

## Understanding Frames of the State-Sponsored Media Tweets During the 2019 Hong Kong Protests

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**Abstract.** In this current study, Chinese government's strategic communication efforts were explored in the context of the 2019 Hong Kong protests via state-sponsored media tweets. To understand how the government conveyed the protests and how it is engaged with other stakeholders, tweets were examined inductively in terms of frames and stakeholders. Recognizing the strategic nature of agenda building, message frames, stakeholders, and their characteristics and relationships around the issues were the key aspects of understanding the issue. Results show the multiple frames identified to understand how the protests were described, who the main actors were, and how their relationships were presented in the social media messages. The representation of the stakeholders or frames in the social media messages changed over a short period. The roles of state-sponsored tweets as strategic public diplomacy tools and information sources are discussed.

**Keywords:** Tweets, government, protest, frames, global communication, strategic communication

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## 1. Introduction

In 2014 and 2019, Hong Kong received global attention for its citywide grassroots movement, comprising the biggest demonstrations in Hong Kong's history since the 1997 handover from the United Kingdom. The protests began by opposing the government's proposals on Hong Kong's electoral and judicial system reforms (Li, 2019; Neuman, 2019; Reuters, 2019). In 2019, hundreds of thousands of people filled the streets to protest against a now-suspended extradition law amendment bill.

Protests have gradually increased the size and scope of the controversies, presenting multiple stakeholders' perspectives: fear of the end of China's "one country, two systems" principle, criticism of Western countries' intervention in domestic affairs, support for freedom, and support for the status quo (A. K., 2019; Quinn, 2019; Xinyan & Weiping, 2019). The protesters' focus has evolved from the extradition bill to include democracy and free speech, and the 2019 Hong Kong controversy has gained international recognition from worldwide stakeholders, including global media, government officers, lawmakers, business and sports organizations, and public protesters (Hollingsworth, 2019; Impelli, 2019; Rascoe, 2019).

This study explored the Chinese government's strategic communication via social media by examining the evolution of the issues presented in tweets during the 2019 Hong Kong controversies. Social media (such as Twitter) became important information sources for foreign audiences, and from the international agenda building perspective, scholars proposed that certain issues or attributes (such as frames) frequently appeared on the state-sponsored media would be more salient on the foreign news coverages (Cheng et al., 2016). To explore frames then, in the context of social movement, scholars emphasized the needs of frame development to understand its processes and outcomes (Benford & Snow, 2000).

One of the goals of this study is to suggest descriptions of frames that can be used for the social movement cases in the international level (involved with multiple stakeholders). An inductive, interpretive analysis was conducted on state-sponsored media tweets collected in October 2019.

Researchers have largely studied the effectiveness and process of the strategic communication using the agenda-building theoretical framework in various communication contexts—expanded from the role of media in setting public and policy agendas (Cobb & Elder, 1971; Sheafer & Gabay, 2009; Sheafer & Weimann, 2005). Moreover, several agenda building studies emphasize the role of online or social media in transferring issues or attributes salience to media outlets (or public) (Lariscy et al., 2009; J. H. Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; John H Parmelee, 2014).

Issues and attributes salience transfer refers to the first and second level agenda building framework: issues (e.g., social issues, candidates, corporates, or nation) and attributes (e.g., issue frames, candidate/corporate/nation images) (Cheng et al., 2016; Kioussis et al., 2006, 2007; Ragas, 2012; B. Signitzer & Wamser, 2006; Wanta et al., 2004). Attributes are used for journalists or people to understand certain objects better highlighting certain aspects more than others; and frames are one of the popular examples of attributes in the agenda building studies (Cheng et al., 2016; Kioussis et al., 2007; Lariscy et al., 2009).

In the context of anti-government protest in Thailand, Sinpeng (2021) analyzed tweets and suggested Twitter as a central communication tool protesters used to build their stories. Through hashtags, it would act as an agenda-building tool for public discourse (Sinpeng, 2021). In Arab regions, scholars examined social media use by the public and by media professionals to explore its role in political and social changes (Al-Jenaibi, 2014; Khondker, 2011). Moreover, scholars also identified social media as a tool authorities use to frame public discourse in their favor (Sinpeng, 2021). At the international level, Sheaffer and Gabay (2009) also analyzed the agenda-building associations in terms of the issues and frames (McCombs, 1997; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), emphasizing multiple actors' strategic communication process of mediated public diplomacy.

