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Protests and social mobilization during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Do pandemics lead to rebellion? Policy responses to COVID-19, inequality and protests in the USA

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Introduction

- The COVID 19 is a global disaster that has taken the world by surprise.
- First identified in China's Wuhan region in December 2019, the virus Sars-Cov-2 (the cause of COVID-19) rapidly spread to the rest of the world.
- As the virus spread, so did social discontent: protests across the world increased by almost 30 percent between January 2020 and January 2021.
- In the USA, angry protesters have taken to the streets since mid-April 2020 to voice their anger over lockdown restrictions.

Introduction



Theoretical framework

- COVID-19 is exposing existing inequalities (Galletta and Giommoni, 2020).
- The health shock and government-imposed restrictions, in turn, may cause economic decline (Gurr 1970, Runciman 1966, van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013).
- ... some individuals or groups may react by engaging in more vociferous forms of political engagement, such as civil protests and demonstrations (Justino and Martorano, 2019).
- *The aim of this paper is to disentangle empirically the role of **pre-existing inequality** in explaining the relationship between **policy restrictions** and the **incidence of protests***

Data and Empirical Strategy

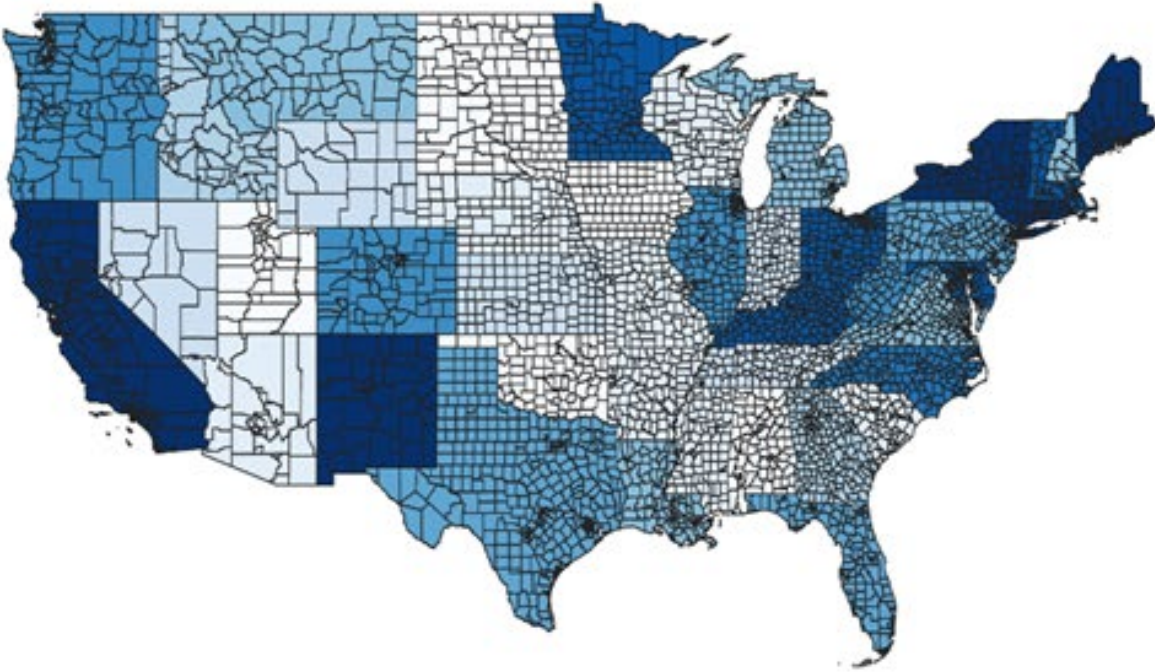
- The final sample includes 3,142 US counties from 50 states and the District of Columbia.
- For each county, we compiled time-variant information on:
 - (i) weekly-aggregated figures on COVID-related protest events
 - (ii) weekly changes in COVID-related policies, and
 - (iii) the 2019 Gini index.
- The period of analysis runs between January and December 2020.

