

Predicting Authoritarian Crackdowns

A Machine Learning Approach

Julian TszKin Chan

Bates White Economic Consulting

Weifeng Zhong

Mercatus Center at George Mason University

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policychangeindex.org

Will China crack down on Hong Kong protesters?

If so, when?



Answer may lie in the Chinese government's own words.

习近平同志主持会议并作重要讲话
习近平李克强栗战书汪洋王沪宁赵乐际韩正任中央政治局常委
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中央总书记中央军委主席



会议并作重要讲话
中央政治局常委
中央军委主席
机构

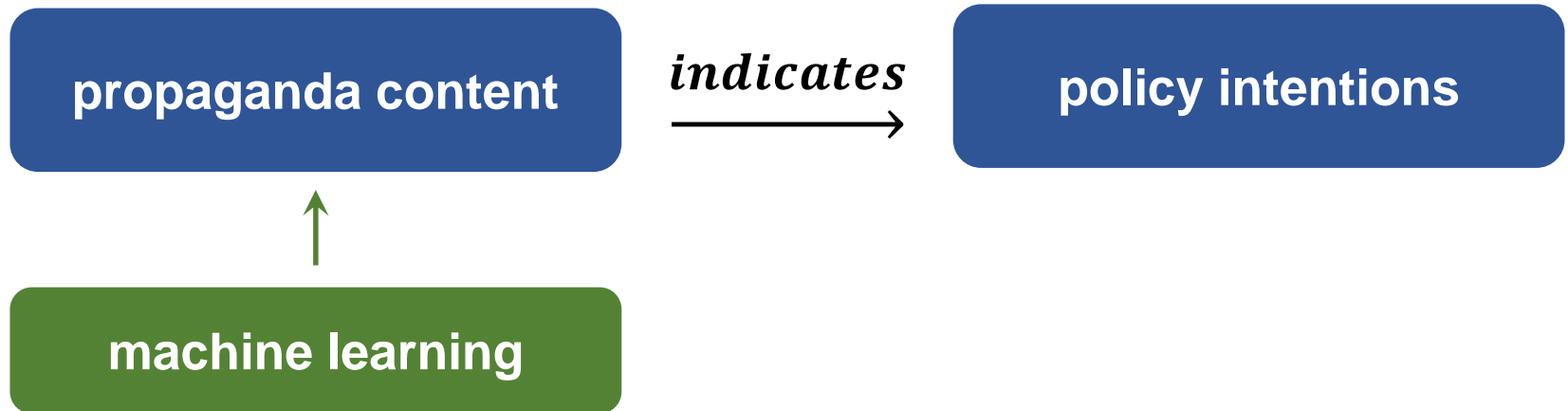
Policy Change Index (PCI) project

- Use machine learning to predict authoritarian policies based on propaganda;
- Current use cases:
 - **PCI-China:** on major changes in policy direction;
 - **PCI-Crackdown:** on Hong Kong protests;
 - **PCI-Outbreak:** on severity of COVID-19 in China.
- Future: more China issues + other authoritarian regimes.
- Open-source and free (on GitHub).

This paper

PCI-Crackdown

The idea: words matter.



What PCI does:

- Automate propaganda analysis;
- Facilitate policy inferences.

Words matter — to crackdowns

propaganda content

indicates
→

policy intentions



How does China's propaganda portray HK protests (compared to Tiananmen)?

Will there be a crackdown? If so, when?



