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The 5 Ws of Democracy Protests

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Summary and Keywords

Recent protests in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as protests a decade earlier in East Central Europe, have peaked public interest while raising concerns about the potential for democracy protests to catalyze major reforms in governance. Although the number of protests that occurred in these periods was remarkable, democracy protests are not a new phenomena, but rather have come and gone throughout history. In some cases, the potential of these protests has been realized and significant reforms have resulted, while in others, the protests have been repressed and hopes of a more democratic future have been crushed. To shed light on these issues, the five Ws of democracy protests—namely *what* are democracy protests, *who* organizes and participates in these protests, *when* and *where* are democracy protests more likely to emerge, and *why* do these protests matter—are discussed.

Keywords: democracy, democratization, protests, Arab Spring, Colored Revolutions, competitive authoritarianism

What?

What are democracy protests? Democracy protests are mass demonstrations for which open and competitive elections are the primary goal (Brancati, 2014, 2016)¹. Open and competitive elections lack significant legal or non-legal barriers preventing political parties, candidates, or voters from participating in elections. Demands for open and competitive elections include demands for multiparty elections, the extension of the right to vote, the lifting of bans on political parties or candidates, and fraud-free polling, among other things. Democracy is thus defined here in a minimal sense, excluding protests that are about political freedoms, such as human rights and intellectual autonomy, which are important features of a good polity, but are not intrinsic features of

democracy. Moreover, protests over these issues are likely to have different causes and consequences, warranting separate analysis.

Other scholars have used different terminologies to describe similar phenomena, including “electoral protests” (Kalandadze & Orenstein, 2009) and “electoral revolutions” (Bunce & Wolchik, 2013; Tismaneanu, 1997). Although these terms are appropriate for the cases examined, they do not encompass all protests that have democracy as their primary demand, only those related to elections. At the same time, they can include protests with demands that are not about the undemocratic nature of elections, but about other issues, including the poor administration of elections or frustration with their outcome. The term “revolution” is further problematic because it presupposes that the protests will transform countries’ regimes. While some protests lead to transitions, many have no effect at all, while still others result in much smaller scale reforms.

Who?

Who organizes and participates in democracy protests? Almost two thirds of democracy protests between 1989 and 2011 were organized by political parties and their supporters, either on their own or in concert with other groups (Brancati, 2016). The 1989 protests to end military rule in Burma were organized, for example, by the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi; the Orange Revolution was organized by Our Ukraine, from which the protest derives its name, while the protests to restore democracy in Nepal after King Gyanendra were organized by a coalition of five opposition parties. The remaining third is equally divided among civic groups, such as Bersih in the Philippines and the National Resistance Front in Honduras, and the public-at-large. The organizational role that these actors played ranged from limited forms of involvement, including exhorting members and supporters to take to the streets, to more active roles, such as applying for permits, arranging speakers to present at rallies, printing signs, shirts and stickers, and so forth. Political parties and their supporters organized protests around elections more than any other triggering event.

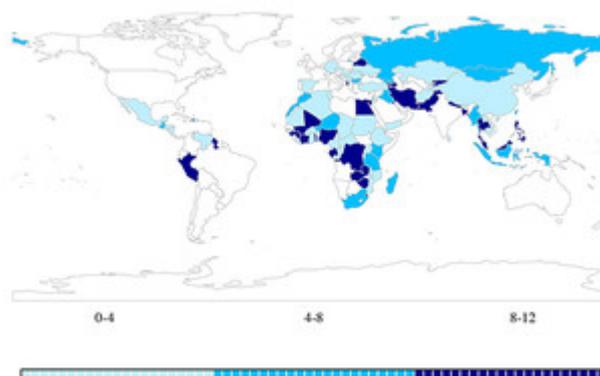
Conclusions about the demographic characteristics of those who participate in democracy protests are limited by the few cases for which survey data are available. Most of the cases for which there are surveys are recent examples of protests that are not necessarily representative of other countries, and attempts to instead extrapolate characteristics of protesters from aggregate features of countries.

Where?

