming the central government in this situation? When a policy-based movement reasons that changes at the national level are needed, it is more likely to work with democracy groups.

Second, directing grievances toward the national government is more resource-intensive compared to targeting subnational governments. This is because the movement is challenging the most powerful political elites who hold a monopoly on the use of violence against citizens. Consequently, movements focusing on the national government require substantial financial and human resources. It is possible that movements blaming national governments seek collaboration with pro-democracy groups to leverage their resources, such as connections with political elites, expertise in legal document interpretation, and access to international support and funding. In essence, forming cross-movement coalitions enhances the collective strength of these movements.

Despite the underlying mechanism, existing research suggests that when a movement attributes responsibility to the regime and national leaders, it tends to oppose the entire political system and advocate for radical demands (Thomson 2017; J. C. Weiss 2014). Case study research indicates that activists within a movement are more inclined to endorse democracy as a solution when they believe the national government is accountable for their grievances. For instance, in China, pro-democracy advocates occasionally join forces with nationalist activists to protest the government's foreign policies because both movements assign blame to the central government and view democracy as a remedy for nationalist issues (J. C. Weiss 2014). In Malaysia, indigenous land activists who attribute blame to the national government call for increased freedom of the press and respect for human rights as means to address land issues. Recognizing that disputes perceived to be connected to the national government or regime necessitate substantial reforms at the central level, authoritarian regimes often try to find a scapegoat (Field et al., 2018; Rozenas and Stukal, 2019).

Conversely, in the case of a policy-based protest attributing blame to local authorities, I contend that forming a coalition with a pro-democracy group is unlikely. This stems from differences in the targets of blame, which exacerbate the ideological gap between the policy-based movement and the pro-democracy group in terms of proposed solutions to the issues at hand. Resolving disputes and problems associated with local authorities' misconduct may necessitate changes at the local level, such as improved policy implementation, rather than sweeping reforms at the regime level (O'Brien and Li 2006). When policy movements focus on the local government, their demands typically revolve around limited concessions from the regime, such as land compensation, higher wages, or a halt to environmentally destructive projects. Indeed, advocating for regime changes to address local affairs can harm public opinion toward local movements

(Truong 2023). Insight from my focus group discussions with students and professionals in Vietnam indicates that when individuals perceive a policy failure resulting from local governance issues, they resist significant regime reforms, deeming such solutions too extreme.

This logic leads to the following hypothesis:

H1: Support for a policy-democracy movement coalition will be higher among members of policy-based movements that blame the national government for their grievances than those that blame the subnational governments.

Social mass base

Pro-democracy groups are typically deemed illegal in authoritarian regimes due to their anti-regime nature. Many authoritarian governments tolerate policy-based movements to a certain extent while harshly repressing pro-democracy groups (O'Brien and Li 2006; Kerkvliet 2019). Consequently, forming a coalition with a pro-democracy group can expose a policy movement to severe state repression. Therefore, the willingness of a policy-based movement to cooperate with a democracy group should be contingent on whether such collaboration increases the risk of repression. Drawing on the literature on protest mass bases, I posit that the social class to which the policy protest potentially appeals influences their perception of state repression when forming a coalition with a democracy group.

A policy-based movement usually emerges in response to a specific conflict at a particular location. For instance, when the Malaysian government announced the Penang South Reclamation project in 2019, aiming to create three artificial islands off the southern coast of Penang Island, an environmental movement surfaced to mobilize public opposition. Similarly, the Dong Tam land movement in Vietnam arose after the government decided to reclaim approximately 70 hectares

of agricultural land in Dong Tam commune, Hanoi. This indicates that the mass base for a policy protest typically consists of constituents from the same social class. For example, the mass base of a land movement often includes farmers from the same village or those facing similar grievances nationwide. A labor movement typically garners support from and involves workers at a specific company. An environmental movement advocating for a halt to the construction of an environmentally destructive dam appeals to residents directly affected by the project.

Nevertheless, there are instances when policy movements manage to resonate with cross-class constituencies. In other words, protesters may find that their grievances strike a chord with social groups not directly impacted by the specific conflict or the overarching policy issue. For instance, the 2016 mass fish deaths along the coastal provinces in Vietnam primarily affected fishermen, yet the incident garnered support from diverse social classes, including workers, farmers, and the professional middle class (Nguyen and Datzberger 2018). Similarly, the unemployment movement is typically broad, encompassing individuals from various sectors, locations, and backgrounds beyond those directly affected by the problem. Several factors can contribute to policy movements appealing to cross-class constituencies. First, many issues, such as nationalism, the environment, and unemployment, may resonate with people of different backgrounds. Second, if an issue remains unresolved over an extended period, its impact can gradually extend to diverse social classes beyond the initially affected group.

Drawing on the literature on contentious politics in authoritarian regimes, I argue that if a policy-based movement can appeal to cross-class constituencies, it will perceive that working with pro-democracy activists will reduce the probability of state repression. Cross-class constituencies lessen the chances of state repression for a few reasons. First, if a policy-based protest draws support from more than one social class or group, it would be harder for the state to justify its

repression. This is because the state would have a more challenging time portraying a cross-class movement as an outgroup and finding allies against them (Goldstone 2011). Second, if a policy-based movement appeals to more than one social class, it has safety in number. Cross-class movements are typically larger than those that draw support from one group, making it harder for the state to repress them (Brancati 2016). Furthermore, if a policy-based movement can draw support from more than one group, it signals that the grievances are shared and widespread, making provocative demands, such as significant regime reforms, more justified (L. H. Ong 2022). Widespread grievances shared by multiple social groups also weaken the authoritarian government's legitimacy. Thus, increasing repression may undermine the government's legitimacy even further.

H2: Support for a policy-democracy coalition will be higher among members of policy-based movements that potentially appeal to cross-class constituencies than movements that appeal to only one social class.

Interaction between blame attribution and social mass base

There is reason to believe that protesters consider both the congruence in targets of blame and the possibility of state repression when deciding whether to join a pro-democracy group. Blaming the national government is necessary for a policy-based movement to cooperate with pro-democracy activists. As mentioned earlier, attributing blame to the national government narrows the ideological gap between policy-based movements and pro-democracy activists, fostering mutual agreement on the need for changes in the national government and the political system. However, congruence in blame attribution may not be sufficient, as it does not guarantee immunity from

state repression when working with pro-democracy groups; indeed, targeting the national government may elevate the risk of state repression.

Therefore, the movement must also perceive that advocating for more radical solutions does not significantly increase the likelihood of a government crackdown. I posit that for the movement blaming the central government, it is essential to appeal to diverse social classes to safeguard the coalition against harsh state repression. Anecdotal evidence supports this possibility, revealing that a coalition between a pro-democracy group and a policy movement blaming the national government might not materialize if the latter resonates only with a specific social class. For instance, the Duong Noi land movement in Hanoi, Vietnam, eventually directed its grievances toward the central government after years of protesting against local authorities but did not seem to collaborate with pro-democracy advocates (Kerkvliet 2019). This could be attributed to the fact that their grievances only resonated with farmers and residents facing land eviction in the immediate neighborhood. This reasoning leads to the following hypothesis:

H3: Support for a policy-democracy coalition will be higher among members of policy-based movements that blame the national government and appeal to cross-class constituencies relative to all other movements.

Vietnam and Malaysia

I test these arguments using survey experiments in Vietnam and Malaysia. Doing experiments in two contexts allows me to examine whether the effect of a movement's blame attribution and social mass base on coalition formation is general or dependent on specific context. On the one hand, discovering similar patterns in two countries would provide strong evidence that broader

processes are in play (Lupu and Wallace 2019). Conversely, recognizing significant differences between contexts is a crucial step in thinking about the specific factors that might explain variations in the development of cross-movement coalitions.

I choose these two countries for a few reasons. First, both countries have experienced many social movements dealing with a diverse range of policy issues related to land, the environment, and labor. Social movements play a prominent role in their domestic politics. In Vietnam, for example, land disputes and environmental movements have affected the development of major policies (Kerkvliet 2019) and even the regime's leadership arrangement (Truong 2022). In Malaysia, citizens have "critical engagement with the state, sometimes through opposition parties but often through advocacy-oriented social movements" (Weiss and Hassan 2003, p.6).

Second, the national governments of both countries consider pro-democracy movements illegal and unlawful; thus, building coalitions with pro-democracy groups is costly for movements. This suggests that decisions to join democracy advocates should be strategic. Indeed, within each country, there is variation in the formation of coalitions between pro-democracy advocates and policy movements. For example, some scholars suggest that in Vietnam, anti-China nationalism and environmentalism create opportunities for collaboration between pro-democracy and policy activists, whereas land and labor movements typically act alone (Nguyen and Datzberger 2018). In Malaysia, corruption and environmental issues are more likely to facilitate democracy-policy group collaboration than other policy issues. However, it is essential to highlight that within the same movement in both countries, the collaboration between pro-democracy advocates and policy activists is sometimes present and sometimes absent.