COVID-related policies and protests events

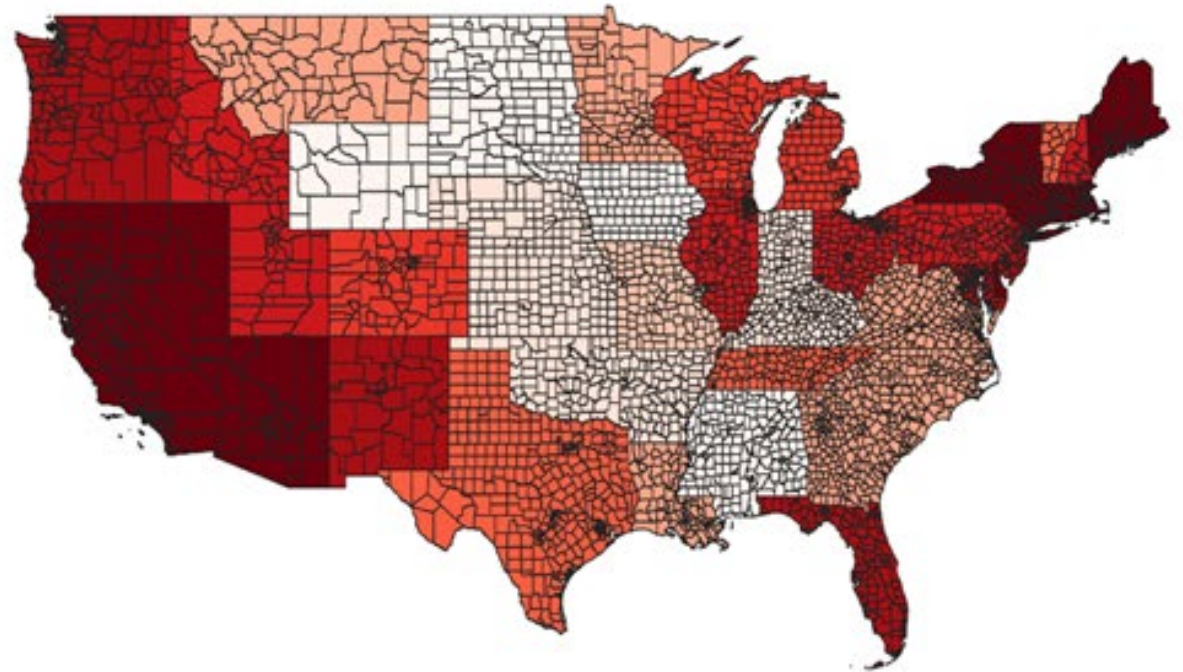
- All protest events are recorded by the ACLED and the Bridging Divides Initiative (BDI) at Princeton University under the US Crisis Monitor initiative.
- The dataset includes dates, actors, locations, fatalities, and types of all political violence and demonstration events in the US.
- The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) collects systematic information on 'lockdown'-style measures and scores the stringency of such measures.
- There are 20 indicators. Some of these indicators are aggregated into a **Stringency Index** ranging between 1 and 100, with 100 representing complete lockdown.