Where do democracy protests occur within and across countries? Democracy protests have occurred across the globe although they have occurred most commonly in the post-Cold War period in Africa and Asia, the least democratic regions in the world (Figure 1). Between 1989 and 2011, 40% of democracy protests occurred in Africa, and 37% occurred in Asia. Only 13% occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean, while 11% occurred in Europe. In every region but Europe, where democracy protests were consistently infrequent, democracy protests fluctuated sharply over time. The year 2011 is the only year for which democracy protests were on the rise in all four regions of the world at the same time.

Democracy protests tend to occur most often in autocratic states (41%), followed by anocracies (32%), and democracies (27%). In democracies, individuals have less incentive to protest because there are fewer breaches in democracy, while in autocratic states and anocracies, there is less freedom to protest, but more need to protest due to the lack of democracy. Over time, as the number of anocracies in the world has grown, so has the number of protests that have occurred in them. Today, anocracies experience far more protests than authoritarian regimes.

Within countries, democracy protests occurred more commonly in this period in urban areas than in rural ones, and in state capitals in particular. In urban areas, the costs of collective action are lower than in rural areas, making it easier for protests to occur (Moore, 1967; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, & Stephens, 1992). Democracy protests are particularly likely to occur in capital cities because the capital is the seat of the national government, the target of these protests. Over 90% of protests between 1989 and 2011 occurred in at least the capital.



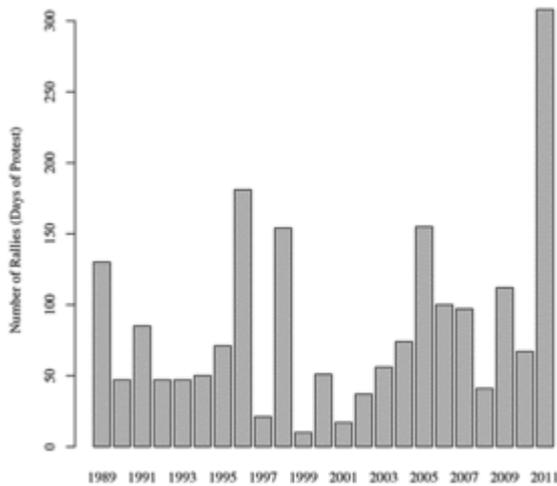
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Figure 1. Democracy Protests, 1989-2011.

When?

When do democracy protests occur? Democracy protests have ebbed and flowed over time. The year 2011, the first year of the Arab Spring protests, was a banner year for democracy protests. More countries experienced democracy protests in this year than any previous year in the post-Cold War period. The outbreak of protests in this year was not unprecedented. Protests were on the rise two years prior to 2011. The second largest protest wave between 1989 and 2011 was in the early 1990s, surrounding the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Figure 2 depicts the number of days of democracy protests that occurred each year between 1989 and 2011. The Arab Spring protests were some of the longest-lived protests, while many protests surrounding the end of the post-Cold War, both in Europe and Africa, were much shorter. Nearly two thirds of all democracy protests that took place between 1989 and 2011 ended in three days or fewer.



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Figure 2. Numbers of Days of Protests, 1989–2011.

Within countries, democracy protests frequently occurred around certain triggering events, the most common of which are elections and coups d'état. Slightly more than a majority of democracy protests that occurred between 1989 and 2011 took place in relation to elections, while about 15% occurred in response to coups d'état. Democracy protests tend to occur around election periods, scholars argue, because elections bring

electoral fraud to light (Fearon, 2011; Hyde & Marinov, 2014; Kuntz & Thompson, 2009; Tucker, 2007). Electoral fraud, according to these scholars, indicates to citizens that they are not alone in their opposition to the government, and that, if they protest, others will likely protest as well.

Economic crises also serve as important triggering events. Haggard and Kaufman (1995) argue that economic crises can lead to protests, strikes, and other forms of social unrest by provoking economic grievances, which opposition leaders take advantage of by linking a country's prevailing economic conditions to the exclusionary nature of the political regime. Haggard and Kaufman support their argument through qualitative analyses of economic crises in several countries in Latin America and Asia. Acemoglu and Robinson (2005) argue that crises—either economic or political—lead to transitions because they provoke social unrest by helping people overcome collective action problems.