Scholars have defined public diplomacy by highlighting its strategic communication characteristics: persuasive and goal-oriented activities by governmental and private sectors via direct and indirect communication aimed at foreign governments and audiences (Cull, 2008; Gilboa, 2008; Malone, 1985; B. H. Signitzer & Coombs, 1992). Cull (2008) defined public diplomacy as "the process by which international actors seek to accomplish the goals of their foreign policy by engaging with foreign publics" (p. 31). Ultimately, strategic communication aims to affect a foreign public's understanding, attitude, and opinion toward another government (B. H. Signitzer & Coombs, 1992). The digital and social media today constitute important public diplomacy tools (Collins et al., 2019; Dodd & Collins, 2017; Golan et al., 2019). Collins et al. (2019) examined how the Obama administration used Twitter for diplomacy to present U.S. foreign policy priorities. Golan et al. (2019) also studied mediated public diplomacy in the context of the Crimea crisis to see how competing governments and foreign stakeholders engage on Twitter.

In their recent study, Huang and Wang (2019) showed that the Chinese government uses Twitter to network with foreign audiences and sought to achieve the Communist Party of China's propagandist communication goals. Scholars also tested mediated public diplomacy in the context of the 2014 Hong Kong protests, comparing agendas between Chinese state-owned media and several foreign news sources (Zhang et al., 2018). Chinese state-owned media could play its government agenda building roles through Twitter in

affecting foreign news media coverages (and consequently international public agendas).

Twitter has particularly emerged as a strategic communication tool for shaping news media stories and affecting the public's understanding of agendas. Tweets by political leaders associate with how news media cover stories about leaders (Parmelee, 2014) and how the public develops political conversations online (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). Many social movements or activist organizations also use Twitter to mobilize public discourse and civic engagement (Guo & Saxton, 2014). Their hashtag activism and framing strategies have been explored with several cases such as the #MeToo movement (Xiong et al., 2019) or #BlackLivesMatter (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018).

Social media platforms provide publics and counterpublics opportunities to position themselves in a social movement debate (Wonneberger et al., 2021); and make discourse more complex even within an "issue community" (Osterbur & Kiel, 2021, p. 194). Hence, when authorities use social media platforms, strategic agenda building and setting efforts are needed to affect the protest frames.

Previously, scholars have studied frames of protest events (anti-government or social movements) in various communication contexts (Harlow et al., 2020; McLeod & Hertog, 1992) and suggested the following frames: riots, confrontations, spectacles, and debates (Hertog & McLeod, 2001; McLeod & Hertog, 1992). Benford and Snow (2000) also suggested collective action frames to describe protesters' actions and movement outcomes. Moreover, scholars argued that traditional news media covered protests more substantially when it favored the social status quo (McLeod & Hertog, 1992); while frames involving protesters' viewpoints and their demands appear more on alternative media, such as online news (Downing, 2001; Harlow et al., 2020).

In the context of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, the Chinese government's public communication efforts became essential for ensuring foreign publics could understand the movements' issues. Such an understanding would affect foreign publics' attitudes and opinions toward the protests and toward the Chinese government. Hence, in the context of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, the Chinese government's communication efforts via tweets were explored with the following research questions – in which point of view the protest stories were described. In other words, how the social movement case has been portrayed in the communication messages.

RQ1: How do Chinese state-sponsored media portray the 2019 Hong Kong protests in tweets?

RQ2: How do Chinese state-sponsored media present the main stakeholders involved in the 2019 Hong Kong protests in tweets?

## 2. Method

Two Twitter handles were selected to review governmental strategic communication efforts by the People's Republic of China. Considering media freedom, state-sponsored media are usually studied as public diplomacy tools of the Chinese government (Zhang et al., 2018). *China Xinhua News* (@XHNews) and *People's Daily, China* (@PDChina) were the most frequently mentioned active and verified Chinese media accounts (Huang & Wang, 2019). Both outlets constituted the most influential Chinese state-run media groups when considering their popularity and traffic (Huang & Wang, 2019; Loh, 2017).