Stringency and Protests in the US

Stringency index



Intensity of protests

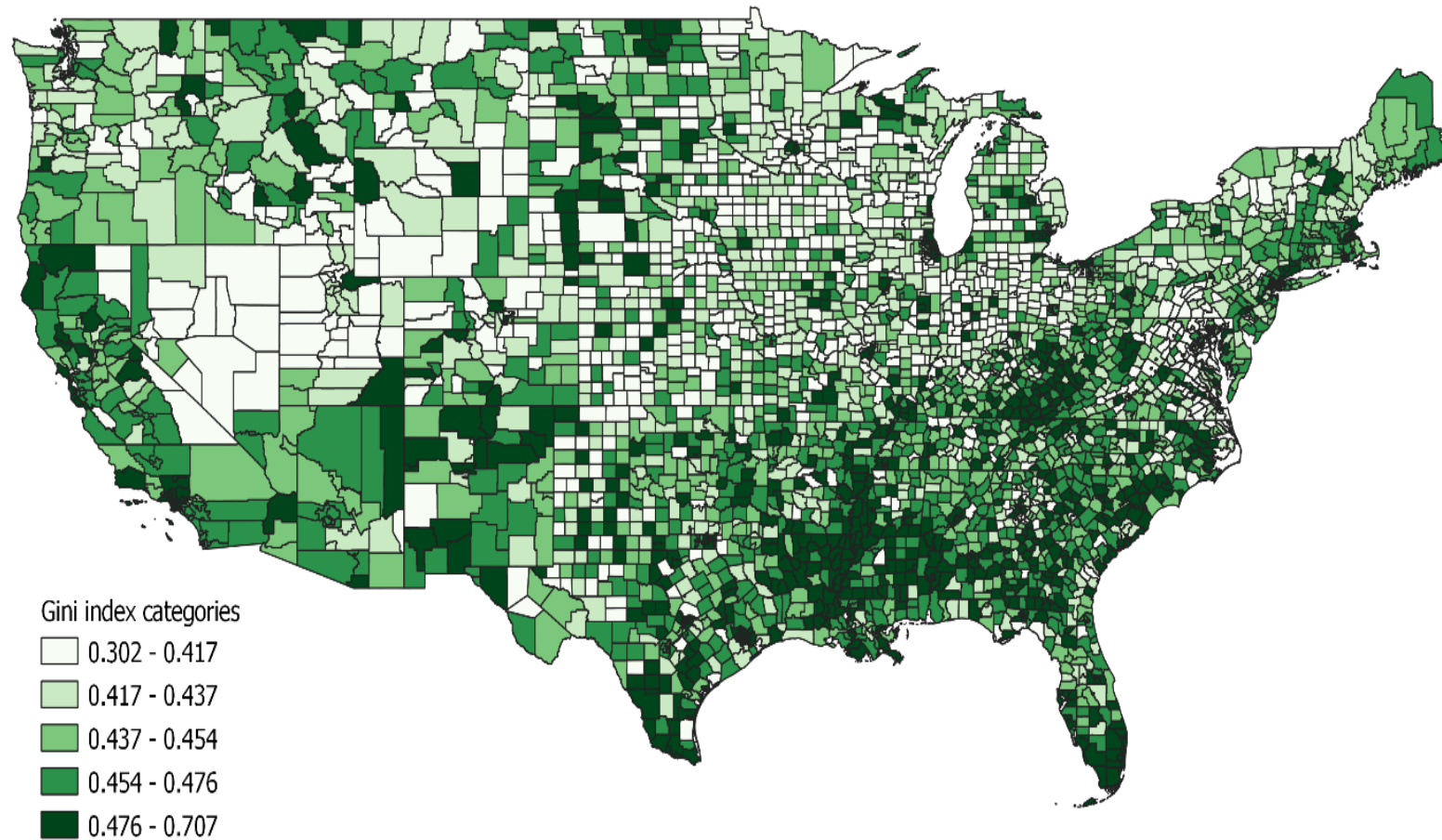


Source: Authors' calculations using the OxCGRT and ACLED Crisis Monitor. **Notes:** In both maps, darker colour shades represent higher intensity of the event (i.e., darker blue corresponds to stricter stringent measures and darker red corresponds to more protests).

Inequality across US counties

- Inequality in the USA is higher than in almost any other developed country (Piketty 2013).
- In this study, we use information on the Gini index is calculated at county-level by the Census Bureau using household income data from 2019 American Community Survey.
- Estimates are available for all 3,142 US counties included in our sample.
- The minimum value observed in our sample is 0.30 and the maximum is 0.71.