Along these lines, Brancati (2014, 2016) argues that democracy protests are more likely to occur in crisis periods, because they raise societal discontent for governments in general, and authoritarianism in particular, and they increase support for opposition candidates who are more likely to organize protests, especially in election periods, when opposition support is high. Economic crises also give those who view democracy in more opportunistic terms a chance to capitalize on anti-regime sentiment arising from crises to mobilize support against regimes. Consistent with her argument, Brancati finds in her statistical analysis that democracy protests are more likely to occur when growth is lower and unemployment is higher, and when a greater percentage of individuals in a country consider economic conditions in their country to be poor and are dissatisfied with their own standard of living. She further finds that poor economic conditions are associated with a higher incidence of fraudulent elections, which are more likely to trigger protests. Fraud makes it difficult for the voting public to throw incumbents out of power, and when the incumbent remains in power when the economy is not performing well, democracy protests are even more likely to occur, she finds. Fraud also makes for smaller margins of victory, which, in turn, increase, albeit very slightly, the likelihood of democracy protests to occur.

Protests in neighboring countries have also been suggested as important triggering events of democracy protests (Beissinger, 2007; Bunce & Wolchik, 2006; Saideman, 2012). These scholars convincingly show that the demonstrators appropriated symbols, borrowed language, and adopted similar strategies, and they potentially revised their expectations of success based on protests in neighboring countries. However, there is not yet strong evidence regarding the extent to which protests in one country caused protests in another, or merely affected the timing of events in neighboring countries. Statistical models have identified a geographical clustering of democracies, which is consistent with the idea that democracy protests spread to other countries, but this clustering can be explained by other phenomena (Elkink 2011; Gleditsch & Ward, 2006). Moreover, some countries, like China, fearful that the protests would spread to their borders undertook measures to preempt their spread, reducing democratic freedoms in these countries.

Why?

The final “W” question is really two distinct questions regarding why people protest for democracy and why should we care. Individuals may have psychological as well as material motivations for participating in democracy protests. Psychological motivations, such as identification, emotions and social embeddedness, are important in explaining why people participate in protests in general (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013), but they are not very helpful in understanding why people participate in democracy protests in particular. People’s material motivations—whether they are intrinsic, instrumental, or opportunistic—are more helpful in this regard.

People who intrinsically value democracy desire democracy for its own sake, while those who value democracy instrumentally see democracy as a means to achieve another goal. The former, in other words, desire democracy more for its procedures, while the latter desire democracy more for the outcomes that result from these procedures. Opportunists, in contrast, do not necessarily value democracy, but support democracy in order to advance their own objectives. For this reason, participation in democracy protests is a good proxy for the demand for democracy, but a poor proxy for the desire for it. Not only may individuals demand democracy but not support or value it, but people who value democracy may not demand it because the odds of establishing democracy in a country is low due to the repressive capacity of states, the lack of support among the business leaders, and so forth.

Any protest is likely to include people with intrinsic, instrumental, and opportunistic motivations. Internally, people may also have multiple motivations for participating in democracy protests, although those who value democracy for either intrinsic or instrumental reasons cannot also support democracy for opportunistic reasons. Surveys surrounding the Orange Revolution and the 2011–2012 Russian protests suggest that many people who participated in these protests joined them for opportunistic reasons. According to Beissinger (2013), most people who participated in the Orange Revolution were only weakly committed to the revolution’s democratic narrative. Chaisty and Whitefield (2013), meanwhile, found in Russia, believing that a multi-party electoral system is the best system of government for Russia is not significantly associated with thinking that the 2011–2012 protests were justified.

The second why question asks whether or not democracy protests really lead to changes politically, economically, or socially in countries. Qualitative case studies yield mixed conclusions regarding the political changes that result from democracy protests. While some scholars find that democracy protests lead to democratic transitions by pointing to

cases where governments democratized in response to these protests (Bermeo, 1997; Beissinger, 2007; Bratton & van de Walle, 1992; Bunce & Wolchik, 2010, 2013; Collier & Mahoney, 1997; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Slater, 2001; Wood, 2001), other scholars come to the opposite conclusion—that protests do not lead to democracy, or still worse, that they provoke a backlash against it and to deeper authoritarianism (Casper & Taylor, 1996; Curry & Göedl, 2012; Higley & Burton, 2006; Higley & Gunther, 1992; Huntington, 1984; O'Donnell, Schmitter, & Whitehead, 1986).