Although these countries are similar in the ways described above, differences in institutional features, ethnic diversity, and the strength of pro-democracy movements may affect

opportunities for opposition groups to build coalitions. Institutionally, Malaysia has been considered one of the most enduring competitive authoritarians, where reasonably free elections for federal and state legislatures have been held since independence (Levitsky and Way 2010). Unlike Malaysia, Vietnam is a single-party regime in which opposition parties are banned, and the Communist Party has dominated Vietnamese politics since 1975. Vietnamese citizens have less space to organize to oppose the regime than their counterparts in Malaysia. Malaysia and Vietnam also differ in the way the government is structured. Malaysia is a federal system where the subnational governments, by definition, have more autonomy in policy-making and implementation processes. Vietnam, on the other hand, is a unitary system in which the national government dictates policies and attempts to intervene regularly in local affairs.

Additionally, while the pro-democracy movement in Vietnam is characterized by relative weakness and fragmentation, preventing large-scale street demonstrations for democracy (Thayer 2014), contemporary Malaysian politics notably features robust, large-scale pro-democracy movements that draw in diverse social groups (L. H. Ong 2022). Another difference between the two countries is the level of ethnic heterogeneity. Vietnam is a relatively homogenous country, while Malaysia is characterized by communalism, which may also affect perceptions about democracy, democracy movements, and coalition-building strategies.

These differences allow us an opportunity to assess how the emergence of movement coalitions may depend on these specific contexts.

Research design

To test my hypotheses, I conducted online survey experiments involving a sample of 1,200 Vietnamese Internet users and 1,641 Malaysian Internet users. The surveys were administered

through the Qualtrics platform on an online panel provided by the TGM Research company. Data was collected in July 2023 for Vietnam and November 2023 for Malaysia. TGM Research recruited the respondents through local market research firms with proprietary survey panels. To mitigate the concern that the sample is skewed towards specific populations, I set quotas for groups typically underrepresented in online survey experiments, such as rural respondents, women, and older residents. In Malaysia, I also set quotas on religion and ethnicity to ensure these characteristics are relatively representative of the population.

Regarding the survey instrument, before the treatment, all online respondents were first asked several questions on demographic characteristics. Immediately before the experiment, respondents were asked to list two major challenges facing their country. After these questions, all respondents were told that they had been randomly assigned to a fictitious environmental group based on their answers. The group was called “*Let’s Protect Dong An River*” in the Vietnamese survey and “*Melur River Guardians*” in the Malaysian survey. The environmental movements advocated for attention to an environmental issue in the hypothetical province of Dong An (Vietnam) and the Jelantik Valley State (Malaysia). They were told to imagine that they were active members of this group. After that, all respondents read a *Facebook post* about the origin and mission of their group:

Table 1: Texts about the origin and mission of the hypothetical environmental movement

<p>Vietnam: Let’s Protect Dong An River</p>	<p>We, residents living around Dong An River, organized the group “Let’s Protect Dong An River” to call for attention and protection of the main river of Dong An province.</p> <p>In August 2020, Dong An River became polluted, leading to the mass deaths of fish and other animals. We discovered</p>
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	<p>that An Xing, a foreign industrial factory, released chemicals directly into the river, creating severe pollution. As residents living near the river, we believe that this crisis would result in loss of livelihood and health degradation and would disrupt the region's delicate ecosystem.</p> <p>We organized the group's Facebook page to share opinions, organize debates, and mobilize public support to address this environmental issue.</p>
<p>Malaysia: Melur River Guardians</p>	<p>We, the residents living around the Sungai Melur River, have established the "Melur River Guardians" group to protect the main river of the Jelantik Valley State.</p> <p>In October 2020, a dam was proposed to be constructed in the Sungai Melur River to harness the river's water for hydroelectric power. The project poses significant environmental damage to the Sungai Melur River. As residents living near the river, we believe that the dam would result in the flooding of a large portion of the valley, submerging pristine forests, and disrupting the delicate ecosystem of the region.</p> <p>We organized the group's Facebook page to share opinions, organize debates, and mobilize public support to stop the dam construction project to protect the Sungai Melur River.</p>

Figure 1: An example of a Facebook post about the origin and mission of the group in Malaysia



Note: In Malaysia, the survey was conducted in both Malay and English, while in Vietnam, it was only administered in Vietnamese. A similar Facebook post was created for Vietnamese respondents.

I chose to focus on an environmental movement because environmental issues have become prominent in both Malaysia and Vietnam. Environmental protests have become much

more frequent and brought together people from different social, economic, and political backgrounds in both countries. Surprisingly, in both countries, collaboration between pro-democracy advocates and environmentalists is inconsistent, even when addressing environmental issues—it is absent at times and present at other times. For example, in Vietnam, while some environmental movements, such as the "tree-felling" and the mass fish deaths movements, saw the collaboration between environmentalists and pro-democracy activists, many others were localized (Bui 2016). I used Facebook posts as treatments to increase the realism of the experiment. In these countries, many social movements use Facebook to deliver messages to the public and their members.

Note that I use hypothetical instead of real-life situations so that my analysis will not be influenced by respondents' existing beliefs and perceptions of an event that did happen. Additionally, a hypothetical dispute also helps reduce the sensitivity of the study. However, to make it realistic, my examples are designed to be as similar to real movements in Vietnam and Malaysia as possible. Therefore, depending on the context, I decided to choose two different environmental issues. In Vietnam, respondents are more likely to resonate with environmental issues related to pollution caused by a foreign factory's discharge of toxic chemicals than other concerns. In Malaysia, environmental issues associated with construction projects that potentially threaten the environment are likely to resonate more with respondents.

The success of the experiment depends on whether respondents meaningfully identify with these fictitious groups. Previous studies have shown that individuals can identify with groups randomly assigned to them in experimental settings (Tajfel et al. 1971). This holds even in challenging or sensitive situations (Nugent 2020). After reading the Facebook post about their group's mission, respondents were also asked to brainstorm about the group to which they were

assigned. This task was intended to increase the salience of this group in each respondent's mind before continuing with the experiment. Respondents were asked to write down a slogan for the group. Most respondents provided a slogan in line with the environmental issues. For example, several Vietnamese respondents wrote, "Stop polluting our river, Xi Ang factory!" Another popular slogan is "Together we protect the purity and greatness of the community." In the Malaysian survey, some respondents wrote, "We want Melur River, We hate dam construction." Some other relevant slogans include "Live with Nature," and "Give us back the Melur." When asked about why or why not they supported their group collaborating with a pro-democracy group at the end of the survey, many respondents in both countries referred to the fictitious groups as "my group." This suggests that respondents understood their assignment, found it believable, and could construct a group narrative consistent with their assignment.

In addition to learning about their group assignment, all respondents were told that other people were randomly assigned to a fictitious pro-democracy group called "*For a Freer Vietnam*" in Vietnam and "*Malaysian Democracy Guardians*" in Malaysia. After reading about their group, all respondents were provided with the following information about the "*For a Freer Vietnam*" group and the "*Malaysian Democracy Guardians*" group on a Facebook page by the pro-democracy group. Note that I did not mention free and fair elections in Vietnam for sensitivity reasons. While pro-democracy activists sometimes call for multiparty elections to resolve environmental issues, such a demand is considered highly radical, extreme, and sensitive in Vietnam. Therefore, to ensure that my survey did not breach any Vietnamese laws, I focused on the elements of democratic institutions, the discussion of which the government is more tolerant.

Table 3: Information about the pro-democracy group

Contexts	The pro-democracy group information
Malaysia	<p>We have organized the "Malaysian Democracy Guardians" group, which is dedicated to promoting democracy in Malaysia and making our nation a better place for everyone.</p> <p>Our mission is straightforward: we believe that clean, free, and fair elections, freedom of the press, and freedom of association are essential for addressing the pressing issues confronting Malaysia, such as corruption, environmental concerns, and human rights. We firmly hold that, as these issues often stem from governance challenges at the federal level, democracy serves as the cornerstone for finding effective solutions to these pressing challenges.</p>
Vietnam	<p>We have organized the "For a Freer Vietnam" group, which is dedicated to promoting democracy in Vietnam and making our nation a better place for everyone.</p> <p>Our mission is straightforward: we believe that democracy, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and freedom of association are essential for addressing the pressing issues confronting Vietnam, such as corruption, environmental concerns, land, and human rights. We firmly hold that, as these issues often stem from governance challenges at the national level, democracy serves as the cornerstone for finding effective solutions to these pressing challenges.</p>

Next, respondents were randomly assigned to one of two treatments regarding blame attribution. In one group, the environmental movement blames the national government, while in the other group, the environmental movement blames the subnational government. Table 4 summarizes the information about the blame treatment.

Table 4: Blame attribution treatment.