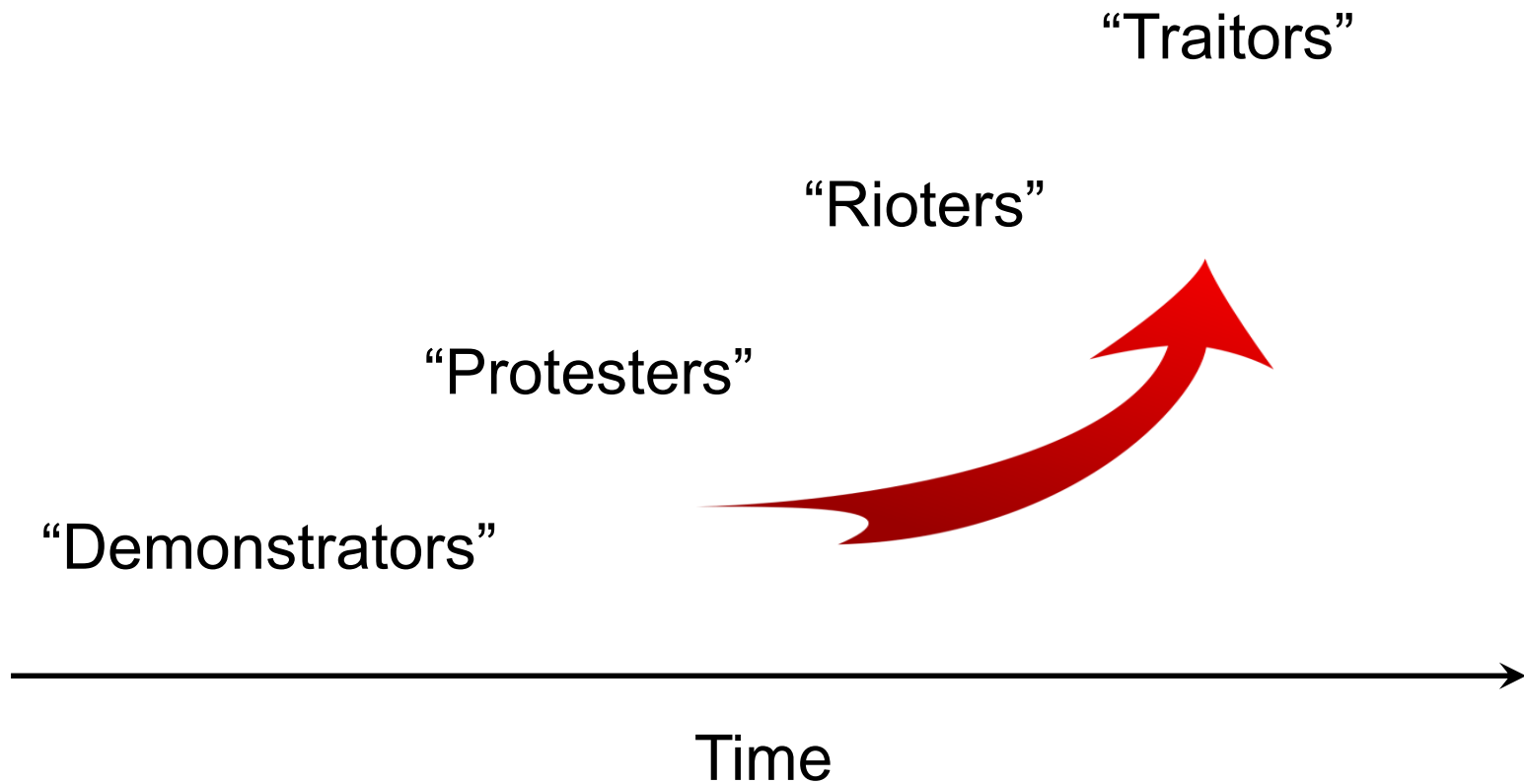
Words matter — to crackdowns



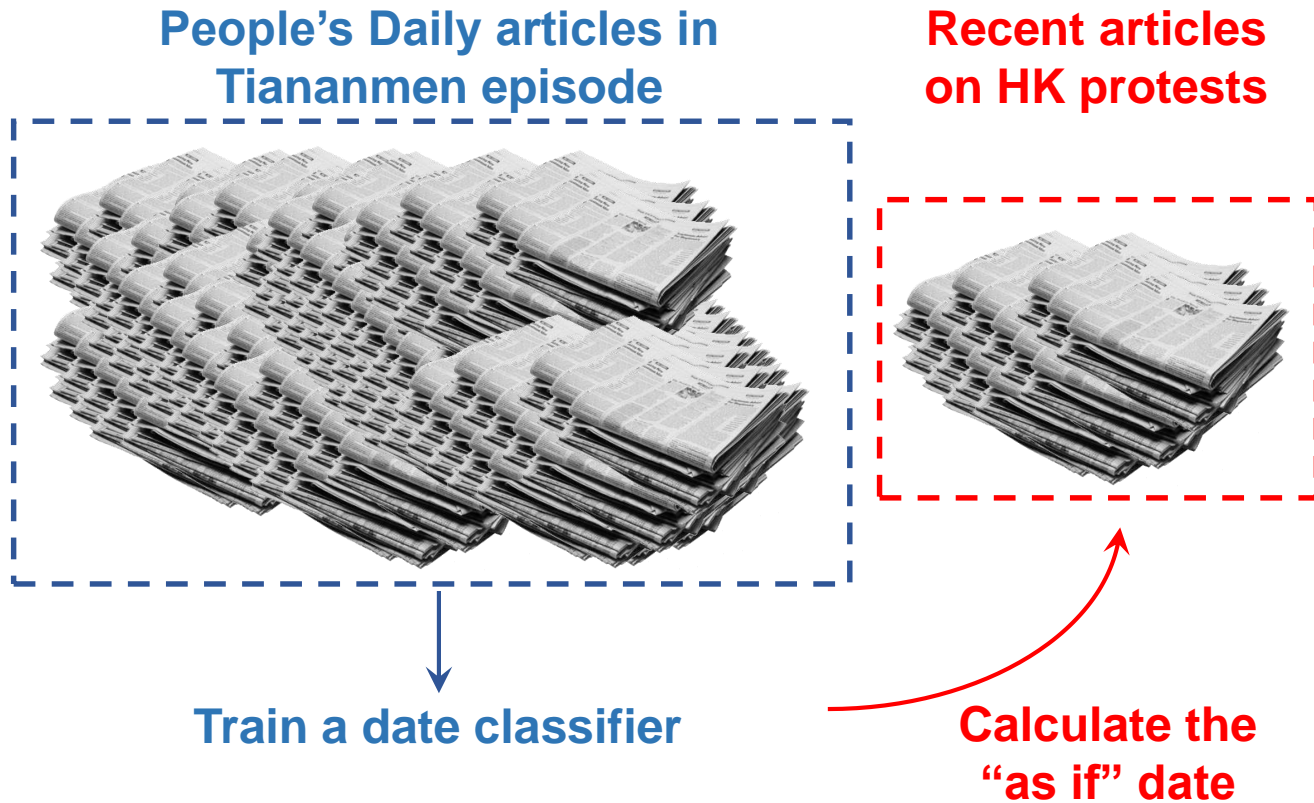
How does China's propaganda portray HK protests (compared to Tiananmen)?

Will there be a crackdown? If so, when?

Who were Tiananmen protesters?