Levitsky and Way (2010) suggest two factors that may help explain this variation—strong state and party systems and international integration. The former, they argue, which includes the military, allows governments to monitor and defuse political opposition and to crack down on protests (60). International integration and, in particular, economic and political linkages to the West, the authors argue, should also make democracy protests more likely to lead to transitions because it increases the likelihood that the West, democrats themselves, would take action by pressuring governments to democratize with the withdrawal of foreign aid, trade sanctions, and the threat of military force (49). The authors support their argument through a large-scale, qualitative analysis of 35 competitive authoritarian states between 1990 and 2008. Beaulieu analyzes quantitatively the effect of international support for post-election protests in particular, and does not find robust support for this argument in developing countries (Beaulieu, 2014, p. 110).²

Brancati (2016) suggests an alternative mediating condition. According to Brancati, governments offered political concessions to almost a quarter of democracy protests that occurred between 1989 and 2011; she finds, in her statistical analysis, that governments are more likely to make political concessions to protests the more the protests control for regime type, state repressive capacity, and a host of other factors, and that democracy protests are likely to be larger the worse economic conditions are within countries. Political concessions include major reforms such as holding multiparty elections and restoring elected officials to office after coups d'état, as well as less significant reforms, such as lifting bans of certain political parties or candidates. Brancati further finds that protests are significantly correlated with democratization (any increase in the Polity Index), and democratic transitions in particular, controlling for the same set of factors.

There is little scholarly research on the economic impact of democracy protests, but policy-related, case analysis suggests that long-drawn protests can have a significant negative effect on countries paralyzed by protests, and even on foreign countries if the affected countries are well integrated into the international market. The costs of protests include a reduction in trade and production, a decline in sales due to the closure of retail businesses, a drop in financial activity due to the closure of markets, and so forth. HSBC

(The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation) estimates that the gross domestic product of the seven Arab Spring countries it analyzed (i.e., Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia) was 35% lower at the end of 2014 than it would have been had the 2011 uprisings not happened, and that the value of lost output from the protests topped USD 800 billion.³

What's Next?

Mass mobilization, of which protests are one form, underlies many explanations of democratization. Certain modernization theories argue that economic development leads to democratization by increasing the size of the middle class, which supports democracy because it values individualism, autonomy, and self-expression (Inglehart & Welzel, 2009; Lipset, 1959). Similarly, arguments regarding inequality posit that, in the face of mass demands for democracy, governments are more likely to democratize when inequality is low because the redistributive consequences of democracy are less significant as opposed to when inequality is high (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2005; Boix, 2003; Haggard & Kaufman, 2012). Yet, until now, due to the dearth of data on democracy protests, the intermediate effects of democracy protests in these and other theories has not been tested explicitly. Future research may benefit from using protests as a measure of the demand for democracy. Demand should not be confused, though, with the desire for democracy, as many who desire democracy may not participate in democracy protests, while not everyone who participates in democracy protests does so necessarily because of a hardened belief in democracy's intrinsic or instrumental value. Yet, democracy can result, although it may not be sustainable unless a desire for democracy subsequently develops, where the public demands democracy even if they do not necessarily desire it at the outset.

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Notes:

(1.) Although it would be more precise to refer to these protests as pro-democracy protests to distinguish them from protests against democracy, which are held largely by Islamists seeking to establish a caliphate state, I use the term *democracy*, rather than pro-democracy, for simplicity's sake. Democracy protests may include other demands among them, so long as they are not of equal or greater importance than democracy.

(2.) Not all post-election protests are necessarily democracy protests. Some protests may not demand democracy but result from frustration with the bureaucratic administration of elections or their outcome.

(3.) Krishnadev Calamur, (2013), What Did The Arab Spring Cost? One Estimate Says \$800 Billion, *Parallels: Many Stories, One World. National Public Radio*, October 12.

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