	Blame the national government.	Blame the subnational government.
Malaysia	<p>RESPONSIBILITY OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT</p> <p>This environmental issue is linked to the governance of the federal government, which is located in Putrajaya, south of the capital city of Kuala Lumpur.</p> <p>The lack of transparency within the political system has raised concerns about allegations of corruption within central authorities.</p> <p>The federal authorities, in cahoots with investors, approved the dam construction project, disregarding the significance of public input and participation in the project and dismissing residents' valid concerns and objections regarding the project's social and environmental impacts.</p>	<p>RESPONSIBILITY OF THE JELANTIK VALLEY STATE GOVERNMENT</p> <p>This environmental issue is tied to the governance of the Jelantik Valley state government.</p> <p>Authorities within the Jelantik Valley state government in cahoots with investors, proposed the dam construction project, disregarding the significance of public input and participation in the project and dismissing residents' valid concerns and objections regarding the project's social and environmental impacts."</p>
Vietnam	<p>RESPONSIBILITY OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT</p> <p>This environmental issue is linked to the governance of the central government located in Hanoi.</p> <p>The lack of transparency in the political system created opportunities for corruption among central authorities. Many central authorities were accused of receiving bribes to allow An Xing company to release chemicals into the Dong An River.</p>	<p>RESPONSIBILITY OF THE DONG AN PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT</p> <p>This environmental issue is linked to the governance of the Dong An provincial government.</p> <p>Many provincial authorities were accused of receiving bribes to allow An Xing company to release chemicals into the Dong An River.</p>

In the analysis, I consider those in the group that blames the subnational government as the baseline group, given that this is the most common actor condemned by policy-based movements. In addition, because blame attribution is an essential element of a movement's ideology, as a member of the fictitious group, a respondent needs to be aware of the actor to whom their group

attributes blame. It is important to note that due to variations in terminology for national and subnational governments in Vietnam and Malaysia, I carefully selected government levels that align with the respective contexts. In Malaysia, the national government is referred to as the federal government, while in Vietnam, it is termed the national or central government. Similarly, for subnational governments, I chose the level immediately below the national government—state government in Malaysia and the provincial government in Vietnam.

Figure 2: An example of a Facebook that blames the national government.



Next, respondents were further randomized into two groups regarding the mass base the movement appeals to. One group was provided with information on a Facebook post that the environmental protest only negatively affected the lives of fisherfolks. In contrast, the other group read that this environmental issue affected diverse social groups, from fishermen to the youth, the working class, and the middle class. In the analysis, I consider those in the one social class treatment as the baseline group.

Table 5: Social mass base treatment.

	One class mass base	Cross-class mass base
Malaysia	<p>FISHERFOLKS' LIVELIHOODS WILL BE AFFECTED</p> <p>The construction of the dam is poised to have a profound impact on local fishermen. The alteration of the river's flow and the submergence of large areas may lead to a significant decline in fish populations, affecting fishermen's catches and income.</p>	<p>EVERYONE WILL BE AFFECTED</p> <p>The construction of the dam is poised to have a profound impact on diverse social groups, including fishermen, the middle class, the working class, and the youth. The alteration of the river's flow and the submergence of large areas may lead to a significant decline in fish populations, affecting fishermen's catches and income.</p> <p>The working class, often involved in manual labor and agriculture, may experience job displacement and reduced access to natural resources.</p> <p>The middle class and youth, dependent on the valley's unique environment for recreational and cultural activities, could see their way of life disrupted, affecting their overall quality of life and opportunities for leisure and education.</p>
Vietnam	<p>FISHERFOLKS' LIVELIHOODS WILL BE AFFECTED</p> <p>Mass fish deaths are poised to have a profound impact on local fishermen.</p> <p>The depletion of fish stock means a direct loss of income for fishermen, as they rely on fishing as their primary source of livelihood. The decline in the fish population can result in</p>	<p>EVERYONE WILL BE AFFECTED</p> <p>Mass fish deaths are poised to have a profound impact on diverse social groups, including fishermen, the middle class, the working class, and the youth.</p> <p>The depletion of fish stock means a direct loss of income for fishermen, as they rely on fishing as their primary source of livelihood. The decline in the fish population can result in</p>

	decreased catches, leading to financial strain on the fisherfolk and their families.	decreased catches, leading to financial strain on the fisherfolk and their families. The working class, often involved in manual labor and agriculture, may experience job displacement and reduced access to natural resources. The middle class and youth could see their way of life disrupted, affecting their overall quality of life and opportunities for leisure and education.
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In general, I employed a 2 x 2 factorial design. Table 6 presents all the experimental conditions.

Table 6: Experimental conditions

	One class mass base	Cross-class mass base
Blame the national government	Condition 1 (N =277 in Vietnam N= 391 in Malaysia)	Condition 2 (N=271 in Vietnam N= 431 in Malaysia)
Blame the subnational government	Condition 3 (N=276 in Vietnam N= 429 in Malaysia)	Condition 4 (N=266 in Vietnam N=390 in Malaysia)

Note: Table 1 shows the different treatment groups. For the nature of blame attribution, H1 predicts that support for building a coalition with the pro-democracy group will be higher in the group that blames the national government relative to the group that blames the subnational government. For the nature of the social mass base, H2 predicts that support for building a coalition with the pro-democracy group will be higher in the group appealing to cross-class constituencies relative to the group that appeals to one class. Regarding the interaction between the two variables, H3 predicts that the group that blames the central government and appeals to cross-class constituencies (Condition 2) will have higher support for building coalitions with the democracy group than all the other groups.

The primary dependent variable asked the extent to which respondents supported their group in building a coalition with the pro-democracy group to advocate for significant regime

reforms to address environmental issues. The responses to the questions are on a six-point Likert scale from completely unsupportive to completely supportive.³

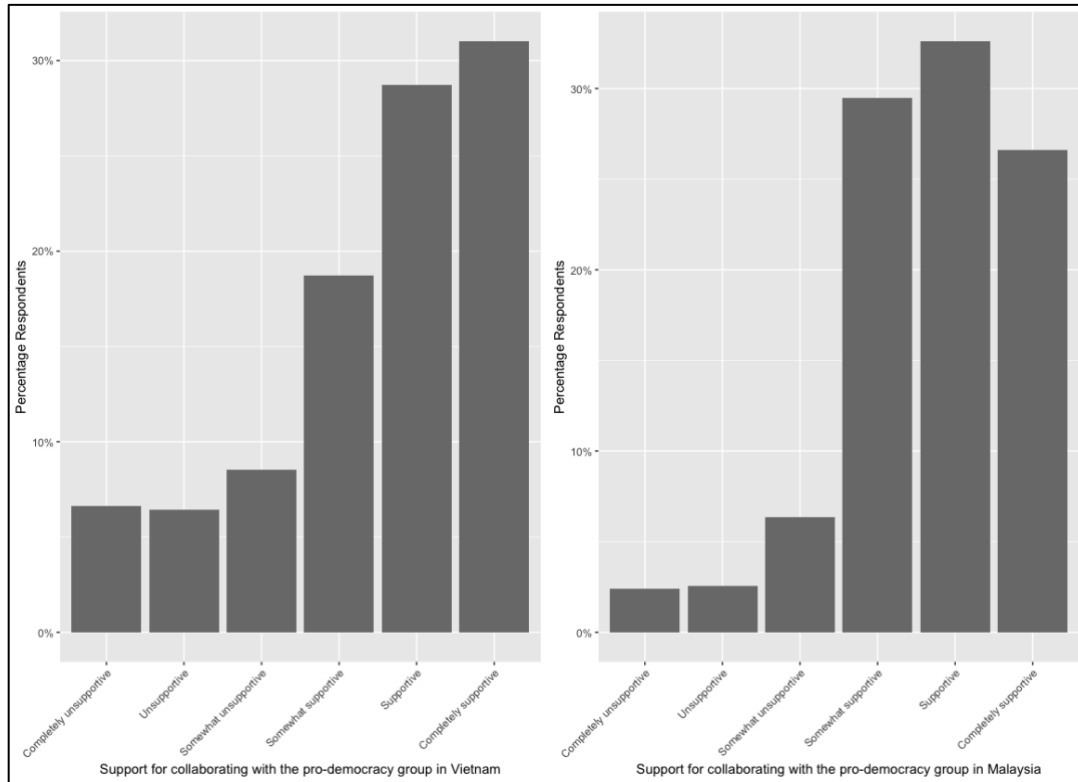
1. *To what extent do you support or not support your group, Let's Protect Dong An River/Melur River Guardians, to build a coalition with the pro-democracy group, For a Freer Vietnam/Malaysian Democracy Guardians, to advocate for regime reforms to address environmental issues?*

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the main dependent variable. Many respondents expressed support for their group to build a coalition with the pro-democracy activists in both countries. This helps ensure that preference falsification should be a minor concern because respondents were willing to say they supported coalitions.

To probe possible mechanisms, I asked an open-ended question, asking respondents to explain why they supported or did not support their group collaborating with the pro-democracy group to address the environmental issues.

³ (1) completely unsupportive; (2) unsupportive; (3) somewhat unsupportive; (4) somewhat supportive; (5) supportive; (6) completely supportive.

Figure 3: Distribution of Main Dependent Variable



Regarding pre-treatment covariates, I measure gender, age, political affiliation, level of interest in politics, education level, risk acceptance, degree of national pride, self-reported income level, perception of economic conditions, whether their parents are involved in farming activities, and whether they are engaged in farming activities. In Malaysia, in addition to these variables, I also measure the extent to which they trust the government,⁴ religion, and ethnicity.