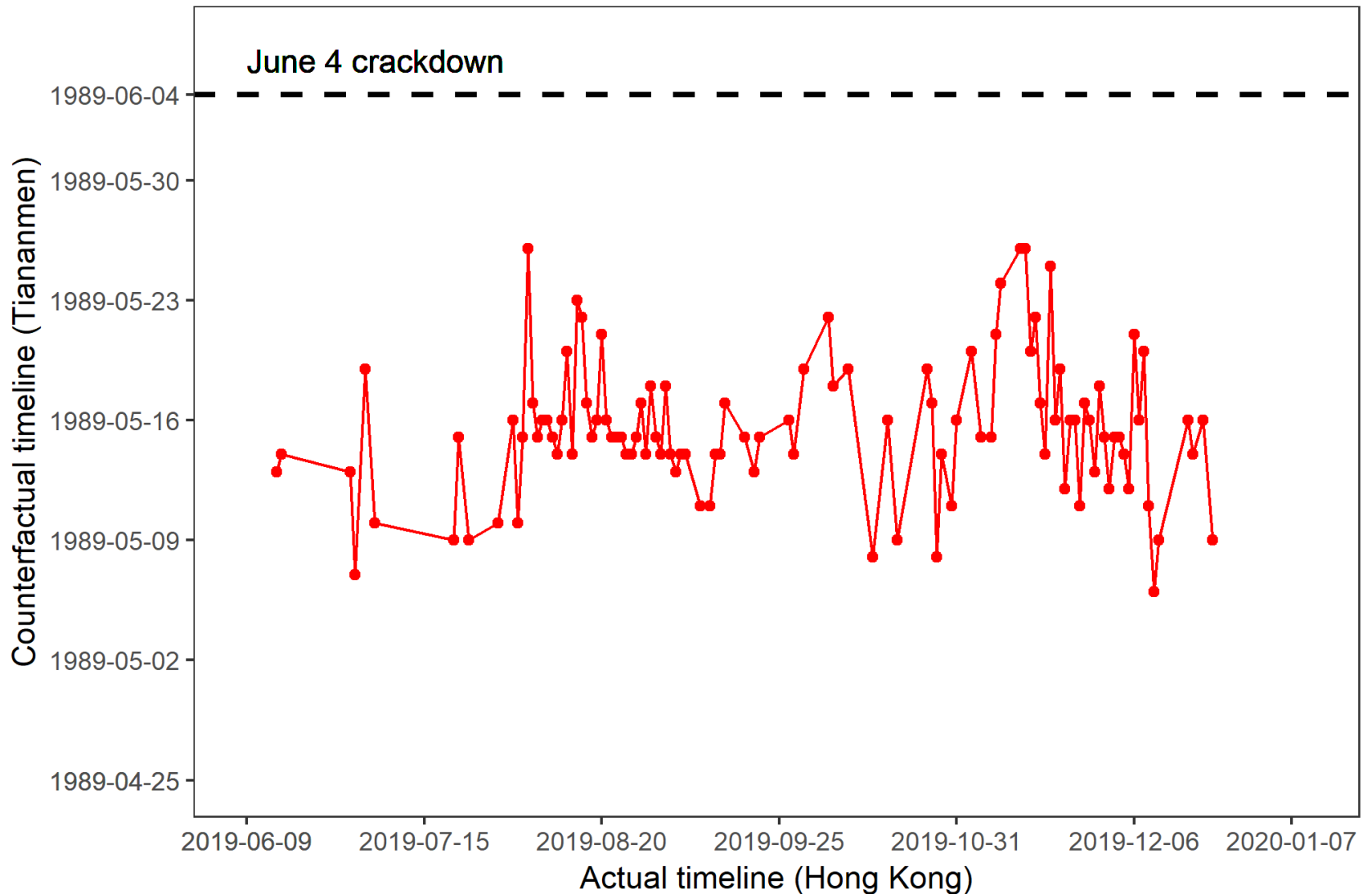
PCI-Crackdown: algorithm



PCI-Crackdown: "as if" date for the actual date