For a thematic analysis of tweets, a previous researcher manually copied original tweets and inductively coded a small data set (Fountain, 2017). Using "Hong Kong" as a keyword, tweets made between October 4 and October 25, 2019, were retrieved during the 3-week period after Morey, the Houston Rockets' general manager, tweeted his support for the Hong Kong protest on October 4 and triggered international audiences' and media's attention. Most of the tweets were made during the time period. Of all available tweets captured from the two Twitter handles, 45 (out of 89 total) and 11 (out of 20 total) tweets were analyzed from @XHNews and from @PDChina, respectively. Sample tweets were randomly and proportionately selected from each account (Dodd & Collins, 2017) from each week: Week 1 (October 4–11), Week 2 (October 12–18), and Week 3 (October 19–25; Golan et al., 2019).

To understand how the Chinese state-sponsored media presented protest issues, texts and visual images (photos) of tweets were examined inductively via the hashtag description of the actors, their characteristics, and the frames. The inductive content analysis helped to identify the roots and problems of the controversies and to generate frames from media messages (Elmasry & El-Nawawy, 2020; Golan et al., 2019).

The inductive content analysis generated patterns from communication messages by making sense of the whole context via open coding by grouping and categorizing similar objects and traits (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Entman et al., 2009; Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Walter & Ophir, 2019). Compared with previous literature, a systematic review of the content can provide new codes and rich interpretations of media portrayals (Colton & Poploski, 2019; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Media messages (including tweets) develop people's recognition and representation of the world via their understanding of social identity, systems, and relations (Fairclough, 1995; Wachter, 2018). Texts are produced and consumed in certain social relations and brief systems of societies (Wachter, 2018). Understanding those economic, political, and social modes beyond the texts constitutes an essential part of a communication analysis of media messages such as tweets (Shi, 2020). What is presented and what is missing from the texts

were analyzed. If any hashtags were used, those were recorded as well.

From the collected tweets, a keyword search was used to identify the similar vocabularies and phrases, and the repeated themes were examined to understand portrayals of the events (Entman et al., 2009; Fountaine, 2017; Walter & Ophir, 2019). All main key terms first were extracted from the messages and then those terms were grouped to identify what the main issues are in the messages (e.g., riots, principle, bill), how the main issue is described (e.g., radical, not appropriate, extreme), and what stakeholders were presented together (e.g., NBA, government, Chief Executive).

For example, foreign politicians or analysts were categorized as foreign stakeholders in the data collection, and their involvement was analyzed in terms of their role and viewpoint on the matter of the protests. Sometimes, they were just used as an information source in the tweets; while other times, they were praised or criticized. Theme and communication patterns were then summarized by time (Golan et al., 2019)—initial and early periods right after the protest gained international attention from the media and public (Elmasry & El-Nawawy, 2020).

### **3. Results & Discussion**

#### **Week 1**

Except for #Hong Kong, not many hashtags were used in the state-sponsored media tweets. Mostly, they called the protesters riots or threats to freedom in Hong Kong. Those descriptions show the Chinese government's view on the movement—violent and disruptive acts, months-long unrest, or an extensive and serious public danger. While the level of violation is escalating in society, much stronger adjectives are used to describe the protests: black terror, brutal, barbaric, ruthless, or reckless violent acts.

The most frequent actors presented in the tweets were Chinese government representatives and the protesters (so-called “rioters” in the tweets). Two main government actors were the Commissioner's Office of the Chinese Foreign Ministry in Hong Kong and Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). Their involvement was focused on the government announcements (e.g., new mask ban) rather than interactions with other actors.

During this period, tweets presented some opposite points of view on the protesters. In such tweets, they were called “defenders of human rights” and “freedom fighters” and considered the people supporting revolution. However, mostly, they were portrayed as violators and arrestees in government tweets. Tweets highlighted dangers toward the public through the text and visual images. Visual images were used to present the escalation of violence, including confrontations between police officers and the protesters

(“<https://twitter.com/PDChina/status/1180671517937606656>”).

