

Abstract

Mass protests are widely recognized as powerful drivers of political and societal change. When protests attract large crowds and gain broad public support, they can exert significant pressure on governments to enact institutional reforms, expand minority rights, or even contribute to the collapse of authoritarian regimes. Hence, mass mobilization is often regarded as an important force for democratization and political liberalization.

Nevertheless, many protest movements fail to achieve their intended outcomes. In some cases, they may even have the opposite effect, undermining support for the protesters' cause or boosting support for illiberal leaders. Protesters thus face a dilemma: while mobilizing for democracy, they risk alienating the broader public or inadvertently reinforcing authoritarian rule. Moreover, although protests constitute a central mechanism of democratic expression, they are not always aimed at promoting democratic or liberal institutions. Indeed, many protest movements have explicit anti-liberal or even authoritarian agendas, such as supporting anti-democratic leaders or opposing civil rights and freedoms. Thus, while protests enable citizens to challenge power structures and demand democratic reforms, they can also unintentionally – or intentionally – bolster anti-liberal leaders and institutions.

This thesis examines the dual role of protests, investigating *how protests can function as both pro-democracy and anti-democratic forces in contemporary societies*. I focus on two core aspects central to this overarching research objective. The first aspect examines the micro-level mechanisms through which protests influence citizens' attitudes and behaviors. It sheds light on potential unintended backlash effects, such as undermining support for democratic institutions or fueling issue-based and affective polarization. The second aspect analyzes mass mobilizations that explicitly advocate for anti-liberal or authoritarian objectives, examining their societal determinants and key characteristics while explicitly comparing them to pro-democracy protests.

A central argument – and empirical finding – of this thesis is that the cues conveyed during protest events resonate differently among citizens, often reinforcing pre-existing attitudes rather than changing them. As such, the same protest can simultaneously strengthen and weaken support for democratic institutions among different citizens – either directly, by shaping their attitudes toward (anti-)democratic actors or institutions, or indirectly, by inducing issue-based or affective polarization. These dynamics are documented across a wide range of protest issues and political contexts, including Hong Kong, Brazil, and Poland, drawing on both observational data and original survey experiments.

Additionally, the thesis provides a comprehensive global mapping of anti-liberal mobilizations over the past century. While the previous decade is often referred to as a “global decade of pro-democracy protests,” I highlight a concurrent rise in mass mobilizations that directly challenge democratic and liberal institutions, alongside a broader trend of democratic backsliding. However, these anti-liberal mobilizations typically have a narrower social base than liberal movements, attract smaller crowds, and are shorter in duration. Importantly, economic downturns – often seen as catalysts for pro-democratic protest – are also associated with the emergence of anti-liberal campaigns. Thus, economic hardship can fuel mass mobilization not only in support of liberal or democratic objectives but also against them.

This thesis contributes to a longstanding research agenda in political science, seeking to understand the associations between mass protests and the quality and stability of democracy. It demonstrates that protests can both advance democracy and undermine it – either through unintended attitudinal shifts or by explicitly promoting anti-democratic goals. Because citizens’ commitment to democracy is a fundamental safeguard against democratic erosion, it is crucial to examine both the individual-level variation in how protests shape citizens’ attitudes and behaviors, as well as the broader patterns by which citizens mobilize – not only to defend democracy but also to contest it.