... the most unequal counties are in the South East.
The most equal counties are in Utah



Empirical strategy

Our regression model expresses protest incidence as a function of the stringency of anti-COVID-19 policies and its interaction with the level of inequality in each US county.

$$Y_{xit} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Stringency_{it} + \beta_2 Stringency_{it} * Gini_{xi} + \beta_2 X_{xit} + \delta_x + \theta_{it} + \varepsilon_{xit}, \quad (1)$$

where Y is a binary indicator with value one if a protest related to COVID-19 occurred at the county level x , in state i and in week t .

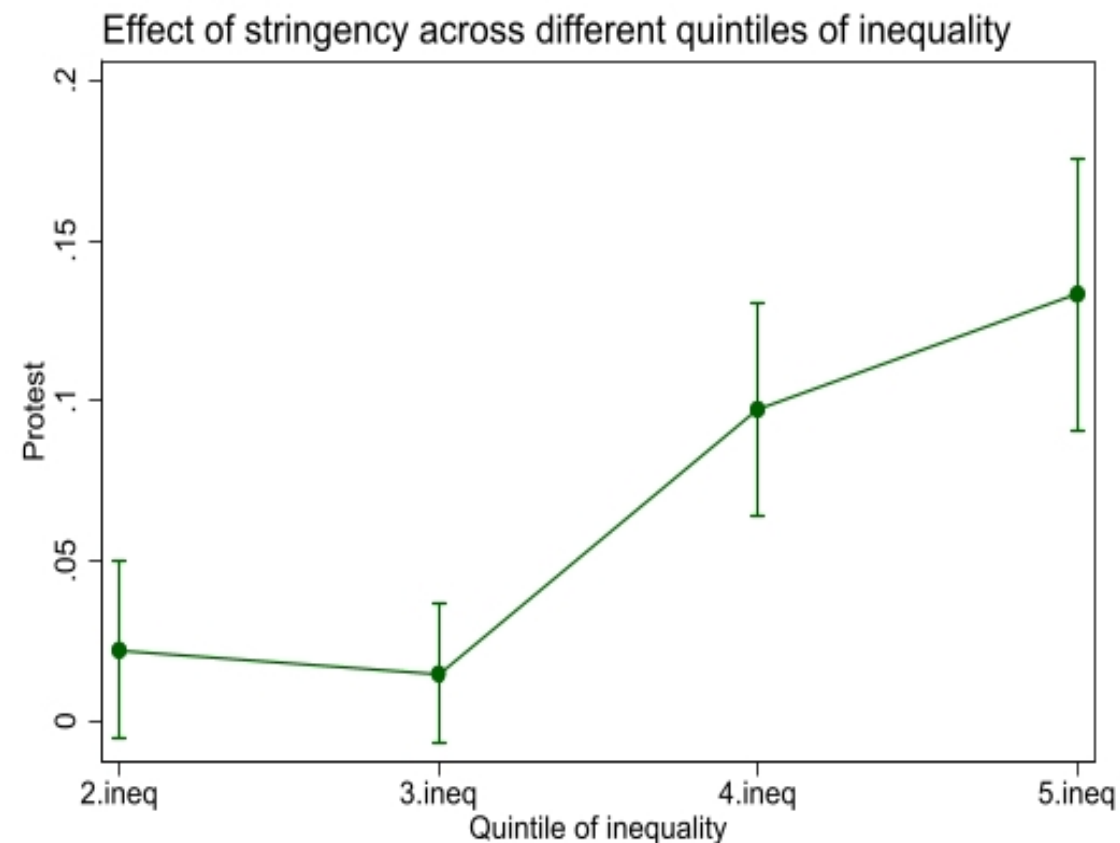
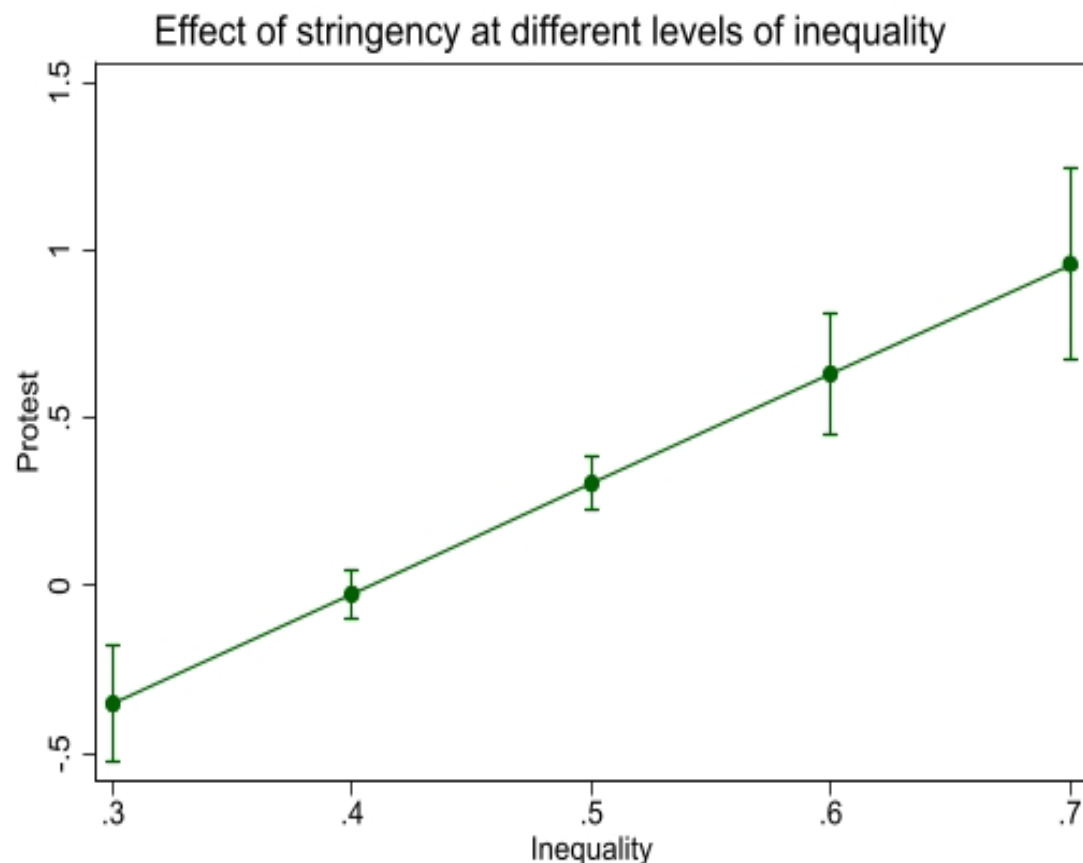
Coefficient β_2 measures how county-level restrictive policies may translate into variation in protest activity in areas with different levels of inequality.