On the other hand, attitudes toward the foreign forces are either neutral or negative. Mostly, foreign forces simply played a role as information sources (e.g., Philippine analyst or Russian scholar). However, a few tweets showed the Chinese government’s suspicion regarding the foreign powers’ intention, saying that they used protests as a vehicle to pressure Beijing in trade or border talks. Specific counterparts or countries were not identified.

Government efforts to maintain and establish norms (status quo) in Hong Kong are another focus found in the tweets. For example, Hong Kong’s government enacted an anti-mask law targeting protesters wearing facemasks. Needs for the anti-mask law were explained as follows: to curb escalating violence and citywide vandalism in Hong Kong (e.g., attacking police officers, disrupting public transport, or setting fire to properties) and to reaffirm the bottom line of civil society. The government also said the law was enacted in several developed societies, such as Britain.

## **Week 2**

More hashtags were used to describe the protests as violent riots: #HKRiots, #HKRioters, or #HongKongRioters. One tweet used the #weapons hashtag (e.g., umbrellas became “multifunctional” #weapons in Hong Kong protests). Even stronger adjectives and labels were used to describe the case: brutal attacks, vandalism, and unanimous condemnation. More specific examples and consequences were used to show the intensity of the acts: rioter cuts police officer’s neck, railway services partly suspended, or properties attacked by masked rioters/mobsters.

Rather than the abstract characteristics of the protesters (such as “freedom fighters” or “public danger”), their strategies and tactics behind the acts were addressed (e.g., Hong Kong’s police officers were willfully targeted and assaulted). The involvement of the Chinese government and foreign forces was also specified.

The main domestic government actors were the HKSAR, Chief Executive Carrie Lam, the principal official of the Liaison Office of the Chinese Central People’s Government in the HKSAR, and the Foreign Ministry spokesperson. Then, the U.S. House of Representatives, Assembly, or U.S. government was presented as a counterpart to the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019.

State-sponsored media tweets show firm opposition to the bill by foreign legislatures, saying it was a blatant backing of the riots and violent radicals in Hong Kong. Additionally, they said foreign governments should not interfere in Hong Kong’s domestic political affairs. Some keywords used in the criticism were the HKSAR’s “one country, two systems” core



value and “pure interference” by foreign forces.

Moreover, this is when the economic consequences started to present in the state-sponsored media tweets. Mostly, negative impacts on Hong Kong’s economy are presented (e.g., increasing unemployment rates in tourism, worsening business indicators after the protests).

### **Week 3**

Still, #HongKong and #HKRioters were the main hashtags, and tweets described how protesters vandalized the city of Hong Kong. Visual images were used to support the negative consequences of the unauthorized demonstrations (e.g., photos of setting fire to the entrance of a store) (“<https://twitter.com/PDChina/status/1186455882038566912>” or “[http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/23/c\\_138497172.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-10/23/c_138497172.htm)”).

Opposition to the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019 continued, but the reactions were narrated from multiple perspectives. These included global experts’ criticism of the bill (e.g., groundless and biased), Chinese Americans’ anti-movement, and San Francisco Bay Area advocacy groups’ opposition to the U.S. government interference in China’s internal affairs.

Moreover, Chan Tong-Kai’s case was presented, which triggered the mass movement in Hong Kong early in June. With the fact that “Hong Kong has no jurisdiction over the homicide case in Taiwan” (Xinhua, 2019), some concerns over the fugitive bill controversies were addressed. Linked to other information sources, those tweets would support the domestic and foreign public’s understanding of the origins of the issue and its magnitude.

At the same time, there were concerns for the leaders and the public not to exploit this political conflict. In one tweet, for example, a concern of the president of the Chinese University of Hong Kong was shared saying that colleges should not be affected by the political conflict.

Furthermore, not only negative economic consequences, but also a somewhat hopeful future were presented in the tweets. For example, there was news of an incentive program launched by the Hong Kong government to assist tourism industries (i.e., providing monetary support to travel agencies) and the opening of the Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macao Bridge, the longest sea-crossing link. It highlighted the social and economic benefits to the people living in Hong Kong.