Regarding covariate balance, as Table 7A and Table 7B below suggest, there is balance across nearly all covariates with regard to blame attribution, except for Communist Party membership in Vietnam and ethnicity in Malaysia. In the survey in Vietnam, the treatment that blames the national government has slightly more party members than the treatment that blames

⁴ In the survey in Vietnam, I decided not to include a question on government trust because previous surveys in Vietnam showed little variation in responses to this question.

the subnational government. In Malaysia, the national blame treatment has slightly fewer Chinese respondents. Appendix 1 shows the balance across the randomized social mass base groups. Again, there are no significant balance issues, but to ensure this is not a problem, I run my analyses using these covariates as controls in my robustness checks.

Table 7A: Balance of Potential Covariates Across Blame Attribution Treatment in Vietnam

Variables	Blame the national government	Blame the subnational government	Test
Age	33 (11)	33 (11)	F=0.104
Gender			$\chi^2 = 0.17$
• Female	45.6%	47 %	
• Male	54.4%	53%	
Province			$\chi^2=0.289$
• Major City	60 %	61.8%	
• Others	40 %	38.2%	
Educational level			$\chi^2=0.1714$
• College Degree	66.4 %	70.3%	
• No College Degree	33.6 %	29.7%	
Income level	5.443 (1.766)	5.494 (1.718)	F=0.234
Party membership			$\chi^2=3.897^*$
• No	76.1 %	81.2 %	
• Yes	23.9 %	18.8 %	
Interest in politics			F=0.671
• High interest	64%	63%	
• Low interest	36%	37%	
Pride	5.4 (1.1)	5.3 (1.0)	$\chi^2=0.107$
Risk acceptance	4.1 (1.4)	4 (1.3)	F=0.858
Parents involved in farming.			$\chi^2=0.172$
• Yes	60.6 %	62%	
• No	39.4 %	38 %	
Self-involved in farming			$\chi^2=0.31$
• Yes	52 %	53.9 %	
• No	48 %	46.1 %	

Observations	548	542
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Table 7B: Balance of Potential Covariates Across Blame Attribution Treatment in Malaysia

Variables	Blame the national government	Blame the subnational government	Test
Age	36 (11)	36 (11)	F=0.103
Gender			$\chi^2 = 2.297$
• Female	53%	58 %	
• Male	47%	42%	
State			$\chi^2 = 2.361$
• East Malaysia	17 %	14%	
• West Malaysia	83 %	86%	
Educational level			$\chi^2 = 0.046$
• College Degree	56 %	57%	
• No College Degree	44 %	43%	
Income level	2.6 (1.2)	2.7 (1.3)	F=1.996
Interest in politics	6.4 (2.3)	6.4 (2.3)	F=0.361
Pride	8.4 (2.2)	8.4 (1.9)	$\chi^2 = 0.048$
Risk acceptance	7.2 (2.1)	7.2 (2)	F=0.004
			$\chi^2 = 0.221$
Parents involved in farming.			
• Yes	42 %	43%	
• No	58 %	57 %	
			$\chi^2 = 0.438$
Self-involved in farming			
• Yes	33 %	35 %	
• No	67 %	65 %	
			$\chi^2 = 1.882$
Religion			
• Islam	68%	64%	
• Other	32%	36%	
Ethnicity			$\chi^2 = 15.633^{***}$
• Chinese	19%	25%	
• Indian	4%	4%	
• Malay Bumiputera	66%	62%	
• Other	11%	9%	

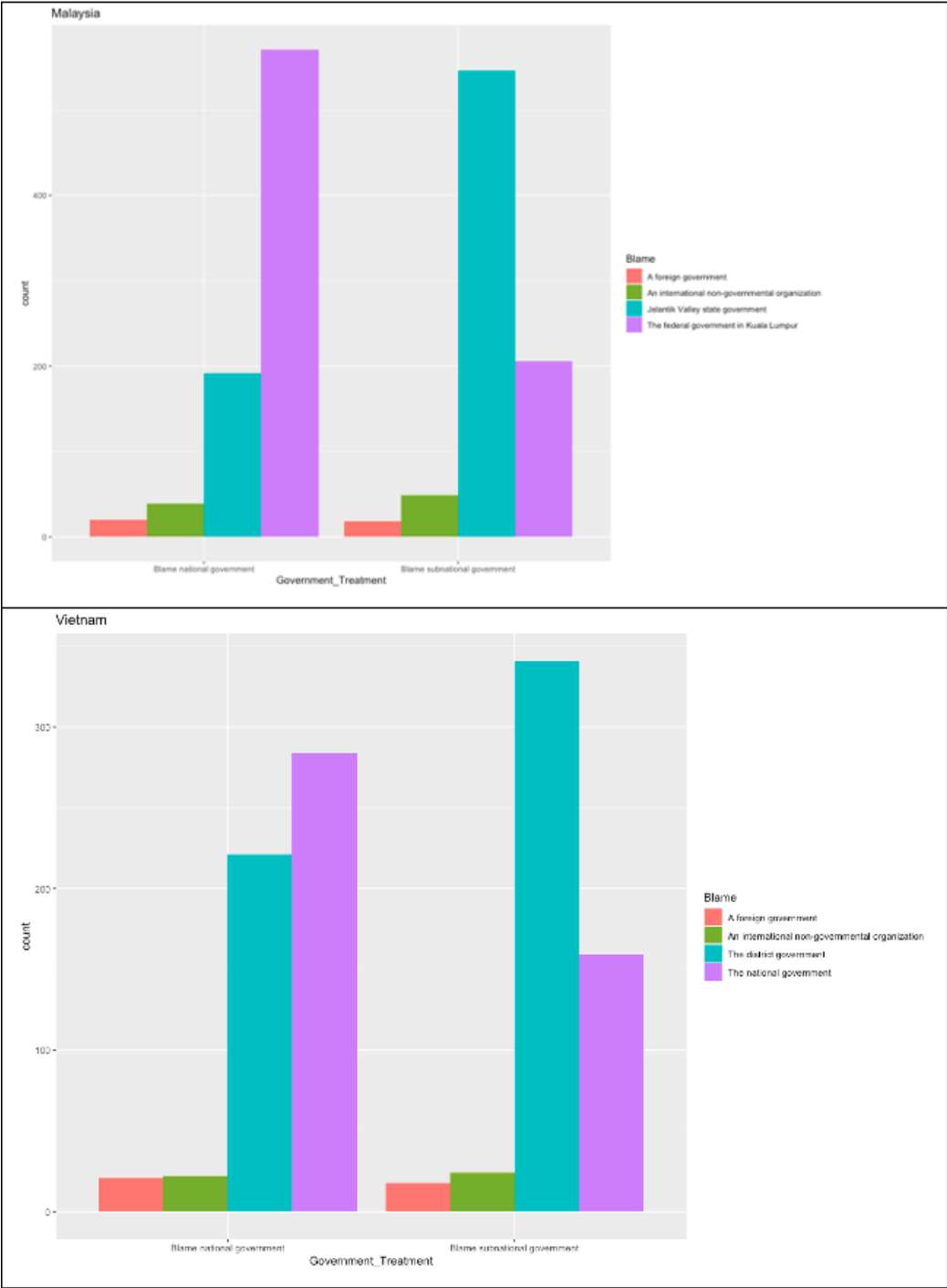
Observations	822	819
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Note: This table shows the means of the different covariates according to whether respondents are assigned to groups that blame the central government or the local government. The difference column shows the F-value of an F-Test of differences in means of continuous variables and the χ^2 value of a Chi-Square test of differences of categorical variables between treatment groups. Statistical significance markers: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Results

Before looking at the results, I conducted a manipulation check to ensure respondents paid attention to the treatment. After receiving the treatment, I asked respondents about the name of the hypothetical province/state, why their group was formed, the level of government that their group blamed for the environmental issue, and the social classes affected by the crisis. Regarding blame attribution, Figure 4 illustrates that a majority of respondents accurately recalled the level of government being blamed. In the national group in Vietnam, a significant proportion believed their group blamed the local government. To ensure this is not a problem, I rerun the analysis, dropping all the respondents who did not pass this manipulation check in the robustness checks. The manipulation checks in Appendix 2 shows that the post-treatment responses revealed that the majority could accurately recall the province's name and the rationale behind the group's formation. However, in the social class treatment, a notable number of respondents believed that the environmental crisis would impact diverse social groups. This might suggest a consensus that environmental movements generally appeal to a broad range of groups. In the robustness checks, I will drop those who did not pass the manipulation check regarding social mass base treatment.

Figure 4: Recollecting the level of government being blamed



I conducted separate data analyses for Vietnam and Malaysia. To test the direct effect of blame attribution (H1), I used an OLS regression model with support for building a coalition with

the pro-democracy group as the outcome and the randomized blame attribution treatments as the only independent variables. To test the direct effect of the social mass base (H2), I ran an OLS regression model with support for coalition building as the outcome and the randomized social class treatments as the only independent variables. I then ran an OLS regression model in which both the blame attribution and social class are included as predictors of the dependent variable to check if the effect of each factor changes when controlling for the other. In the main analysis, I left all respondents in the sample regardless of whether they passed the manipulation check to avoid bias in the results (Aronow, Baron, and Pinson 2019; Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018). Therefore, this is an “intention to treat” (ITT) design.