Empirical strategy

- Equation (1) implies that the effect of the level of policy stringency on protest incidence varies linearly with the level of inequality.
- To capture these non-linearities, we interact levels of policy stringency with quintiles of the Gini index:

$$Y_{xit} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Stringency}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{Stringency}_{it} * q1_{xi} + \beta_3 \text{Stringency}_{it} * q2_{xi} + \\ \beta_4 \text{Stringency}_{it} * q3_{xi} + \beta_5 \text{Stringency}_{it} * q4_{xi} + \beta_6 \text{Stringency}_{it} * q5_{xi} + \\ \beta_7 \text{Health controls}_{xit} + \beta_8 \text{Controls}_{xit} + \delta_x + \theta_{it} + \varepsilon_{xit} ,$$

Effect of stringency on protests at different levels of inequality



Source: authors' own calculations. Note: Panel A shows the effect of stringency at different levels of inequality. Panel B shows the effect of stringency on different quintiles of inequality. Both panels report estimated marginal effects. Vertical lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals for each marginal effect.

Endogeneity

- Controlling for county and state-week fixed effects lessens concerns about omitted variable biases
- The structure of the data ensures that the incidence of protests during week t is unlikely to affect levels of inequality – which were recorded in the same county during the previous year.
- We also show that trends in the probability of protest are parallel in areas with different levels of stringency as well as in those with different levels of inequality.
- We build 2 instruments to further address these endogeneity concerns i.e. average n. of new COVID-19 cases in neighbouring states and the average level of policy stringency in neighbouring states.

Endogeneity

	(1) Baseline estimation	(2) IV: COVID-19 cases in neighbouring states	(3) IV: policy stringency in neighbouring states
<i>Panel A: second stage</i>			
Stringency Index * q5	0.289*** (0.047)	0.235*** (0.038)	0.279*** (0.049)
<i>Panel B: First stage</i>			
IV		0.087*** (0.004)	0.009*** (0.0003)
Observations	155,471	155,471	155,471
Controls	Y	Y	Y
County FE	Y	Y	Y
State-Year FE	Y	Y	Y
Kleibergen-Paap rk LM statistic		30.120	31.100
Kleibergen-Paap Wald rk F statistic		115.591	256.544

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Economic Mechanisms

- Policy measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have caused severe economic damage
- In April 2020, unemployment reached its highest levels since 1948, with an average rate at 14.8% - most hit categories were temporary workers and members of minorities.
- Fortune magazine reports that by September 2020, approximately 100,000 commercial establishments shut down permanently e.g. restaurants and retail shops.

Economic Mechanisms

	(1) Small business open	(2) Small business revenue	(3) Consumer expenditure	(4) Unemployment level	(8) Unemp. level (BLS)
Stringency index (SI)	0.018* (0.009)	0.080*** (0.012)	0.005 (0.011)	0.016*** (0.005)	8.117*** (0.783)
SI * q2	-0.000 (0.005)	-0.000 (0.007)	-0.006 (0.005)	0.003 (0.004)	0.141 (0.219)
SI * q3	-0.009* (0.005)	-0.004 (0.007)	-0.012* (0.006)	0.005* (0.003)	-0.019 (0.307)
SI * q4	-0.018*** (0.005)	-0.008 (0.008)	-0.018*** (0.004)	0.013*** (0.004)	0.414 (0.473)
SI * q5	-0.033*** (0.006)	-0.025*** (0.008)	-0.032*** (0.007)	0.019*** (0.004)	1.199** (0.499)
Observations	93,517	93,517	78,528	34,491	155,462
R-squared	0.366	0.227	0.232	0.523	0.533
Controls	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
County FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
State-Year FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Social and political context

Results show that protests are more likely to take place in the most unequal counties where:

- (i) trust in the president is below the median
- (ii) citizens are less satisfied with democracy.
- (iii) higher levels of social trust and civic engagement i.e. : n. of religious organizations and of civic organizations; n. of political organizations; and n. of labour organizations.

Conclusions

- The main results show that the implementation of policy restrictions to contain the virus led to increases in the incidence of protests in US counties with high levels of inequality.
- This result validates a longstanding theory of civil unrest, which emphasises the role of economic inequality in motivating deprived groups and individuals to protest (Gurr, 1970).
- Further analysis strongly suggests that the impact of government responses to COVID-19 is largely by changes in economic conditions in counties with the highest levels of inequality.

The paper has important policy implications...

- Protest incidence was highest among those in the most unequal counties.
- More than politics ... protests were motivated by the drastically adverse economic effects of such policies on living standards.
- The Biden administration is implementing new social protection measures to address these profound economic effects of the pandemic.
- However, the political and social consequences of such a severe economic shock are yet to be completely understood and may take decades to be fully grasped

THANK YOU

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KOMAPSUMNIDA
MAKETAI
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