### **Discussion**

The first research question asked how the 2019 Hong Kong protest was framed in the Chinese state-sponsored media tweets. Mainly, there was a communication effort to label the



protests as riots and unauthorized demonstrations in the initial stage of the event. Both textual (i.e., adjectives such as barbaric or reckless) and visual representations (photos of setting fires or beating up police officers) were used to describe the escalation of violence from the protesters. Protesters were portrayed as a threat to the norms in civil society using violent means.

Some conflict attributions went to foreign forces. For example, the United States criticized the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019, saying it is biased and involves no care for citizens' well-being in Hong Kong. For this foreign counterpart, there might be a lack of understanding of the Chinese "one country, two systems" core political principle.

As a result, frames presented in this study were summarized as follows: presence of public gathering, violent actions or conflicts, descriptions of issues, process of rule changes (laws, regulations, or policies), consequences (economic consequences), public engagement (support or criticism), and culture or values.

The second research question asked how the main stakeholders involved in the 2019 Hong Kong protests were presented in the Chinese state-sponsored media tweets. Domestic and foreign political actors were the main stakeholders throughout the period; however, their representation became dynamic and even more specific as time passed. In the beginning, two government actors were the Commissioner's Office of the Chinese Foreign Ministry in Hong Kong and Carrie Lam, the chief executive of the HKSAR. Later, additional Chinese government officers were involved in the discourse, including the principal official of the Liaison Office of the Chinese Central People's Government in the HKSAR and the Foreign Ministry spokesperson.

Moreover, interactions among the stakeholders became diverse and complex when other public and international actors got involved, such as the U.S. House of Representatives, international advocacy groups, and the president of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Their positions toward the protests or the views on the U.S. bill were clearly stated in the later tweets. Stakeholders presented in this study were summarized as follows: government, public officers, protesters/activists, media, business, advocacy groups, experts, and foreign government.

In the mediated public diplomacy perspective, traditional news media coverage has been the most important information source for foreign media and the public (Entman, 2008; Golan et al., 2019). This strategic communication effort has been commonly studied in the international agenda-building framework. Moreover, digital and social media, such as Twitter, have also been recognized as important agenda-building tools (Collins et al., 2019; Dodd & Collins, 2017; Golan et al., 2019; Sun, 2019), as such digital and social media

platforms became important information sources for foreign journalists and their public (Lariscy et al., 2009; J. H. Parmelee & Bichard, 2012).

Even though government strategic communication efforts through Twitter have been emphasized, compared with other countries, the Chinese government's Twitter use has been less recognized and under studied (Huang & Wang, 2019; Sun, 2019). In the current study, strategic communication efforts by the Chinese government in the context of the 2019 Hong Kong protests were explored through state-sponsored media tweets.

Recognizing the competitive and strategic nature of agenda building, especially during a crisis or conflict, message frames, stakeholders, and their characteristics and relationships around the issues were the key aspects of understanding the issue. In the Chinese state-sponsored media tweets, the use of hashtags, descriptions of the actors, and the frames were identified to understand how the protests were described, who the main actors were, and how their relationships were presented in the tweets.

The role of social media in political and social change has been studied in various protest events, such as the Arab Spring (Al-Jenaibi, 2014). On one hand, social media allows the public to actively engage in social issues and consequently can lead to pro-democratic social movements. However, scholars have also emphasized that the effects of social media are not uniform, and the social media messages should be critically examined to understand the intention of the sources and their effectiveness (Fontaine, 2017; Harlow et al., 2020; Howitt, 2013; McLeod & Hertog, 1992).

This study explored the Chinese state-sponsored media Tweets during the 2019 Hong Kong controversies by examining how the protest is framed. Scholars have emphasized the needs to develop frames to understand social movement process. For example, Benford & Snow (2000) suggested a few collective action frames derived from action-oriented or discursive processes (p. 615). Collective action frames describe how to “negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change” (p. 615). Frames presented in this study also describes the social movement with protesters' (or public officers) actions or engagement outcomes. It also highlights the understanding of the movement from multiple stakeholders including government, advocacy leaders, or international publics. Due to China's unique media freedom and censorship status, Chinese media tweet analysis can provide researchers an opportunity to study multiple perspectives on social protests. In the context of social movements or protests, there are multiple stakeholders who are in favor of or against the status quo.