Table 8: The effect of blame attribution and social mass base on coalition support

VARIABLES	SUPPORT FOR BUILDING COALITION WITH THE PRO-DEMOCRACY GROUP					
	Vietnam			Malaysia		
	Model 1a	Model 2a	Model 3a	Model 1b	Model 2b	Model 3b
Blame national government	0.185** (0.090)		0.186** (0.090)	0.175*** (0.057)		0.174*** (0.057)
Diverse social class		-0.081 (0.090)	-0.082 (0.090)		0.041 (0.057)	0.032 (0.057)
Constant	4.402*** (0.064)	4.535*** (0.063)	4.442*** (0.078)	4.585*** (0.040)	4.652*** (0.040)	4.570*** (0.048)
Observations	1,090	1,090	1,090	1,641	1,641	1,641
R -squared	0.004	0.001	0.005	0.006	0.0003	0.006

Notes: The model is OLS with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Coalition support is a six-point variable ranging from 1 (completely unsupportive) to 6 (completely supportive).

Table 8 shows the effect of the movement's blame attribution and social mass based on the respondents' support for their group to build a coalition with the pro-democracy group to resolve the environmental issue. Blame attribution significantly impacts support for cooperating with the pro-democracy group, as evident in both Model 1a and Model 1b. Even when accounting for the movement's social mass base in Model 3a and Model 3b, blame attribution remains statistically significant. In the Vietnamese context (Model 3a), framing environmental protests as caused by the national government results in a relatively small effect, with a 0.124 standard deviation shift in mean support for coalition building. Nevertheless, this shifts the distribution from being supportive to only somewhat supportive. In the Malaysian context (Model 3b), blaming the national government leads to a 0.151 standard deviation shift in mean support, similarly shifting the distribution from supportive to only somewhat supportive of joining the democracy group. As shown in Figure 3, baseline support for coalition building is relatively high in both contexts. Therefore, although the shift in the dependent variable is relatively small, it holds meaningful significance.

Model 2a and Model 2b show that the direct effect of the movement's potential social mass base on support for building a coalition with the pro-democracy group is not statistically significant. The impact of the protest's social mass base remains insignificant when controlling for the effect of blame attribution in Model 3a and Model 3b. The null effect of the social mass base may be attributed to the treatment's lack of specificity compared to the blame attribution treatment. However, the treatment texts did not just mention which class was affected by the environmental crisis but also elaborated specific negative consequences that the crisis had on the social classes. Therefore, this should not be a major concern. Another concern is that the treatment failed to shift respondents' perception of which class environmental movements typically appeal to. The

manipulation checks in Appendix 2 reveal that many participants in the one-class mass base treatment believed that environmental issues affect diverse social groups. Though excluding respondents who failed the manipulation check made the social mass base effect statistically significant, caution is needed due to potential bias (Aronow, Baron, and Pinson 2019). One explanation for the null result is that the social mass base a movement appeals to may not influence support for building coalitions with pro-democracy advocates. The theory suggests that the social mass base affects perceptions of state repression, subsequently influencing support for collaborating with the pro-democracy group. However, an OLS regression found no significant difference between treatment groups regarding the perception of state repression, suggesting that the nature of the social mass base may not impact support for working with the democracy group.

Appendix 3 presents results from an ordered logistic regression model, showing that the nature of blame attribution continues to have a significant effect on coalition support while the nature of the social mass base does not. In the Vietnamese context, the ordered logistic analysis suggests that for respondents randomly assigned to the treatment that blames the central government, the odds of being more supportive of building a coalition with the pro-democracy group is 1.27 times that of respondents in the treatment that blames the local government, holding constant the social mass base variable. In Malaysia, the national blame treatment is 1.24 times more likely to support building a coalition with the pro-democracy group.

To test H3, I ran an OLS regression with the interaction between blame attribution and social mass base as the main independent variable. Table 9 presents the interaction effect on coalition support.

Table 9: The interaction effect between blame attribution and social mass base

VARIABLES	SUPPORT FOR BUILDING COALITION WITH THE PRO-DEMOCRACY GROUP	
	Vietnam	Malaysia
Blame national government	0.244* (0.127)	0.122 (0.080)
Diverse social class	-0.022 (0.128)	-0.020 (0.080)
Blame central government * Diverse social class	-0.118 (0.180)	0.104 (0.113)
Constant	4.413*** (0.090)	4.594*** (0.055)
Observations	1,090	1,641
R -squared	0.005	0.007

Notes: The model is OLS with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Coalition support is a six-point variable ranging from 1 (completely unsupportive) to 6 (completely supportive).

As Table 9 shows, the interaction term is not significant. Compared to a movement that blames the subnational government and appeals to only one social class, a movement that blames the national government and appeals to a diverse constituency does not receive higher support for building a coalition with a pro-democracy group. Additional analyses in Appendix 4 compare the mean across four treatment groups and show no differences. In the survey in Vietnam, while the interaction effect is insignificant, the effect of blame attribution remains significant. Respondents blaming the national government expressed higher support for building a coalition with pro-democracy activists relative to the treatment blaming the local government.

In short, the results suggest that blame attribution has the strongest effect on respondents' support for cooperating with pro-democracy activists. The impact of blame attribution does not depend on whether the protest potentially appeals to one social class or diverse social classes. If a policy-based movement perceives that the national government is to blame for its grievances, it is more supportive of cooperating with regime dissidents.

Research suggests that coalition building is typically initiated by elites who have high political interests (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). Thus, I examine whether the effect of blame attribution depends on the level of political interest. I measure respondents' political interest by asking the extent to which they follow political news about Vietnam and the world on a four-point Likert scale, which is then recoded as a binary variable. Table 10 presents the effect of blame attribution among respondents who have high political interest and those with low interest. Table 10 shows that the effect of blame attribution on coalition building is relatively stronger among respondents who are highly interested in politics in both contexts. This group's support for collaboration with the pro-democracy group is significantly higher among those exposed to the environmental movement that targets the national government than the movement blaming the local government. On the other hand, among respondents with low political interest, there is no significant difference in support for coalition building between the movement targeting the national government or the local government. It could be that those with high political interests are more capable of seeing the benefits of collaborating with the pro-democracy group when both groups target the national government.

Table 10: The interaction effect between blame attribution and political knowledge

VARIABLES	COALITION SUPPORT			
	Vietnam		Malaysia	
	High political interest	Low political interest	High political interest	Low political interest
Blame national government	0.208* (0.107)	0.087 (0.130)	0.170** (0.076)	0.145* (0.080)
Diverse social class	-0.043 (0.108)	-0.051 (0.130)	0.033 (0.075)	0.010 (0.079)
Other covariates	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	2.464*** (0.461)	4.124*** (0.578)	1.480*** (0.437)	3.030*** (0.340)
Observations	684	401	882	760
R -squared	0.208	0.153	0.125	0.083

Notes: The model is OLS with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Coalition support is a six-point variable ranging from 1 (completely unsupportive) to 6 (completely supportive).

Robustness checks

A concern is the possibility that through bad luck in the randomization, the lack of balance on some potentially important covariates drives the findings. To account for this, Appendix 5 and Appendix 6 include the results from a model including the control variables in Table 7A and Table 7B. The results show that the effect of blame attribution remains when including all the control variables. Respondents in the treatment that blamed the national government expressed higher support for building a coalition with the pro-democracy group in both contexts.

As shown in Figure 4, several respondents did not recall the level of government being blamed, which could affect the results. Although recent work cautions against testing only on those that pass the manipulation check (Aronow, Baron, & Pinson, 2019), I drop those that do not

correctly identify which government is blamed. As Appendix 7 shows, the results remain even after dropping those who did not respond to the treatment. Blame attribution continues to have a significant impact on support for the coalition.

One concern with the null results of the social mass base could be the inclusion of respondents who did not pass the manipulation check. There may be a stronger effect for those who did pass the check. I re-examine the effect of the social mass base, excluding those who did not recall which classes were affected by the issue. As Appendix 8 shows, the effect of social class becomes significant at the 90% confidence interval. However, it is important to note that dropping subjects "can bias estimates or undermine identification of causal effects" (Aronow, Baron, & Pinson, 2019, p.573). Thus, the effect of the social mass base is inconclusive.

In Vietnam, another concern, given my sample, is that the results are driven by the high number of party members, who could react more negatively to pro-democracy activists. To address this possibility, I rerun the analysis on only nonparty members. Appendix 9 shows that the results remain unchanged using only nonparty members.

Mechanisms

To examine the mechanism behind the effect of blame attribution on support for coalition building, I asked an open-ended question about why the respondent supports or does not support collaborating with the pro-democracy group. In general, the analysis of this open-ended question suggests that respondents support building a coalition with the pro-democracy group when their group blames the national government because of two potential mechanisms. First, it increases the strength of the group to achieve the desired outcome. Many respondents suggest that working together (1) creates higher pressure on the national government to be more transparent about environmental issues and to change policies, (2) raises awareness of this environmental issue to

wider audiences, and (3) helps both groups come up with more solutions to the environmental issue. Second, it reduces the ideological gap between the two groups. Many respondents supported coalition building because of the perception that both groups attempted to achieve similar goals and radical solutions, such as democracy, are needed to address environmental issues. In both surveys, I asked respondents if radical solutions such as democracy are necessary to address the hypothetical environmental issue on a 6-point Likert scale from "Completely unnecessary" to "Completely necessary".