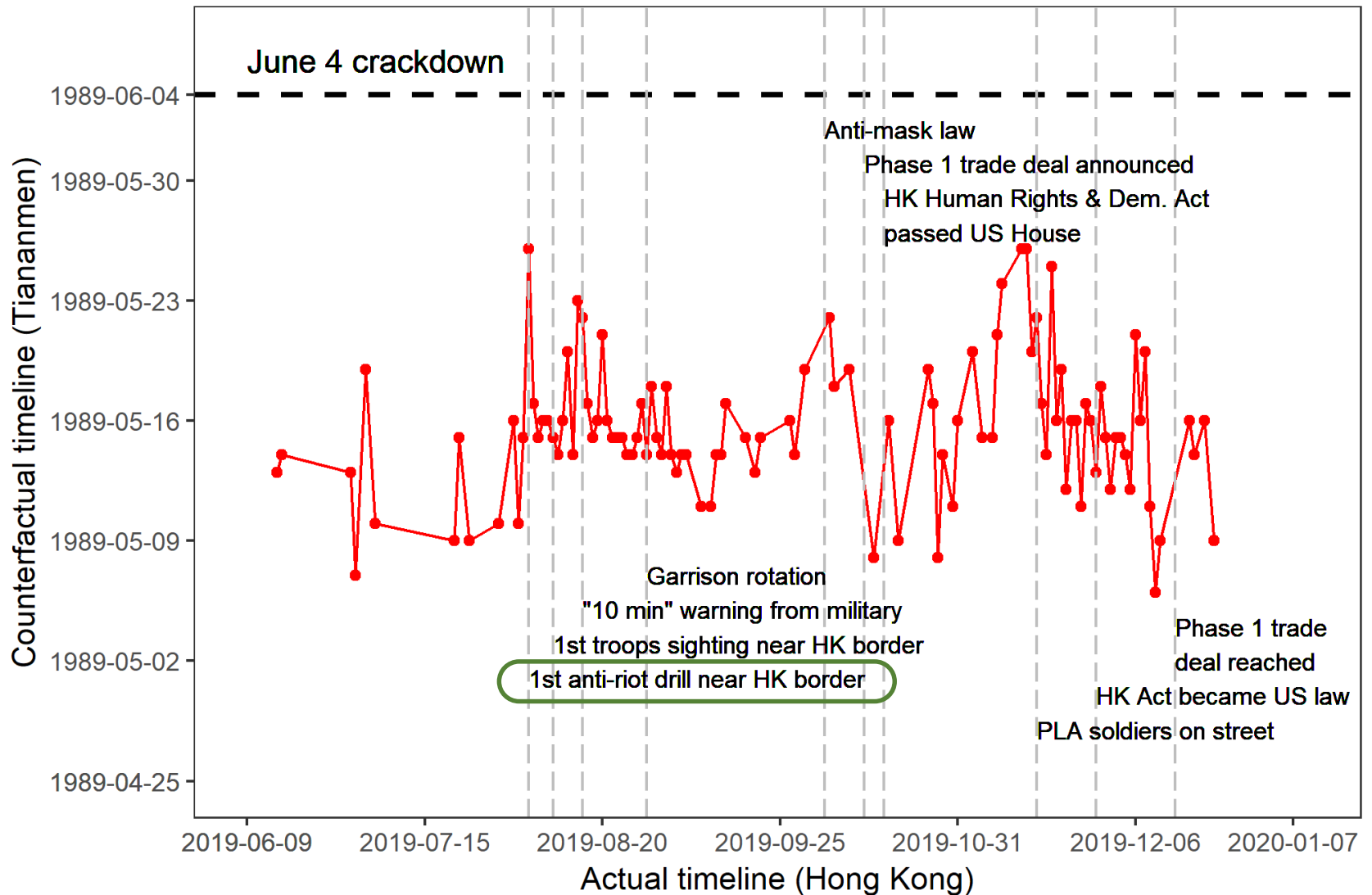
PCI-Crackdown monitors HK protests

(First wave: Jun 9, 2019 to Jan 7, 2020)