Findings suggested the following frames describing the controversial issues: presence of public gathering, violent actions or conflicts, descriptions of issues, process of rule changes, consequences, public engagement, and culture or values. Some of the descriptions of the frames are similar to the ones suggested in the previous studies such as riots, confrontations, spectacles, and debates (Hertog & McLeod, 2001; McLeod & Hertog, 1992), and the study shows that those frames can also be useful to understand the social movement discourse in the state-sponsored media tweets. Moreover, the results of this study show that the frames of violent actions or conflicts were the most popular for the government to describe the protests; however, the public engagement frame (e.g., describing protesters' demands; Harlow et al., 2020) was used more later in time.

Scholars have proposed mediated public diplomacy models using government information strategies via news media and other communication channels (Entman, 2008; Golan et al., 2019); and scholars have explored the role of media in influencing nation images (Wanta et al., 2004). More recently, those government communication efforts have also been emphasized on a social media platform in more dynamic communication contexts such as a social movement or crisis situation. Many social movement or activist organizations use social media such as Twitter to mobilize public discourse and civic engagement (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018; Xiong et al., 2019). Governments' reactions to or interactions with the stakeholders became an important indicators of their effective communication strategies outcomes. Golan et al. (2019) studied mediated public diplomacy in the context of the Crimea crisis to see how competing governments and foreign stakeholders engage on Twitter.

Practically, how to develop these different frames, as well as how to change the strategies over time, are important considerations for practitioners. Previously, scholars analyzed message traits from the aggregated data to explore an organization's (government, business, or media) overall communication strategies; however, the current study showed that the government's communication strategies and tactics on social media (particularly in the context of social movement) can be altered or shifted within a short span of time.

In the current study, the representation of the stakeholders or frames in the tweets changed over a short period. Considering Twitter's real-time and worldwide accessibility characteristics, strategic use of Twitter requires more sophisticated plans. This is especially true when there are two or more counterparts involved in the issue or crisis, meaning when there are more than two competing agendas. In this study, although the main issue frame shifted, the number of involved stakeholders was expanded. Stakeholders may represent different interests in a protest, and their presence can influence the cognitive and affective attributes of the protest.

Moreover, the current study shows that some aspects of social media functions, such as hashtags on Twitter, have not been fully demonstrated by the state-sponsored media, and the use of images in the state-sponsored tweets is not dynamic. A previous study showed that use of images together with texts in tweets could build or loosen tension and consequently affect the perceived authenticity of the tweets (Wetzstein, 2017). From an image discourse analysis study in the context of the 2014 Hong Kong protests, Wetzstein (2017) found that image storytelling strategies helped to empower the protesters. Practitioners may consider the use of images along with texts to intensify the effectiveness of tweets.

#### **4. Conclusion**

From the public diplomacy or international agenda-building perspective, governments' (authorities') use of social media may serve different needs of media professionals or the public. Protesters were portrayed as a threat to the norms in civil society using violent means in the context of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, and both textual and visual representations were used to describe the escalation of violence from the protesters. Additionally, more stories about protesters' demands and the meaning of their actions were also found as stories developed involving more domestic and international stakeholders. Identifying stakeholders and understanding their positions toward protests is an important step to understand the role of protests in a society's political and social change and to explore Twitter's potential as a strategic communication tool for the government.

Even though the inductive, interpretative analysis was useful to identify the main problems or issues of the controversies from the state-sponsored tweets, further examination is needed to test the effects of the tweets using deductive or mixed approaches. Moreover, additional Twitter handles can be used to review the governmental strategic communication efforts. Using the same keywords, tweet data can be collected from multiple sources, including international businesses, activist organizations, and domestic and foreign public protesters to increase the size of the samples and to explore the online discourse from multiple perspectives. Then, to test the international agenda-building relationships, correlations between their agendas can be examined through a quantitative content analysis over a longer period. Additionally, data can be collected from multiple international counterparts (considering the government's diplomatic goals), including the U.S. and other foreign nations, who have experienced some political reforms in their contemporary history.

## Notes on contributor

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