Table 11: Is democracy necessary to address the environmental issue?

VARIABLES	IS DEMOCRACY NECESSARY?	
	Malaysia	Vietnam
Blame the national government	0.175*** (0.057)	0.087 (0.086)
Constant	4.369*** (0.061)	4.585*** (0.040)
Observations	1,641	1,090
R2	0.001	0.006

Table 11 above suggests that groups that blame the national government are more likely to perceive democracy as necessary to resolve the environmental issue in the Malaysian survey. In Vietnam, although the effect of blame attribution on whether democracy is necessary is not statistically significant, it is in the right direction. Future research should investigate which mechanism best explains why policy-based movements that blame the national government are

more likely to collaborate with pro-democracy groups relative to those targeting subnational governments.

Conclusion

Why are some policy-based movements willing to build a coalition with pro-democracy activists while others are not? What affects a policy-based movement's decision to cooperate with pro-democracy activists to address policy issues? Using survey experiments in Vietnam and Malaysia, my paper shows that congruence in blame attribution plays a vital role in determining whether a policy-based movement wants to build a coalition with pro-democracy advocates. Specifically, a policy-based movement that blames the national government is more supportive of working with pro-democracy advocates than a movement targeting the subnational government. Potential mechanisms are increased collective strength and reduced ideological gap. This finding is consistent across both countries that differ in many dimensions, suggesting that the theory on blame attribution can be generalized.

It is essential to highlight that the experimental design ensures that blame attribution is not endogenous. However, blame attribution is not isolated from its context in real-world scenarios. Different factors can shape the choice of target for a policy-based movement, which may then impact its decision to join democracy groups. For instance, a movement advocating for changes at the local level without success may eventually turn its focus to the national government. Shifts in the perceived risks of state repression can also lead a policy movement to refocus efforts at the national level. It is highly possible that frustration from unsuccessful activism and changes in the perception of state repression may influence a movement's decision to align with more extreme groups. This paper suggests that once a policy movement targets the national government, it is more likely to ally with a more radical group. It explains why authoritarian governments invest

enormous resources and efforts in 'blame avoidance' strategies. Perhaps autocrats know that being blamed for policy crises could facilitate collaboration between policy activists and regime dissidents.

The paper also contributes to the debate on the factors that lead to social movement coalitions. In addition, the findings have an important implication for the durability of authoritarian regimes. In times of crisis, if authoritarian governments manage to direct blame to other actors, they can prevent movements of different natures from working together to challenge their power.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Balance of Potential Covariates Across Social Mass Base Treatment

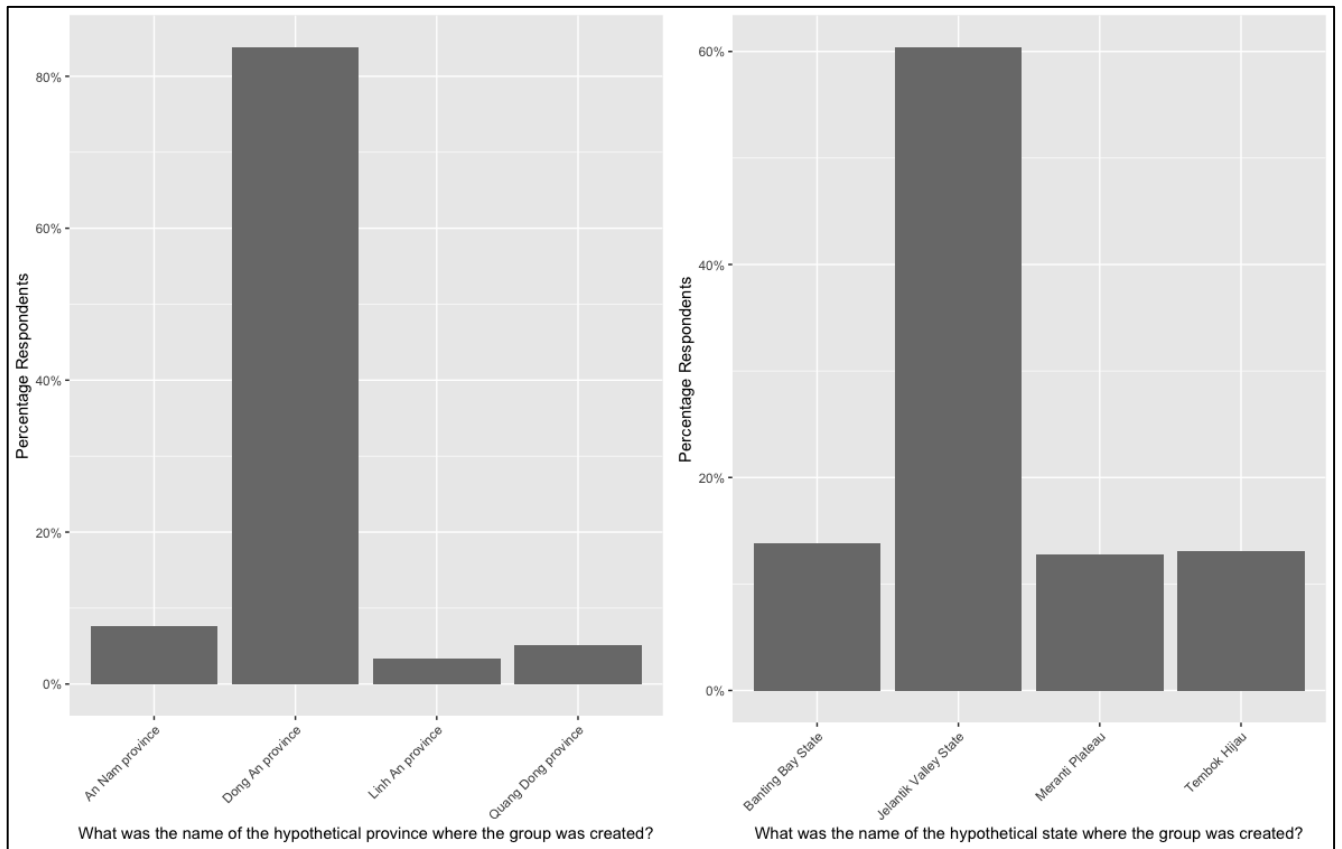
A. Malaysia			
Variables	Cross-class constituency	One class constituency	Test
Age	36 (11)	36 (12)	F=0.165
Gender			$\chi^2 = 3.093^*$
• Female	53%	58 %	
• Male	47%	42%	
State			$\chi^2 = 0.355$
• East Malaysia	17 %	15%	
• West Malaysia	83 %	85%	
Educational level			$\chi^2 = 1.998$
• College Degree	52 %	56%	
• No College Degree	48 %	44%	
Income level	2.6 (1.2)	2.6 (1.3)	F=0.061
Interest in politics	6.4 (2.2)	6.4 (2.3)	F=0.258
Pride	8.4 (2.0)	8.4 (2.1)	$\chi^2 = 0.008$
Risk acceptance	7.2 (2.1)	7.2 (2.2)	F=0.026
Parents involved in farming.			$\chi^2 = 0.032$
• Yes	42 %	42%	
• No	58 %	58 %	
Self-involved in farming			$\chi^2 = 1.124$
• Yes	33 %	35 %	
• No	67 %	65 %	
Religion			$\chi^2 = 0.087$
• Islam	66%	67%	
• Other	34%	33%	
Ethnicity			$\chi^2 = 6.207$
• Chinese	21%	24%	
• Indian	3%	4%	
• Malay Bumiputera	64%	65%	
• Other	11%	8%	
Observations	821	820	

B. Vietnam

Variables	One class constituency	Cross-class constituency	Test
Age	33 (11)	33 (11)	F=0.104
Gender			$\chi^2 = 0.585$
• Female	48%	45 %	
• Male	52%	55%	
Province			$\chi^2=0.626$
• Major City	60 %	62 %	
• Others	40 %	38 %	
Educational level			$\chi^2=0.204$
• College Degree	68 %	69 %	
• No College Degree	32 %	31 %	
Income level	5.4 (1.8)	5.6 (1.7)	F=4.554**
Party membership			$\chi^2=0.011$
• No	79 %	78 %	
• Yes	21 %	22 %	
Interest in politics			F=1.288
• High interest	61%	65%	
• Low interest	39%	35%	
Pride	5.4 (1.0)	5.3 (1.0)	$\chi^2=0.296$
Risk acceptance	4 (1.4)	4 (1.3)	F=0.003
Parents involved in farming.			$\chi^2=0.673$
• Yes	63 %	60%	
• No	37 %	40 %	
Self-involved in farming			$\chi^2=0.113$
• Yes	54 %	52 %	
• No	46 %	48 %	
Observations	553	537	