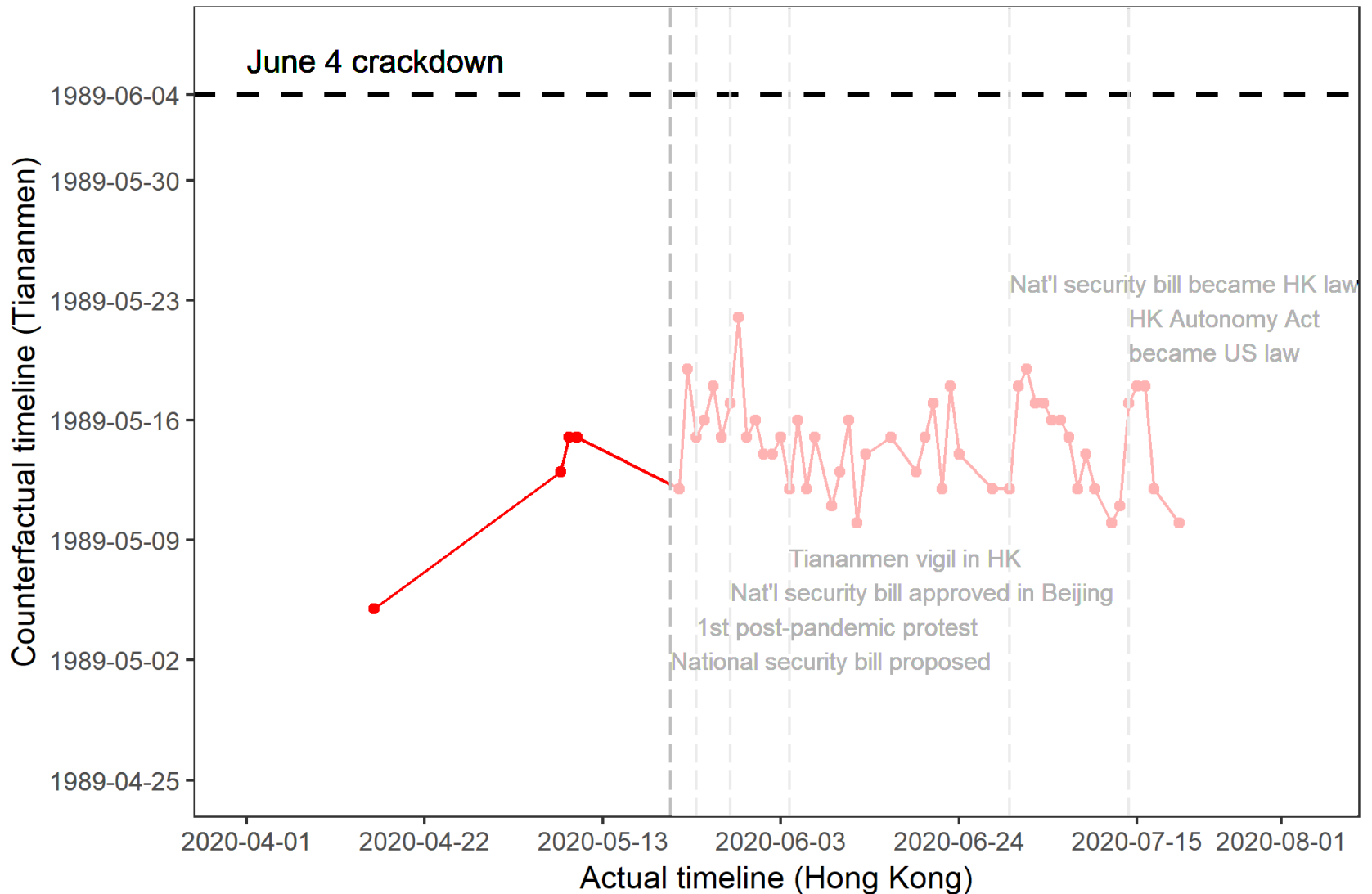
PCI-Crackdown monitors HK protests

(First wave: Jun 9, 2019 to Jan 7, 2020)



PCI-Crackdown monitors HK protests

(Second wave: Apr 16 to Jul 20, 2020)



Bottom line

Fluctuations in

propaganda content

indicates
→

Fluctuations in

policy intentions

Our judgment calls/hypotheses:

- There is a well-formed precedent;
- The same “playbook” is being followed now.

Similarly, SARS vs. COVID-19

What's next for PCI

Future programs

- More applications on China:
 - Predict a Sino-Indian border war;
 - Predict China's Taiwan policy; ...
- Extensions to other countries:
 - North Korea, Cuba, Iran...

Thank you!

- Website & source code: policychangeindex.org
- Newsletter: mercatus.org/pcinewsletter
- We welcome your feedback!
 - Julian Chan (Bates White), julian.chan@policychangeindex.org
 - Weifeng Zhong (Mercatus), wzhong@mercatus.gmu.edu