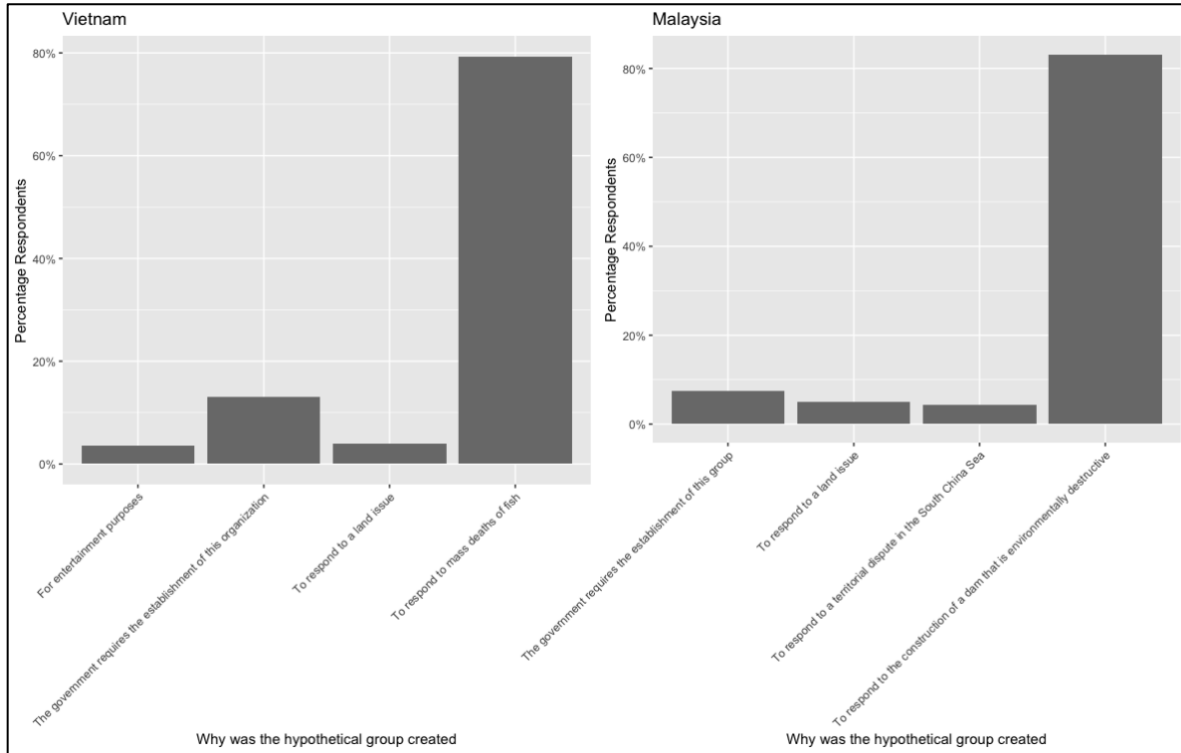
Appendix 2: Manipulation check

A. Recalling the hypothetical place where the group was created.



This figure presents the percentage of respondents who recalled the name of the hypothetical province/state where the group was created. The correct answers are Dong An Province/Jelantik Valley State.

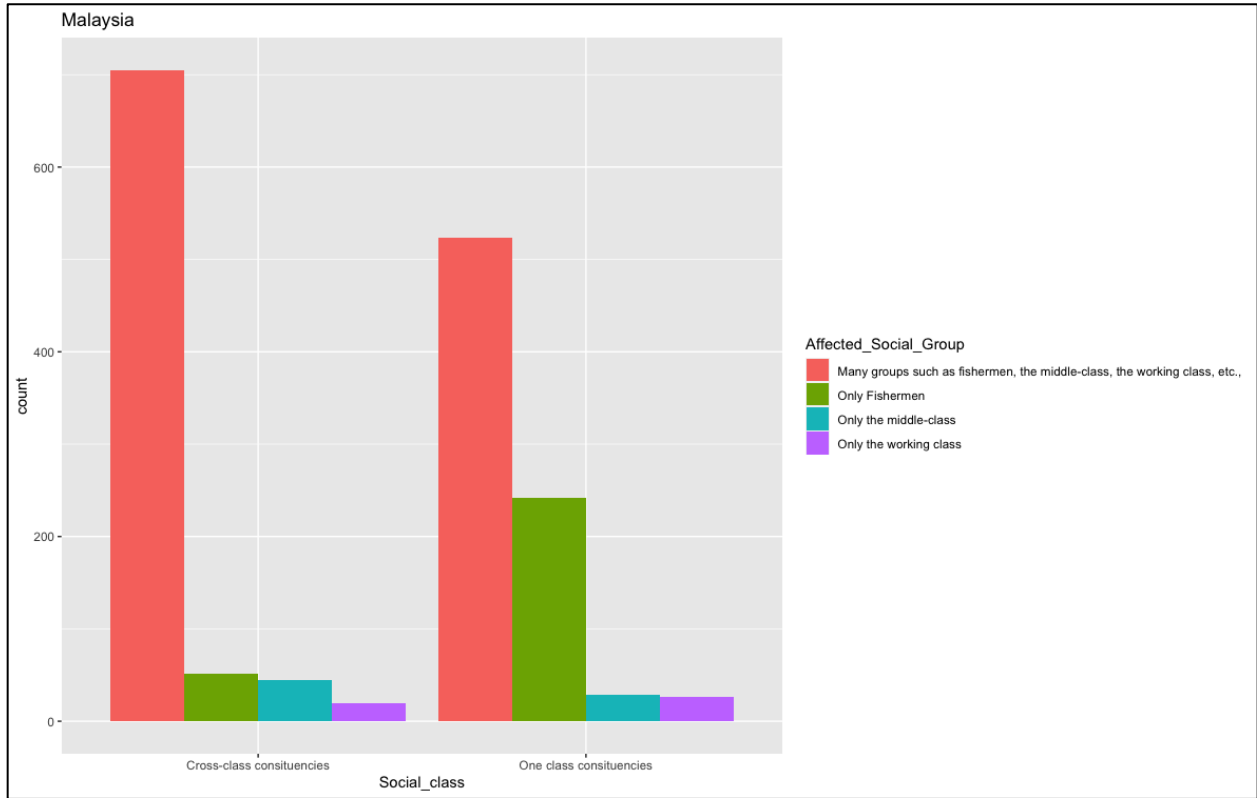
B. Recall the reasons why the group was established.



This figure presents the percentage of respondents who recalled why their group was established.

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C. Recall the social class that the movement appeals to.



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Appendix 3: The effect of blame attribution and social mass base, using an ordered logistic regression model

A. Vietnam

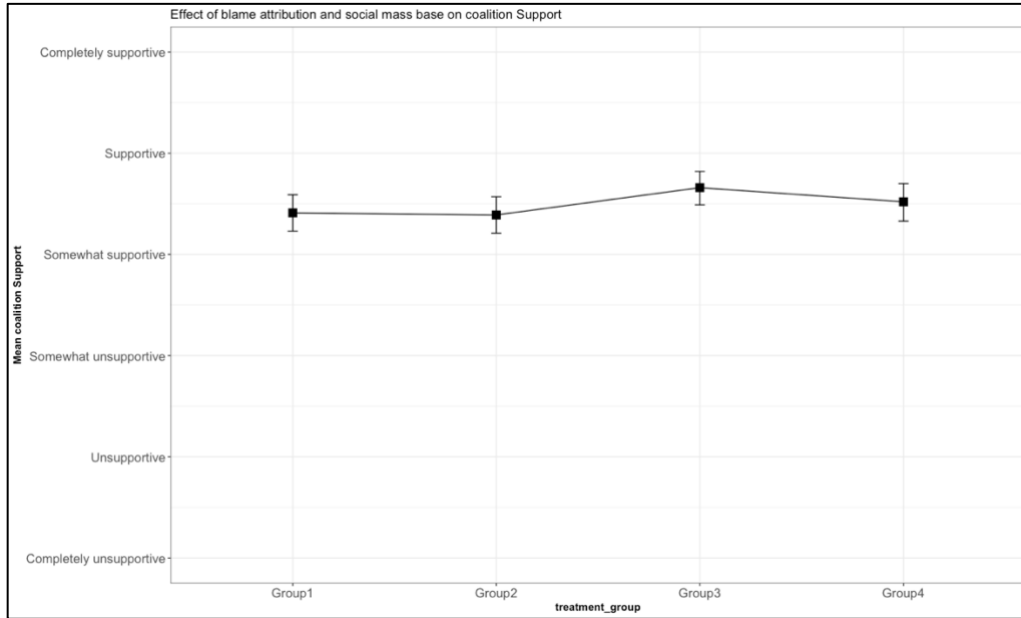
VARIABLES	COALITION SUPPORT			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Odds ratio (Model 3 only)
Blame central government	0.185** (0.090)		0.24** (0.108)	1.2738
Diverse social class		-0.081 (0.090)	-0.086 (0.108)	0.916
Observations	1,090	1,090	1,090	
Residual Deviance: 3484.116				
AIC: 3498.116				

B. Malaysia

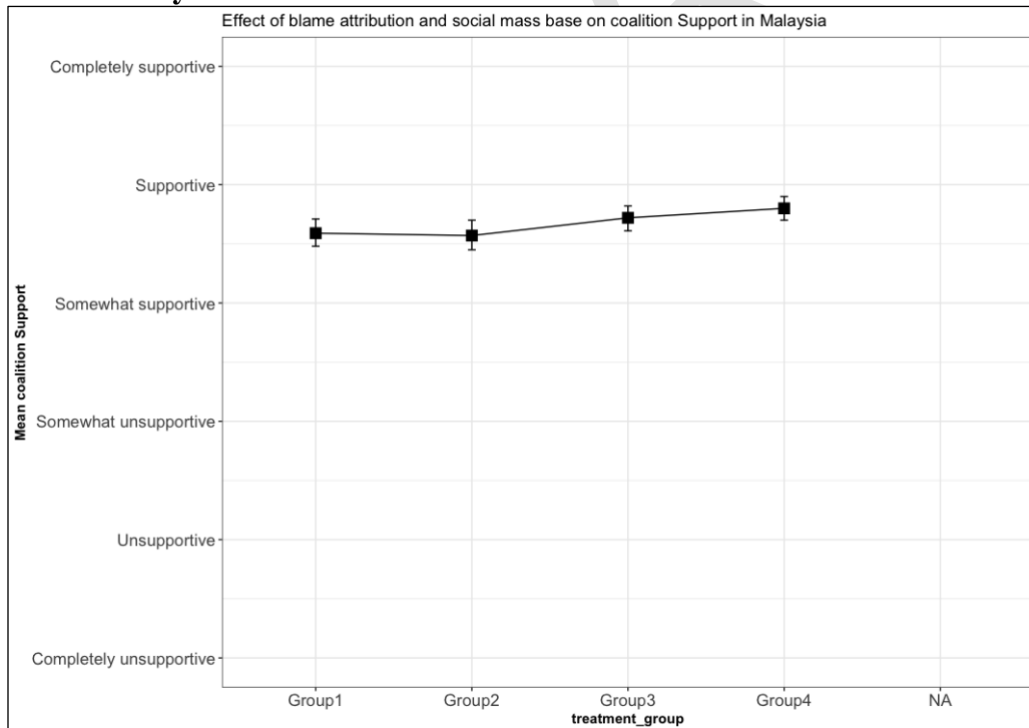
VARIABLES	COALITION SUPPORT			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Odds ratio (Model 3 only)
Blame central government	0.221** (0.089)		0.22** (0.089)	1.24
Diverse social class		0.081 (0.090)	0.067 (0.089)	1.07
Observations	1,641	1,641	1,641	
Residual Deviance: 4704.794				
AIC: 4716.794				

Appendix 4: Additional analyses among four groups

A. Vietnam



B. Malaysia



This graph compares the means of supporting coalition building among four treatment groups. Group 1: Blame the local government and appeal to one class; Group 2: Blame the local government and appeal to cross classes; Group 3: Blame the central government and appeal to one class; Group 4: Blame the central government and appeal to cross class.

Appendix 5: The effect of blame attribution and social mass base with control variables

VARIABLES	COALITION SUPPORT	
	Vietnam	Malaysia
Blame national government	0.159* (0.083)	0.167*** (0.055)
Cross-class constituencies	-0.071 (0.083)	0.017 (0.054)
Male	-0.117 (0.085)	-0.024 (0.055)
Age	-0.007* (0.004)	0.003 (0.003)
Outside big cities	-0.004 (0.092)	
West Malaysia		-0.016 (0.086)
No college degree	0.039 (0.097)	-0.035 (0.060)
Income	-0.006 (0.026)	0.043* (0.025)
Party member	0.046 (0.104)	
Parents as farmer	-0.132 (0.107)	-0.078 (0.070)
Involvement in farming	0.260** (0.107)	0.037 (0.072)
Risk acceptance	0.438*** (0.031)	0.026* (0.015)
Economic perception	-0.123** (0.049)	0.028 (0.017)
Frequently follow news	-0.181** (0.089)	0.028* (0.015)
Pride	0.051 (0.042)	0.113*** (0.016)
Muslim		-0.233* (0.132)
Indian		-0.153 (0.158)
Malay Bumiputera		0.396*** (0.142)
Non-Malay Bumiputera		0.521*** (0.132)
Others		0.214 (0.195)
Trust in the government		-0.001 (0.017)

Constant	3.087*** (0.361)	2.596*** (0.240)
Observations	1,090	1,642
R -squared	0.179	0.101

Notes: The model is OLS with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Coalition support is a six-point variable ranging from 1 (completely unsupportive) to 6 (completely supportive).

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Appendix 6: The effect of the interaction with control variables

VARIABLES	COALITION SUPPORT	
	Vietnam	Malaysia
Blame national government	0.232** (0.116)	0.133* (0.077)
Cross-class constituencies	0.004 (0.118)	-0.017 (0.077)
Blame central government * Diverse social class	-0.147 (0.166)	0.067 (0.109)
Male	-0.121 (0.085)	-0.024 (0.055)
Age	-0.007 (0.004)	0.003 (0.003)
Outside big cities	-0.002 (0.092)	
West Malaysia		-0.015 (0.086)
No college degree	0.040 (0.097)	-0.034 (0.060)
Income	-0.007 (0.026)	0.043* (0.025)
Party member	0.050 (0.104)	
Parents as farmer	-0.133 (0.107)	-0.080 (0.070)
Involvement in farming	0.262** (0.107)	0.038 (0.072)
Risk acceptance	0.438*** (0.031)	0.026* (0.015)
Economic perception	-0.122** (0.049)	0.028 (0.017)
Frequently follow news	-0.179** (0.089)	0.028* (0.015)
Pride	0.051 (0.042)	0.112*** (0.016)
Muslim		-0.233* (0.132)
Indian		-0.154 (0.158)
Malay Bumiputera		0.397*** (0.142)
Non-Malay Bumiputera		0.522***

Others		(0.132)
		0.210
		(0.196)
Trust		-0.001
		(0.017)
Constant	3.054***	2.614***
	(0.363)	(0.242)
Observations	1,090	1,642
R -squared	0.179	0.101

Notes: The model is OLS with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Coalition support is a six-point variable ranging from 1 (completely unsupportive) to 6 (completely supportive).

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Appendix 7: The effect of blame attribution and social mass base, dropping those not passing the manipulation checks

Panel A: Malaysia: Dropping those that did not recall the government being blamed.

VARIABLES	COALITION SUPPORT			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Blame national government	0.168** (0.066)		0.168** (0.066)	0.145 (0.094)
Cross-class constituencies		-0.009 (0.066)	-0.014 (0.066)	-0.038 (0.095)
Blame central government * Diverse social class				0.047 (0.133)
Other covariates	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	4.681*** (0.047)	4.772*** (0.047)	4.688*** (0.057)	4.700*** (0.066)
Observations	1,117	1,117	1,117	1,117
R -squared	0.006	0.00002	0.006	0.006

Panel B: Vietnam: Dropping those that did not recall the government being blamed.

VARIABLES	COALITION SUPPORT			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Blame national government	0.338*** (0.120)		0.340*** (0.120)	0.286* (0.171)
Cross-class constituencies		-0.043 (0.120)	-0.053 (0.120)	-0.102 (0.162)
Blame central government * Diverse social class				0.106 (0.241)
Other covariates	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	4.299*** (0.081)	4.474*** (0.085)	4.325*** (0.100)	4.349*** (0.113)
Observations	625	625	625	625
R -squared	0.128	0.123	0.124	0.130

Appendix 8: The effect of blame attribution and social mass base, dropping those not recalling the social mass base that the movement appeals to.

VARIABLES	COALITION SUPPORT			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Blame national government	0.203** (0.071)		0.201*** (0.071)	0.322** (0.147)
Cross-class constituencies		0.154* (0.082)	0.150 (0.185)	0.236** (0.119)
Blame national government*Cross-class constituency				-0.085 (0.171)
Other covariates	YES	YES	YES	YES
Constant	4.651*** (0.055)	4.628*** (0.074)	4.529*** (0.083)	4.496*** (0.107)
Observations	947	947	947	947
R -squared	0.127	0.123	0.011	0.131

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Appendix 9: The effect of blame attribution and social mass base, dropping party members in Vietnam

VARIABLES	COALITION SUPPORT		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Blame national government	0.282*** (0.100)	0.317** 0.141	0.249*** (0.093)
Cross-class constituency	-0.135 (0.100)	-0.100 (0.140)	-0.164* (0.093)
Blame national government *		-0.072	
Cross-class constituency		(0.201)	
Male			-0.088 (0.095)
Age			-0.004 (0.005)
Outside big cities			0.027 (0.103)
No college degree			0.038 (0.107)
Income			0.013 (0.031)
Parents as farmer			-0.201* (0.116)
Involvement in farming			0.350*** (0.117)
Risk acceptance			0.438*** (0.036)
Economic perception			-0.151*** (0.057)
Frequently follow news			0.216** (0.098)
Pride			0.022 (0.050)
Constant	4.395*** (0.086)	4.377*** (0.099)	3.133*** (0.415)
Observations	857	857	857
R -squared	0.011	0.012	0.181

Notes: The model is OLS with robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Coalition support is a six-point variable ranging from 1 (completely unsupportive) to 6 (completely supportive).